

## **WHAT IS AN EDITORIAL CARTOON?**

An editorial cartoon is an illustration which is designed to convey a social or political message. This art form dates back to at least the 1500s in European culture, and it is considered an important part of visual expression in much of the West. Editorial cartoons are often found on the editorial pages of newspapers and magazines, and they also sometimes appear in the comics section, or as standalone illustrations: the British artist Banksy, for example, has produced works which could arguably be considered editorial cartoons on walls, streets, and buildings all over the world.

Defining an editorial cartoon is a bit tricky, as a lot of art has a political or social overtone, since artists do not work in a vacuum. Cartoons themselves are a bit nebulous, as the term “cartoon” can refer to a simple single-panel illustration, or a running series of strips which narrate an ongoing story. As a general rule, cartoons are simple line drawings, usually with a humorous edge, which may be captioned or left untitled, depending on the taste of the artist. Cartoons are also designed to stand alone as works of art, needing no guidance from an interpreter to be understood.

The goal of an editorial cartoon is to send a clear message, using images which will be familiar to all of the people in a society. Editorial cartooning relies heavily upon the use of caricature and simple visual images which are instantly recognizable to readers, with various visual symbols standing in for complex political and/or social concepts. For example, in a cartoon about pollution, the artist might use a sketch of the Earth crying, trusting readers to understand that the cartoon is supposed to reflect the fact that the environmental situation is dire enough to make even the planet sad.

Irony and satire are heavily used in editorial cartoons, and no public figure or concept is sacred. Sitting Presidents, religious officials, monarchs, gods, and even the editor of the very newspaper the cartoon is published in may be featured in an editorial cartoon. Sometimes, editorial cartoons can become very controversial, especially when they deal with heated political issues, or when the drawing veers in the direction of crude, rather than subtle.

In countries where the freedom of the press is protected, this protection extends to editorial cartoons, with cartoons being viewed as a viable mode of personal expression. Even in these nations, editorial cartoons can cause an

uproar, as in Denmark in 2005 when a series of cartoons featuring the Muslim prophet Muhammad resulted in a global outcry. In regions where such freedoms are not extended, people can get into serious trouble with an editorial cartoon, especially one which lampoons a nation's leader.

One interesting thing about editorial cartoons is how heavily they rely on public culture and the common vernacular. Examining political cartoons produced in your own society 50 to 75 years ago can sometimes be deeply puzzling, as the figures and symbols may be totally unrecognizable, making the intent of the cartoon unclear. Looking at editorial cartoons from other countries can sometimes be equally mystifying, as these cartoons reference public figures and events which may only really be well known in their native country. Other editorial cartoons, such as the classic American cartoon featuring J.P. Morgan sitting on piles of money, are universally understandable, even if the identity of the fat top-hatted man is unclear.