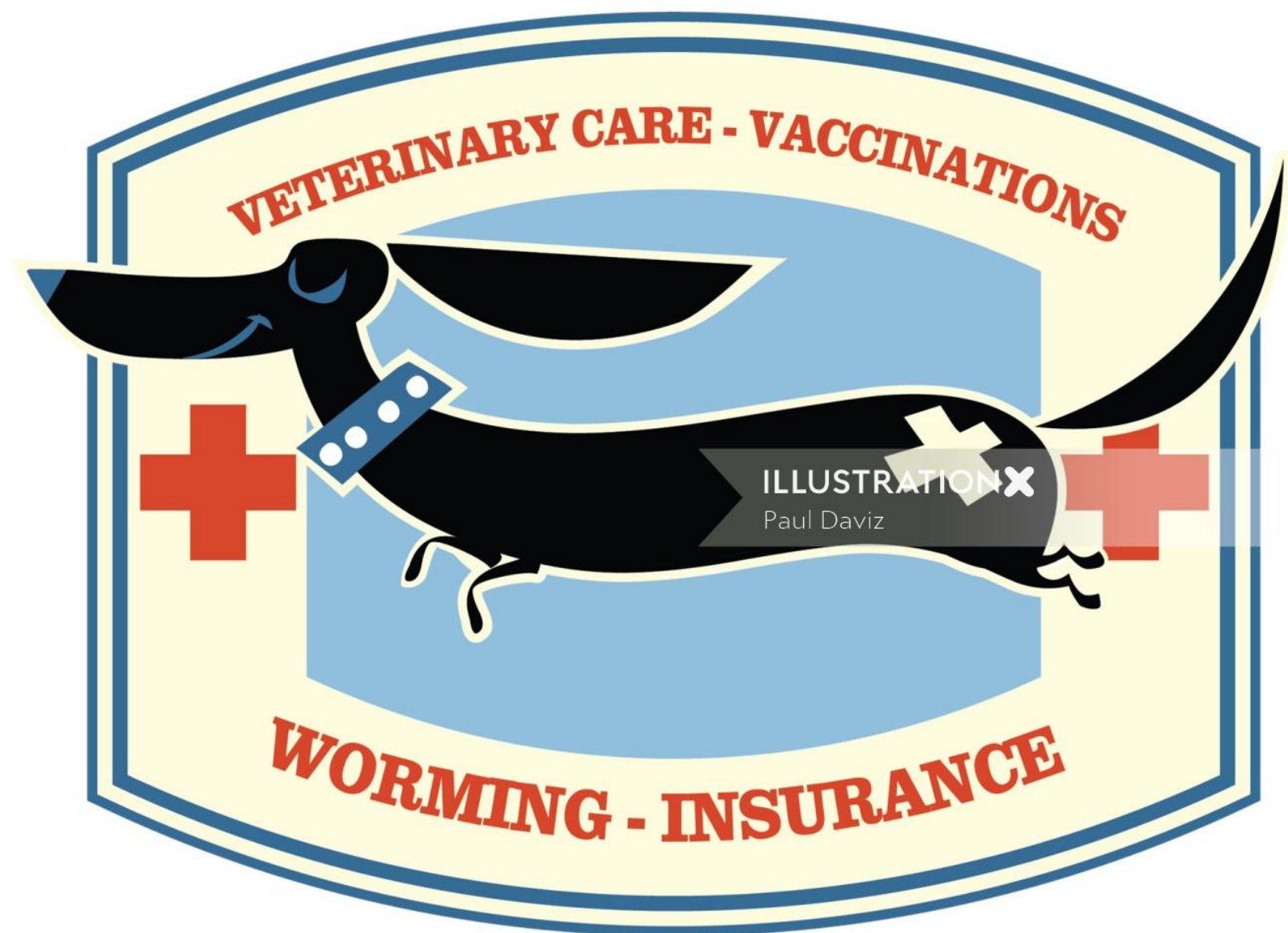


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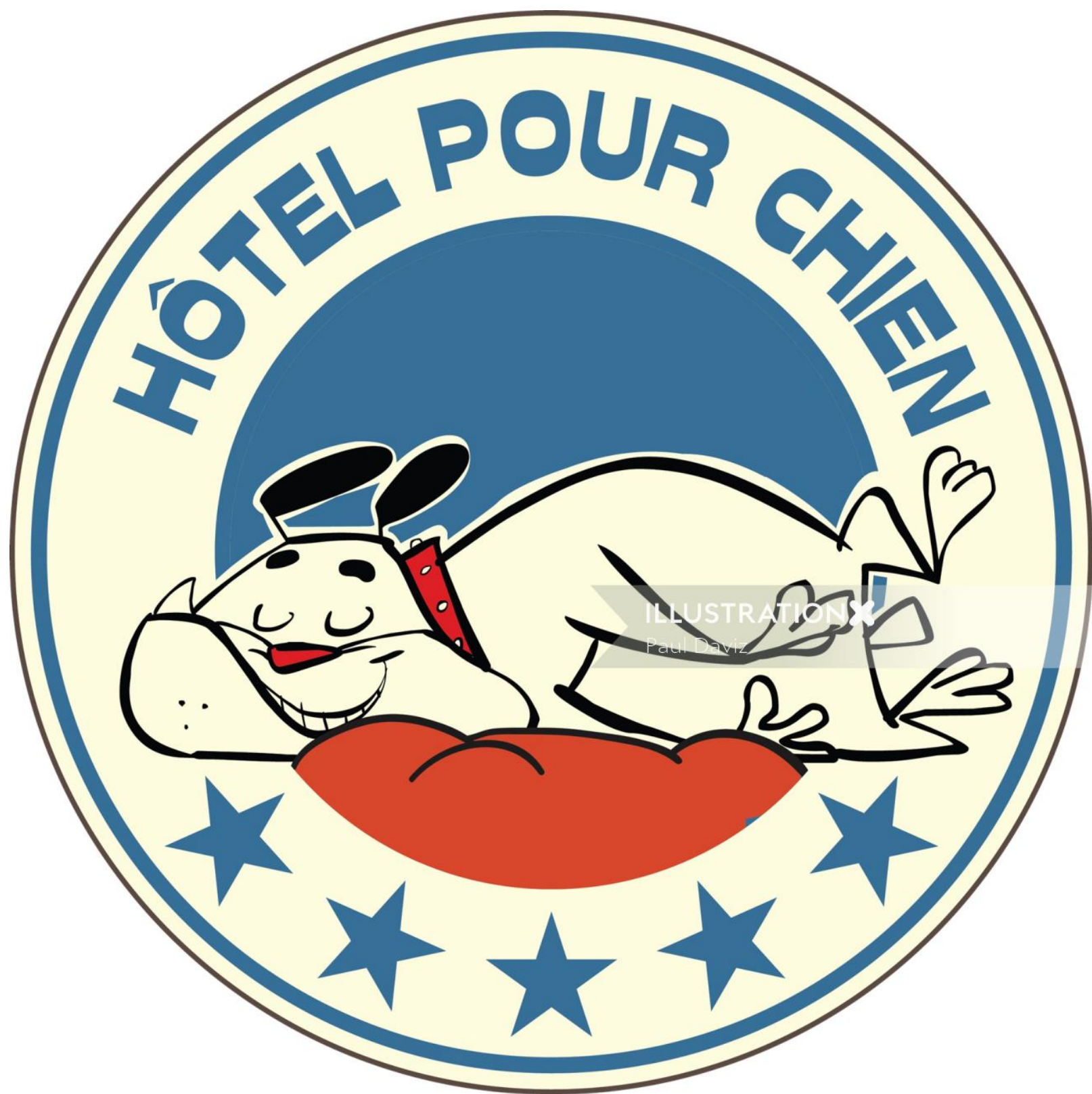
