

>

Lecture Topics 2010

Symbols: The Alphabet of Human Thought

Symbols have been used to show ownership, group affiliations and to signify who made a particular object. They convey direct information or can carry quiet subliminal messages. These images are edited selections from class slide lectures. Reading this page is not a substitute for attending class.

A Symbol Primer



1. Pictograms

A pictogram is an **image that represents an object**. Pictograms are useful for conveying information through a common "visual language" able to be understood regardless of one's native language or degree of literacy. So that means that anyone in the world familiar with a drinking fountain should recognize the pictogram above.

This particular pictogram is part of an entire system of signage symbols developed by the United States **Department of Transportation** to help manage the flow of large numbers of people through transportation hubs. To encourage their adoption world-wide the symbols were made available for free. The **American Institute of Graphic Arts** played a pivotal role in the design and development of these symbols. Read more in entry #15 on this page.

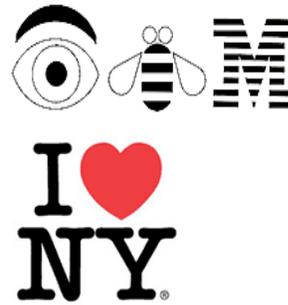


1. Pictograms

Chinese is composed entirely of pictograms, a system of writing used by more than any other in the world. (About 1 billion Chinese speakers compared to 350 million English speakers). To be literate in Chinese requires knowledge of several thousand of the over 80,000 Chinese pictograms — although about 3,500 are most commonly used. The pictogram above is Chinese for world peace

[Image source](#)

During the 2008 Olympics in China the event signage employed pictographs that echoed the style of Chinese language pictographs. More of the images can be seen at [this link](#).



2. Rebus

The rebus is a pictorial image that represents a spoken sound. Today the rebus is mostly used for amusement however it was a critical link in the development of the **phonetic alphabet** starting in Egyptian hieroglyphics. ([See the "Development of Handwriting" on this site](#)).

Shown above are two famous rebus logos from the 20th century. First, a famous rebus for IBM by **Paul Rand**, an American graphic designer renowned for his corporate identity work from 1960—1980. (See #11 below for more about Rand)

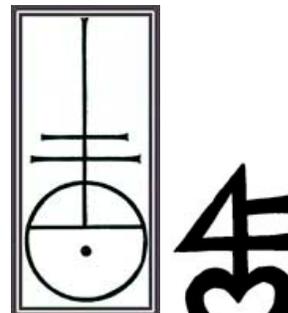
[Milton Glaser's](#) ubiquitous rebus "I Love New York" is actually a combination of a rebus and a phonogram. **A phonogram is a symbol (letter) that represents a spoken sound**. For example the letter 'A' represents sounds, ahh or aay, etc.



3. Ideogram

An ideogram is a character or symbol **representing a complete idea** without expressing the pronunciation of a particular word or words for it. Above, an ideogram demonstrates the perils of tipping a vending machine. (Image from [Warning](#) by Nicole Recchia)

Below is the familiar request to not smoke in a specific area. The red bar is an image that alone means nothing but when combined with a circle symbolizes the idea of "no."



4. Trademarks | Brands

During the Middle Ages European trade guilds began using marks to identify the origin and content of their products. The term "**hallmark**" comes from the identification marks that metal artisans stamped into metal when exhibiting wares in the **guild hall** in London. In the image above the anchor refers to the town where the product was made, the lion signifies the type of metal (sterling silver) and the letter B refers to the year the item was marked. ([Image source](#))

The terms **ear mark** and **branding** have their origins in the practice of farmers marking ownership on their animals. When herds ranged freely, intermingling with others in common pastures, these permanent marks were imperative. Ear marks are cuts or holes punched into ears; branding is a scar burned into the skin.



5. Logotype or Logo?

Technically the term **logotype** means a symbol comprised entirely of typography. The Coca-Cola symbol is an example of a purely typographic logotype.

Frequently the term **logo** is used interchangeably with **symbol**. The symbol below is from the Wiener Werstatte, or Vienna Workshops, formed in Austria in 1903. The workshops were a co-operative of artisans and artists united in their goal of making products that merged pure and applied arts. Their hand manufactured goods were imprinted with the WW symbol (left) but often also carried the individual marks of each designer and craftsman involved in the production. By 1913 the Wiener Werkstätte symbol was officially registered a **trademark**.



