Illustrating the Illustrators – The V&A Illustration Awards

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Background

The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) has been running a cash prize competition for the best published illustration (http://tinyurl.com/cb6oxo) for nearly forty years.   The Awards offer the largest cash prize in this field. Initially the Francis Williams Awards for Illustration were presented every five years, starting in 1972, for the best illustrated books. These moved to an annual prize for both illustrated books and magazines when the bookseller and stationer WH Smith commenced its sponsorship of the prize in 1987. When this came to an end in 1995 the competition was renamed the National Art Library Illustration Awards. Sponsorship was secured from the Enid Linder Foundation which continues today. Enid Linder's brother Leslie was a noted Beatrix Potter collector and scholar whose collections are housed in the V&A. The Foundation takes an active interest in the awards, often providing suggestions for new initiatives and improvements.   Their sponsorship covers the cost of publicity, the judging process, an awards party, a display of winners' work and the prizes. The awards process was delivered by an external consultant for most of its existence. However, in 2004 the museum took this process in-house, introducing new categories for illustrated book cover and an editorial category covering newspapers, magazines and comics. In 2005 a further new category was introduced for students who were eligible to enter their course or personal project work.

The Competition

Until recently entry to the published categories of the awards was by sending print copies of entries to the V&A accompanied by an application form. Because of the costs involved most entries came directly from publishers rather than artists or agents. Administering the process involved the logistically demanding task of handling up to five hundred individual entries. Entry was limited to work published in the UK. The competition was advertised through publicity postcards and leaflets mailed to individual publishers, editors and agents.   Advertisements were also placed in a few key magazines.

Lately the published competition has been judged by the Director of the V&A, Mark Jones, accompanied by renowned artists such as Sir Peter Blake and Posy Simmonds

together with well-known British cultural figures such as Mariella Frostrup and Beryl Bainbridge.

Awards are presented at a special prize-giving party at the V&A attended by publishers, agents, judges, artists and other key figures in the industry. This event also coincides with the launch of a public display of winners' artwork in a gallery in the museum for three months. Previous winners of the awards have included noted British illustrators such as Quentin Blake, Posy Simmonds, Ralph Steadman and Michael Foreman.

The student prize has operated as a parallel competition with its own judges and entry system. The judging panel consisted of previous winners and academics. Batches of publicity postcards were sent to tutors of illustration courses throughout the country for forwarding to their students. The entry process was partly automated with entrants emailing files or posting work on formats such as CD-ROM. These entries were then presented on a secure website visible only to museum staff and judges. Up to two hundred entries were whittled down to a shortlist of fifteen. At this point the process moved to a manual operation with shortlisted student work borrowed by the museum for a final analysis by the judges.   The latter process was particularly time consuming because of museum bureaucracy relating to borrowing works of art.   From this point onwards the student competition merged with the published awards for the prize presentation and display stages of the process.

Challenges

Early in 2007 the awards faced a serious problem as virtually all of the V&A staff working on them moved on through a combination of retirement, resignation or change of roles. The awards faced the following challenges:
- They were very labour-intensive to run, occupying a significant portion of the working time of up to six members of staff
- In spite of their longevity the awards still had a very low profile amongst publishers, agents and artists.
- Printed publicity and advertising had only a marginal impact on the quantity of entries and general awareness of the awards
- Very little of the illustration output of any given year, including the design processes and techniques involved, was archived for posterity
- In spite of using high profile judges the awards received negligible press and media coverage
- The awards were seen as somewhat peripheral to the main activity of the V&A
- There was a confusing array of eleven individual prizes

