

Typography and Iconography: Influential Tools in Visual Communication

James Livingston, East Tennessee State University, United States

The European Conference on Media, Communication and Film 2015
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Graphic design is the most effective art form to quickly communicate a message to the viewer. People are influenced by skillful storytelling, which can provide both a logical and an emotional investment (Wroblewski, 2007). A visual communication craftsperson can efficiently stir the emotions in his or her audience through various tools of storytelling such as typography and iconography.

Typography is an illustrative technique that has been wielded by designers for centuries (Flask, 2009). Researchers suggest that creative typography and color is useful in technical communication (Keys, 1993) and is most influential in Web design (Mowery, 2011). It is all around us, in every medium. In my basic visualization courses and in my upper level motion tools courses, typography is a staple in digital design projects.

Another design tool that has been used for centuries is iconography. A few of many examples of iconography in film, photographs, or paintings include religious icons used to ward off vampires, a hero cowboy dressed in white, or a rustic world of desperation (Grant, 20017). Iconography symbols are used as a design element that give viewers an immediate understanding. For example, symbols are used to illustrate which restroom to use, the power button of a device, or which direction to take. We understand these icons and interpret their meaning at a moment's glance. This paper provides effective usages and examples of typography and iconography.

Keywords: Typography, Iconography, Graphic Design, Motion Design

iafor

The International Academic Forum

www.iafor.org

Introduction

The manipulation of type and iconic imagery are representations of cultural understanding and are effective art forms to efficiently communicate messages. Logo designs surround us. These designs are created to build images of corporations and organizations; however, the usefulness of typography and iconography are much broader. Typography and iconography create messages that are recognizable to people of different languages. There are icons that provide audiences with shared meaning, an important element in communicating across cultures. Iconography has been used for 40,000 years by artists to relay the human experience. Typography is used to show a hierarchy of information in everyday documents as well as to express the emotions of the message. Both typography and iconography are pictures that paint a thousand words of culture, emotion, and shared meaning.

Typography

Typography, simply put, is the stylization of alphabetic characters. One method of typography that is used in documents is to establish the importance of information using font size, color, style, or position (Lloyd, 2013). Headlines in the newspaper and pullout quotes are good examples of subtle type influencing a reader. Communication researchers suggest that nonverbal language relays more of the message than the words being spoken (The Nonverbal Group, 2015). Similarly, typography, or the visual language in type, are more powerful than words alone (Knight & Glaser, 2012). Typography not only gets a literal message across, but it sends an emotional message.

An example I use in class as a graphic design decision involving type is the word speed. I show this in a plain serif font and compare it with a sans serif font such as Impact or Haettenschweiler, which is a heavy bold font (fig. 1).



Speed Speed

Figure 1: Speed typed in Times New Roman and Impact.

Immediately, the word is more pronounced using a bolder font, which seems to be relevant to its meaning. Taking this a bit further, I italicize the font. Typically this will give the word motion, which again, is relevant to its meaning. After showing these progressions, I explain that the word went from 0 to 90 miles per hour. Finally, I remove thin lines from the text, implementing a design decision to add a bit of flare and drama to the word's meaning. (fig 2).



Speed Speed

Figure 2: Speed typed in Impact Italicized and with design.

Iconography

Early forms of iconology can be translated from cave paintings. This art documented the existence and events of early man. Why these images were created can certainly be debated, but the iconic paintings show a day in the life of early civilization (fig 3). Furthermore, they recorded events and accomplishments and gave the artist a voice expressing that I can think, I am creative and I exist.



Figure 3: The Bhimbetka cave paintings in India, South Asia. Photo by Raveesh Vyas (Scimix, 2010).

Whatever the case may be, these visual representations can easily be translated as a human event that occurred.

In the renaissance period, iconology is seen in religious sculptures and paintings (fig 4). However, to be understood by the viewer, the design of the image itself must be recognized and understood by many cultures. Erwin Panofsky explains, “To understand the iconographical meaning of the picture he would have to familiarize himself with the content of the Gospels” (Panofsky, 1972). With this being said, one would have to have a practical experience of familiarity with the object in order to derive a meaning.

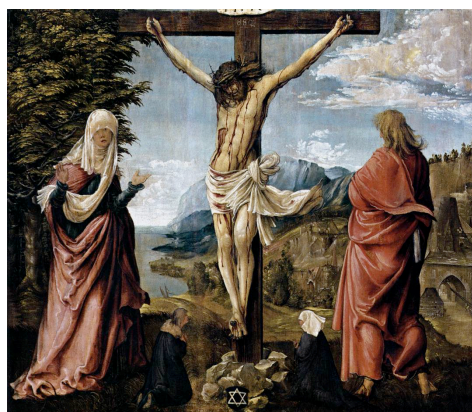


Figure 4: Christ on the Cross between Mary and St John c. 1512. (Altdorfer)

This idea is understood all too well in the design industry where designers suggest that less is better and simplicity is key. In other words, it is usually the best solution and execution to create iconic imagery that must be understood worldwide. In today's electronic networked society, graphic icons are everywhere. Icons will not replace the written word but do communicate a vast amount of information at a moment's glance.


