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# UNIVERSAL APPROACH TO CHARACTER DESIGN

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## Abstract

This paper serves as an introduction to the field of character design and is the first part of an ongoing exploration of this topic. It follows the approach of practice-led research and proposes the strategy of visual observation as a method for data collection. Through this approach, the "character map" was developed, which records the variety of visual characters and the mediums in which they are presented, providing a comprehensive overview of the field of character design. The characters are not limited to the conventional mediums such as animation, comics, and video games, but are extended to other forms of visual arts and visual communication. Overall, the paper concludes that character design is a multidimensional and multifunctional field that, due to its breadth, can be considered as an autonomous artistic domain with a variety of applications.

**Key-words:** Character design, Observation, art forms

## 1. Introduction

The present study constitutes an introduction to the field of character design and production and represents the first part of an ongoing research on the subject. In order to thoroughly address all aspects of the topic, further analysis and expansion are required. Within Greek literature, there appears to be a lack of significant research findings related to character design. More broadly, as Wang highlights, character design is not frequently the focus of academic research, although there is literature primarily emphasizing media such as animation and comics, which relate to the study of character design (Wang, 2018). A critical stimulus for shaping and exploring the topic was the establishment of a community centered around character design and art, with the international platform Pictoplasma functioning as a collaborative space. This platform promotes dialogue and interaction among professionals and researchers, encouraging the exploration and development of contemporary character design, as well as its integration into various forms of art and visual communication. Based on the above, the research questions arising focus on the following: *What is the scope of the field of character design? Do characters appear exclusively in media such as animation, comics, or video games, or are they also found in other forms of visual arts and communication? What are the functions and uses of characters across different forms of visual communication? In what ways do they influence narrative, emotional engagement, recognizability, and other aspects of visual language and communication? How are the aesthetics and form of characters shaped according to the medium in which they are developed and the identity of the artist? Are there differentiated design orientations for animation, comics, games, digital media, etc.?*

According to the research questions posed, the objective of this study is to investigate and map, to the fullest extent possible, all forms of visual characters that appear across various expressions of visual arts and visual communication media. The study focuses on examining the dimensions of the visual character, covering most of the cases in which he or she appears, with the aim of achieving a comprehensive and holistic understanding of the topic. To address the research questions, practice-related research was adopted. However, two types of practice-related research can be perceived: practice-based research and practice-led research (Candy, 2006). In this study, the practice-led approach was followed, which focuses on the nature of practice and aims to generate new knowledge that is functionally significant to the practice itself. The primary goal of the research is to advance knowledge related to the practice or to enhance knowledge within the practice (Candy, 2006), in this case referring to the practices followed by artists in character design within specific media. Practice-led research in the fields of Art, Design, and Architecture is a fundamental activity that is continuously increasing. This approach has a positive effect on the academic culture of relevant departments, as academic professionals often perceive it as the primary means of conducting research. Consequently, it is regarded as a crucial tool for strengthening and advancing the academic fields of Art, Design, and Architecture (Rust, Mottram & Till, 2007). The main feature of practice-led research is the intention or need to create artifacts and present them as part of the "response" to the research questions initially posed. In this sense, practice-led research differs from many other approaches, as it does not merely use artifacts as evidence but attempts to present the artifacts created during the research process as arguments. However, artifacts alone cannot embody knowledge; therefore, no knowledge is embedded in the object until it is interpreted (Biggs, 2002). As Ασλανίδου (2023, p.249) states: *"Artifacts are objects created by societies and cultures for private use. They provide indications and evidence related to the materials of the past, which they document and record [...]. Examples of such artifacts include photographs, tools, buildings, toys, ceramics, jewelry, clothing, weapons, painting, furniture, etc. In terms of function, they may be religious, artistic, technological, or functional."* In the context of the study, a systematic approach was proposed for the interpretation of artifacts, based on a series of coordinated processes, referred to as Visual Observation (VO). However, for VO to function effectively, it relies on visual language. Although art as a means of expression and communication has existed since prehistoric times, its systematic study as a "language" was developed to a greater extent mainly during the period of contemporary art. Initially, humans created art and then proceeded to analyze it. This analysis constitutes a theoretical investigation evolving through a series of logical reasoning processes (Ντίνια-Μπούνταλη, 2011). There exists a visual syntax that includes guidelines for image composition and fundamental elements, as well as techniques for the creation of clear visual messages. Understanding these elements enables more effective decoding of visual messages. Despite its complexity, visual syntax is definable (Dondis, 2002). From the perspective of expressive capability, an artwork consists of two fundamental elements: form and content. Form refers to the external and visible part of the artwork, including its material properties (shape, colour, imagery, material qualities, volume, space, etc.), while content refers to the emotional or, according to some, ideological component of the artwork (Κάνιστρα, 1991). Another essential element is the technique used in the creation of the artwork, as it contributes to shaping the emotional impact and significantly determines its final form (Μπενάκη & Τσιούρης, 2015). The practical part of the study was analyzed in depth through the use of VO, examining the artifacts in relation to their form, content, and technique. Through VO, with a focus on visual

characters, and through categorization, comparison, and critical analysis of sources, the different aspects of the topic are presented and examined.