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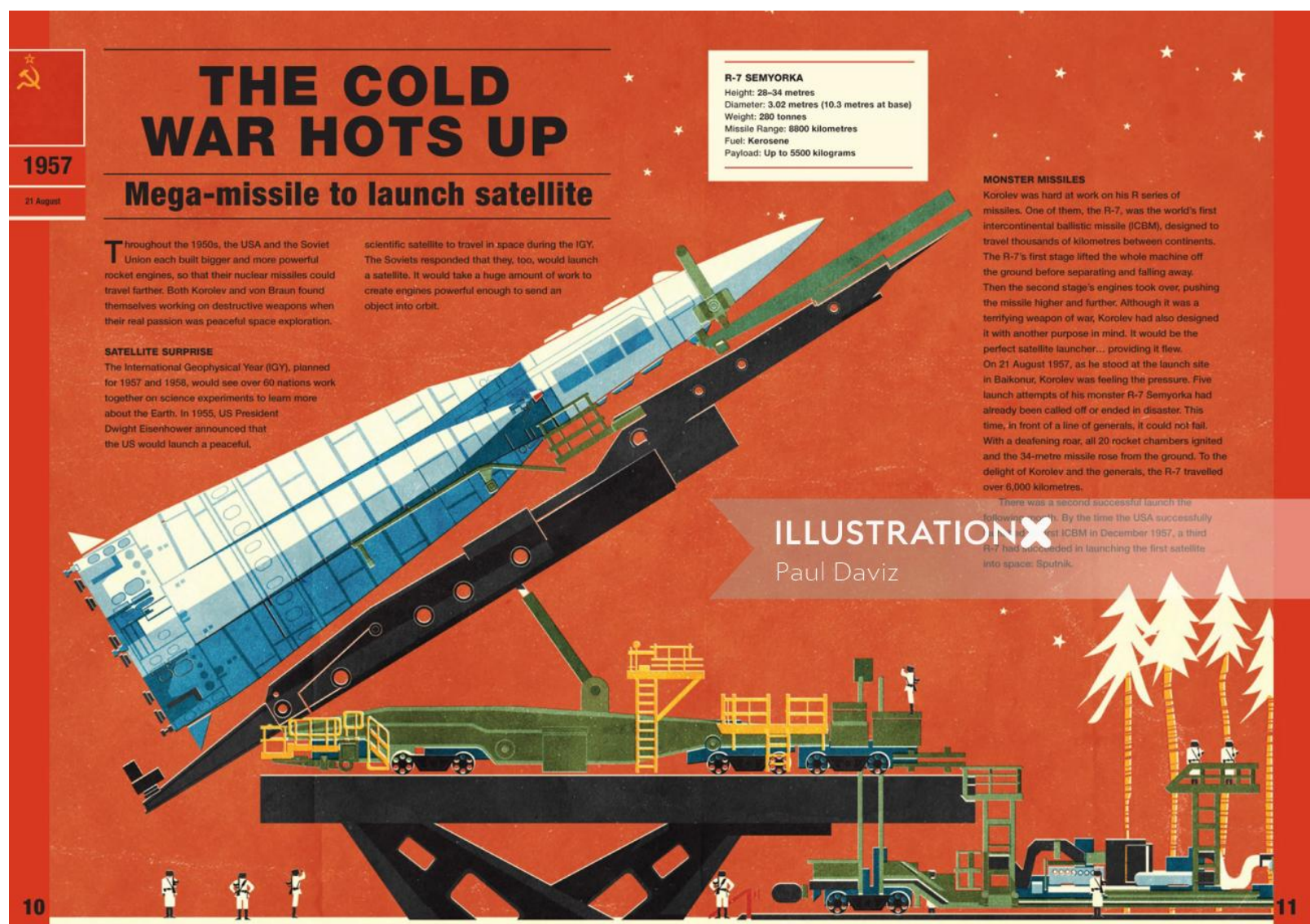
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1961
12 April

