

doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16371420>

TALES IN A SHOE BOX - PLAYING WITH TYPE

**Gago, José<sup>1</sup>, Marques, Tiago<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Universidade de Évora  
gago.silva@uevora.pt  
navarro.marques@uevora.pt

**Keywords:** *Learning settings, Hans Christian Anderson, Nature, Visual compositions*

A design project focusing on tunnel book compositions was conducted as part of the Technologies of Vector Drawing course at the University of Évora during the 2023/24 academic year. This study follows a descriptive case methodology, using Hans Christian Andersen's narratives as its foundation. Students selected one of Andersen's tales and created a scenic representation in the form of a tunnel book, housed in a 15x30x15 cm card box. These visual compositions incorporated typographic fonts of varying sizes to generate contrast. The students' individual works were later combined to form a "wall of stories." Upon project completion, the authors conducted a thematic analysis of the students' project descriptions to evaluate their interpretation of the stories and determine if the romantic relationship with nature was evident in their work.

## Introduction

Nature plays a central, enchanting role in many fairy tales, featuring forests, flowers, trees, plants, animals, birds, and insects (Nadu, 2020). Children are naturally drawn to these elements of nature, easily empathizing with them. Fairy tales provide children with environmental knowledge, fostering empathy for ecological connections between themselves and other living beings. Hans Christian Andersen creates a dual connection with nature in his works. He establishes a “romantic” link with natural elements through various creative strategies, including literary recycling. Andersen repurposes themes, linguistic images, and figures (such as the elemental spirits “Svimlen” and “Lisjomfruen/Sneedronningen”) as part of his creative approach (Grum-Schwensen, 2016).

In Andersen’s tales, child protagonists often transcend their circumstances through imagination, with nature playing a crucial role in this imaginative transcendence. The natural world conveys spiritual truths and morally influences characters (GREYVENSTEYN, n.d.)

Anthropomorphism is a common theme in Andersen’s fairy tales, where he symbolically uses not only nature but also household objects, trinkets, toys, and birds to address more serious human issues (Paludan, 2019).

While it’s impossible to know an absolute state of nature before human intervention, the term “nature” can describe the status quo ante before additional human action. It’s important to note that all “states of nature” are simultaneously “states of culture”(Holm, 2008).

Tales, as products of fantasy, help give order to the world and assign meaning to it. Humans, as a species, require meaning in their lives. In a seemingly meaningless cosmos, people invest the world with significance through their imagination. The autonomy of imagination characterizes the human psyche, allowing individuals to formulate and perceive what is not physically present (BOUCHET, 2015).

In visual representations, students employ graphic elements to translate their imagination into tangible forms. These elements serve as a filter for visual ideas, composition, and meaning. By utilizing typographic contrast solutions within a limited set of elements, students create diverse and unique interpretations.

This approach aligns with Roland Barthes’ model of text as an open web of references, rather than a closed and perfect work. Barthes’ theory emphasizes the reader’s role over the writer’s in creating meaning, treating the text as a game to be played (Lupton, 2024). In the context of visual design, this concept can be extended to viewers interpreting and engaging with the visual compositions created by the students. The creative process encourages students to explore the interplay between typography, space, and meaning, resulting in a rich variety of solutions despite the constraints. This exercise not only develops their design skills but also cultivates their ability to communicate complex ideas through visual language.\

## **Research Questions**

This project focuses on developing Tunnel book compositions using a standard shoe box as a container. The study aims to address the following research questions:

How can individual interpretations contribute to a cohesive collective composition when designing graphic works with multiple layers of depth?

What creative solutions emerge from using typographic fonts to represent stories visually?

By exploring these questions, the study seeks to understand the interplay between individual creativity and collective artistic expression, as well as the potential of typography as a storytelling medium in three-dimensional compositions.

## **Methods**

This research employs a descriptive case study methodology. A descriptive case study is a focused and detailed approach in which researchers carefully examine and articulate propositions and questions about a phenomenon at the outset of the study (“Descriptive Case Study,” 2010). This method aims to describe natural phenomena within the data in question, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. Descriptive case studies often take a narrative form, allowing researchers to present their findings in a coherent and engaging manner (McDonough & McDonough, 2016). This approach is particularly useful for capturing the complexity of real-world situations and providing rich, contextualized insights into the topic under investigation.

