icônes by Susan Kare

musée de l'imprimerie et de la communication graphique

04.14–09.18 2022

Icons is one of the first international retrospectives dedicated to graphic designer and iconographer Susan Kare (born 1954), a pioneer of digital design, who currently lives and works in San Francisco (USA).

The main mission entrusted by Steve Jobs and Andy Herzfeld to Susan Kare when creating the first Macintosh personal computer in 1982 was to "humanize" the graphical interfaces developed by the Apple team.

Susan Kare, who graduated with a PhD in Arts from New York University, used her knowledge of the study of 19th century French caricature (Daumier, Doré, Grandville) to create icons and typefaces (Monaco, Chicago, Geneva, Cairo) which then became standards for future designers and which entered the MoMA collections in 2015.

The exhibition will first review the tools and techniques that Susan Kare has developed to invent digital icons as part of her work for Apple (grids, pixels, editors, layers), then for NeXT, Microsoft (Windows 3.1), Facebook, Paypal or Pinterest. Her visual inspirations will also be presented, from Kanjis, Chinese ideograms used by the Japanese, to Scott McCloud's comics.

Her research on what she calls "the economy of expression", the need for an icon to convey its meaning at a glance, will be detailed, as well as her choice to consider these icons (a trash can, a watch, a hand, a bomb) as a road sign system, a universal sign language.

The Museum of Printing and Graphic Communication, one of the main heritage centers dedicated to graphic design in Europe, will confront its collections with the archives and references of Susan Kare, together with around thirty prints of her icons, made by the designer in her studio.