FIRST MAN IN SPACE

Soviet officer orbits Earth

“Poyekhali!” - “Off we go!” shouted Yuri Gagarin above the roar of Vostok-K’s rocket engines. As a teenager, he’d worked as a steelmaking apprentice, a dock labourer and, for almost two years during World War II, he had lived in a tiny mud hut after German forces took over his home. Now he was lying on his back inside a 2.3 metre-wide steel ball called the descent module, about to become the first person in history to head into space.

Gagarin had only qualified as a pilot in 1957 but during cosmonaut training he was the popular choice to be the first Soviet in space. His fitness, intelligence and calmness under pressure marked him out, as did his size. Gagarin was just 1.57 metres tall – handy, as the spacecraft was smaller than a telephone box! But Gagarin didn’t know he was about to make history until just three days before lift-off.

The days before the launch were incredibly tense for Chief Designer Sergei Korolev. The Vostok programme had been the brainchild of 120 organisations and 36 factories. Everything had to be just right. De-the-very-very-very-unknown, and even then there were fears about how space flight would affect the human body. Vostok had no rescue plan or back-up engines. If something went drastically wrong and Gagarin got marooned in space, all he had was ten days of food rations.

THE LAUNCH
The rocket was launched at 9.07 a.m. Moscow time. After just 118 seconds of hurtling skywards, the Vostok-K’s rocket boosters were used up and fell away. They were followed shortly after by the main rocket, leaving the spacecraft to cruise into orbit above Earth. Gagarin caught glimpses of his wild ride through three portholes. He marvelled at the weightlessness of space, watching his pencil drift out of his grasp and a drop of water float in mid-air.

It wasn’t long before the Vostok’s engines fired, to begin re-entry and bring Gagarin back to Earth. The instrument module and descent module were meant to separate before re-entry, but this did not go quite as planned, and the spacecraft began spinning wildly. Inside, Gagarin experienced G-forces eight times those on Earth – but he didn’t panic. He even whistled “The Motherland Hears, The Motherland Knows”, a patriotic Soviet song in which the second line is: “Where her son flies in the sky”.