## 2. Character Design

Character Design is a process in which the creator/designer acquires “divine qualities”, as they “shape” and create from nothing a being that is not generated through a casting process, like actors in cinema or television. The life of this being, the hero, consists on the one hand of their biography, their internal life (from the moment of birth to the moment they begin to appear in a film), and on the other of their external life, which concerns their actions during their on-screen presence (Κυριακουλάκος, 2018). In visual arts, character design represents a comprehensive proposal for shaping the aesthetics, personality, behaviour and overall visual appearance of a character or hero, usually as a vehicle for storytelling. Therefore, design focuses on two main directions: the internal life of the character and their external form (Χατζήπαπας & Τηλιγάδης, 2022). A character must be a harmonious combination of visual appearance and internal characteristics. Although well-designed visual representations significantly contribute to the audience’s first impression, if the character lacks something beyond a pleasant external image, the viewer's interest may decrease. To maintain the character's appeal and memorability, the creator must also consider how the character moves, expresses himself and interacts with other characters (Nieminen, 2017). Even after the design is completed, the character carries responsibilities, primarily regarding behaviour. They must respect the elements assigned to them, remain consistent and “struggle” daily for their establishment (Μπαρτζώκας, 2010). Character design is, therefore, a challenging and highly demanding process, forming an autonomous visual research field with multiple uses and applications (Χατζήπαπας & Τηλιγάδης, 2022). When referring to the art of animation, Βασιλειάδης (2006) makes some observations concerning characters. Characters consist of various types that are self-existent, possessing their own identity, distinctive flexibility and plasticity. In reality, they are not a copy but a distortion and caricature of real types. As Gombrich (1995, p.391) states, “The invention of caricature presupposes the theoretical discovery of the difference between resemblance and equivalence.” It should be emphasised, however, that the most essential and dominant element of the characters is neither lost nor altered, as they are uniquely created by the artist (Βασιλειάδης, 2006). As Κωνσταντινίδου - Σεμόγλου (2001, p.91) explains: *“In the artist’s effort to convey precision, certain graphic characteristics are either exaggerated or minimised in order to give greater importance and meaning to their designs. [...] Caricature, as the art of feature distortion, serves a comprehensive spirit and provides information through externalisation.”* Most authors refer to caricature as a means of expressing a specific intention. For example, in theatre, the actor performing a role does not fully identify with it, whereas caricature, when embodying a role, becomes identical to it. The distortion may be intentional, as it contains the creator’s intention to convince us that the hero must possess the specific characteristics. Through caricature, the specification of characters or heroes does not address only their internal nature or actions but also indirectly affects their external appearance. Characters or heroes do not always appear with the same behaviour but do appear with consistent visual traits. A representative example is Lucky Luke, with the red neckerchief, wide-brimmed hat and large revolver, a figure so distinctive that it can be immediately recognised despite numerous imitations (Κωνσταντίνου - Σεμόγλου, 2001). Finally, another observation made by Βασιλειάδης (2006), regarding animation characters is the tendency toward exaggeration, magnification and emphasis in presentation. The distinctive characteristics of characters (eccentricity, human

weakness, naivety, cunning, etc.) are highlighted, driven by psychological and aesthetic reasons (Βασιλειάδης, 2006). Moreover, simplification also occurs, imposed by the genre and the necessity of graphic economy (Βασιλειάδης, 2006). In conclusion, characters maintain their core traits, with consistent visual elements that make them recognisable. Despite exaggerations or distortions, whether relating to personality or appearance, the essential characteristics remain unchanged, making the character unique. These distortions are not accidental but necessary for the effective transmission of the message, enhancing psychological and aesthetic impact. The simplification of graphic elements serves the comprehension and functional efficiency of the character.

### **3. Methodological Approach to Visual Character Identification**

In this study, a practice-led research approach was followed, aiming to generate new knowledge with direct application to practice itself. The proposed strategy is based on Visual Observation (VO) as a method of data collection. For VO to be effective, it is essential that researchers, who in this case are also the observers, possess both theoretical and empirical knowledge of visual language. Therefore, theoretical grounding is necessary, always combined with practical and experiential experience in the fields of visual arts, design, etc. Art as a whole is generally accepted as a form of human communication, a product of human action that begins with the senses and is primarily addressed to them. Visual arts belong exclusively to the domain of visual communication and primarily appeal to the eyes (Κοζάκου -Τσιάρα, 2006). Our vision functions continuously, focusing and selecting among all that surrounds us. We only see what we choose to see, and this process is an active act that determines what is perceived. Our gaze constantly explores, moves, and creates a conceptual circle that includes everything we recognise as present in our lives (Berger, 1993). As Zeki accurately notes, “vision is an active process during which the brain, in search of knowledge of the visual world, rejects, selects, and by comparing selected information with stored records, creates the visual image, a process that strikingly resembles what an artist does” (Zeki, 2002, p.29). Observation as a data collection strategy constitutes a tool of social research that attempts to record, in a relatively systematic way, the behaviours and reactions of individuals within their social environment. The observer strives to keep organised notes from their experience and present them as objectively as possible (Κεδράκα, 2009). In VO, however, it is not the behaviours of individuals or groups that are observed, but rather the artifacts they have produced, allowing conclusions to be drawn regarding issues that relate to character design practices and visual language more broadly. In the context of this study, the artifacts are artistic-visual in their use and were identified, examined, and evaluated through VO. For the design and structure of VO, the authors relied on scientific observation and adapted it within their methodology according to the needs of the research. Two main reasons led to this choice: firstly, observation is a fundamental element of scientific methodology as well as of visual arts, and secondly, its use facilitates the communication of visual subjects with the broader scientific community. As Μαγγελιώτης (2002, p.73) states regarding visual arts, “*The actions of observation aim at the discovery of the real world. Through the capabilities of observation, methods of detection, examination, selection, critique, and evaluation of phenomena are pursued. However, the task of discovery through observation is entrusted to the senses. Without them, observation cannot function*”.

