



Sofia Pusa

What was the commission?

With my swan illustration I took part in and won the 2017 campaign picture competition organised by the Helsinki Book Fair, the largest book event in Finland. The theme of the book fair in that year was Finland and they were looking for a campaign image that would connect the country theme to books and also “be insightful, topical and catch people’s attention”.

What was the biggest challenge of this assignment?

The biggest challenge was to find a strong idea for the illustration that would capture the theme of the fair as well as the nature of the event in one powerful image.

What is the first thing you do when you receive a commission?

I always start my illustration process with a period of research. I also make mind maps using keywords that trigger associations to spark further ideas.

Describe your sketch process.

I usually begin the process by doing some thumbnail sketches to quickly explore concepts and to see the big picture and basic composition. That way I explore multiple possible solutions before narrowing the concepts down to just a handful of best ideas. Usually when I’m happy with the idea and composition, I finalise and vectorise the sketch and send it to the customer for approval before it goes to the next stage of colouring and filling in the details.

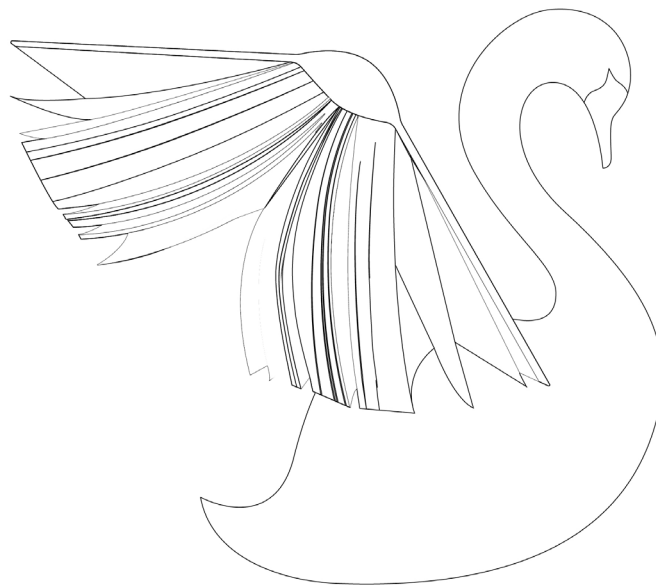
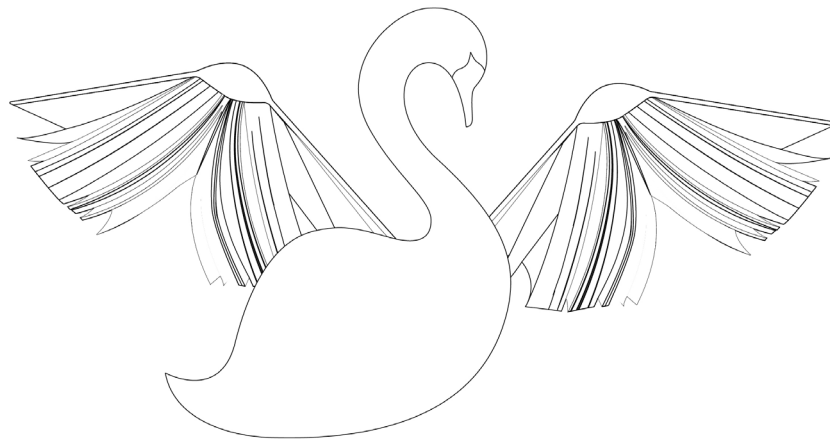
Of course, while making this illustration, I skipped the last phase since it was a competition.

Did the finished work turn out the way you thought it would?

I was really happy with the finished work and I thought that it captured my idea pretty well.

What was the feedback you were given ?