At 7000 metres above the ground, Gagarin’s ejection seat fired, his parachutes opened and he spent 10 minutes floating towards the ground. His landing back on Earth alarmed some local programme historians. Korolev calmly explained, “Don’t be afraid, I am a Soviet like you, who has descended from space...and I must find a telephone to call Moscow!”

A SPACE LEGACY
Gagarin’s trip into space had only lasted 108 minutes, but its effects were felt worldwide. The Soviets spread news of their triumph and allowed Gagarin to travel abroad where he was greeted as a celebrity. He was now too valuable, as a mark of the Soviet’s achievement, to be risked in space again, so Gagarin returned to train future cosmonauts.

THE ROUTE
①Launch, ②In orbit, ③Vostok 1 passes into darkness above the Pacific Ocean, ④Vostok 1 emerges into daylight above the Atlantic Ocean, ⑤Retro-rocket fire for re-entry, ⑥Vostok 1 re-enters Earth’s atmosphere, ⑦Gagarin lands back on Earth’s surface

“Don’t be afraid, I am a Soviet like you, who has descended from space.”
YURI GAGARIN

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PLAYING CATCH-UP

American astronauts reach space

I didn't take long for the US to respond to the Soviets' success. Less than four weeks after Gagarin's mission, US astronaut Alan Shepard was launched into space in a Mercury craft he named Freedom 7. The US had been making careful preparations, carrying out 17 test launches before Shepard was blasted from Cape Canaveral in Florida. Shepard's mission lasted only 15 minutes and 22 seconds, much shorter than Gagarin's, but it was groundbreaking in its own way. Freedom 7 was the first spacecraft to be controlled in space by an astronaut. Shepard used levers which fired small rocket thrusters to steer.

The next eighteen months were a hectic period in the American space programme, with five more Mercury missions launched. One of them nearly ended in disaster. Astronaut Virgil 'Gus' Grissom almost drowned in the Atlantic Ocean after his capsule's hatch came off too early, letting water flood in. However, other missions went more smoothly.

In the third Mercury launch, John Glenn became the first American to complete an orbit of the Earth, while in the last Mercury mission Gordon Cooper circled Earth 22 times.

SANDWICH IN SPACE

The next step after the Mercury missions was the Gemini programme. This was a scaled-up version of Mercury, with a spacecraft that could carry a crew of two. (Gemini means 'twins' in Latin). Its first crewed mission blasted off in 1965, carrying Gus Grissom, John Young and a surprise corned-beef sandwich! Space food at the time was dried into cubes, sealed in pouches or squeezed out of tubes like toothpaste. In the weightless conditions in space, floating crumbs could jam the spacecraft's electrical circuits. However, John Young smuggled the sandwich on board in a spacesuit pocket. The mission went smoothly, but he got into trouble afterwards due to the unnecessary risk.

QUICK PROGRESS

The next eighteen months were a hectic period in the American space programme, with five more Mercury missions launched. One of them nearly ended in disaster. Astronaut Virgil 'Gus' Grissom almost drowned in the Atlantic Ocean after his capsule's hatch came off too early, letting water flood in. However, other missions went more smoothly.

MOON TALK

In May 1961, less than three weeks after Shepard's mission, US President John F. Kennedy gave a historic speech. He said, "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the Moon and returning him safely to the Earth." Kennedy's speech also warned that no single space project would be more impressive, difficult or expensive to accomplish.

For the USA, at least, the space race now had a finishing line. Millions of dollars were poured into research, staff and building new machinery and facilities. NASA's budget tripled between 1960 and 1962, then doubled again in 1963. By 1965, an astonishing 4 per cent of all the money the American government spent was going to the space agency.

"I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal... of landing a man on the Moon..."

US PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, 25 MAY 1961

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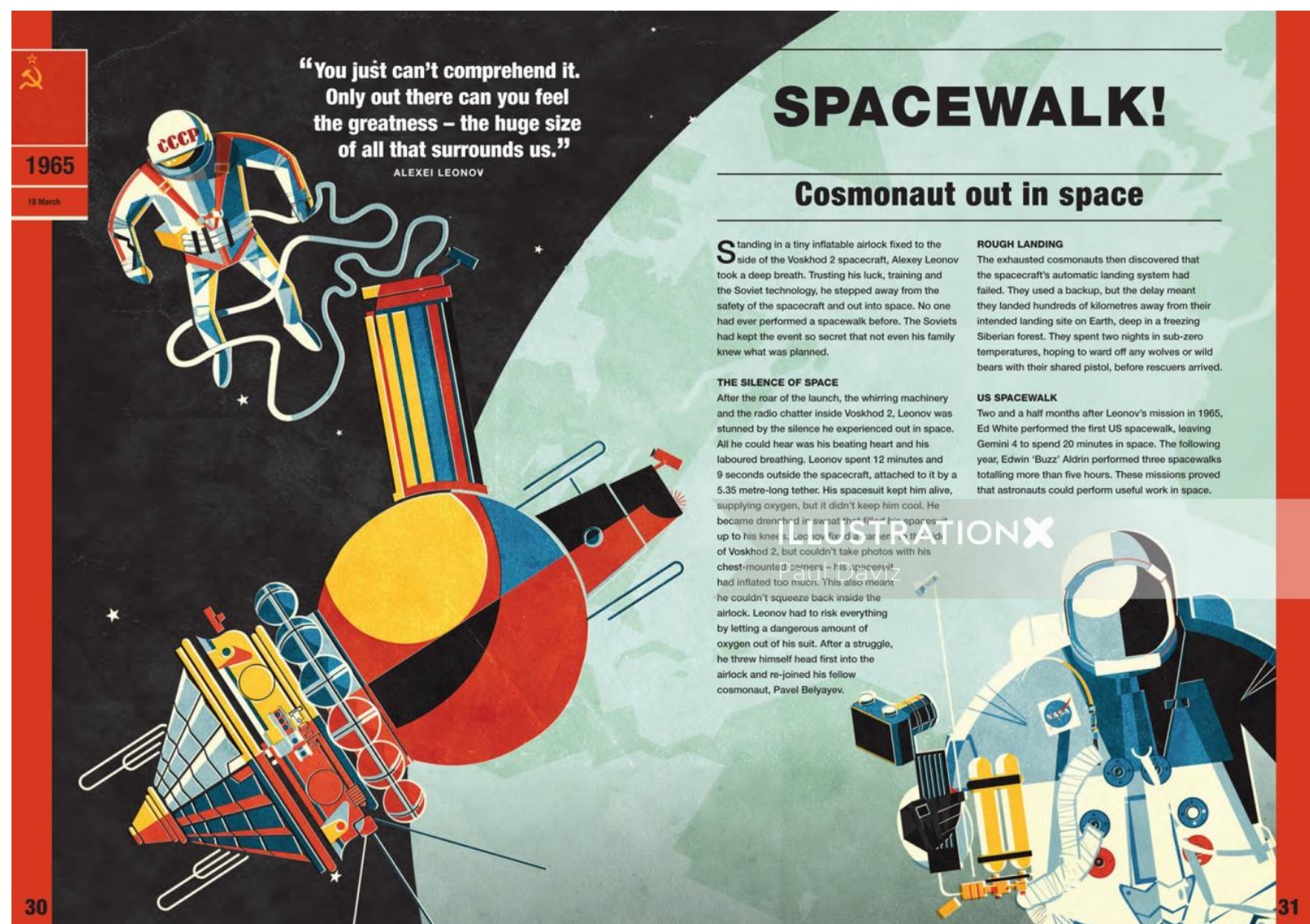
1961
5 May