**3.1. Basic characteristics of the VO processes:** Observation is not an action performed in a random or unstructured manner. The observer must make a series of organisational decisions before proceeding with the observation process, whether it

involves participation or not (Κακανά&Μπότσογλου, 2016). A significant aspect of observation is therefore the extent of the researcher's involvement in relation to individuals, the group, etc. (Κεδράκα, 2009). At one extreme, the observer acts as a complete participant, whereas at the other, as a complete observer. From total participation, we shift to absolute detachment (Gold, 1958). The researcher may observe only, without taking part in the process and possibly without the subjects being aware of it. This is considered the most strict and structured form of observation and documentation (Κεδράκα, 2009). In this study, the authors/observers adopted the role of the complete observer, observing the artworks/artifacts of the artists without interacting with them and without the subjects being aware of it. In this case, the ethical dimension of observation arises, relating to matters of research ethics. As Καλούρη - Αντωνοπούλου (1999, p.22) state: *“Do we have the right to observe the behaviour of an individual when they are unaware of it? And if we inform them, the behaviour being observed is no longer spontaneous, and therefore not the desired behaviour for observation.”* However, in this case, VO does not raise ethical dilemmas, as the subjects themselves are not being observed without consent – only their artworks. These artworks either belong to art history and global cultural heritage, and are therefore available in literature and online, or contemporary works can be located via the artists' official websites or other online sources. The types of observation span a spectrum from unstructured to structured, and from interactive to predetermined (Cohen et al., 2008). In this case, structured and predetermined observation is followed. In a highly structured observation, we know in advance what we are looking for and we have already formulated and developed the categories and observation groups (Cohen et al., 2008; Ασλανίδου, 2013). The observer adopts a passive, discreet role and only records the presence of the factors under study using an observation sheet (Cohen et al., 2008).

**3.2. Methodology of VO Design:** In the communication process, the five basic human senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) play a fundamental role. The ways in which communication occurs depend on one or more of these senses, forming the basis of different types of communication, such as visual, auditory, and gustatory. Visual communication systems include all forms of written communication, graphic representations, road signage, as well as simpler forms such as gestures, facial expressions, and body movements. However, in order for communication to be understood, the medium through which it takes place must be clearly defined. Traditional means of communication include speech, writing, inkless printing, and typography, while contemporary forms include audiovisual media (Βιθυνόζκ.α., 2002). Within the visual language, each medium possesses specific structural elements and follows a unique methodology for implementing decisions and employing techniques associated with meaning and expression (Dondis, 2002). From among these media, the focus is placed exclusively on those that belong to visual communication and on various art forms, whether two- or three-dimensional, handmade or printed, analogue or digital. More specifically, the field of Character Design is examined across various visual communication media, where present, identifying any possible variations in visual qualities accordingly. However, challenges in classification emerged when determining the scope for identifying characters through Visual Observation. For instance, shadow theatre (one of the oldest forms of theatrical art) involves characters or figures that are two-dimensional constructions and entirely artistic creations. A similar example is puppetry, which also uses puppets or marionettes during performances- three-dimensional structures and entirely visual products. Advertising was also proposed and explored as a field, as it frequently makes use of characters (e.g., on packaging or in advertising spots). However, this was ultimately rejected, as the applications of