6. Printer's Devices

This semester we will also be looking at printer's devices (symbols) used to identify the printer or publisher of a book. Many early printers used the combination of the **orb and the cross**, a signifier of the earth and Christianity. The mark on the left is a version of the orb and cross by Joannes de Colonia of Venice, 1481.

On the right is a contemporary printer's mark by Paul Moxon for his [Fameorshame](#) press. He explains the myriad of reasons for the mark, "The Fameorshame mark is based on the *orb and four*, a traditional sign used by some early printers. A related sign the orb and cross—literally the earth surmounted by the cross—is also the alchemical symbol for antimony, an ingredient in type metal. Long before the development of printing, the 4 had been a mark of merchants to identify their wares. Several authorities, including the great lettering artist Rudolph Koch also associate the 4 with Hermes, the god of scribes, tradesmen, and travelers. Additionally, in *The Book of Signs* Koch provides an illustration of a 4 being represented in a medieval monogram for the Christian name Paul. Thus in the Fameorshame mark, where the components are 4, F, and M, the 4 may also be read as a reversed P, the F for Fameorshame, and the M for Moxon. M in its curvilinear form suggests a heart, a shape featured in several orb and cross marks.

[Quote and image source](#)

An often duplicated printer's mark originated with the master printer Aldus Manutius, who started his famous **Aldine Press** in Venice in 1494. The Aldine innovations included scholarly editing of content, high quality typography and printing as well as masterful woodcut illustrations. Look for more about him in [the book section, entry #17](#).

Aldus's **Anchor & Dolphin** device, which embodied his motto "Make Haste Slowly" is shown above. This semester we will see this mark used by many printers from the Renaissance period until the present. It is used by printers who want to signify their attempt to follow the innovation and quality of the Aldine Press.



7. Monogram

Greek for 'single line.' In early European kingdoms illiterate monarchs signed documents with custom monograms. Today a designer's monogram can add status to an everyday object and add value to the price. Case in point below.



8. Coat of Arms & Family Crest

The origin of "a coat of arms" came from the symbols displayed on the **crest** of a helmet or metal chest **armor** to help identify soldiers in battle or jousting matches. Eventually the images were moved off of the helmet and chest plate and onto banners, dinnerware, etc. The coat of arms, however, often retained the helmet reference as part of the composition (see above where the goat stands). Now the coat-of-arms appears on items ranging from automobiles to 50cent's web sites, or on any application that wishes to imply regal lineage or status.



If you are interested in a book that thoroughly explores symbols, their origin, development, style and classification, I highly recommend [Per Mollerup's Marks of Excellence, The History and Taxonomy of Symbols](#). The text classifies symbols into three categories, by history, function and motif.

(Source for #7 and 8)

Symbol Pioneers



9. Symbols are "styled"

Trademarks are designed to reflect the style during which they are created. Above is the GE logo first used in the late 19th century at the height of the Art Nouveau period. It clearly reflects the curvaceous motif that dominated in that period.

As Art Nouveau waned logo styles became more geometric and simplified as seen in the 1907 trademark for AEG (a German electrical company) designed by **Peter Behrens**. This symbol was part of an entire design scheme in which Behrens applied the symbol to all of the print work, products and architecture for AEG, making it **the first complete corporate identity system**. [Read more about Behrens on this site here.](#)



10. Raymond Lowey

Both Behrens and Lowey have been named by historians as the "Father of Modern Industrial Design." In addition to their dual monikers they both share importance as significant contributors to Graphic Design.

Lowey is most well known for his simplified **streamlined designs** that he applied to buses, cars and airplanes. He pushed the 1940's design frontier by application of his mantra, MAYA (Most Advanced, Yet Acceptable). [Raymond Lowey site.](#)

Lowey also streamlined his logo design. Above is his logo for Shell Oil, a symbol that became so recognized that the company was able to drop the name entirely from the symbol without loss of customer recognition. Betcha' knew what it was without reading this.



