

## A Touch O'Clast

We regularly strive on this page to tease or completely debunk something, either directly or at least by implication. Our targets have heretofore had well-known blemishes—what we would call “consensus foibles.” Rationales for science funding, committees that don't work, peccadilloes of language, and various other symptoms of group-bureaucratic-think make easy targets. Essentially, clay feet galore! Then, long, long ago, from far, far away (actually last year from Pittsburgh) came the call, nay the challenge, to suggest an icon to adorn our POSTERMINARIES page. It would be applied when and if the Bulletin's format is freshened by, among other ploys, the addition of departmental icons. Not having easily come up with a simple, clever, meaningful postermicon, we naturally decided it was a silly and frivolous request in the first place that deserved vigorous debunking on this very page.

A modicum of research into any superficially straightforward notion always reveals ramifications upon ramifications, muddling the best initial idea. Happy to say, the icon is a most muddled concept. How to begin? Perhaps by asking, “What do Lionel Barrymore and the little ten-by-twenty-pixel image of an envelope on your computer monitor have in common?” The answer is “both everything and nothing”—a gross equivocation originating from the bifurcation in modern times of an ancient practice. Recognition with and without respect, respectively, correspond to both icons, the idol of the silver screen and the clip-art of the PC screen.

We can hypothesize on how such a disparity evolved. Originally, we worshipped a relatively small constellation of deities each associated with particular human pursuits like harvesting, loving, warring, etc. Demand for attention from the gods far exceeded their ability to make personal appearances. Proxies were therefore devised. Graven images played stand-in for the oversubscribed originals.


Thus it was that icons and idols proliferated. You could pray to and venerate the gods of your choice through their surrogates, objects that in short order became ubiquitous. Artisans of the day became adept at creating ornate and intricate representations of each icon's particular alter ego. Today's psychologists might call the next phenomenon transference because eventually the icons themselves became objects of devotion. So long as they provided ceremonial solace to the soul and produced the requisite number of periodic miracles, all was well. In those days, the distinction between idolatry and iconolatry was academic.

There were however prophetic bumps in the road, the biggest being Emperor Leo III

who, in 726 AD, outlawed icons in religious art. He noticed that their influence was “draining thousands of men from active economic activity.”<sup>1</sup> Designers practiced on decorative mosaics for the duration and, after lifting of the ban over a century later, they hedged their bets by introducing abstractions where once the human form sufficed.

Given the limited galaxy of gods and demigods, finite venues for their pricey totems, and the yet-to-be-discovered practice of engineered obsolescence, the market for these *objet d'art et du culte* saturated. Two divergent approaches to ameliorate the flattened market evolved. First we lowered the bar from deity to include famous, estimable, to-be-emulated mere mortals. We began to venerate notable people. So vast an array of people on pedestals obviated the need for inanimate representations. They became their own icons—to wit, Attila, Julius, Leonardo, Mahatma, Lionel, J. Edgar, Elvis, Albert, Vladimir Ilyich, and not quite Bill. The bar is now so low and the secular supply so great that we not only inflate our icons but also tear them down just for fun.<sup>2</sup>

This windfall for the iconolater in no way rescued from underutilization all those adroit artisans whose high calling it was to translate our notions of the gods to iconographic representations. Their talent might have been lost to the ages had they not also lowered their bar. Many cleaved to their original themes as anyone strolling the streets around Vatican City sees in the sea of souvenir shops. Mass production of low-budget figurines has accessed a new market. Intermingled with the creches, one even encounters statuettes of late leaders and little telltale Leaning Towers.

At the same time, a diversification toward graphics for graphics sake took hold. It may have begun long before with family crests of landed gentry, but it soon blossomed to graphic representation of just about everything and every idea. Mass media and the printing press supplanted the chisel and the brush. Secular icons graduated grammatically from representing just names and nouns to imperatives like the *stop*, *no parking*, and *exit here for food* of roadside signage. For all these, adoration is not inspired and adornment is not required. Modern versions have therefore grown so cartooned, sleekly stylized, and excruciatingly abstract as to be abstruse. Take, for example, the Nike™ logo, , which conveys its message only to those already steeped in Nike™ lore, or the Bell System™ bell that rings no more.

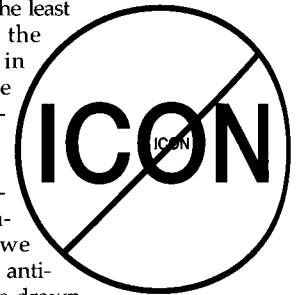
What is it about human nature that moves us to dispense with a real object in favor of its likeness and then to dispense with the likeness in favor of an oblique sym-

bol? If there were courses in representation-alism, instruction would probably begin with the lesson of Pavlov's dogs to which a mere sound meant food. Apparently we are just as easily trained to associate symbols having no logical relation to a subject with it anyway. One need not have the intellect required by metaphors to bark on cue.

Had nature been allowed to run its course, who knows if the trend toward greater abstraction would have reverted to more meaningful icons or led to the graphical icon's eventual demise? Natural selection was upset, however, by the appearance of the GUI<sup>3</sup> (pronounced *goeey*). Icons have proliferated on computer screens and, in a frightening reversal of roles, they are trying to emulate real life. They have begun to take on three-dimensional character and, unlike their idle idol progenitors, they have started to move. Even worse, these little animated proxies have become functional links and hyperlinks. Now after they evoke recognition of whatever they are supposed to represent, they can actually do something for you. In a way, they've come full circle if you regard clicking a mouse as a reverential act. The coming generation of digerati will be oblivious to the danger that millions of men glued to their screens will be drained from active economic activity and that unseemly wealth will be concentrated in a new pagan Temple of the Web. Where is Emperor Leo now when we need him most?

Where does that leave the postermicon? How can a symbol that is descendant from gods represent the least pious page of the *Bulletin*? How in good conscience can we contribute to a triumph of tool-bars and conquest by caricature? Clearly we either require an anti-icon like the one drawn here, which sends a definite, albeit iconic, message, or we need no icon at all. We choose the latter. So the next time you see a completely blank space where a dreaded icon might otherwise have been, just associate that with POSTERMINARIES.

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<sup>1</sup>James Trager, *The People's Chronology* (Henry Holt and Co., Inc., 1996).

<sup>2</sup>This is akin to dragging and dropping icons in a graphical context.

<sup>3</sup>Graphical User Interface, not to be confused with government-university-industry relations which are also goeey.