characters in advertising are encompassed within other visual expression fields already included; for example, the depiction of characters on product packaging was classified under printed imagery. Finally, an additional characteristic of characters was considered: in some cases, they function as symbols, while in others they are not visibly depicted but indirectly or subtly implied. Consequently, in order to achieve the most comprehensive approach to the subject, the presence of characters with a visual dimension was examined across a wide range of artistic forms, including those beyond traditional visual arts. Based on the identified focus areas, the researcher determines the specific objects from which data will be collected and subsequently defines the method for gathering the required information (Ασλανίδου, 2013). In this context, data collection focused on artworks and artistic practices developed for character design. These objects emerged from a systematic study of visual characters, based on visual forms of communication established through the exploration of the history of visual arts, as well as other art forms (fine and applied arts, theatre arts, etc.). Beyond observation itself- which is naturally of great significance for the subject under study- the process of recording observed elements is equally essential. The data collected may take various forms, including notes made by the observer during different processes or activities, as well as the collection of written or other documentary materials complementing the observation. These forms of primary data may be recorded in more or less structured ways, such as through written notes, audio recordings, photographs, or video (Κακανά&Μπότσογλου, 2016). In this study, data collection primarily involved: a) photographic material of artistic works featuring visual characters, b) accompanying text and notes describing aspects of the works, including form (scale, proportions, colour, style, etc.), content (date, artist information, region/country of origin, function of the character, narrative dimension, etc.), techniques, and medium, and c) links and bibliographic references. All these data were compiled into a unified PowerPoint file, which was subsequently categorised and organised. The research began in December 2022 and continued until August 2025, lasting two (2) years and eight (8) months. The data collection process followed a specific progression: initially, visual characters were examined in traditional art forms (e.g., painting, sculpture); subsequently, more contemporary art forms were studied (e.g., digital arts, graffiti), following a method of exhaustive enumeration in chronological order. This was followed by the examination of applied arts (e.g., packaging, mascots), and finally theatrical arts (e.g., shadow theatre, puppetry). This procedure was followed cyclically, with frequent repetitions, to ensure comprehensive and in-depth coverage of the subject (Fig.1).

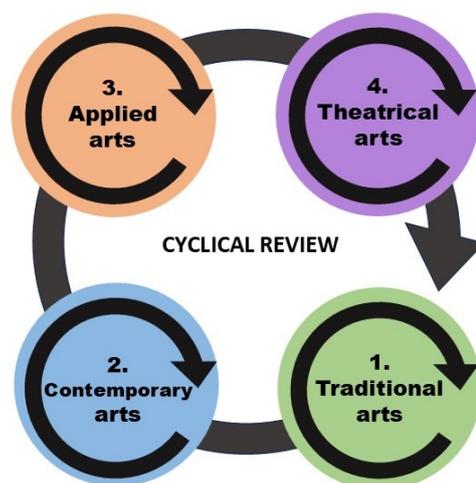


Figure 1. Combined processing of all stages. Iterative review for: Pattern identification, Character classification, Synthesis of theoretical and practical data.

Based on the above, seven (7) categories were identified, although the existence of additional ones cannot be excluded, as they may not have been detected by the researchers. Titles were proposed for these categories to reflect as accurately as possible the content corresponding to each medium of visual communication. The proposed titles are: 1) Handmade Two-Dimensional Characters, 2) Printed Characters, 3) Digital Characters, 4) Shadow Characters, 5) Public Characters, 6) Three-Dimensional Characters, and 7) Implied Characters. In organising the method for the collection of observational data, entries were made using worksheets and lists. According to Vrettos (n.d.), when designing an observation sheet, it is essential to have already developed the categories- that is, the key points or behavioural forms to be observed. These categories are included in the observation sheet (observation keys). Ultimately, the observation keys correspond to the seven (7) aforementioned categories. An observation sheet cannot include too many categories, as it would become difficult to apply, but neither can it include too few (Vrettos, n.d.). Consequently, a total of thirty-one (31) visual communication media and art forms were identified and classified under the seven (7) categories. The resulting Observation Sheet revealed and led to the development of a “character map” (Tab. 1).

Categories	1. Handmade 2D Characters	2. Printed Characters	3. Digital Characters	4. Shadow Characters	5. Public Characters	6. 3D Characters	7. Implied Characters
Medium	1. Painting	1. Comics	1. Animation	1. Shadow Theatre	1. Carnival Floats	1. Puppet Theatre	1. Symbol
	2. Embroidery	2. Packaging	2. Emoticons	2. Shadowology	2. Mascot	2. Sculpture	2. Concealed
	3. Vase Painting	3. Stickers	3. Emoji	3. Hand Shadow theater	3. Graffiti character	3. Toys	3. Invisible
	4. Mosaic	4. Illustration	4. Avatar		4. Monuments	4. Marionettes	
	5. Illuminated Manuscripts	5. Paper toys	5. Video games		5. Animated street art		
					6. carnival masquerade		

Table 1. Character Observation Sheet, “the character map”. The red frame delineates the area of characters that were analysed in the present study.

As previously mentioned, this study represents the first part of an ongoing research of the subject, which requires further analysis and development in order to fully address all its aspects. At this stage, the research focused on the first two communication media within each category (as indicated by the red frame in the diagram), while a subsequent study (Part B) will follow to complete the investigation. Specifically, within the first category, *Handmade Two-Dimensional Characters*, five (5) visual communication media are identified, of which the first two (2) -painting and embroidery- were analysed (Tab. 1). The same process was applied to the remaining six (6) categories. In the context of the analysis, a total of fourteen (14) examples of artistic works are ultimately referenced, originating from a population of more than fourteen artists, since some of the works are collective creations.