- Some cash prizes were fairly insignificant
- The awards were based on quite a traditional notion of illustration production and did not adequately address emerging digital influences
- The annual display of artwork relating to winning entries was logistically onerous in spite of a limited payback in terms of the length of time it was on display and its relatively obscure location within the museum
- Entry criteria were fairly restrictive and debarred some UK artists from eligibility for the competition e.g. those working here but only publishing abroad
- A concentration on the quantity rather than the quality of entries led to a significant amount of formulaic work being submitted which stood little chance of being considered for prizes
- Judges and winners frequently didn't attend the awards ceremony because of other commitments, distance , costs or contractual impediments
- Our manual entry system entailed a cost for publishers in spite of the fact that there was little or no financial gain to them in winning
- Artists and agents were reluctant to enter themselves because of the costs involved
- Multiple and changing prize categories worked against a clear sense of identity for the awards
- Although, in theory, comics artists were eligible to enter none did so as our entry criteria tended to debar their work
- The awards timeframe did not take account of both the publishing and major book prize annual cycles
- The awards process provided negligible management information about the quantity and range of artists, publishers, genres and academic institutions entering the awards

Reviewing the Awards

The Museum organised a think tank on the awards in 2003 with academics, practitioners and commissioners involved in illustration. A further review of the operation of the awards was conducted in 2007. In spite of the difficult challenges experienced in running the awards they were still felt to be central to the core purpose of the museum. The review built on the initiatives which emerged from the think tank and the V&A set about achieving the following in the ensuing five years:
- Significantly reduce the workload involved in the competition
- Shift the focus of our energy from bureaucratic processes to development and innovation

- Focus on the UK creative industries
- Broaden the range of entries
- Improve the public profile of the awards
- Simplify the entry process and eliminate costs for entrants
- Maximise our use of digital technologies
- Recognise and celebrate the changing nature of the design processes and techniques involved in creating contemporary illustration
- Move the awards to a more central position within the V&A

Publicity

Considerable time and cost were expended on producing publicity leaflets and postcards. These had negligible results which is not surprising in a publishing industry which is awash with print material. Designing and paying for advertising in the professional press also had little impact on either awareness of the awards or on the quantity of entries. All of this activity yielded only 10% of entries and had to be followed up by individual phone calls to publishers and agents. We also had no methodical means of logging and following up individuals' enquiries about the awards.

Instead we moved to using email as our main means of publicising the awards. We have compiled email lists of key contacts in all major publishers, agencies and colleges which are regularly updated. Automated mailings are sent two months before the closing date for entries. Reminders are also sent two weeks before the cut-off date. These contain links to the online entry system on our website.

Entry Process

We were determined to move the whole of our entry process online and managed to achieve this in two stages. We started with our student awards. We looked at a variety of possibilities including internet forums and Flickr, which was then in its infancy. Flickr staff, the Flickreenies, sent a very positive response to our initial enquiry in spite of the fact that they do not specifically support business use and illustration is not their core business. However, using an invitation-only group would have been labour-intensive to administer and a possible deterrent to entrants.

Eventually we found the solution to our needs staring us in the face on our own website. A competition had been hosted there to allow entrants to upload a single photo relating to the theme 'Twilight' (http://tinyurl.com/c4uszp) to coincide with a public photography exhibition on the same subject. By adapting this software to allow

for multiple uploading of photographs we were able to build our student entry system. All entries are initially sent to an administrative system which is mediated prior to uploading on to our public website. Such a system avoided the difficulties we had experienced with our hybrid student entry system which encountered repeated problems with file sizes and formats. The new system allowed up to three photos of artwork (up to 2MB each) to be submitted as jpegs. Entrants could also link to their own website or social network sites such as deviantArt (http://www.deviantart.com/#). Although there was a potential to upload short video clips built into the system we found that links to material hosted on sites such as YouTube were sufficient for our needs.

All online entries are now visible on our website and this year we rolled this process out to the published competition as well. We also introduced a search facility for our public presentation of submitted artwork entries. Generally the system has worked very well. The V&A's recent implementation of a large file transfer system has been invaluable in helping to resolve queries. Most problems arising related to a lack of familiarity with, and understanding of, digital file sizes and shapes by entrants. We feel confident that, over time, the level of awareness of these issues will inevitably improve.

