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## **Happy hearts do not hang down**

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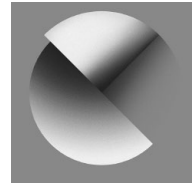
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# Happy hearts do not hang down: the design process for the 2018 Valentine's Day postage stamps of Finland

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the multimodal design process for a set of Valentine's Day postage stamps. It shows how semiotic resources were used to create the overall mood of the design. In particular, the style of the images made the general mood melancholic. During the process, the design was adapted to a commercial Valentine's Day context through changes in specific resources.

## KEYWORDS

graphic design • illustration • multimodality • postage stamp design • visual style

## INTRODUCTION

This article is a consequence of several happy incidents. In 2016, I created an art exhibition called *Fantasy Forest* for which I investigated how to generate fantasy meanings using natural elements as a starting point. I soon realized that my works had melancholic overtones. This is evident in the image of a dragonfly breaking into pieces and dying (Figure 1). The title of this work, *Last Day of September*, extends the meaning to the dying of summer. In the same year, I took part in a postage stamp contest arranged by Posti Group, Grafiä – The Association of Visual Communication Designers in Finland – and Kuvittajat – The Finnish Illustration Association. For my work for the contest (Figure 2), I used the same technique as I had used for the *Fantasy Forest* exhibition. I scanned natural elements and then manipulated them in Photoshop to make digital collages. For the Valentine's Day postage stamp, with the client and the audience in mind, I decided to use an aspen leaf cut

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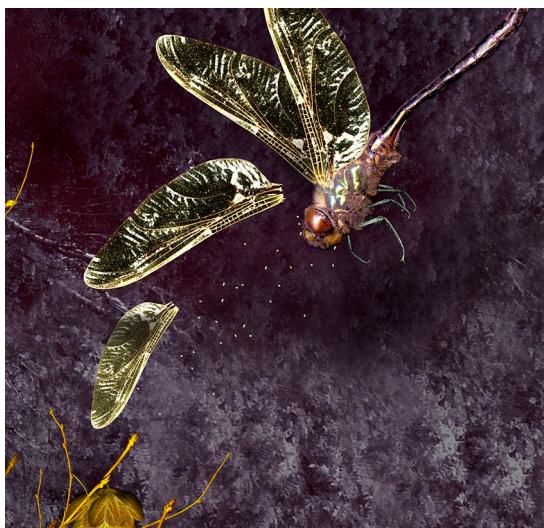
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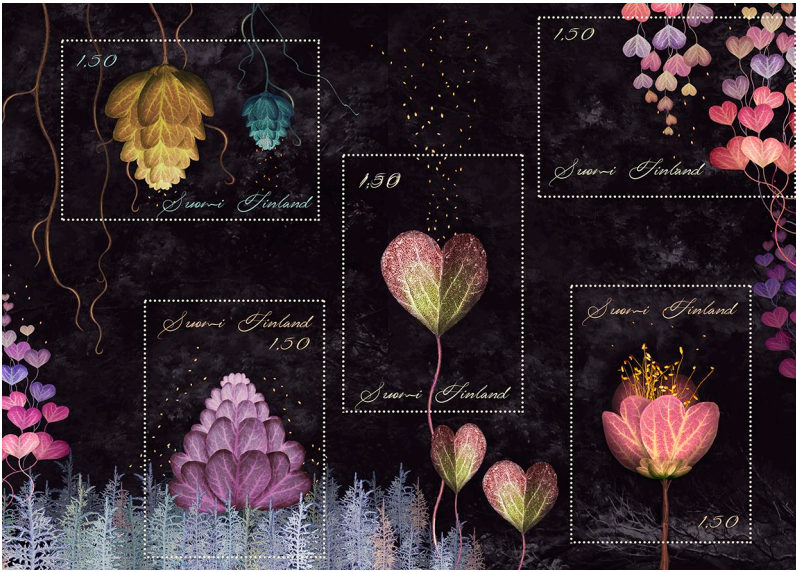