This exhibition will be steeped in the nostalgic atmosphere of the early 1980s (pixel art, video games, music videos). It will allow us to reflect on the place of women in the history of graphic design and upon the transition from Byzantine to digital icons, from Egyptian hieroglyphs to heraldry and emojis.
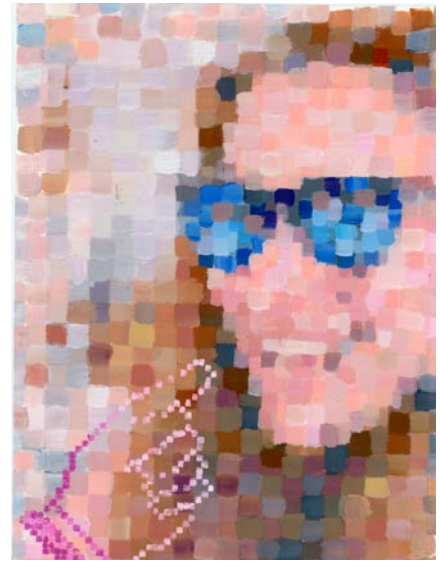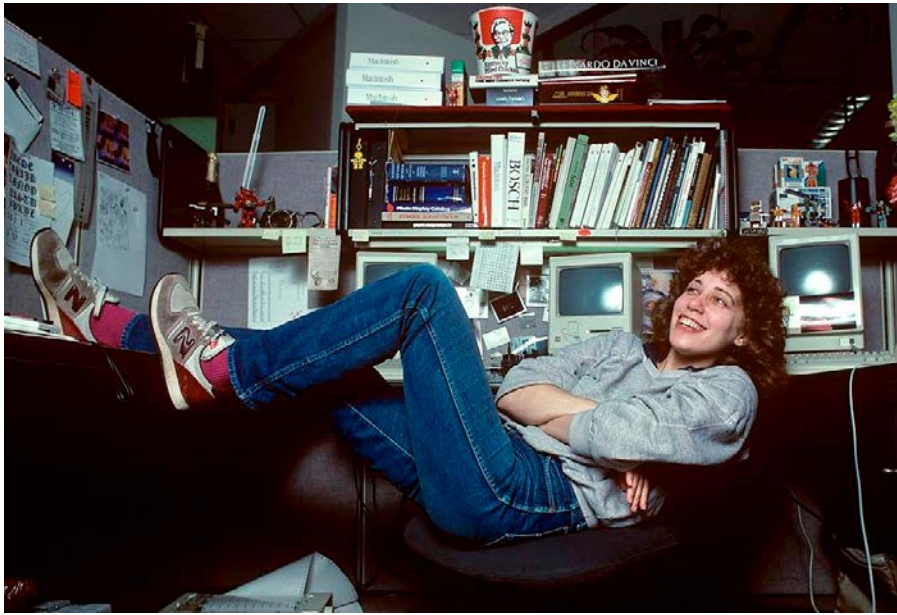
**icônes / icons
by Susan Kare**
An exhibition
at the Museum
of Printing
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Communication,
Lyon, France
**From   April 14
          2022
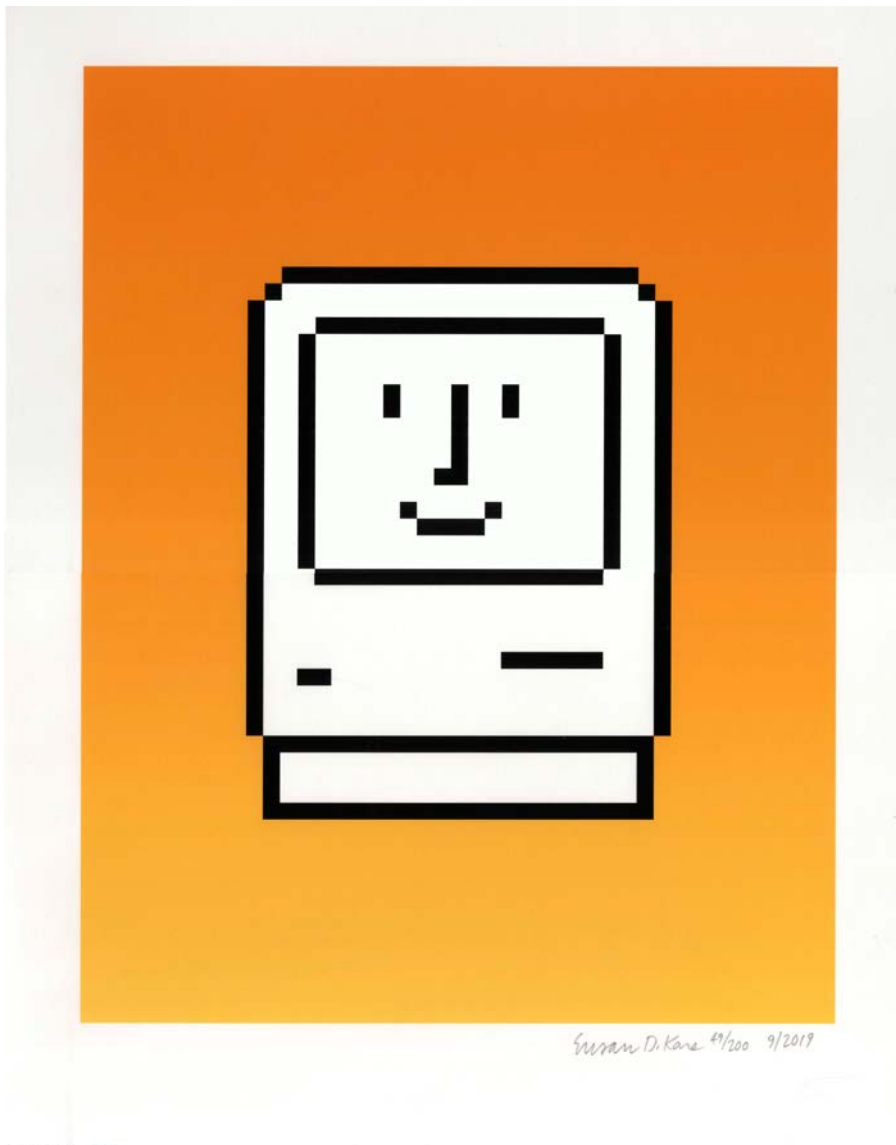to   September 18
          2022**

"I believe that good icons are more akin to road signs rather than illustrations, and ideally should present an idea in a clear, concise, and memorable way. (…) Some icons are easy because they're nouns — a calender, for example. But verbs are hard to do. Undo is especially hard. I struggle year in and year out about undo. (…) I feel much happier that people are looking at my icons every day than having my sculptures in five living rooms across the country."

"I started at Apple in 1982. I came from a classic era, hand lettering, painting, sculpture and printmaking. I had read about creating typefaces in order to have an interview in the company, as I was hoping to get this job done by making faces and icons in bitmap format, and I had sketched out a few symbols in a notebook."

1. Norman Seeff, Portrait of Susan Kare at her office at Apple, photograph, 1983

2. Ann Rhoney, Portrait of Susan Kare, photograph, 2014

3. Chloé Cruchaudet, Portrait of Susan Kare, oil, acrylic and digital retouching, 2020

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"I really enjoyed working with Steve Jobs, both at Apple and later at NeXT (the company founded in 1985 by Jobs after he was forced to leave Apple). He cared so much about every detail, cared about design and graphics and challenged you to do your best every time."

