SKULL OPTICAL ILLUSIONS
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Virtual Museum of Optical Illusions
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INTRODUCTION

The metamorphic skull has always been one of the most popular optical illusions. From the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, artists and designers have been using this kind of image in postcards, comics, advertisements or covers.

In this exhibit we are showing more than fifty examples of this kind of illusion. We would like to start with the origins of skull illusion. \textit{All is vanity}, the image designed by Charles Allan Gilbert, has always been considered the first skull illusion ever. However, our research shows that \textit{Blosson and Decay}, published in 1860 according to several sources, might be the oldest. Many other skull illusion postcards were published in the first decades of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, most of them included in the exhibit.

Skull illusions have also been used for all kinds of graphic works. There are numerous examples of pulp magazine covers, satiric posters and, in the last years, cd covers or movie posters which show them. Lots of contemporary artists, some of them present in this exhibit, have also worked with these illusions. A special mention should be made here to the work by Istvan Orosz, who has made up the most impressive collection of this kind of illusions.

Other works, which haven´t been included in this exhibit, deserve to be mentioned here: the artworks by Octavio Ocampo and Salvador Dalí and other graphic examples used in covers or ads.

We must be very grateful to the collaboration of the artists, right owners and collectors who have given us permission to publish their artworks.
The origin of skull illusions
This anonymous skull image, *Blossom and Decay*, was published by J. K. Defeher in 1860 and lithographed by Day and Sons (courtesy of the Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture, University of Exeter, UK).
Three other versions of *Blossom and Decay*: a German picture puzzle, anonymous, 19th century (figure 2), a carte de visite published by Golden & Sammons of Chicago (figure 3) and an old postcard (figure 4).
All is vanity was created by Charles Allan Gilbert (1873-1929), an American illustrator.

A woman looking at the mirror makes up a skull with her own reflection.

The date of the illusion is probably around 1892. It has been widely imitated, even in advertising.
L’Amour de Pierrot (circa 1905) shows love between Pierrot and Colombine. This is one of the most famous and beautiful examples in the skull illusions history.
This beautiful illusion was created by Bernhard Gutmann (1869-1936), a painter born German who worked in America. The postcard is called *In the midst of life we are in death* and was published in 1905 by Gutmann & Gutmann, the company he owned with his brother Hellmuth, married with the artist Bessie Collins Pease Gutmann.
Judge Magazine, in the issue of May 19th, 1894 included a very good example of skull illusion (figure 8). The text on the cover was Death to our industries!, and referred to the Wilson-Gorman tariff of that year. Right, the back cover of a Pchela Magazine issue (1906).
Skull illusion postcards
This picture, with the two little children and their puppy, is a very well known example. It appeared with different titles, such *Then & Now* or, as seen in the advertising on the right, *The beginning and the end of life*. There’s not much information about the artist, but the name Baltgheim appears in some references.
Different versions of classic skull optical illusions were published in Japan at the beginning of the 20th century. These postcards (circa 1910) show versions of *All is vanity* (figure 12) and *L’Amour de Pierrot* (figure 13), respectively.
Two French postcards: left (figure 14), two ladies meet in *Au revoir*! Right (figure 15), the terrible journey of *Tête de mort*. 
Three examples where the skull is formed with two people, one facing each other. There’s not much more information about them, but they were all created in the first half of the 20th century. There’s a black and white version of the one above (figure 16) with some differences with the coloured one.
Two versions of the “death car”. On the postcard of the left, from 1910, we can read *Automobile, the course of death*. We can compare it with the Russian version, on the right, also from the early 20th century.
A final collection of vintage postcards. As usual, you might find other versions of these illusions somewhere else. In fact, the two metamorphic skulls (figures 21 and 22) are similar. There exists, also, a Japanese version of the two children’s skull (figure 23). The images on the left (the woman on her bed and the woman with her baby) use more original illusions.
Graphic design
Several skull illusions appeared in pulp magazines during the first half of the 20th century. Norman Saunders was the author of the cover of the *All Detective Magazine* October 1933 issue (figure 28). In May 1935 The Shadow Magazine published the novel *The third skull* with a hidden skull on the cover (figure 29). John Drew was the cover artist of the illusion from *Best Detective Magazine*, February 1932 (figure 30).
Two covers (from August 1946 and June 1952) of *Famous Fantastic Mysteries* magazine. Lawrence Sterne Stevens is the author of both artworks.
Two recent skull covers: a work by Owen Smith (figure 33), originally published in the November 2000 issue of *The New Yorker* and, on the right, the advertisement created by the Calder Bateman agency for the *Mothers Against Drunk Driving* association in May 2007.
Istvan Orosz
Istvan Orosz is a Hungarian artist, known by his optical illusions, impossible figures and anamorphosis. From 1999 to 2004 he designed three posters for the satire *The ships of fools*, all of them composed of skull optical illusions. On the next pages you can see the three posters and some of the skull illusions.
The Ship of Fools XLV (figure 38)
The Ship of Fools XXVIII (figure 39)
Above, *The Ship of Fools XVII* (figure 40). Right, the last three skulls presented in a smaller size to show the strong illusion effect.
Contemporary artists
Robert Butters is an American artist fascinated by art connected to experiments in visual perception, like the work by M.C. Escher or Salvador Dalí. So, his work pretends to shock the viewer's senses, as it happens with his skull illusions. Above, *Reflection* (figure 48) and *Trouble Ahead* (figure 49).
Dance of the dead (Robert Butters)
Norbert Jung, German painter, has created several skull illusions. Some of them are based on the engravings by Albrecht Dürer. Left, you can see Jung’s skull version (figure 51) of the original Dürer work (figure 52). The other Jung version (figure 53) shows an unusual example of two skull illusions in a single work.
Two skull illusions by the English artist Trevor Brown. The one above was used in Coil’s *The Unreleased Themes for Hellraiser* EP. Right, a recent work by the author.
Figure 58

Figure 59

Left, a great skull artwork by Eddie Yuen, a collage artist, illustrator and designer based in Hong Kong. Right, *Death*, by the American artist Saratoga Sake.
Figure 1. Bill Douglas Centre for the History of Cinema and Popular Culture, University of Exeter.

Figure 3. Wikimedia Commons. From Eugen von Philippovich, *Kuriositäten/Antiquitäten*.

Figures 4, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14. Juan Luis Roldán (private collection).

Figure 20. Collection of Steven Weiss. [http://bennyspostcards.com/](http://bennyspostcards.com/)

Figure 33. Owen Smith. Originally published in The New Yorker.

Figure 34. Calder Bateman Agency.

Figures 35 to 47. Istvan Orosz. [http://www.utisz.net/](http://www.utisz.net/)

Figures 48 to 50. Robert Butters.


Figure 54. John Coulthart.


Figures 56, 57. Trevor Brown.

Figure 58. Eddie Yun.

Figure 59. Saratoga Sake.