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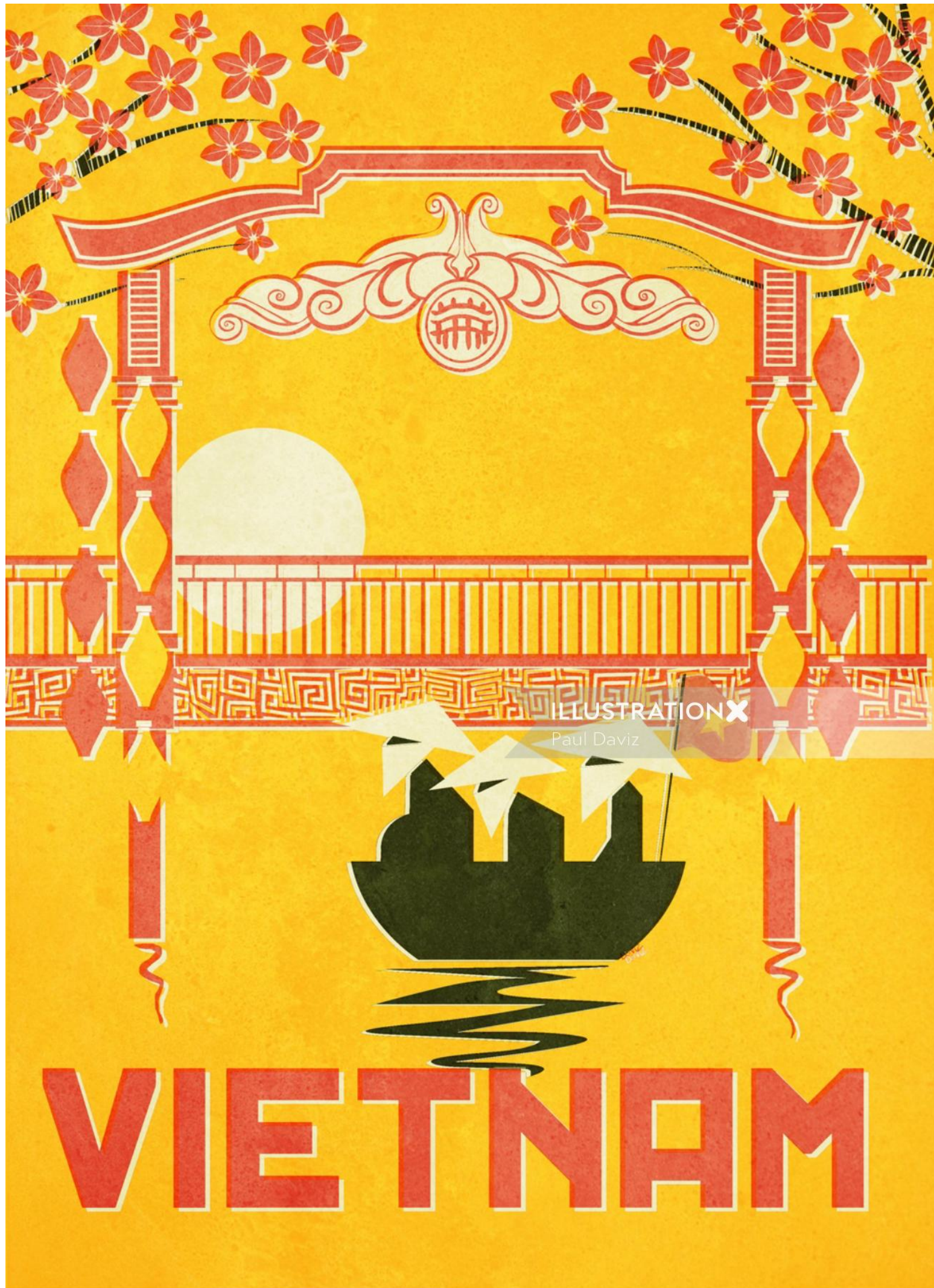
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