"When I see this icon, the Happy Mac, which is one of my favorites, I think back to the group effort, our effort to try to make a computer" for the greatest number "and above all a public of amateurs of technologies and techniques, which included me."

4. Susan Kare, *Happy Macintosh on Orange Gradient*,
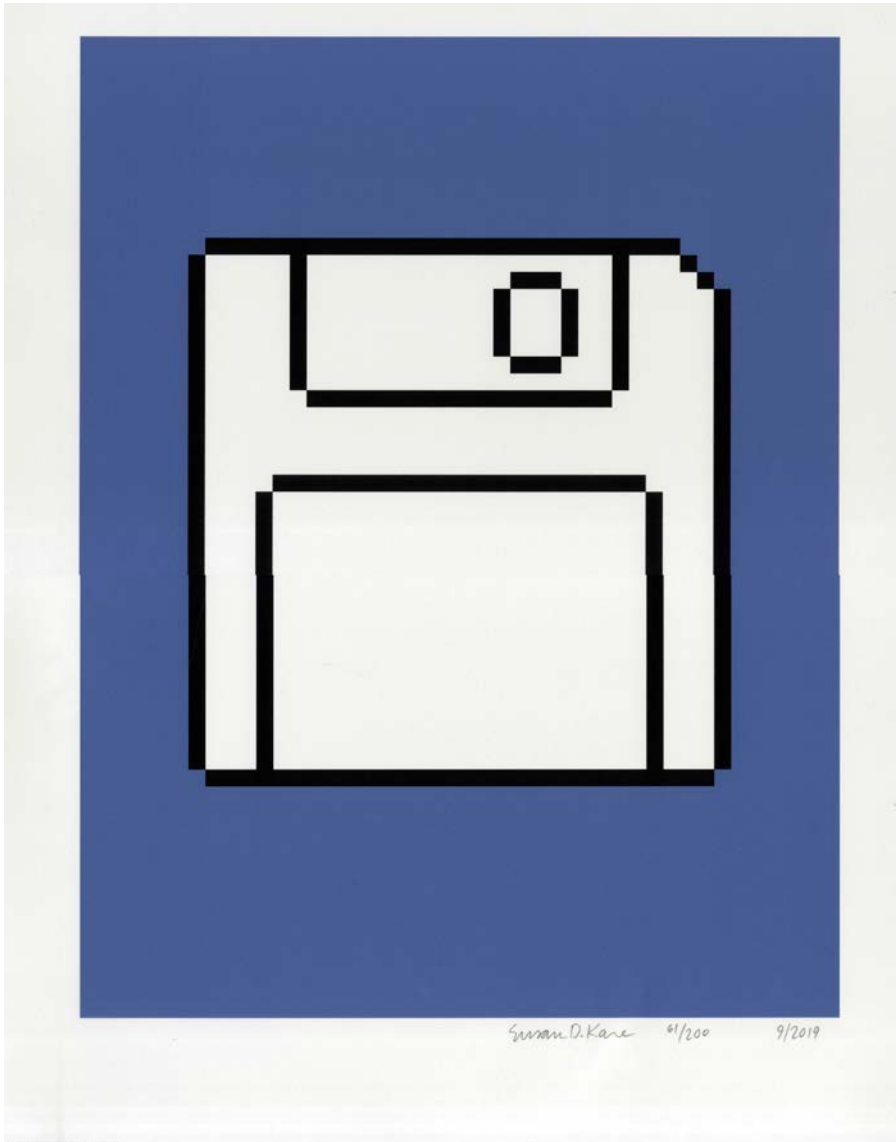17 × 21 inches, 43 × 55 cm,
2019

5. Reproduction of *Portrait of a boy*, from Fayum funerary paintings, encaustic painting on wood, 14.5 × 7 inches, 37 × 18 cm, second half of 2nd century

"My philosophy has not really changed — I really try to develop symbols that are meaningful and memorable. I started designing monochrome icons using a 32 × 32 pixel icon editor that Andy Hertzfeld created. Subsequently I've been able to take advantage of more robust tools and higher screen resolution, and also design vector images in Illustrator. But design problems are solved by thinking about context and metaphor — not by tools."

"The end goal is to develop an image that is easy to understand and remember, and that works well in its screen environment. It's always optimal to be able to see the whole visual UI and mock up how icons will fit into that, and iterate."