11. Paul Rand

It was in the area of corporate identity design that Rand achieved his highest recognition. His designs reflect the style of the mid to late 20th century —simplicity, neutrality, clarity—all part of the vocabulary of the Modernist period. But **Rand added a blend of playfulness and illustration** that set his work apart. Rand wrote: "A trademark is not merely a device to adorn a letterhead, to stamp on a product, or to insert at the base of an advertisement; nor one whose sole prerogative is to imprint itself by dint of constant repetition on the mind of the consumer public. The trademark is a potential **illustrative feature** of unappreciated vigor and efficacy; and when used as such escapes its customary fate of being a boring restatement of the identity of the product's maker."



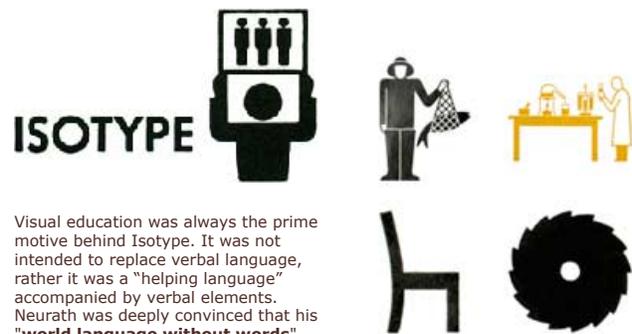
11. Paul Rand

The role of the logo is to point, to designate—in as simple a manner as possible. A design that is complex, like a fussy illustration or an arcane abstraction, harbors a self-destructive mechanism. Simple ideas, as well as simple designs are, ironically, the products of circuitous mental purposes. Simplicity is difficult to achieve, yet worth the effort. The effectiveness of a good logo depends on:

- a. distinctiveness**
- b. visibility**
- c. useability**
- d. memorability**
- e. universality**
- f. durability**
- g. timelessness**

[See a selection of his logo designs and the source of the Rand images and quotes shown here.](#)

ISOTYPE: International System of Typographic Picture Education: "Words Divide, Pictures Unite."



Visual education was always the prime motive behind Isotype. It was not intended to replace verbal language, rather it was a "helping language" accompanied by verbal elements. Neurath was deeply convinced that his **"world language without words"** would not only enhance education but help international understanding.

12. Otto & Marie Neurath

The ISOTYPE system was born from research and theories of Otto Neurath (1882–1945), a Viennese philosopher, economist and social scientist. As a child he was fascinated by the function of Egyptian hieroglyphics—their forms and ability to communicate a story. This early influence was integrated into his life's work, the development of a

In the 1920's Neurath was hired to head the Social and Economic Museum of Vienna. There he made displays of **social information** to educate the general public about post war housing. This position afforded him an opportunity blend his philosophical and aesthetic views into a symbol-based language that was **an alternative to**

Marie Reidmeister Neurath "Transformer"

M While working at the museum Neurath began his collaboration with **Marie Reidmeister**. Her role was classified as a **transformer** (graphic designer) which meant that she took the mathematical statistics and conceptual direction from Neurath and converted it into a clear visual format. She worked

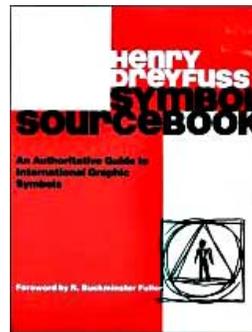
Gerd Arntz (1901–88)
Graphic Artist of ISOTYPE Symbols

M An essential member of the Neurath group was German artist Gerd Arntz who joined the ISOTYPE team in 1928. Arntz was an activist artist who embraced the same socialist ideals as Neurath. He was artistically and philosophically influenced by the Expressionism and Constructivism

movements. As part of his socialist values Arntz embraced the primitive qualities of wood block as his primary medium. The wood block medium in turn influenced the look of the ISOTYPE. Arntz drew over 4,000 ISOTYPE symbols in his own direct and clean graphic style that set the tone for future symbols in the coming decades.

When the ISOTYPE team left for England in 1940, Arntz stayed in The Hague and applied his style to symbols for the Dutch Foundation for Statistics. Currently there is an extensive history and archive of Gerd Arntz's symbol design on line at [The Gerd Arntz web archive](#). I highly recommend you see this informative and well designed site.

