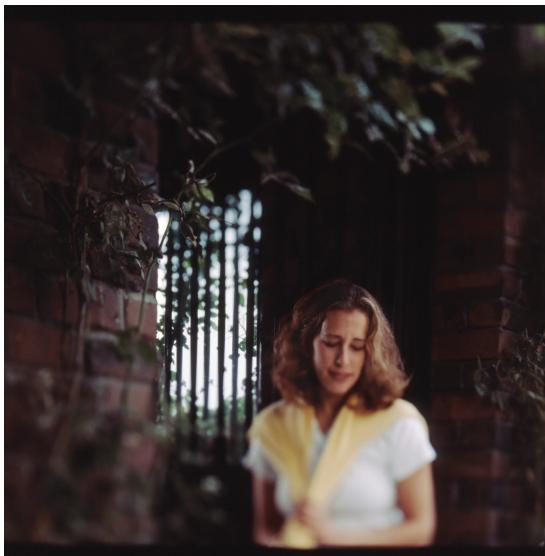


CULTURAL COMMENT

THE WOMAN WHO GAVE THE MACINTOSH A SMILE

By Alexandra Lange

April 19, 2018

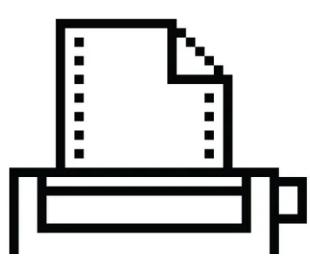
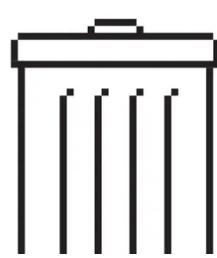
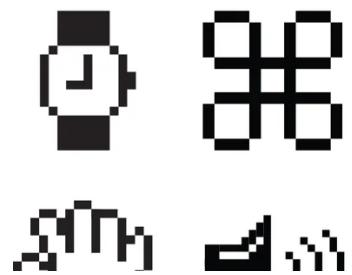
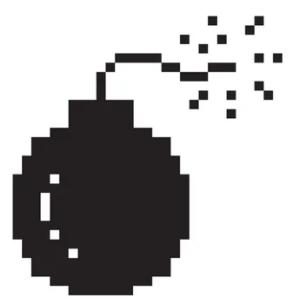
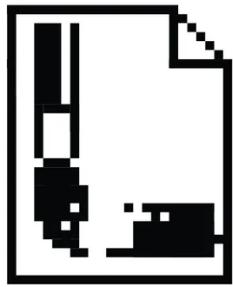
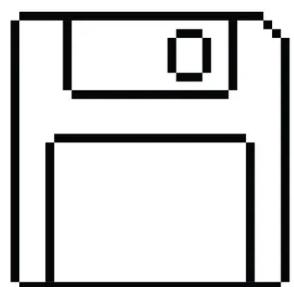
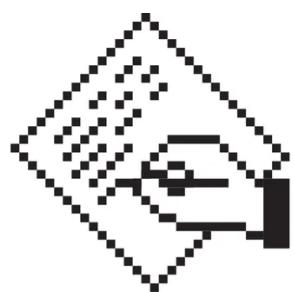
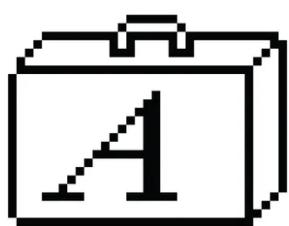
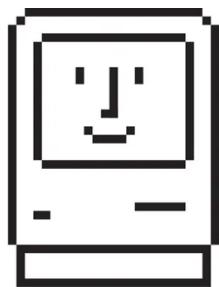


Susan Kare designed the suite of icons that made the Macintosh revolutionary—a computer that you could communicate with in pictures. Photograph by Elena Dorfman / Redux

Every fifteen minutes or so, as I wrote this story, I moved my cursor northward to click on the disk in the Microsoft Word toolbar that indicates “Save.” This is a superstitious move, as my computer automatically saves my work every ten minutes. But I learned to use a computer in the era before AutoSave, in the dark ages when remembering to save to a disk often stood between you and term-paper disaster. The persistence of that disk icon into the age of flash drives and cloud storage is a sign of its power. A disk means “Save.” Susan Kare designed a version of that disk, as part of the suite of icons that made the Macintosh revolutionary—a computer that you could communicate with in pictures.

Paola Antonelli, the senior curator of architecture and design at the Museum of Modern Art, was the first to physically show Kare’s original icon sketches, in the 2015 exhibit [“This is for Everyone.”](#) “If the Mac turned out to be such a revolutionary object—a pet instead of a home appliance, a spark for the imagination instead of a mere work tool—it is thanks to Susan’s fonts and icons, which gave it voice, personality, style, and even a sense of humor. Cherry bomb, anyone?” she joked, referring to the icon which greeted crashes in the original operating system. After working for Apple, Kare designed icons for Microsoft, Facebook, and, now, Pinterest, where she is a creative director. The mainstream presence of Pinterest, Instagram, Snapchat, emoji, and GIFs is a sign that the visual revolutionaries have won: online, we all communicate visually, piecing together sentences from tiny-icon languages.

Kare, who is sixty-four, [will be honored for her work](#) on April 20th, by her fellow designers, with the prestigious AIGA medal. In 1982, she was a sculptor and sometime curator when her high-school friend Andy Hertzfeld asked her to create graphics for a new computer that he was working on in California. Kare brought [a Grid notebook](#) to her job interview at Apple Computer. On its pages, she had sketched, in pink marker, a series of icons to represent the commands that Hertzfeld’s software would execute. Each square represented a pixel. A pointing finger meant “Paste.” A paintbrush symbolized “MacPaint.” Scissors said “Cut.” Kare told me about this origin moment: “As soon as I started work, Andy Hertzfeld wrote an icon editor and font editor so I could design images and letterforms using the Mac, not paper,” she said. “But I loved the puzzle-like nature of working in sixteen-by-sixteen and thirty-two-by-thirty-twopixel icon grids, and the marriage of craft and metaphor.”





