



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

Forecasting & Futurism

January 2012 – Issue 4

Hidden in Plain Sight

By Frank Grossman

One of the earliest tales in the detective fiction genre concerns the search for a stolen letter that has been hidden in plain view. This original idea—hiding the Hitchcockian “MacGuffin” in a place where it could be readily seen by all—proved to be a very effective plot device. So popular was this concept, over the intervening century and a half since its debut, that what was once a novel idea seems very nearly a cliché today. Yet the basic key for successful sleuths remains unchanged: knowing how to look for what one is seeking—or, just maybe, knowing how to *see* what is already there.

A moment’s reflection may bring to mind sundry items that can be both seen and not seen at the same time, depending on one’s point of view. A present-day example of how shifting one’s physical point of view literally transforms what one sees is located within the Toronto Transit Commission’s Bayview subway station. The walls and floors of this station’s subterranean passages are decorated by visual illusions, otherwise known as *anamorphoses*, created by Panya Clark Espinal. Her large-scale pictures—of a butterfly, or a ladder, or a pocket watch—are plain to see, but *only* if one looks at them in the right way, to the perennial amusement of youngsters en route to and from the subway platform.

Indeed, there is a long tradition of paintings that incorporate anamorphic elements requiring an appliance or visual aide to decipher. Mirrors or other shiny objects—cylinders, cones or spheres—placed just so, or a lens of one form or another, are needed to reveal these hidden images. Hence, this type of anamorphosis is accessible only to those having both the requisite knowledge and the proper tool to unlock its secret.

There are, as well, other types of anamorphoses, namely those visible to the unaided eye but requiring a unique vantage point, akin to those in the Bayview subway station. A notable example is *The Ambassadors*, Hans Holbein’s

famous double portrait painted nearly 500 years ago. Located in the foreground of this painting, between two full-length pictures of French emissaries to Henry VIII’s court, is an apparent smear or blurred image. Only when viewed at an extremely acute angle is the smear transformed to reveal a human skull. This traditional symbol of death in the 16th century artist’s lexicon is just one part of a complex message hidden in plain sight within Holbein’s masterwork.¹

How might the foregoing description of hidden items and images, and various viewpoints, speak to contemporary actuarial practice? Well, consider the ongoing debate enjoined by proponents of a market-consistent world view and their confreres, those who cleave to its counterpoint, a more traditional best estimate world view. This is an example of how similar information, when examined from different perspectives, can lead actuaries to radically different findings and recommendations.

A recent book about Hans Holbein describes the coexistence of conflicting perspectives within *The Ambassadors* that conspire to constrain or limit the viewer’s perspective. (Please note that the following excerpt is taken from an English translation which may account for its slight idiosyncrasy.)

Holbein placed an apparently anamorphous (sic) shape before the two men; if the picture is viewed at close range from below on the left or from above on the right, this shape transforms—suddenly—into a human skull, while at the same time the rest of the image becomes illegible² ... Thus the image is constructed according to two perspectival (sic) systems, one organizing the living figures and the world of phenomena around them, the other articulating the skull, the metaphor of Death. These two systems coexist in one painting but are at the same time mutually exclusive: to comprehend fully one of them (sic) the viewer has to lose sight of the other.³

The particular passage “These two systems coexist ... but are at the same time mutually exclusive: to comprehend



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fully one of them the viewer has to lose sight of the other.” seems an apt description of the duality of the market-consistent and traditional actuarial approaches. It also underscores the challenge of satisfactorily reconciling market value liabilities with statutory reserves: to comprehend one of them fully, the actuary has to temporarily lose sight of the other.

I once heard an actuary deftly attribute the acrimony that sometimes accompanies the market-consistent versus best estimate debate to differing, and yet equally valid, *belief systems* held by opposing actuaries. Clearly, the risk of embracing a point of view too strenuously is that it can simultaneously render one unable to see from an alternate vantage point. Avoiding such professional blindness means that actuaries ought to shed their preconceived notions and biases from time to time, and (however temporarily) strive to see things differently. In this way, actuaries may overcome the self-imposed limitations implicit in a particular mind-set, and possibly gain both a greater insight into their present circumstances and a clearer glimpse of the future too.

The detective story mentioned at the outset of this article was “The Purloined Letter” written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1844. Within this story, Poe’s prototypical private detective, C. Auguste Dupin, didn’t set his meerschaum pipe down and rise from his chair to physically change his vantage point—aiming to see more clearly and hence solve the mystery. Rather, Dupin’s crucial insight stemmed from his decision to challenge a fundamental assumption made by the Paris police and adopt an alternate viewpoint in figurative terms. Ultimately, it was flexibility of thought—and a willingness to part ways with conventional wisdom—that enabled Dupin to locate what others sought but could not see, and thereby discover a letter which had been there all along hidden in plain sight. ▼

END NOTES

- 1 Devotees of Dan Brown’s later-day fiction *The DaVinci Code* and others interested in learning more about the creation of *The Ambassadors* and its hidden message are referred to John North’s *The Ambassadors’ Secret: Holbein and the World of the Renaissance* (Hambledon and London, 2004).
- 2 A utility that enables one to virtually manipulate *The Ambassadors*, and hence make its anamorphosis plainly visible, is located at www.michaelbach.de/ot/sze_anamorph/index.html.
- 3 Bättschmann, Oskar, and Pascal Griener, *Hans Holbein* (Princeton University Press, 1997, English edition) page 188.



From one vantage point, Panya Clark Espinal’s mural within the TTC Bayview subway station appears skewed ...



... yet moving several steps to the right brings her picture of a pocket watch into view.