The 1970's: A Great Decade for Symbol Design



13. Otl Aicher, Munich Olympics, 1972

The pictograph style Aicher and his team devised for the **Munich Olympics** and the **Frankfurt Airport** have been integrated into international information styles. His Olympic symbols set a new standard for reductionism and clarity in 1972, the era of the "International Style." Bibliotheque design has an extensive site on Aicher, his life and work and an exhibition of his designs. [72: Otto Aicher and the Munich Olympiad Exhibition.](#)

"...Aicher and his team developed a cohesive set of nearly 180 pictograms for sporting events as well as services through a strict orthogonal and diagonal square grid, where all visual elements were arranged at 90 and 45 degrees. The sum of all the work amounted to a very precise and structured identity with just the right amount of warmth."(Quote From speak up web site)



[Image Source](#)



The Munich Olympiad Logo, 1972, Otl Aicher Office.

14. Henry Dreyfuss

Another industrial designer with an interest in symbols, Henry Dreyfuss advocated for symbols to replace words such as on-off, stop, up-down, etc, on control panels to enhance **safety and clarity**. In 1972 Dreyfuss and his staff codified and published graphic symbols from throughout the world in an attempt to create a unified frame of reference. The book, **A Symbol Sourcebook** was essentially a dictionary of universally used symbol designs organized into categories by basic symbols, disciplines, color, and graphic form. To make the sourcebook truly universal, the Table of Contents was in 17 languages in addition to English.

Dreyfuss's earlier books, *Designing for People* 1955, and 1960 *The Measure of Man* are considered classic reference texts. These books are in the Moore Library if you want to see them in person.

[Information source at the IDSA site](#)

15. AIGA Transportation Symbols, 1974

It was Henry Dreyfuss who urged the AIGA and the IDSA to join forces to convince the US Department of Transportation to implement a well designed system of passenger and pedestrian symbol signs."This system of 50 symbol signs was designed for use at the crossroads of modern life: in airports and other transportation hubs and at large international events. Produced through a collaboration between the AIGA and the U.S. Department of Transportation, they are an example of how public-minded designers can address a universal communication need."

A committee studied and standardized dozens of symbols which were then drawn by designers **Roger Cook & Don Shanosky**. To ensure their adoption the DOT offered the symbols copyright free. You too can download them for free on the AIGA web site.

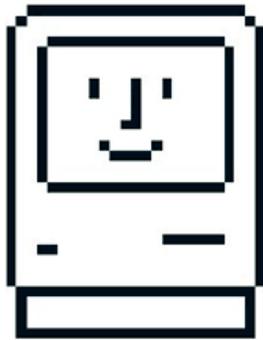
[AIGA Information](#) with a link to the symbol download.

Digital Symbol Pioneers



16. William Golden

Designing for CBS Broadcasting, Golden created the first symbol that was deliberately considered for how it would look on a screen. Golden's original inspiration came while he was driving through Pennsylvania Dutch country. He became intrigued by hex symbols resembling the human eye drawn that were painted on the Amish barns to ward off evil spirits. He also studied Shaker art from 1850s which contained images of the eye. These images contributed to his concept of television's **unblinking electronic eye**. With the help of graphic artist Kurt Weiss, the first CBS eye logo was drawn.



17. Susan Kare, Mac Icons

The visual language of point-and-click computing came to life from the imagination of Susan Kare, a fine arts curator hired by Apple in 1983 to design the look and feel of the Macintosh interface. Her whimsical, easy-to-grok icons tempted even nontechnies to pick up a mouse, and her sleek screen fonts—with jet-set names like Geneva and Monaco—launched the first wave of elegant digital typography. [Quote Source Wired Magazine](#)

Now see her work on her site <http://www.kare.com>



18. Animated Logos

Interbrand's new logo for xerox considers the internet and animation... "They wanted a logo that would work as well on the Internet and on a fast-moving bike as it does in print or on television. Xerox is a sponsor of the Ducati Xerox World Superbike Team. "The Internet, sponsorships, all kinds of 3D icons —none of that existed when Xerox adopted its old logo," said Maryann Stump, senior director of brand strategy for Interbrand. "And you can do animation with a symbol that you just can't do with a wordmark."