**3.4 Data Analysis: (1st Category) Handmade 2D Characters. (1st Medium) Painting:** A contemporary example is *Mr. DOB* (Fig. 2), the alter ego and first signature character of Takashi Murakami, which has appeared in his works

since 1993. With this smiling creature, Murakami intended to create a Japanese icon with global resonance, in the spirit of *Hello Kitty* and *Pikachu*. He drew inspiration from popular culture characters from both East and West, including the beloved Japanese manga character *Doraemon* and Walt Disney's iconic *Mickey Mouse* (Estiler, 2019). The name *DOB* derives from the Japanese slang term "*dobozite*," which translates as "*why*." The character is partly monstrous and partly tender, with a fluid visual appearance (sometimes consisting of multiple eyes and sharp teeth) (Estiler, 2019). In painting, naturally, there are several representative examples of character depiction in artists' work. For example, in 1967, the Greek painter, engraver, and sculptor Yannis Gaitis (Γιάννης Γαΐτης), presented for the first time the "*Little Men*" or "*the man with the hat*," the defining element of his artistic expression and his trademark, using them as a vehicle for irony and social commentary (Αδαμοπούλου, 2000). **(2nd Medium)** Embroidery: A characteristic example is the famous *Bayeux Tapestry* (Fig. 3), a Romanesque artwork. Measuring 70 metres in length and 50 centimetres in height, it acts as an illustrated chronicle, depicting a military campaign and its subsequent victory with impressive narrative vitality, exceptional economy of means, and great attention to elements deemed significant (Gombrich, 2006). The tapestry features 72 different scenes with human and animal figures, accompanied by Latin inscriptions. It is believed that the work was never completed, as a part of it remains unembroidered. The narrative describes Harold's journey to Normandy, his return to England, and his coronation following the death of King Edward the Confessor in the 11th century, as well as the preparation of the military expedition organised by William the Conqueror.

**(Second Category)** Printed Characters. **(1st Medium)** Comics: Comics are recognised as the "*ninth art*." The term "*Comics*" was adopted by the Americans, borrowed from the Greek word *κωμικό*, due to the humorous content of early strips. The French refer to them as "*Bandes dessinées*" (drawn strips), the Italians as "*Fumetti*" (from the speech bubbles), the Japanese as "*Manga*," while Greeks commonly retain the American-derived term "*κόμικς*" (Κουκουλάς, 2006, σ. 13). Regarding the term itself, Καλιόρης proposed the Greek translation illustration (*εικονογράφημα*) while Μαρτινίδης suggested *visual narrative* (*εικονογραφήγημα*), arguing that it better reflects the essential quality of this art form: "*the narration of stories through the juxtaposition of drawn images*" (Μαρτινίδης, 1989). One of the most iconic comic characters is *Lucky Luke* (Fig. 4), the main protagonist of the comic series of the same name, created by *Morris* (*Maurice de Bevere*). An interesting transformation in the character design occurred: until 1983, *Lucky Luke* appeared with a cigarette in his mouth. The creator had stated that the cigarette was part of the character's identity, similar to *Popeye's* pipe. However, *Morris* was eventually compelled to replace it with a piece of straw, partly due to pressure from anti-smoking organisations and partly for commercial reasons. In 1988, the *World Health Organization* awarded him for the removal of the cigarette from the character (Μηχανή του χρόνου, χ.χ.). **(2nd Medium)** Packaging: Advances in print technology led to the exploration of cases where comic characters became highly popular and widely specializing, allowing them to be used as successful promotional icons. Designers with significant involvement in the comics industry create advertising campaigns featuring well-known or newly developed characters specifically designed for product promotion (Κελαϊδή, 2019). An example is the anthropomorphic bee representing *Honey Nut Cheerios* (Fig. 5), first designed by *Dean Yeagle* at *Zander's Animation Parlor* in New York. The bee did not receive a name until the year 2000, when *Kristine Tong*, a fifth-grade student from Coolidge, Texas, won a national naming competition, officially naming the character "*BuzzBee*."

**(3th Category) Digital Characters. (1st Medium) Animation:** How did an anthropomorphic sponge living in the sea inside a pineapple become the favourite character of both children and adults? The creator of *Bob Sponge (SpongeBob SquarePants)* (Fig. 6) was a marine biologist who had previously worked as a fry cook in a restaurant- just like SpongeBob himself. Stephen Hillenburg held a degree in natural resource management, specializing in marine environments, and taught marine biology. At the same time, he had a strong passion for drawing, which led him to create the comic *The Intertidal Zone*, the early version of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. According to the art director Derek Drymon, Hillenburg wanted to create a character with a youthful, boyish attitude- something between a child and an adult—drawing inspiration from the personas of Jerry Lewis, Pee-Wee Herman, and Stan Laurel. *SpongeBob SquarePants* is one of the longest-running cartoons on the Nickelodeon television channel and is still ongoing<sup>6</sup>. **(2nd Medium) Emoticons** (Fig. 7): In face-to-face communication, participants express far more information than that conveyed through words alone. Elements such as body language (facial expressions, posture, gestures), physical distance, tone of voice, intensity, and vocal quality form part of the paralinguistic and extralinguistic aspects of speech, contributing to message interpretation (Baron, 2001). The gap created in distance communication- due to the absence of “*real*” interaction- is filled through alternative means (Παππά, 2018). The term “*emoticons*” originates from the words “*emotion*” and “*icons*,” referring to graphic symbols that convey emotional content, as implied by its etymology.