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6. Susan Kare, *Floppy Disk on Blue*, 17 × 21 inches, 43 × 55 cm, 2019

7. Gustave Doré, *Childhood of Pantagruel, The giant drinks the milk of 4,600 cows*, engraving, 1873
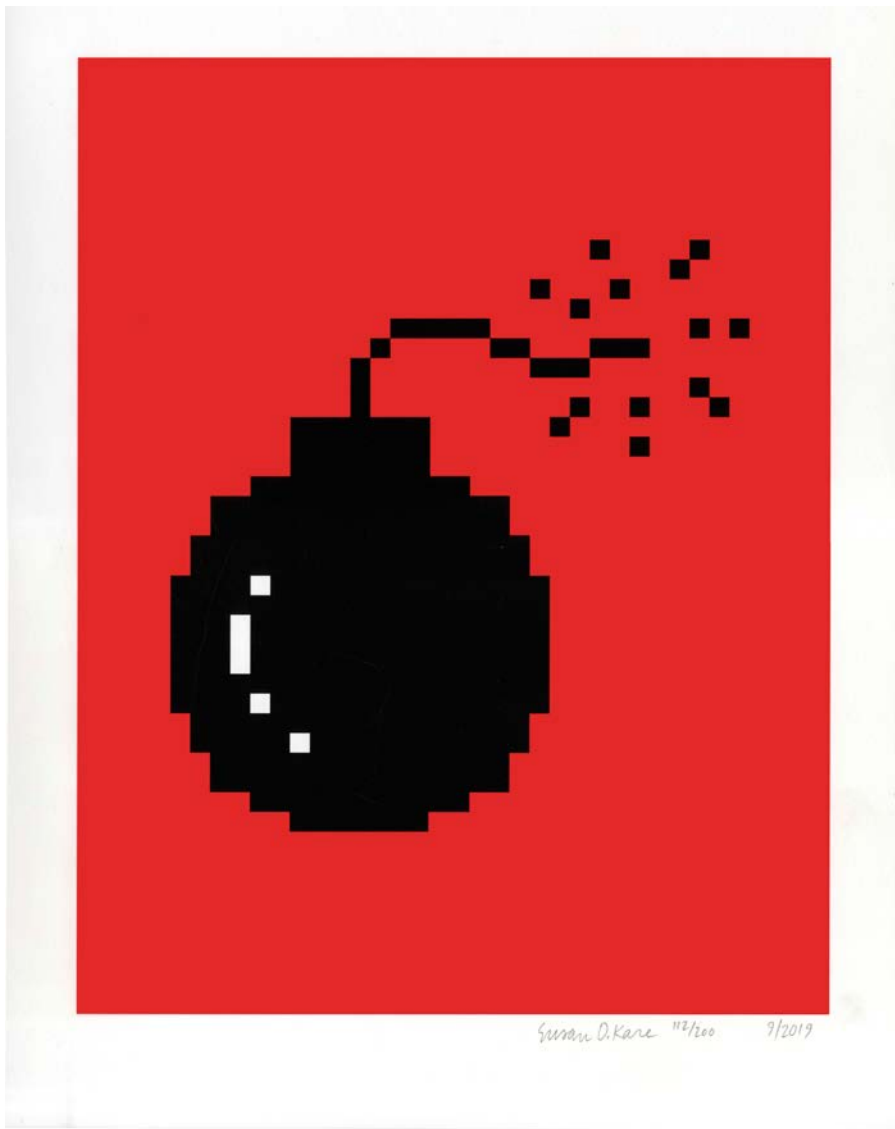
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"My work also focused on developing a set of proportional typefaces for the computer screen; a departure from the monospaced characters typically found on typewriters and earlier computers. With the icon and font work, I hoped to help counter the stereotypical image of computers as cold and intimidating."

