

## Guest editorial

### The two faces of Rex Whistler (1905–1944)

Reginald John ('Rex') Whistler (figure 1) is perhaps best remembered for his witty representations of two faces in a single picture, although these were not seen by him to reflect his most important work. His upside-down drawings hardly feature in his brother's account of his life and drawings (L Whistler 1948). For example, there is a Whistler restaurant in the Tate Britain art gallery, London, which contains a large mural he painted when only a young man. He also illustrated books, designed stage sets and was noted for his trompe l'oeil paintings. Nonetheless, it is his upright/inverted faces that have proved most intriguing to students of perception. The two faces typically share eyes but the inverted one is generally unrecognisable until the design is itself inverted. Many of his drawings had their origins as advertisements and, unlike the upright/inverted portrait of Whistler shown in figure 1, the two faces were quite different (see Whistler and Whistler 1946, 1978).



**Figure 1.** *Two Faces of Rex Whistler* by Nicholas Wade. The illustration was derived from a self-portrait drawing in L Whistler (1948).

His brother, Laurence, was an artist, too, and he remarked that Rex first saw an illustration of an inverted face in 1930 when visiting his publishers. It was a frontispiece engraving in a book by Pierre Bérault (1680); it represented “a drawing of the Pope, very smooth and smiling, which, when turned the other way up, proved His Holiness to be entirely repellent and (evidently) heretick” (Whistler and Whistler 1978, page numbers are not given in the book because, like the earlier *¡OHO!*, it can be read upright or inverted!). Bérault was drawing on a rich seam of pictorial satire that

had then been practised for some time. For example, a painting from around 1600 (a detail of which is reproduced in figure 2, centre) plays on the theme of the contrast between the Pope and the Devil, depending upon the orientation of the picture. An even earlier illustration sought to contrast arrogance and folly (figure 2, left), and a slightly later one playing on the same theme is shown in figure 2, right. In each of these orientationally duplicitous figures, the mouth is shared by both faces: the nose in the upright version defines the chin in the inverted one, and vice versa. Whistler did not use this graphical device in his published pictures: either a single eye or both eyes were the common features of the upright and inverted heads. Occasionally, in profiles the nose was shared by both faces.