By utilizing this methodology, the current study seeks to offer a thorough and nuanced exploration of the research questions, illuminating the creative processes and outcomes involved in the Tunnel book composition project.

## **PROJECT GUIDELINES**

The project assigned to the students was titled “STORY IN A SHOE BOX.” The primary objective was to develop a construction strategy for an image composition using digital vector tools. The final design, referred to as the Concept Image, was to be built in perspective, with compositional elements distributed across various depths, from foreground to background. The ultimate goal was to create a Concept Image that would give the impression of a three-dimensional composition when adapted to fit inside a standard shoebox. This approach challenged students to think spatially and consider how their designs would translate from a digital, two-dimensional space into a physical, three-dimensional format. For this assignment, each student was required

to select one of the following stories by the renowned writer Hans Christian Andersen:

- The Little Mermaid
- The Little Match Girl
- The Princess and the Pea
- The Ugly Duckling
- The Tinderbox
- The Teapot
- Thumbelina
- The Steadfast Tin Soldier
- The Snow Queen
- The Goblin and the Grocer
- The Garden of Paradise
- The Flying Trunk
- The Angel
- The Red Shoes

This project aimed to merge literary interpretation with visual design, encouraging students to translate narrative elements into a compelling, multi-layered visual composition. By using a familiar object like a shoebox as the canvas, the assignment also explored the intersection of everyday items with artistic expression. The authors provided context to the students regarding Hans Christian Andersen's storytelling approach. They emphasized how Andersen consistently aimed to convey societal behavioral patterns, often highlighting confrontations between:

- The "powerful" and the "unprotected"
- The "strong" and the "weak"
- "Exploiters" and the "exploited"

Beyond advocating for equal rights for all individuals, Andersen's tales inspired empathy for small creatures and plants. His stories attuned emotions to nature and intensified feelings of harmony with others. This perception of unity is best achieved through an open mind and a sense of innocence.

The authors stressed how Andersen's tales reinforce the idea that all creatures are indispensable in maintaining the beauty and health of our planet. Students were encouraged to understand that fairy tales reveal a dynamic web of relationships, where each natural element is imbued with profound meaning.

For their project, students structured their compositions in various layers, similar to a Tunnel book. This format features a narrative presented through overlapping multiple layers of paper, creating a visual tunnel perspective. This approach allowed students to translate the multi-layered themes of Andersen's stories into a physical, three-dimensional representation.

## DEVELOPMENT

The authors conducted this project within the Technologies of Vector Drawing course at the University of Évora during the first semester of the 2023/24 academic year. The project ran from September to December, with weekly three-hour sessions.

As previously stated, Hans Christian Andersen’s narratives served as the foundation for the project. Each of the thirty-two students in the class selected one of Andersen’s stories as their inspiration. They then produced individual compositions in the form of a Tunnel book, a format that allowed for a scenic representation of the chosen narrative.

The assignment required students to organize their visual narratives into six distinct layers, progressing from foreground to background. These layered compositions were designed to fit within a cardboard box measuring 15x30x15 cm, creating a three-dimensional representation of the story.

This approach challenged students to:

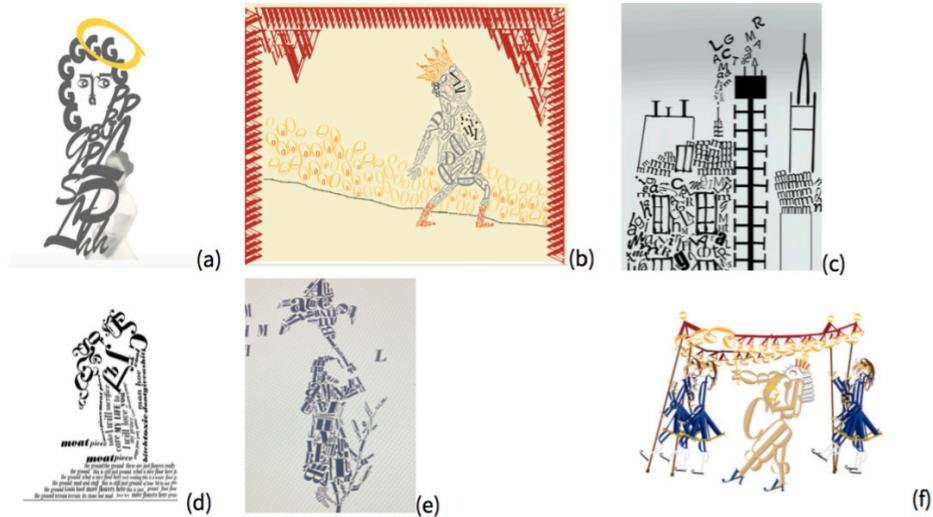
1. Interpret a literary work visually
2. Think spatially and sequentially
3. Apply vector drawing techniques to create depth and perspective
4. Manage multiple design elements within a confined space

The project’s structure encouraged students to explore the intersection of literature, visual design, and spatial thinking, while also developing their technical skills in vector drawing. To achieve these objectives, the project was divided into five distinct phases, guiding students from initial concept development to final refinements, Table 1

phase 1	phase 2	phase 3	phase 4	phase 5
Choice of tale and definition of the concept	Development of first drafts	Vector makeup of digital composition	Stenographic makeup of the composition	Refinements and corrections.

**Table 1.** - - Phases carried out in the project.

While the project had a strong digital focus, the authors sought to integrate traditional graphic techniques into the solution-generation process, as illustrated in Figure 1.



**Figure 1** - Examples of sketches developed in the project: (a,c) The Little Match Girl, (b,f) The emperor's New Clothes, (d) The Little Mermaid (f) Thumbelina

To gather student feedback on the project experience, a survey was conducted upon completion. The survey focused on the concepts students emphasized in their project descriptions. Textual analysis was conducted to identify recurring words related to the following question: 'How did you translate the author Hans Christian Anderson's portrayal of human interaction with nature in your chosen story into the scenic construction?'

Data was collected in two forms: textual (from the survey) and visual (by assessing the design project's focus). The visual design evaluation was conducted from September to December.

## RESULTS

The project yielded 24 diverse graphic compositions. Each composition was presented individually, with students explaining their technical choices and design decisions in constructing the boxes. Figure 2.



**Figure 2** - Examples of composition "The Red Shoes", developed by the student Sara Santos.

For the final display, the class collectively arranged the twenty-four compositions. The teacher then led a discussion on how the overall interpretation of the “wall of stories” had evolved and how it influenced the individual compositions, Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** - Final assemblage

The ‘wall of stories,’ a collection of the students’ compositions, formed a rich visual mosaic that could be arranged in various ways. While some compositions were more visually and structurally complex than others, the combination of elements within the mosaic created a sense of balance and harmony. The textual analysis of the survey revealed a recurring theme of ‘inclusion,’ emphasizing the need for cohesion among elements in a unified environment. Interestingly, this mosaic-like structure mirrors the editing techniques of Hans Christian Anderson, who often rearranged his works after completion. This demonstrates that the concept of ‘mosaic-like joining’ is not exclusive to visual arts (Möbius, 2000).

Humans inhabit a world shaped by their imagination, whether through fantasy, scientific inquiry, or logical reasoning. Even the most rational applications originate from imaginative processes. But which approach is more conducive to imaginative exploration? Or, as the researcher on the topic of human imagination Dominique Bouchet might ask, (BOUCHET, 2015) Are we accepting the potentialities of the human imagination in creating new worlds?

We inhabit a world shaped by our imagination, influenced by both personal autonomy and the structures of our context. Beyond the collective imagination, individual imagination acts as a lens through which we ‘scrutinize’ and ‘distort’ other ‘realities,’ as exemplified by photographer Romain Laurent’s ‘Something-Real’ series (Laurent, 2012) Fairy tales, while not literally believed, transport readers to magical realms and can foster a propensity for mythological thinking. Myths, created by humans as cryptic knowledge, transmit specific combinations of elements. The meaning of a myth lies not in its individual elements but in the way those elements are combined, (Levi-Strauss, 1955).