18. How to Explain a Logo Design 101

The Xerox/Interbrand team settled on lowercase letters because they seemed friendlier, and on a deeper red and a thicker font, to stand out better on the Web and on high-definition television. They chose a ball to suggest forward movement and "a holistic company" Stump said. They also devised a series of variously-colored "connectors" - swirled lines, reminiscent of the ribbons used to connote support for AIDS and breast cancer research - that Xerox will etch on conference rooms at its new headquarters in Norwalk, Connecticut, and that it will use to connect images and text in commercials & advertisements. [International Herald Tribune](#)

A Downside to Symbols : Cultural Mismatches



20. Religious Interpretations

The Red Cross logo, designed in 1963, cannot be used in Muslim countries due to its connotation of Christianity. The red cross will soon be changed to the the red diamond, an acceptable symbol for Christian, Muslim, Jewish and other world religions. " The Red Crystal is a compromise designed to break a deadlock over the admission of Israel as a full member of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and would allow countries with mixed populations to replace the cross or crescent with a more neutral symbol."



The compromise plan was discussed during six years of negotiations brokered by the Swiss government. Its adoption requires approval by two-thirds of the 192 signatories to the Geneva Convention. We live in a period where these symbols are taking on very strong connotations and very divisive ones." Like the designers of euro bank notes, which feature nondescript images of bridges, arches and other monuments, officials at the Red Cross believe that **by selecting a symbol devoid of any apparent historical reference, controversy can be avoided.**"



21. Perception of Skull & Crossbones

"Research indicates that the old skull and crossbones used in the past to identify poisons had little meaning for the children in the 20th century. Pirate symbols have been exploited in movies, cartoons, commercial products and amusement parks to denote happy, exciting things like pirates and adventure. In a university-conducted testing program, children at daycare centers were shown six symbols which were affixed to identical bottles of mouthwash often found in family homes. The symbols included a red stop sign, the skull and crossbones, and four others.



Mr. Yuk was developed for, and is distributed by, the Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh

At the beginning of the test, each child was told that he might find bottles like these at home and was asked to identify any bottle he might not like to play with. The symbol that proved to be least attractive to the children was **Mr. Yuk**.

From the [Washington Poison Center](#)

Rebranding and Anti-Branding



22. Rebranding

Rebranding is the process by which a product or service developed with one brand, company or product line affiliation is marketed or distributed with a different identity. This may involve radical changes to the brand's logo, brand name, image, marketing strategy, and advertising themes. These changes are typically aimed at the repositioning of the brand or /company, usually in an attempt to distance itself from certain negative connotations of the previous branding, or to move the brand upmarket.

Poland— How a Country Gets Rebranded

Last year, Poland's Ministry of Foreign Affairs hired DDB Corporate Profiles, a branch of the global agency DDB, to design a logo that could be used to promote tourism and trade. This summer, the company unveiled its design: a red-and-white kite whose tail is held by a dancing stick figure that doubles as the K in the word "Polska." The Polska lettering is thick, red and curvaceous, a nod to the emblem of the Solidarity movement. The red-and-white design on the kite is a four-square checkered pattern, reminiscent of the emblem on Polish warplanes. "A dancing group of people flying a kite with Poland's colors' has taken the place of protesters carrying a bloody flag." Source, [2002 NY Times Article](#)



23. Carolyn Davidson

Based upon art student Carolyn's \$35 interpretation of the wings of Nike in 1971, the swoosh was once the emblem of youth and athleticism but now has an unfortunate association with corporate greed.

Another example of logo with negative association was experienced by McDonald's when their overseas restaurants were damaged by protestors who used the golden arches as a representation of American capitalistic imperialism.



24. Anti-Branding

The world's first global anti-brand created by [Adbusters](#) magazine. **Black Spot Sneaker** an eco-friendly, anti-brand sneaker —the black spot replaces the corporate logo. As describe on the Adbusters web site: "The world's most ethical shoes" Our current historical moment is an opportunity to redesign and rethink how we interact with the market—to move away from hyper-inflated megabrands like Nike and go smart, go local, go indie...to change the system by putting power back into the hands of the many.

Visit them at the [Black Spot](#) link Price approx. \$95.00



History of Graphic Design is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](#).