Entry Criteria

One of our central aims is to support the UK illustration industry. In the past we had limited eligibility to work 'published in the UK in the previous year'. However, we found that this could have the effect of favouring artists from other countries at the expense of UK artists. UK editions of foreign publications were eligible whereas the work of UK artists publishing abroad was not. This was particularly an issue in relation to comics artists. Many of these were publishing only in the US because of severely limited opportunities in the UK market. As a result we changed our eligibility criteria to 'illustrators living in the UK or publishing within the UK market'.

Previously students were only eligible to enter if they had reached at least the second year of an illustration course at university level in the UK. We felt that this was too restrictive and ideally we wanted to encourage all illustration students to apply. We were also aware that the first year after completing a course is often the most difficult in terms of building a career and that the accolade of winning an award could be crucial in this process. We therefore extended eligibility to all students who had attended an illustration course over the previous two years.

Judging

We took the rather controversial step of judging the student awards completely on the basis of their online entries. Although some concerns were raised that this might not do full justice to the students' original artwork we felt that it was acceptable on the basis that this is the method that aspiring artists would need to use to submit their work to potential publishers. Our entry process enables and encourages entrants to describe the inspiration behind their work and their design processes and techniques and to provide links to further examples of their artwork online.

Judging for the published awards categories now takes place online up to the point of shortlisting. Judges choose their favourite three items from each category and the published work is acquired by the V&A for a final judging session. We retained this last stage as we are ultimately judging how the work looks in print.

As the whole process of engaging and supporting judges is very time consuming, particularly for busy public figures, we have reduced the number of these significantly. We are increasingly engaging people already known to us, such as previous winners of the competition, to act as judges.

In the past our judges have undertaken the task for free and merely been paid out-of-pocket expenses. Undertaking this work tended to be seen as a civic duty. However, we have recently introduced consultancy payments for student judges in recognition of the time consuming nature of this work and the fact that these judges tend to be taking significant time out from their paid employment to complete this task for us.

Prizes

We have reduced the total number of prizes from eleven to six. This has allowed us to increase the prize money in all cases. It has considerably reduced the work involved in liaising with winners and acquiring their artwork for display. Saving on costs such as inscribed trophies, certificates and insurance have also been achieved.

One of the key goals of the V&A is to promote and develop the creative economy. Although the V&A's Illustration Awards both highlight and reward some of the best contemporary practitioners in the illustration industry there is clear potential for being more strategically proactive in this area. We have therefore begun contracting award winners to design publicity material, such as postcards, posters and web images, for

the museum. This association with the V&A is at least as beneficial to an artist's career as winning an award. We have also started a process of employing them to deliver talks and run workshops to coincide with other museum initiatives.

Winning Entries

In spite of shifting the focus of the awards on to the UK creative industries the 2009 competition had a distinctly international flavour. Our winners were:

- Lydia Wong for Student Illustrator of the Year (http://tinyurl.com/d4z68h)
- Kristina Hoffman for Student Runner-Up (http://tinyurl.com/crzgpw)
- Swava Harsymowicz won two prizes: for Best Editorial Illustration (http://tinyurl.com/b95hdb) and for Best Book Cover (http://tinyurl.com/c7yxug)
- Tom Burns won the prize for Best Illustrated Book as well as being the Overall Winner (http://tinyurl.com/bqmkf4)

Display

An annual display of the published works of competition winners together with their preparatory artwork had been mounted in a public gallery of the museum for approximately three months. There were several problems associated with this approach. The gallery is located on an upper floor of the museum and difficult to find. Limiting the display to three months is a relatively poor return on the investment of time and resources required to mount such a display. Displaying books in an interesting and accessible way is always challenging but more so in glass cases in light-reduced galleries. The quality of illustration design material on show has tended to be quite variable and often lacked any record of digital processes. This regularly produced a fairly haphazard effect in the display.