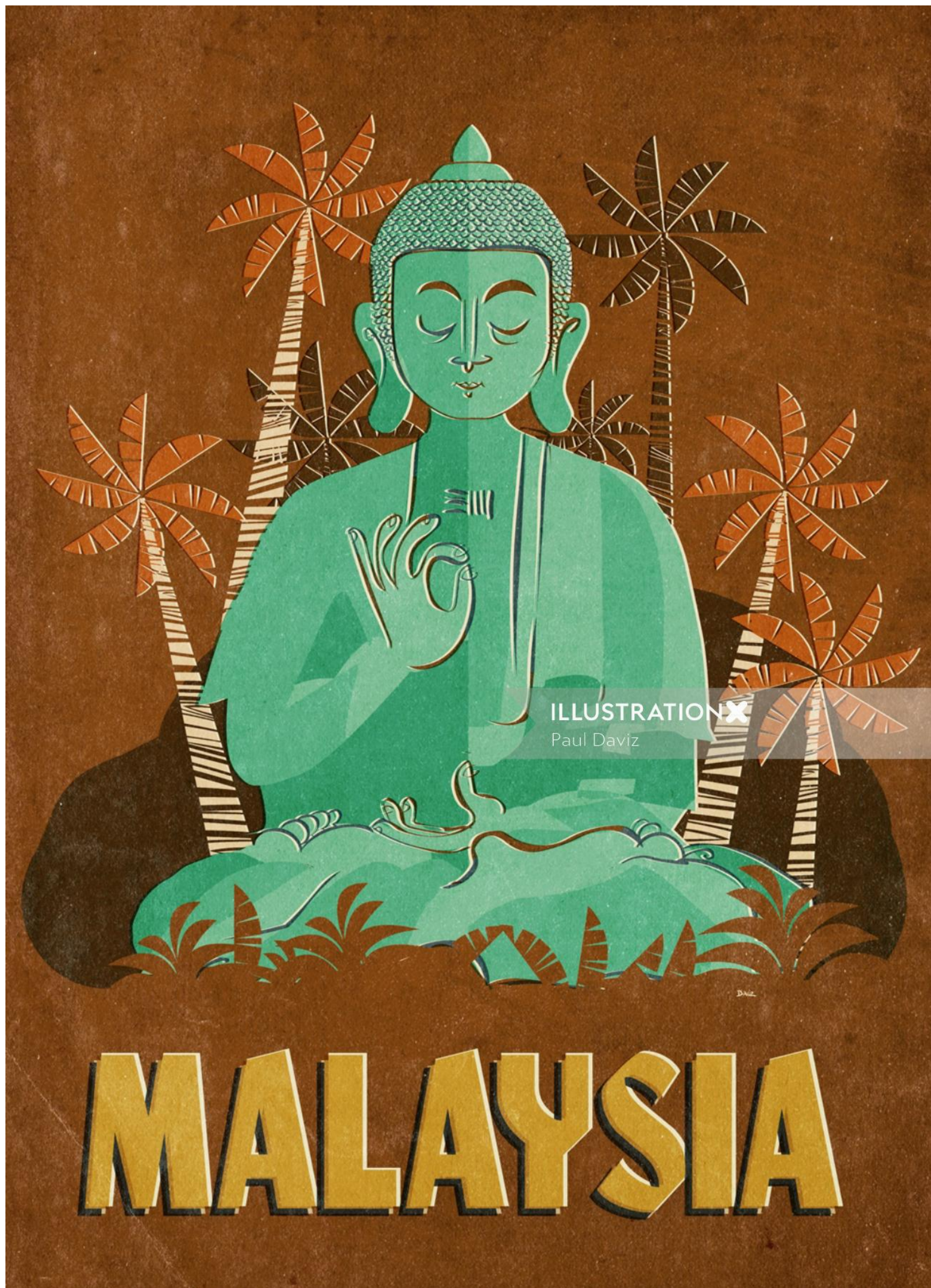
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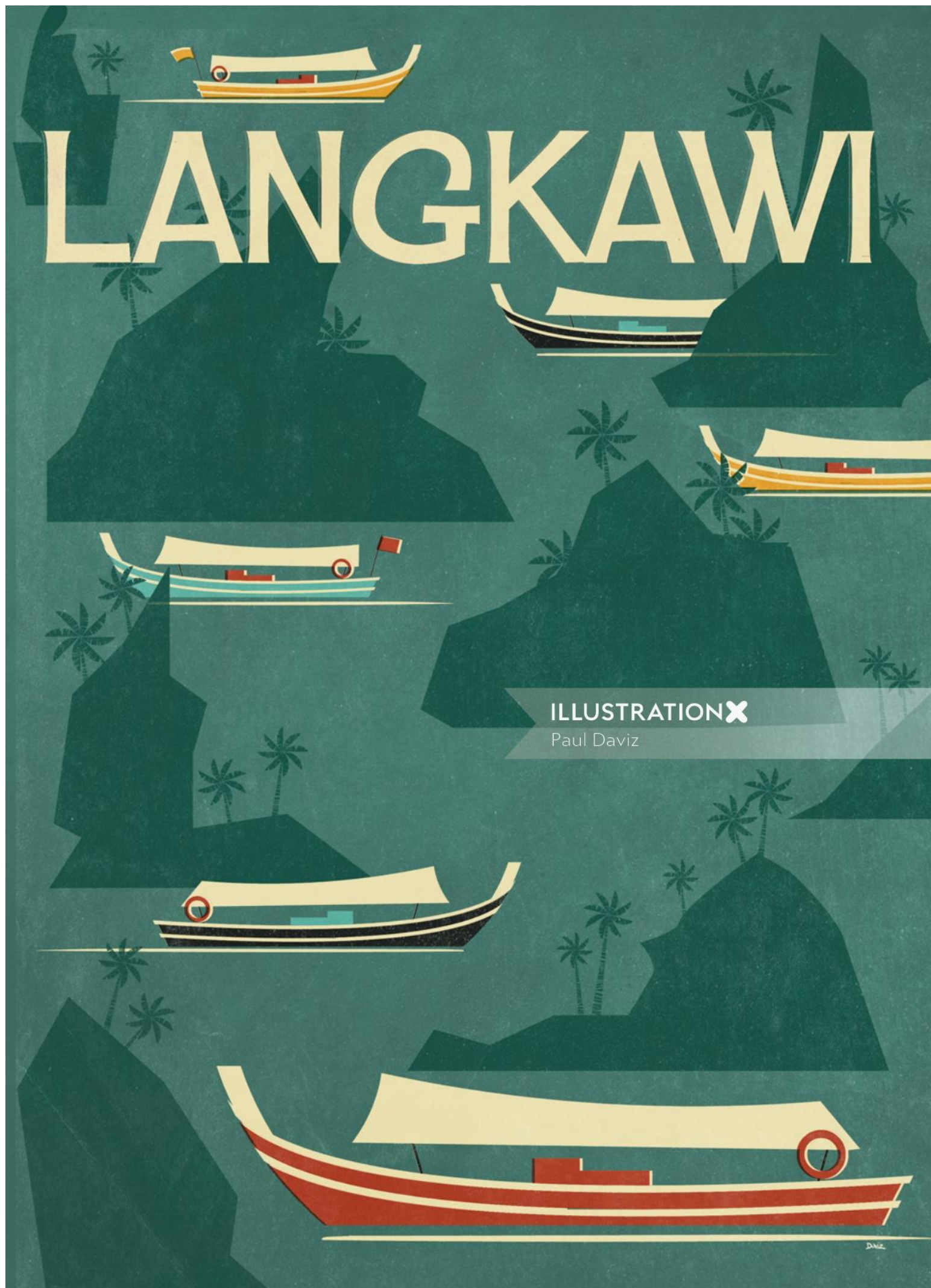