**Figure 1.** *Last Day of September* (detail, 2016). Art print. © Raappana-Luiro.

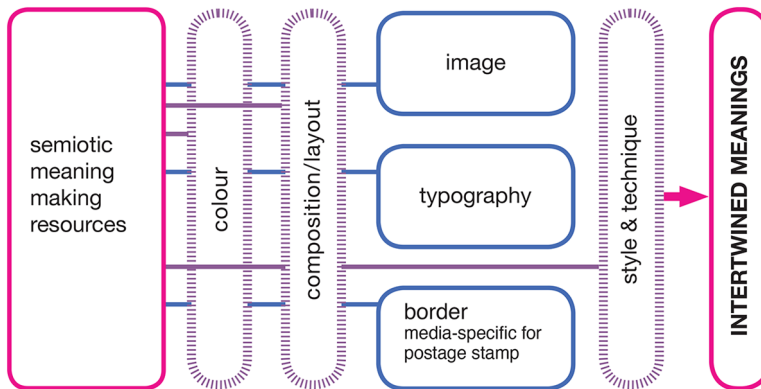
into a heart shape as the main design element and to make different kinds of flowers and plants from it. My contest work was awarded the second prize, and the jury characterized the work as ‘poetic and delicate’. As a result, I was commissioned to design the national stamps for Valentine’s Day 2018. The design process began in co-operation with the client’s design manager who consulted the art committee of Posti Group.

In terms of theory, this article draws on multimodality research (see Kress, 2010; Machin, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 2005). Semiotic resources, such as image, composition, colour and typography, are meaning making and socially constructed (Figure 3). They operate in two ways: connotation and experiential metaphor. Connotation is based on having previously seen a resource used in a different context. Experiential metaphor is connected to our human experience of things. For instance, we consider certain colours warm and certain shapes heavy or sharp. Resources interact with one another to generate ‘intertwined’ overall meanings. Picture book semiotician Perry Nodelman (1990: 37) writes of how an overall mood is conveyed by ‘predominating qualities . . . matters like the size or shape of pictures . . . the artist’s choice of medium and style, the density of texture, and the qualities of colours.’ Paying attention to choices of colour, composition, typography, style and technique, and to the selection of image subjects during the stamp design process reveals how resources are used as semiotic tools. The process also shows how style is itself a resource – the stylistic influences, personal taste and aesthetic attitude of the designer – which affects the overall mood of the design and how this mood relates to the commercial context of Valentine’s Day.

Once commissioned, I met with the client’s design manager, and later communicated through email and by telephone. At first, I was given



**Figure 2.** First adaptation of the style for the context of Valentine's Day. *Ystävyys on valo* (Friendship Shines a Light). Postage stamp contest work (2016). © Raappana-Luiri.



**Figure 3.** Multimodal meaning making in the postage stamp design process.

a relatively open brief. I was asked to make as many sketches as I wanted, including sketches unrelated to those submitted for the contest. From these, five were selected to work with. At this stage, the format of the booklet (125 x 120 mm) had been determined (Figure 4). The small size of the booklet was a technical consideration, which determined the horizontal, rectangular format of all the stamps. In principle, the stamps could have been created in any format (Figure 5) within the dimensions of the booklet, but I was somewhat attached to an old-fashioned postage stamp format. Thus, the rectangular format connotes a traditional 'stampness'. This also meant that the client's wish to emphasize the dignified role of the postage

stamp as a security document with monetary value was met. This traditional function was sustained by using a perforated border, which, nowadays, is an aesthetic relic of the earlier, purely technical practice that made stamps easily detachable from each other.



**Figure 4.** The format of the booklet affected the format and composition of the stamps. *Ystävyys on valo* (Friendship Shines a Light): a booklet of five national postage stamps for Valentine's Day 2018, Finland. © Posti, Finland. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holder.



**Figure 5.** Different formats of Finnish stamps. From the left: Wilhelm Brandstake (1875), Janine Rewell (2009) and Janne Harju (2011). Images reproduced by kind permission of the Postal Museum, Finland.



**Figure 6.** The change in format and composition in the stamp number 2. Left: working version. Right: final design. © Posti, Finland. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holder.