A graphic design exercise I give in class is to manipulate type and the meaning of a word to create the symbol or icon. I have students limit their design as black text on white and then create a color version. In the color version, I emphasize the use of color to complement the meaning of the object (fig. 5). While color is a vital component in the design process and can constitute other meanings and principles of design, color theory is part of a larger and different discussion entirely.




Figure 5: Typographic symbol exercise. Black and white and color version.

Iconography and Symbols

It is important to note the difference between icons and symbols. As mentioned earlier, the use of iconic imagery, in the purpose of this discussion, is relevant to graphic design solutions to create objects with specific meanings. In iconography, the object created directly relates to its meaning. However, symbols are typically abstract representations of their meanings and are prevalent within computer software and online components. For example, in Photoshop, the paintbrush tool is represented by a

paintbrush . Its meaning is literal and very well understood. If I chose this function, I expect the tool to react in a brush-like fashion. However, in Google

Chrome, I always thought the Google Apps icon  to be subjective. After creating my Google account, it took me awhile to find what I was looking for only to discover that it was hidden beneath this icon. I still find myself hovering the cursor over this icon waiting for the definition text to appear in order to reacquaint myself with its function. This is an example of an icon in which the function is not immediately understood by the user and must be learned.

Design

Typography and iconography are essential components within visual communication in today's society. We see it everywhere, and it guides us to our destination or helps us make decisions. It is important that graphic designers understand that sometimes

less is better. This is certainly true in designing an icon or corporate identity image. The viewer must understand the message without much clutter surrounding its meaning.

Twitter's logo (fig. 6) or icon is an interesting solution for what it is. The name associated with the image and the action that one takes to implement the service are demonstrated in the logo. The simplistic logo design or icon of a small bird in flight and the name and terms used by the service, Twitter and Tweet, seem to directly relate to the actions of the icon itself. This symbol took little time in its online introduction to be completely understood as a mainstream communication source in today's electronic society.

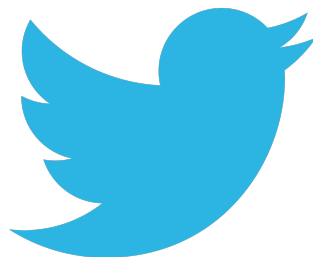


Figure 6. Current version of Twitter logo.

Other icons such as airport, men and women's restroom, and no smoking (fig. 7) are a few of the many iconic graphic representations that can be understood worldwide.

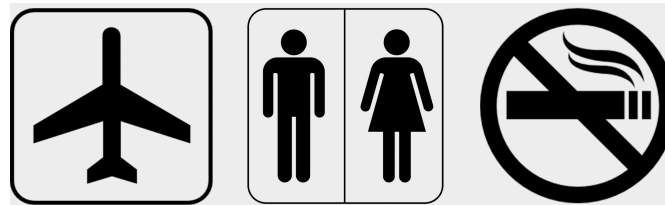


Figure 7: Commonly recognized icons.

Conclusion

Typography and iconography are design tools that have choreographed messages for centuries. Symbols surround us so that audiences can understand literal and emotional meanings within seconds. Typography is the stylization of alphabetic characters using font, size, color, style, organization and position to relay meanings and/or hierarchies of importance. Iconography are images that are easily recognized and have specific meaning to their target audience. These tools are all around us. They are used in social media, advertisements, signs, and in buildings and on roadways to give us direction.

References

Altdorfer, Albrecht (c. 1512). Christ on the Cross between Mary and St John. [image]
Retrieved from <http://www.wga.hu/index1.html>

Flask, D. (2009). Typographers. *Design is History*. Retrieved from
<http://www.designishistory.com/design/typography/>

Grant, B. K. Film Genre: From iconography to ideology. (2007). London, England:
Wallflower Press.

Keys, E. (1993). Typography, color, and information structure. *Rensselaer
Polytechnic Institute*. Retrieved from
http://pdf.aminer.org/000/592/088/user_information_processing_strategies_and_online_visual_structure.pdf

Knight, C. and Glaser, K. (2012, Apr. 13). When typography speaks louder than
words. *Smashing Magazine*. Retrieved from
<http://www.smashingmagazine.com/2012/04/13/when-typography-speaks-louder-than-words/>

Loyd, J. (2013, Apr. 8). Understanding typographic hierarchy. *tuts+*. Retrieved from
<http://webdesign.tutsplus.com/articles/understanding-typographic-hierarchy--webdesign-11636>

Mowery, J. (2011, Jun. 16). Why typography is the Web's greatest media format. *Web
Designer Depot*. Retrieved from <http://www.webdesignerdepot.com/2011/06/why-typography-rules/>

Panofsky, E. (1972). *Studies in Iconology Humanistic Themes in the Art of the
Renaissance*. Westview Press.

Scimix (2010, Aug. 5). *Cave paintings – Doorways through time*. [images] Retrieved
from <http://www.scimix.com/cave-paintings-%E2%80%93-doorways-through-time>

The Nonverbal Group. (2015) *How much of communication is really nonverbal?*
Retrieved from <http://www.nonverbalgroup.com/2011/08/how-much-of-communication-is-really-nonverbal/>

Wroblewski, L. (2007, Aug. 1). How designers build strategy. *LUKEW Indertion +
Design*. Retrieved from <http://www.lukew.com/ff/entry.asp?567>

Contact email: livingjm@etsu.edu