"I rely on common sense; when I designed buttons, icons, and other screen images for Microsoft's Windows 3.0 in 1987, I was able to use the 16-color palette to replace black rectangles with images that looked like three-dimensional 'pressable' buttons. I was also challenged to fine tune many images for applications by using dithered patterns of color to offset the constraints of the limited VGA palette."
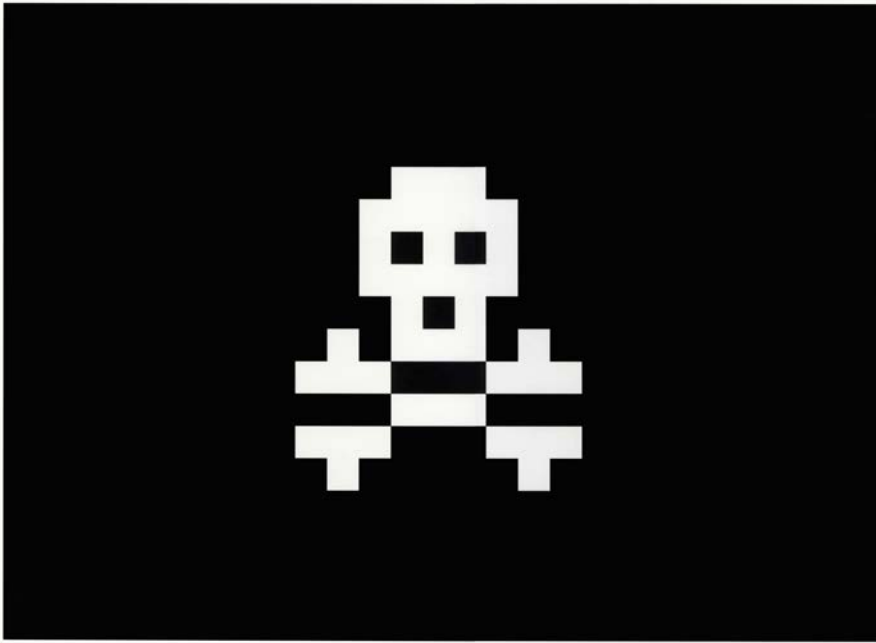
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8. Susan Kare, *Bomb on red*, 17 × 21 inches, 43x55 cm, 2019

9. Reproduction of Jean Widmer, French Cultural and tourist signage, 1972

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“I am a big believer that there is a rich history of symbols from which you can draw even for concepts and icons, whether from fine art or folk art, or advertising or bottle caps. So I had my shelf of books from college, and some that I picked up that were kind of random.”

“I am looking for pixels in everything. Cross stitch fonts are a perfect analogy for what I do — there are 18th century specimens that look stunning. And even though I work a lot on vector images now, where pixel doesn't matter as much, I still feel like, if you have that constraint, I'm the right person for that job.”
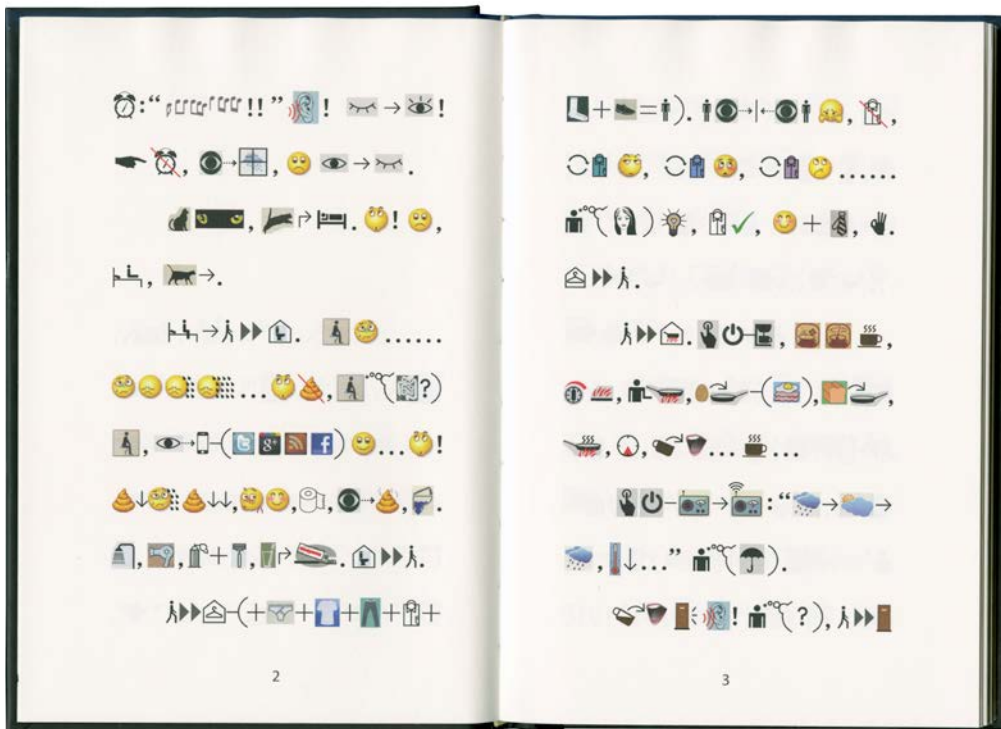
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10. Susan Kare, *Skull and Crossbones on Black*, 17 × 21 inches, 43 × 55 cm, 2019

11. Xu Bing, *Book from the ground: From Point-to-Point*, MIT Press, 2018

The quotes from Susan Kare come from an interview given by the graphic designer to Wendy Marinaccio, for the "Making the Macintosh" project led by Stanford University (USA), and published on November 16, 2001.