The size and format of the booklet meant the stamps had to be in a horizontal rather than vertical format. This technical restriction in format and composition especially changed the mood of stamp number 2 (Figure 6). My original competition work was in portrait (vertical) format, the term derived from the cultural conventions of portrait painting. Through its very nature, portraiture renders the subjective objectively visible, showing the individual essence of its object (Freeland, 2007: 95). In its upright form, plain background and symmetrical composition, the image is predominantly static: we look at the flower for what it is, rather than what it is doing, even if there is some dynamism in the stamens. This combination of format and composition tends to concentrate one's mind on contemplating the essence of the character depicted. In the new, horizontal format, I placed the flower on a slight upward angle – both to fit the flower in and avoid an unusual representation with it completely on its side. This creates a dynamic vector in the image, that is, a narrative process, giving a strong impression that the flower is bursting with life (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 46).

A significant compositional change was made for stamp number 3 (Figure 7): the client asked me to turn the design upside-down. The change demonstrates what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 186–193) write about information values in a composition, whereby the upper part of a composition is associated with the ideal and the lower part is associated with the real. The hearts were no longer hanging – from ideal towards real – but growing upwards to the ideal. Thus, melancholy changed into optimism.

In addition, I was asked to make one crucial change regarding colour: to somehow reduce the blackness of the stamps. This was achieved by changing the hue of the backgrounds from pure black to other dark hues and adding



**Figure 7.** Compositional change in stamp number 3. Above: working version. Below: final design. © Posti, Finland. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holder.

small details in other colours to the backgrounds. The size and colour saturation of the depicted objects were also increased. These changes were relatively minor, but they were important for the overall mood of the images (Figures 8 and 4). Black carries a significant historical burden. It has been the colour of death and mourning, of the devil and witchcraft, dignity and puritanism, romantic melancholy and rebellious rock culture (Pastoureau, 2008). Thus, the potential associations with mourning and the melancholic mood gave way to more positive associations. Saturated colours strengthened the positive, happy mood, but their luminous contrast with the dark background also created a sense of hyperreality (Van Leeuwen, 2011: 60–63). I also strove to explain the darkness of the backgrounds through the verbal mode by giving the title *Friendship Shines a Light* to the whole collection.

In the choice of typography, I had no aesthetic constraints, as had been the case previously with the choice of images, so I experimented with different typefaces in a relatively unprejudiced manner (Figure 9, from top to bottom).



**Figure 8.** Changes in colour. Above: Working version, stamp number 5. Below: Final design. © Posti, Finland. Reproduced by kind permission of the copyright holder.

My first idea was to use the script style font *Spirulina*, to organically blend with the images. Moreover, I wanted to connote handwriting, the personal, material act of writing (see also Skaggs, 2017: 193–194). This suggestion was rejected because of insufficient legibility. Next, I tried *Trajan Pro*, a traditional and formal Roman capital typeface, but this has been somewhat ‘exhausted’ in movie posters over the past number of decades. The client suggested trying some sans serif fonts. After several experiments, I selected *Skia*, a humanist sans serif font based on ancient Greek letterforms. Sans serif also has connotations with modernism, which rejected serifs. Therefore, the typography creates a traditional but slightly modern mood and provides a refreshing contrast to the detailed richness of the images.

In representational images, what is depicted naturally has an important effect on meaning. Some of my own favourite ideas – depicting a giant cabbage-like ‘lantern’ (Figure 2, bottom left), surrealistic dragonfly wings, or a painterly landscape with a heart-shaped group of golden motes – were not selected.





**Figure 9.** Typography. Fonts from the top: *Spirulina*. Designed by Intellecta Design. Available at: <https://www.creativefabrica.com/product/spirulina/> (accessed 12 January 2019); *Trajan Pro* (1989), designed for Adobe by Carol Twombly and Robert Slimbach; *Skia* (1994), designed for Apple Computer by Matthew Carter. *Skia* was used in the final design.

The client regarded them as too ‘artistic’ for Valentine’s Day. Concerning colours, they were also the most bluish and hence, metaphorically, the coldest (see also Van Leeuwen, 2011: 63–64). The conventional imagery of Valentine’s Day – hearts and flowers in warm colours – was preferred.