**(4th Category) Shadow Characters. (1st Medium) Shadow Theatre:** The precise origin of shadow theatre remains uncertain, though most theories trace its roots to India, Indonesia, and Asia more broadly. In Greece, *Karagiozis* (Fig. 8) is the traditional shadow theatre figure (Μιτεντζή, 2018). As Eugenios Spatharis notes: *An ideal representation of the poor Greek, inclined to meddle in everything as he is constantly without money. He is cunning and lazy, sometimes sarcastic with his humour, yet deep down he is kind-hearted and gentle. Regarding his morphology, he displays certain peculiarities, such as an extremely flexible and disproportionately long arm, allowing him to scratch his back and head and gesture accordingly [...]. Karagiozis is a comedic figure who, although burdened by pain and hardship, confronts them with laughter and optimism*” (Μιτεντζή, 2018, σ.20-21). Beyond the main protagonists, each *karagiozopaiktis* (shadow puppeteer) would invent new figures to serve the narrative flow of their performance, resulting in a diverse range of characters appearing in shadow theatre (Μιτεντζή, 2018).

**(2nd Medium) Shadowology:** Belgian artist *Vincent Bal* uses everyday objects to manipulate light and shadows in an innovative visual practice he named “*Shadowology*” (Fig. 9) (Cole, 2022). Since 2016, Bal has created over a thousand sketches using this method, which he has shared on his personal Instagram account<sup>7</sup> as part of the “*Shadowology*” series. It all began when he noticed a shadow reflected from a teacup on his desk which, as he mentioned, “*looked somewhat like a tiny elephant.*” The process is relatively straightforward: one selects an inanimate object, uses its natural shadows formed by a light source, and then fills the blank shapes, treating them as a portal for imaginative creations (Milligan, 2024).

**(5th Category) Public Characters. (1st Medium) Carnival King:** The Patras Carnival is the largest and oldest carnival celebration in Greece. It is an impressive event featuring a parade of floats and carnival groups. The carnival floats are created at the Carnival Workshop of the Municipality of Patras, and inspiration often emerges after days of contemplation, before the sculptor begins sketching the initial designs with charcoal or pencil on a blank sheet of paper. The *Carnival King* (Fig. 10), the central

character of the celebration, along with the spectacular floats, constitutes the core of Patras' Grand Festivity. As the "king" of laughter, he sits on a throne, typically wearing a crown and an elaborate, colorful costume, while holding a scepter. With enormous dimensions and a commanding presence, he is depicted with bright red cheeks and a red nose from wine. In 1953, he acquired movement and was "brought to life", delighting spectators. His head rotates, his eyes open and close, and his arms move to greet the crowd. Since 1968, after various experiments by Dimitris Vourtsis (Δημήτρης Βούρτσης), the use of polystyrene was established for float construction. Although this material offers less environmental protection and is more expensive compared to chicken wire, clay, plaster, and paper, which were previously used- though more cumbersome and difficult to manipulate- it proved faster and simpler to work with, resulting in more efficient constructions. The possible personas of the Carnival King are numerous. Each year, he is symbolically burned (in accordance with tradition), only to be reborn the following year. From *fakir* and *Dionysus* to *Pierrot* and *clown*, the Carnival King undergoes a transformation every year, accompanied by thousands of followers in the parades. **(2nd Medium)** Mascot: According to Μπαμπινιώτης (2008), a mascot is an object- such as a model of an animal or even an actual animal- believed to bring good luck to a team or event. Additionally, it may serve as a symbol of representation. For instance, the mascot of the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games was a model of a small bear. The company Artupmascots- which, since 2013, designs, manufactures, and creates mascots for various types of businesses- states that mascots are a highly effective means of audience engagement. They have the capacity to entertain, evoking strong emotions in children who want to embrace them, while for adults, they create vivid memories and a desire to be photographed with them. They are extremely portable and can participate in promotional activities across multiple locations, events, trade shows, shops, or even travel to other cities or throughout the country<sup>9</sup>. Well-known mascots in Greece are Phoebus (Φοίβος) and Athena (Αθηνά) (Fig. 11), created for the Athens 2004 Olympic Games by Paragraph Design, led by designer Σπύρος Γκόγκος. The mascots were inspired by ancient Greek bell-shaped dolls (*κωδωνόσχημες κούκλες*), and their names originate from the ancient Greek gods: Athena and Apollo (*Phoebus*) (Γαβριελάτος, 2024).