## **CONCLUSION**

Regarding the first question presented at the beginning of this research: How can individual interpretations contribute to a cohesive collective composition when designing graphic works with multiple layers of depth? Each of the boxes' composition, by the depth of the layers and lighting of the background layer, allows different variations, enabling a unique richness open to different combinations and associations between the various boxes. Regarding the second question presented at the beginning of this research: What creative solutions emerge from using typographic fonts to represent stories visually?

The students' compositions evolved into playful typographic explorations, emphasizing type as a visual element. This approach challenged the common misconception in other disciplines that type is merely applied as a "text filler", highlighting its potential to be an integral part of design. The concept of detail, repurposing, and illusion emerged as key themes, alongside the idea of creating comfortable, unpretentious spaces. These explorations led to unexpected combinations and variations, both within and outside the designated areas. By focusing on smaller elements and avoiding the pursuit of prestige, students developed new skills that enriched their overall compositions. The use of a readily accessible medium freed them from the constraints of expensive materials.

The project implicitly encouraged students to view their individual contributions as part of a larger composition, mirroring life's interconnectedness. Their interpretations, efforts, and creations gained value when integrated into a broader context, enriching the whole. Inspired by Hans Christian Anderson's tales, the students' romantic interpretations of natural elements and components culminated in a symbolic "wall of stories." The assembly process and the final exhibition showcased the power of reinterpretation and the significance of each individual contribution.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The authors of this article would like to acknowledge the class from the course Design of Interfaces I, 2023/24, and the coordination of the degree in Design, School of Arts, University of Evora Portugal.

**REFERENCES**

- BOUCHET, D. (2015). THE SPECIFICITY OF HUMAN AESTHETICS. *Knowledge Cultures*, 3(3), 16–41.
- Descriptive Case Study. (2010). In *Encyclopedia of Case Study Research*. SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412957397.n108>
- GREYVENSTEYN, A. (n.d.). HANS CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN'S ROMANTIC IMAGINATION: Exploring eighteenth and nineteenth century romantic conceptualisations of the imagination in selected fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderse [UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA]. [https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/25146/dissertation\\_greyvensteyn\\_a.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://uir.unisa.ac.za/bitstream/handle/10500/25146/dissertation_greyvensteyn_a.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)
- Grum-Schwensen, A. (2016). Billeder og genanvendelse i H.C. Andersens papirarbejde. *Museumodense.Dk*. <https://museumodense.dk/artikler/billeder-og-genanvendelse-i-h-c-andersens-papirarbejde/>
- Holm, S. (2008). Being natural: An exploration of the natural in the writings of Hans Christian Andersen.
- Laurent, R. (2012). Something-Real. *Romain-Laurent.Com*. <https://romain-laurent.com/Something-Real>
- Levi-Strauss, C. (1955). The Structural Study of Myth. *The Journal of American Folklore*, 68(270), 428. <https://doi.org/10.2307/536768>
- Lupton, E. (2024). *Thinking with Type: A Critical Guide for Designers, Writers, Editors, and Students* (3rd Edition, Revised and Expanded). Chronicle Books LLC.
- McDonough, J., & McDonough, S. (2016). *Research Methods for English Language Teachers*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://books.google.to/books?id=UckEvgAACAAJ>
- Möbius, H. (2000). *Montage und Collage: Literatur, bildende Künste, Film, Fotografie, Musik, Theater bis 1933*. Fink. <https://books.google.es/books?id=aiYhAQAAIAAJ>
- Nadu, T. (2020). Nature in the Fairy Tales of Hans Christian Andersen. *Shikha* 1, 1–12.
- Paludan, J. S. (2019). Hans Christian Andersen's Use of Anthropomorphism. *Aktualitet - Litteratur, Kultur Og Medier*, 13(1), 182–194. <https://tidsskrift.dk/aktualitet/article/view/112063>