Icons provided by kareprints.com



What Kare lacked in computer experience she made up for in visual knowledge. “Bitmap graphics are like mosaics and needlepoint and other pseudo-digital art forms, all of which I had practiced before going to Apple,” she [told an interviewer](#), in 2000. The command icon, still right there to the left of your space bar, was based on a Swedish campground sign meaning “interesting feature,” pulled from a book of historical symbols. Kare looked to cross-stitch, to mosaics, to hobo signs for inspiration when she got stuck. “Some icons, like the piece of paper, are no problem; but others defy the visual, like ‘Undo.’” At one point, there was to be an icon of a copy machine for making a copy of a file, and users would drag and drop a file onto it to copy it, but it was difficult to render a copier at that scale. Kare also tried a cat in a mirror, for copycat. Neither made the cut. She also designed a number of the original Mac fonts, including Geneva, Chicago, and the picture-heavy Cairo, using only a nine-by-seven grid.

Her notebooks are part of the permanent collections of the New York and San Francisco modern-art museums, and one was included in the recent London Design Museum exhibit “[California: Designing Freedom](#).” Justin McGuirk, the co-curator of that exhibition, said, “The Xerox Star initiated the metaphor of the ‘desktop’ as an icon-based method of interacting with computers, but it was the Apple Mac that popularized it.” While the Macintosh once made you wait with a tiny watch designed by Kare, Pinterest offers you a spinning button when you refresh, also designed by Kare. Last fall, the small home-design brand [Areaware](#) debuted Kare-designed placemats, coasters, and napkins with bitmap raindrops, waves, and diagonals; I bought them for the whole family for Christmas.

“It’s fun to read that, before there was social media, countless people spent hours with Microsoft Windows Solitaire using the cards I designed,” she said. In 2008, Kare created virtual “gifts” for Facebook that you could buy and send to a friend, with new offerings daily, based on a sixty-four-by-sixty-four-pixel grid. The best-sellers played to the crowd: hearts, penguins, and kisses, like a digital box of chocolates. A sixty-four-pixel palette would seem like a big step up, but Kare doesn’t think detail necessarily makes better icons. “Simple images can be more inclusive,” she said. Look at traffic signs: “There’s a reason the silhouettes of kids in a school crossing sign don’t have plaid lunchboxes and superhero backpacks, even though it’s not because of technology limitations,” she said. “Those would be extraneous details.”

Kare’s personal style is distinctly unfussy. She was bemused last year when her son and colleagues at Pinterest alerted her that a 1984 portrait of her by Norman Seeff, taken for *Rolling Stone*, [had turned up on Reddit](#) in the subreddit of “old school cool.” In the photo, Kare lounges horizontally in her ergonomic chair, wearing jeans and a gray sweatshirt, with one gray-and-burgundy New Balance shoe propped on her desk. “Just a regular 1984 work outfit—nothing special—but seems ‘pre-normcore’ in retrospect,” she said. “I lived in New Balance and Reebok ankle-high workout shoes. Colleagues brought me toy robot souvenirs from work trips to Japan, and I see postcards of favorite images from the Metropolitan Museum.” The toys, the art, and the sneakers embody the rigor and the humor that Kare has always brought to the task of making icons, which resonate across the decades.

A redditor helpfully identified the robots—Monster from Macross (1983), MR-11 Bulldozer Robo/Dozer (1982), and, [on Twitter](#), Daniel Mallory Ortberg made a proposal:

Daniel M. Lavery
@daniel_m_lavery

building a time machine for the express purpose of going to 1985 and marrying the woman who invented the trash icon for macs because OH MY GOD

1:56 AM · Jan 15, 2018

9.9K 1.7K people are Tweeting about this

In a [2000 interview](#) with Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, now a researcher at Institute for the Future, Kare brings the history of American graphic design full circle. It was she who brought the legendary Paul Rand (the AIGA Medal winner in 1966 and a designer of I.B.M.) to the attention of Steve Jobs when the latter founded NeXT, in 1985, and needed a logo as iconic as the Apple. Rand’s solution, [presented in a hundred-page booklet](#), for which he was paid a hundred thousand dollars, was a black box poised on one corner, mimicking the distinctive and problematic appearance of the computers themselves. Letters are easier to fit into a perfect cube than motherboards. “Don’t get scared, this is not the design,” Rand quips in a video of the presentation, taking out the book. Kare stands next to Rand in a star-spangled sweater. “Steve and I both learned a lot from him,” she said. “He was very unequivocal. I remember him almost pounding the table, saying, ‘I’ve been doing this for fifty-five years, and I know what you should do! It must be great to have that much confidence in such an inexact science.’”

I asked Kare if there were other AIGA medalists, besides Rand, whom she saw as influences, and she lists a series of pre-digital greats whose work is known for broad appeal, infectious warmth, and a sometimes cartoony hand: Charles and Ray Eames (1977), Milton Glaser (1972), and the *New Yorker* contributor and cartoonist Saul Steinberg (1963). Through their work, and now hers, one can see a legacy of personal touch that one hopes will continue into our digital future on a deeper level than fingerprint readers. She gave the Mac a smile—where’s the smile now?

Alexandra Lange is the architecture critic for Curbed and the author of “[The Design of Childhood: How the Material World Shapes Independent Kids](#).”