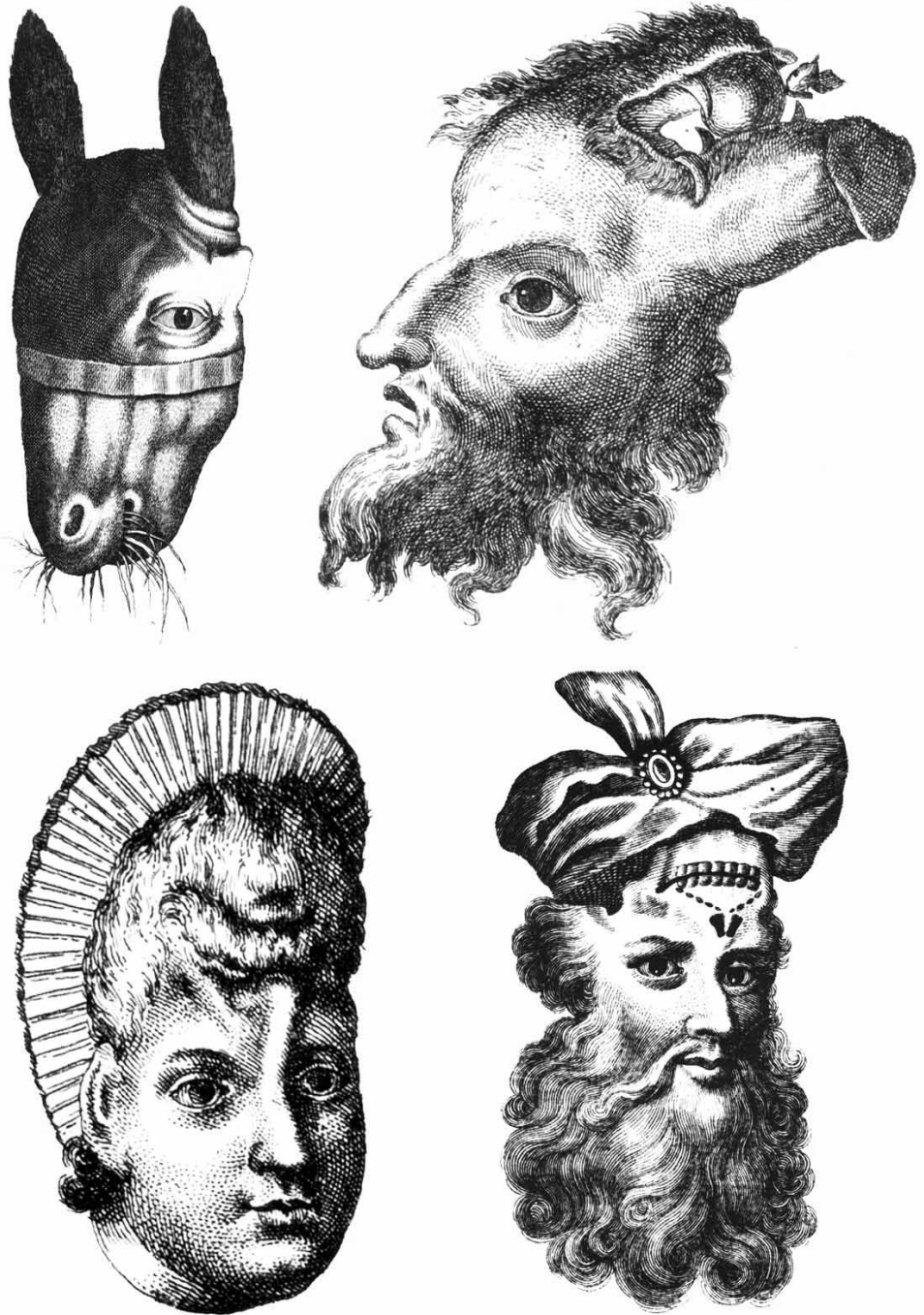


**Figure 2.** Left, detail of a 1558 engraving by Theodor de Bry entitled *Arrogance and Folly*. Centre, detail of an upright/inverted head from 1600, derived from a painting by an anonymous artist entitled *Double Head of Pope and Devil*. Right, detail of an engraving for an official seal from 1626 representing wisdom and foolishness. (Derived from the collection of Werner Nekes).

The upright/inverted face theme was expanded upon in the seventeenth century, and an Italian artist showed that it was even possible to cross the species and gender barriers (figure 3). In each of the four examples shown, the eye or eyes are shared by the faces in both orientations. Since this applied to many of Whistler's drawings, it is probable that the illustration by Bérault that he saw in 1930 was of this type. We have been unable to confirm this, because Bérault's book is rare and the copy of it in the British Library is devoid of a frontispiece. The same applies to his later, and equally provocatively entitled, book *The Church of England Evidently Proved the Holy Catholic Church* (Bérault 1683). Whistler's main attraction was to the visual trick in Bérault's picture but he was also delighted "by the mockery of a pompous and authoritarian figure" (Whistler and Whistler 1978), be it drawn from religion or royalty.

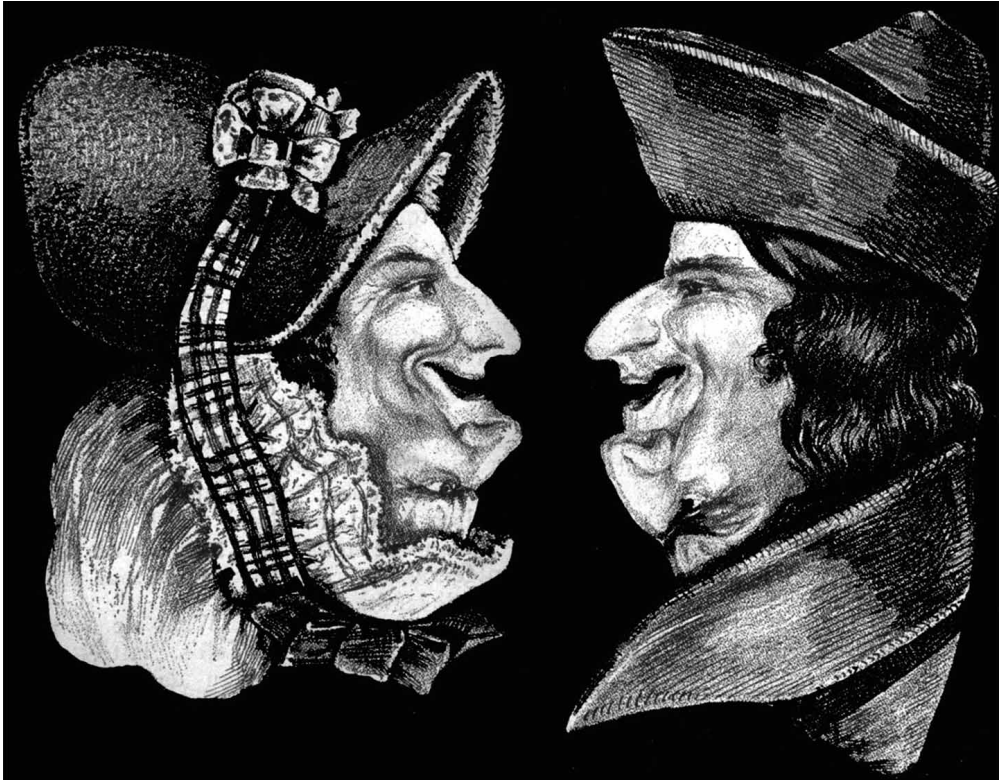
An even earlier example of an upright/inverted face sharing eyes is a second century Roman beaker displayed in the Budapest History Museum (see Wade et al 2003). As is the case for the graphically ambiguous faces shown here, the upright face modelled on the surface of the pottery beaker is easy to see whereas the inverted one is difficult (colour illustrations of the beaker can be seen at <http://www.perceptionweb.com/misc/p3201ed/p3201edc.pdf>). Inverting either the picture or beaker reverses the ease with which one of the alternatives can be seen. This provides further evidence of the perceptual sophistication of Roman potters and mosaic artists—they produced works which captured many of the perceptual principles that were rediscovered in the twentieth century, particularly by Gestalt psychologists (Wade 2004).