**(6th Category)** 3D Characters. **(1st Medium)** Puppetry: Puppetry is a theatrical form in which puppets - animated by people, often hidden from the audience - assume the leading role. This type of theatre allows for the presentation and re-enactment of characters and situations that cannot be depicted through other theatrical mediums. The figures created are designed according to the artist's intentions, often resulting in improbable and highly expressive forms (Μαγουλιώτης, 2006). A key example is *The Muppet Show*, the television series featuring a cast of puppets known as *The Muppets*, operated by puppeteers. The series was created by renowned puppeteer and television producer Jim Henson, who, together with his team, was also responsible for its production. A particularly famous character is Kermit the Frog (Fig. 12), the director and host of the show. Completely green, an accomplished presenter, he appears perpetually bewildered by the absurd situations he must handle. In puppetry, there are naturally several characteristic examples related to character depiction. For instance, *Froutopia* (*Φρουτοπία*), a Greek television puppet show that captured the attention of millions of viewers across age groups. The central character is Pikos Apiko (Πίκος Απίκος), the "δαμόνιος δημοσιογράφος" who works for the newspaper *ΤρέχαΓύρευε*, and is tasked with solving the mystery of the disappearance of Manolis, the greengrocer (Μανώλης, ο μανάβης) (Γεωργόπουλος, 2016). **(2nd Medium)** Sculpture "Laocoön and His Sons" (Fig. 13), dated approximately 175- 150 BC, is a collective sculptural

work by the artists Agesander, Polydorus, and Athenodoros (Αγήσανδρος, Πολύδωρος, Αθηνόδωρος), made of marble. The sculpture stands at 2.42 meters in height and is housed in the Museo Pio-Clementino in Rome. Laocoön's role was significant because, at the end of the Trojan War, he warned the Trojans not to accept the Wooden Horse, inside which the Greek soldiers were hidden. Nevertheless, the gods- who had already decided upon the destruction of Troy and saw their plans being jeopardized- sent two enormous serpents from the sea, which wrapped themselves around Laocoön and his children, strangling them. The way the muscles of his torso and arms express the intensity and agony of the desperate struggle, the expression of pain on Laocoön's face, the powerless movements of his children, and the overall tension and motion captured in the composition freeze into a static yet astonishing ensemble (Gombrich, 2006).

**(7th Category) Implied Character Representation. (1st Medium) Symbol:** The artist, observing the environment and relying on inner vision, draws from the rich world of symbols created by humans to comprehend and interpret the world—or even forms personal symbols. In this way, they create forms which, although they externally represent real-world imagery, function as symbols that convey different images and messages, requiring the viewer's participation to be interpreted and understood (Τσιάρα, 2022). A characteristic example is the painting of Nikos Engonopoulos (Νίκος Εγγονόπουλος), both painter and poet, combined the influences of iconography and the painting style of Kontoglou to develop a “nation-centered art,” where forms and symbols from various eras of Greek history coexist in unconventional settings. The central figure in these compositions is the mannequin, a faceless doll that transforms into a hero and symbol of Greek identity (Fig. 14) (Πετρίδου & Ζιρώ, 2015). **(2nd Medium) Indirect or Concealed Character Implication:** A prominent example is the painting known as “Las Meninas” (Fig. 15), originally titled “*The Family of Philip IV.*” It is perhaps the masterpiece of Diego Velázquez and one of the most impressive demonstrations of the limitless potential of easel painting. In this artwork, the central figure is Infanta Margarita (a title given to a Spanish princess), daughter of Philip IV and his second wife. Velázquez himself appears in the composition with brush and palette in front of a massive canvas, along with other figures. The reflections of Philip IV and his wife appear in a mirror in the background of the scene (Honour & Fleming, 1998). The mirror at the back of the studio shows the king and queen posing for the painter. We are therefore shown what they are seeing- a crowd that has just entered the studio (Gombrich, 2006). Thus, between the artwork and the viewer, the main subject of the painting is ultimately interposed: the royal couple, presented only via reflection and implied to be positioned somewhere between the painting and the viewer.

## Conclusions

In the process of organizing and outlining the field of character design, through the practice-led research approach, the strategy of Visual Observation (VO) was proposed. Through data collection, the observation sheet emerged, which ultimately functions as a “map of characters” (Tab. 1), making visible the range of character use and the media in which they appear. The map reveals an overall picture of the subject, organizing the various types of characters and uncovering relationships among the individual categories, thus providing a more comprehensive and clear understanding of the topic. The results (of the first part) of the study highlight the specificities and new parameters that arise each time in the character design process, regardless of the form, drawing information from the form, content, technique, and medium. Furthermore, certain characteristics were identified regarding the design of each character that make it distinct and unique. That is, apart from their narrative capacity (e.g., *Lucky Luke*, Fig.

4 & Karagiozis, Fig. 8), characters may also function as an alter ego or the artist's signature (e.g., *Mr. DOB* by Takashi Murakami, Fig. 2).

Depending on the medium in which they are developed, characters appear at different size scales, ranging from small puppets (e.g., *Kermit the Frog*, Fig. 12) to large-scale carnival floats (e.g., *Βασιλιάς Καρνάβαλος*, Fig. 10). In addition, they may function as cultural symbols for local events (e.g., the figure of *Βασιλιάς Καρνάβαλος* in Patras, Fig. 10). Characters frequently appear in anthropomorphic<sup>10</sup> or pareidolic<sup>11</sup> forms (e.g., the anthropomorphic bee *Buzz the Bee*, Fig. 5; or the shadowology method of Vincent Bal, Fig. 9).