According to Nodelman (1990: 59–61), style is not a separable quality: ‘It is the name we give to the effect of all the aspects of a work of art considered together.’ Style includes both the content of the image, what is presented, and the form of the image, how that content is presented. Illustrators must adapt their styles to different contexts rather than express their personal, individual styles. In this, they often borrow stylistic features or take inspiration from certain artists or periods. They use them by way of connotation: ‘Because styles speak so strongly of the values of those who originated them, illustrators who borrow them may even evoke ideas and attitudes of which they are not themselves consciously aware’ (p. 64). The contest judges’ description of the work as ‘poetic and delicate’ can be regarded as the overall mood of the design. I have always preferred music in a minor scale and novels with ambiguous endings. And, above all, I have got inspiration for my work from art history. As a designer, I have a ‘sedimented’ visual store in my memory of images that I like and that have touched me somehow. Some of them have lasted and gained the status of ‘classics’ for me. As a child, I used

to look at the illustrations in my grandfather's old natural history books. I remember that I especially admired the works of Ernst Haeckel. Even though they depicted real natural creatures, they were so colourful and detailed that they became more fantasy than real. Something similar happened when, as a young art student, I encountered Dutch still lifes from the 17th century. I cannot specify particular works by Haeckel or even particular artists of Dutch Realism. It was the overall mood of those works that affected me: the dramatic lighting and its contrast with the dark backgrounds, the colours and materiality of their objects and their old-fashioned style. Even before I learned of the function of still lifes as vanitas, I felt the mood of melancholy in them. Historical experience, as such, conveys melancholy:

This feeling of despair . . . may have been occasioned by a work of art, a poem, or by what has provoked a historical experience, all of these are at the same time experienced as a reminder of the unattainability of all the world and of the past. (Ankersmit, 2005: 178)

My sources of inspiration also influenced the mood of the stamps: the dark backgrounds, the intense colours, the accuracy of the details and the dramatic lighting make the modality of images 'more than real' (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 160; Machin, 2016: 61). The technique used in the illustrations enabled me to achieve this hyperreality. It was possible to get extremely accurate enlargements of the natural objects by scanning them in high resolution. During the process, I made the images more and more richly detailed, adding dramatic illumination and three-dimensionality in Photoshop.

From a multimodal perspective, the use of certain resources in certain ways stems from social interactions and lifestyles, through which feelings and attitudes are shared within a certain group of people (Van Leeuwen, 2005: 144–145). This is also the case with my proclivity for history and melancholy: I am not alone. The mood of the stamps can be seen in the wider context of postmodern nostalgia and melancholy, especially with regard to its sentimental, emotional orientation and even kitsch (Cervellon and Brown, 2018; Solomon, 1991).

## **CONCLUSION**

After Christmas, Valentine's Day is the most important sales season for postage stamps in Finland. Designing the final set of five postage stamps (Figure 4) took nearly one year. The stamps were commercially successful: both of the two editions sold out. The melancholic mood that I had freely created in the context of the art exhibition and then transferred to the stamp designs generated an interesting thematic combination of love, friendship and melancholy. This mood was adapted to match the context through changes in resources. The stylistic influences are still visible and make an important contribution to the overall meaning, which 'softened' from ambiguous melancholy to more joyful

fantasy with nostalgic undertones. The elements of tradition were incorporated through typography and the border design.

This project made visible, how, in a commercial context – rather than a purely artistic one – the use of resources is more controlled, and the meanings produced are more conventional and unambiguous. There are many aspects of the design process that more or less depend on the intuition and personality of the designer. However, designers must have sensitive antennae for what is in the air in terms of culture and lifestyle. The main purchasers of Valentine's Day stamps are middle-aged women (Elkelä, 2017). These stamps – in their luminous shades of pink and gold and their open-minded appeal to emotive beauty – seem to touch many women of the post-feminist era (see also Koller, 2008). How these emotive, affective moods are construed in multimodal designs is worthy of further investigation.

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

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