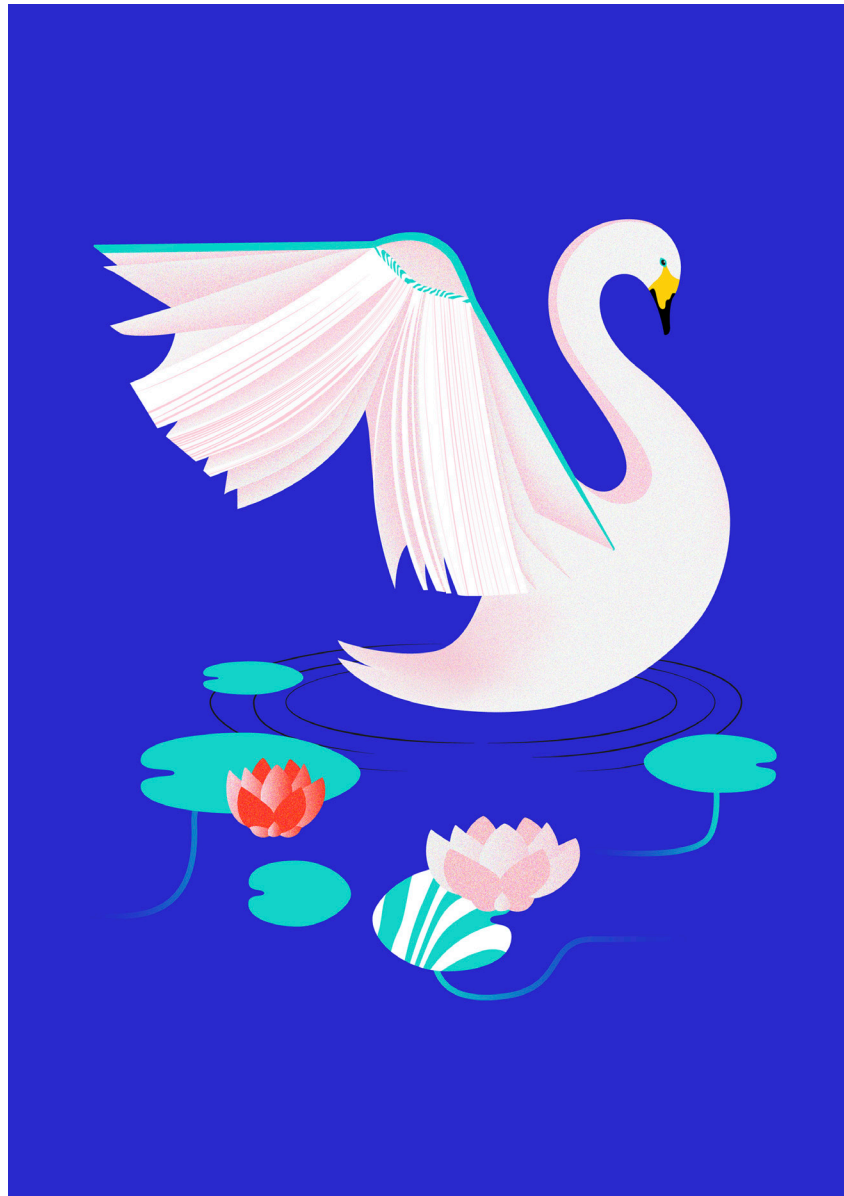
I was glad to hear that the illustration had received more positive feedback in the target group than the campaign images ever before. Many people had commented that they loved the idea and that the illustration was simply beautiful and eye-catching.



What inspired you to make the commission the way you did?

In the beginning of the process I did a lot of research of Finnish cultural symbols and my aim was to connect them somehow to literature and books. Since the theme of the fair was Finland, I chose the whooper swan, the national bird of Finland, as my topic. The whooper swan is featured in Finnish folklore and culture as an animal which connects the afterlife with the living creatures on earth. As the book fair introduces Finnish authors as well as history of Finland, with my illustration I wanted to highlight the power of literature in building bridges between past and present and in fact, building up a whole national identity. The bird theme also points to freedom of speech which is a topical issue also in Finland.

In addition, the swan refers to the popular fairy tale “The Ugly Duckling”. I feel that racism and xenophobia have been increasing globally and empathy is now needed more than ever. In the fairy tale the Ugly Duckling realises that he has grown into a swan when his wings have become strong and big. Then he also gets accepted for who he really is. In the illustration the wings of the swan are formed as a book. I think that literature has the ability to express different experiences of reality and in that way improve empathy and understanding of those who are different from ourselves – literature has the power to turn an ugly duckling into a swan.



Did you have to go outside of your “comfort zone” in this commission?

In the idea phase I definitely had to go outside my comfort zone, as I had to step beyond the obvious solutions and try to bring new perspectives to the topic.

What did you learn from the process of this commission?

I learned that it's good to spend plenty of time brainstorming and trust that the idea comes after researching the theme thoroughly. A strong idea also makes the execution phase faster and easier.

Was it a good brief?

I thought that the brief was pretty clear and it gave me all the information I needed.

What skills helped you the most with this commission?

I have always been interested in many things in addition to art and illustration and I also have a versatile background professionally. I think that has helped me analyse the problem, “see the forest for the trees” and work through abstract concepts and ideas.