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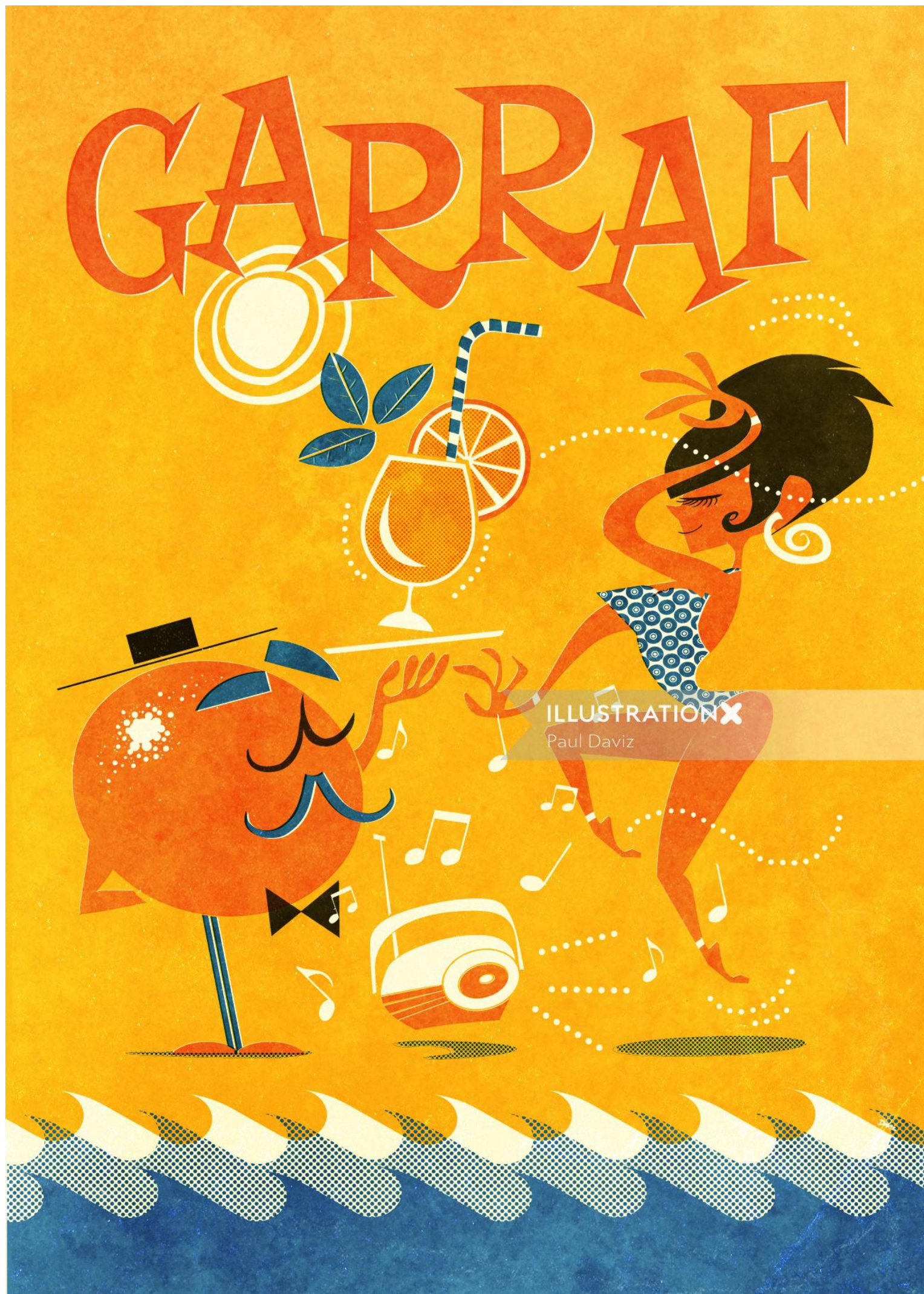
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