Whistler did not include variations in which a mouth was common to both upright and inverted heads, which is surprising because the patterning of the open lips defines a positive or negative expression of a face. This was the graphical source of early examples (like those shown in figure 2) and it was returned to in some nineteenth century



**Figure 3.** Four engravings from around 1700 by an Italian artist called Giuseppe. In the upper two, animals and humans are incorporated in the same illustrations, whereas that in the lower left changes gender. The figure in the lower right is a *Memento mori*. (Derived from copperplate engravings in the collection of Werner Nekes.)

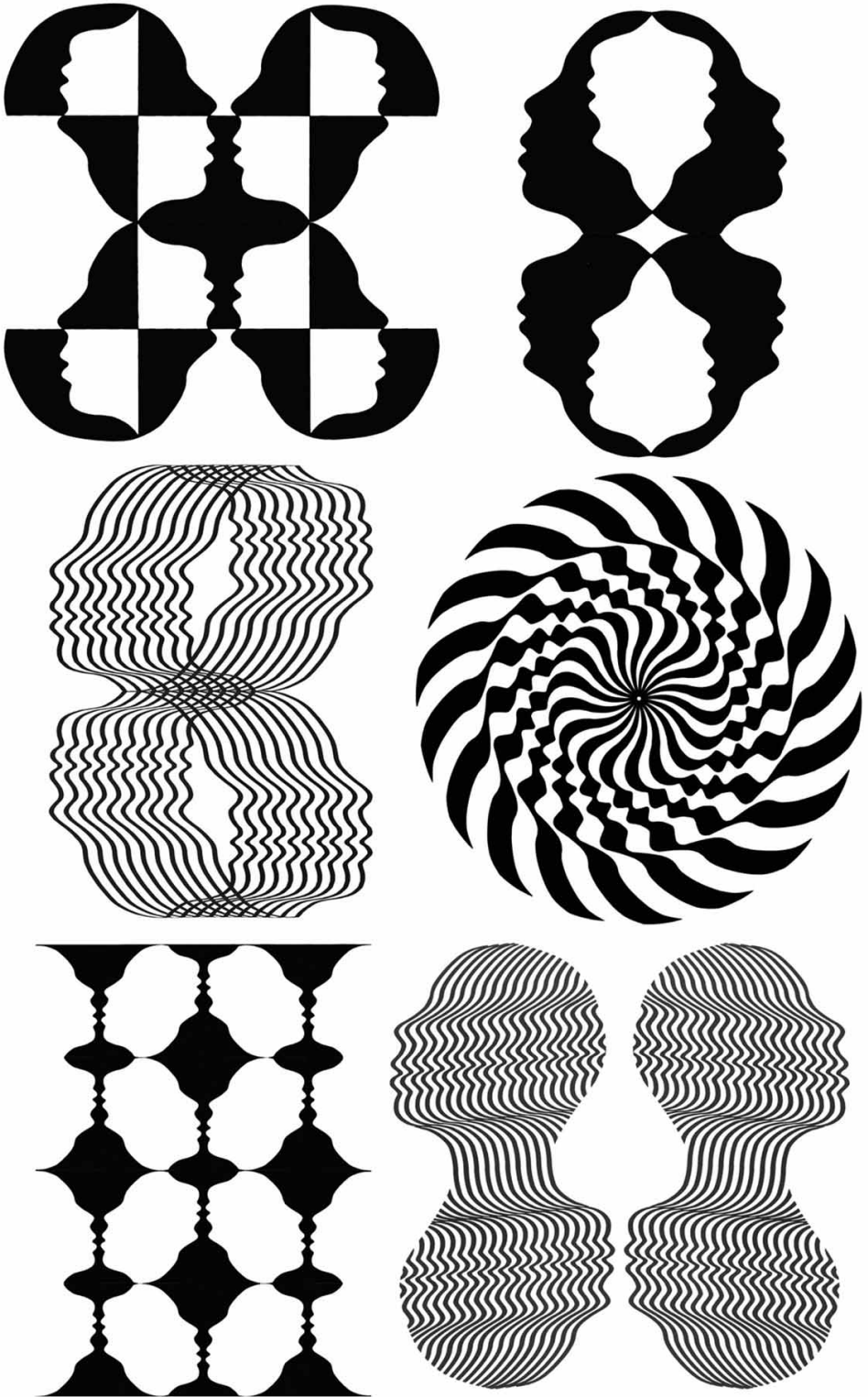
prints (see Mannoni et al 2004). The paired two-faced profiles in figure 4 make a somewhat caustic commentary on the course of love by using this device. The smiles attendant upon the young faces during courtship are transformed into wizened whingeing following marriage!