According to narrative needs, characters appear either individually (e.g., the mascot *Buzz the Bee*, Fig. 5) or as part of a group, such as the main protagonist, secondary characters/enemies, and supporting figures that illustrate a story (e.g., *tapestry of Bayeux*, Fig. 3 & *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Fig. 6). Characters possess significant communicative capabilities (e.g., mascots, Fig. 11) and are used in modern everyday communication applications (e.g., emoticons, Fig. 7). They can be found across a wide range of materials and media, such as printed, handmade, digital, three-dimensional, etc., as well as on communication “platforms” (digital, printed, spatial, etc.).

They are developed through a wide variety of design techniques such as pareidolia<sup>11</sup> (e.g., Vincent Bal, Fig. 9), and may be designed using synthetic thinking (e.g., *SpongeBob SquarePants*, whose personality was based on elements borrowed from three comedians, Fig. 6). Based on the research questions, the field of character design extends beyond traditional media such as animation, comics, and video games, as characters are encountered in a wide variety of visual communication media.

The function of characters varies according to the medium, whereas their aesthetics and form are influenced by the medium's requirements. Moreover, in each medium, characters perform multiple functions- from conveying emotional states and enhancing storytelling to creating recognisability and commercial value. In addition, the aesthetics of characters vary significantly depending on the medium: in animation, the need for “realisticness” leads to more detailed and naturalistic designs, whereas in shadow theatre, exaggeration and simplified forms are often employed to reinforce recognisability and adapt to the medium's needs. This study serves as an introduction to a holistic consideration of character design, presenting and analysing part of this research. Although this is only the first part of the research, it becomes evident that character design is a multidimensional, polymorphic, and multifunctional artistic research field. Given its breadth, it has the potential to be regarded as an autonomous artistic field with multiple uses and applications.

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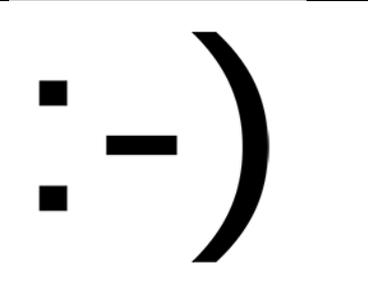
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## Appendices

 <p><b>Figure 2.</b> MrDOB, <a href="https://www.artsy.net/artist-series/takashi-murakami-mr-dob">https://www.artsy.net/artist-series/takashi-murakami-mr-dob</a></p>	 <p><b>Figure 3.</b> Detail of battle depiction Detail of battle depiction <a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/30/Bayeux_Tapestry_scene55_William_Hastings_battlefield.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/30/Bayeux_Tapestry_scene55_William_Hastings_battlefield.jpg</a></p>	 <p><b>Figure 4.</b> Lucky Luke is a cowboy with exceptional skills in marksmanship and in the speed at which he draws his gun <a href="https://shorturl.at/BArDn">https://shorturl.at/BArDn</a></p>
 <p><b>Figure 5.</b> Buzz the Bee, <a href="https://characters.fandom.com/wiki/Buzz_the_Honey_Nut_Cheerios_Bee?file=Buzz">https://characters.fandom.com/wiki/Buzz_the_Honey_Nut_Cheerios_Bee?file=Buzz</a></p>	 <p><b>Figure 6.</b> SpongeBob SquarePants <a href="https://shorturl.at/YIKRU">https://shorturl.at/YIKRU</a></p>	 <p><b>Figure 7.</b> Emoticon με χαμογελαστό πρόσωπο, <a href="https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon#/media/File:Emoticon_Smile_Face.svg">https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emoticon#/media/File:Emoticon_Smile_Face.svg</a></p>
 <p><b>Figure 8.</b> Karagiozis by Evgenios Spatharis <a href="https://shorturl.at/iOfvd">https://shorturl.at/iOfvd</a></p>	 <p><b>Figure 9.</b> 'Bananas' Vincent Bal, <a href="https://www.raandom.com">https://www.raandom.com</a></p>	 <p><b>Figure 10.</b> King Carnival, Patras Carnival 2003 <a href="https://panosholidays.gr/patrino-karnavali/">https://panosholidays.gr/patrino-karnavali/</a></p>

[m/our-blog/vincent-bals-shadowology](https://m/our-blog/vincent-bals-shadowology)



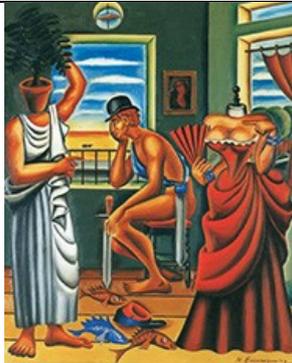
**Figure 11.** Phevos and Athena, the mascots of the 2004 Olympic Games in Greece.  
<https://shorturl.at/kS2lz>



**Figure 12.** Kermit the Frog  
<https://www.mothersblog.gr/news/story/48746/kermit-the-frog-akoystegia-proti-fora-ti-nea-fonitoy-diasimoy-vatraxoy-sto-muppet-show>



**Figure 13.** "Laocoön and His Sons (Vatican)"  
<https://shorturl.at/eMaDV>



**Figure 14.** "Hermes Awaiting", 1939, oil on canvas  
<https://projectmyths.blogspot.com/2014/05/>



**Figure 15.** Las Meninas, Diego Velázquez,  
<https://shorturl.at/sa8In>