These challenges are now being addressed by extending the period of display and promoting awareness of it through other museum services and initiatives. A large screen digital display highlights the range of entrant's online submissions. Layers of manual and digital design process are being revealed and high quality digital prints are utilised to increase impact.   A parallel display is also hosted on the museum's website and then archived for posterity. Details of all past winners are hosted on our website and in 2004 we began providing links to winner's own websites. All winning publications and a selection of shortlisted entries are added permanently to the stock of the National Art Library at the V&A. These can viewed on our catalogue

(http://catalogue.nal.vam.ac.uk/) using a 'name keyword' search for 'illustration awards'.

Incorporation into Museum

The awards have generally tended to be perceived as being grafted on to the V&A's activities rather than an integral part of them. We have begun addressing this by ensuring that they are highlighted in major museum documents such as the published annual review as well as in other strategic arenas within the organisation such as trustee reports and strategic plans.

The V&A runs a programme of themed Friday Late events where the museum opens until ten o'clock at night with entertainment, refreshments, workshops, demonstrations and talks. Approximately three thousand people attend these events providing an ideal opportunity to highlight our awards. An evening dedicated to illustration entitled 'Pen Paper Scissors' was held to coincide with the announcement of award winners and the public display of winners' work. All of those attending were encouraged to view the display which was accompanied by talks and workshops given by some of our awards winners. Other winners were commissioned to design print publicity for this event.

Publicity and Promotion

The awards have suffered from negligible media coverage in the past in spite of having well-known panel judges and also commissioning a consultant in an attempt to improve matters. We have just begun to address this through a variety of approaches. We encourage other relevant organisations to put links to our competition on their websites. So far this has had some limited success with universities and illustration blogs.   We have also begun the process of more active promotion through formal presentations to groups of potential entrants. We have started working with the V&A's own press office to promote the awards in tandem with other related museum events.   We began exploiting human interest angles in the awards such as the fact that Swava Harasymowicz, who won two awards in 2009, was a student winner in 2005 and was commissioned by Penguin to illustrate a series of book covers as a result of her initial award from us.

 We have agreed with publishers of winning artists that they will attach a sticker to the covers of their books indicating that they have won one of our awards. They are also

putting a digital version of this on their websites. We have experimented with putting reviews on bookselling sites, such as Amazon, highlighting the fact that these books are award winners. Next year we have been tentatively promised some editorial coverage in several illustration magazines.

An awards logo design was incorporated into our 2007/8 public display and we are now in the process of extending the use of this to our website and other publicity material.

Outcomes

We have achieved the following improvements in the awards since embarking on implementing our review two years ago:

- Management information available through our online entry system revealed that work was submitted from 116 publishers representing 220 individual illustrators
- A broader range of publishers entering including many more independent publishers
- Tapping into existing online communities leading to a significant increase in entries from artists themselves
- Doubling of the number of student entries to 353
- No comics artists entered the competition up until 2009 but that year they represented 11% of entries in the editorial category because of changes in entry criteria and our online publicity
- Graphic novel entries were negligible in the past but represented 17% of entries in the illustrated book category in 2009
- There is now an archive of 2,500 images on our website as a permanent and growing record of illustration styles
- Our competition entry database forms a potential model for digital collecting
- The workload involved in running the awards has reduced by approximately 75%

Future Challenges

In spite of considerable progress with our strategy for the awards we are acutely aware of a range of outstanding challenges which we still need to address including:

- Significantly improving media coverage of the awards
- Improving our management information in order to effectively test and enhance the success of the awards

- Enhancing our ability to elucidate and display contemporary illustration design processes and techniques
- Improve the location and visibility of the awards display in the museum
- Better searching of our archive through the image function of search engines
- Continue to identify means of reducing workload
- Continuing lack of a distinctive identity for the awards
- More effective system for avoiding large scale return of automated publicity emails from people who have moved jobs
- Appropriateness and range of prize categories
- The role of the awards in relation to rapidly evolving media formats and the challenges this presents in defining our role and remit

We envisage a continual programme of development and innovation to enhance the awards for the broadest range of beneficiaries.

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