**Figure 4.** A Belgian lithograph from 1884 by an unknown artist; it is entitled *Courtship and Matrimony*. (From the collection of Werner Nekes.)

Pictorial ambiguities involving multiple interpretations were made explicit by many eighteenth century painters. An example is an engraving by Pierre Crussaire entitled the *Mysterious Urn*; it depicted a vase defined by two different profiles, with additional profiles in the foliage of a tree. The phenomenon resurfaced in the psychological domain in the early twentieth century with Rubin's vase/faces motif. Many similar perceptual ambiguities are dependent on the lost dimension of pictures—depth (Wade 2005). It introduces uncertainty in our vision, and this uncertainty is evidenced in the fluctuations in apparent depth that ensue. It is not clear whether the duplicities of orientation should be called ambiguities and they are not so readily open to interpretation. The duplicities can also be represented in pictorial images that share the more traditional alternations and ambiguities of perception. Figure 5 shows six designs that conflate the perceptual possibilities of ambiguity and inversion. None contain representations of eyes, which are common to all the upright and inverted figures shown above; all consist of upright and inverted profiles, but the upright ones are much more readily discerned than equivalent inverted contours.

A feature that Rex Whistler added to the upside-down genre of visual trickery was the combination of jovial and jaundiced expressions in the same drawing (two examples are given in figure 6). This was achieved not only by manipulating the shape of the mouth but also by the location of the eyes in the orbits: the unhappy face is generally accompanied by upwardly directed eyes, with the reverse for the happy face. The location of the eyes also influences the conformation of the brows, which is an additional facial correlate of the two expressions. As Charles Bell (1774–1842) observed in his book *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression*: “The most moveable and expressive features are the inner extremity of the eyebrow and the angle of the mouth”



**Figure 5.** *Profile axes* by Nicholas Wade. Six designs, each of which has upright and inverted profiles. In some instances (like top and bottom left) variations on the ambiguous vase/faces motif are played, but the upright versions are easier to see than the inverted ones.



**Figure 6.** Two of Rex Whistler's upright/inverted faces from *¡OHO!* (Whistler and Whistler 1946). (1883, page 126). These were moved by muscles 'which indicate emotions and sympathies of which the lower animals are not susceptible' (page 126).

Rex Whistler was noted for his whimsy. He was expelled from the Royal Academy School because of his light-hearted approach to painting and he continued his studies at the Slade School of Art. During World War II he became a tank commander with the Welsh Guards and was killed on July 18, 1944 on his first day in France. The two-faced figures reflected Rex Whistler's views of the human condition. In *¡AHA!* Laurence Whistler (who supplied words to Rex's drawings) summarised this succinctly. The book starts at both ends, upright and inverted: one commences with the words "A cheerful notion of humanity" whereas its inverted counterpart sets out with "A sour view of mankind"!

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