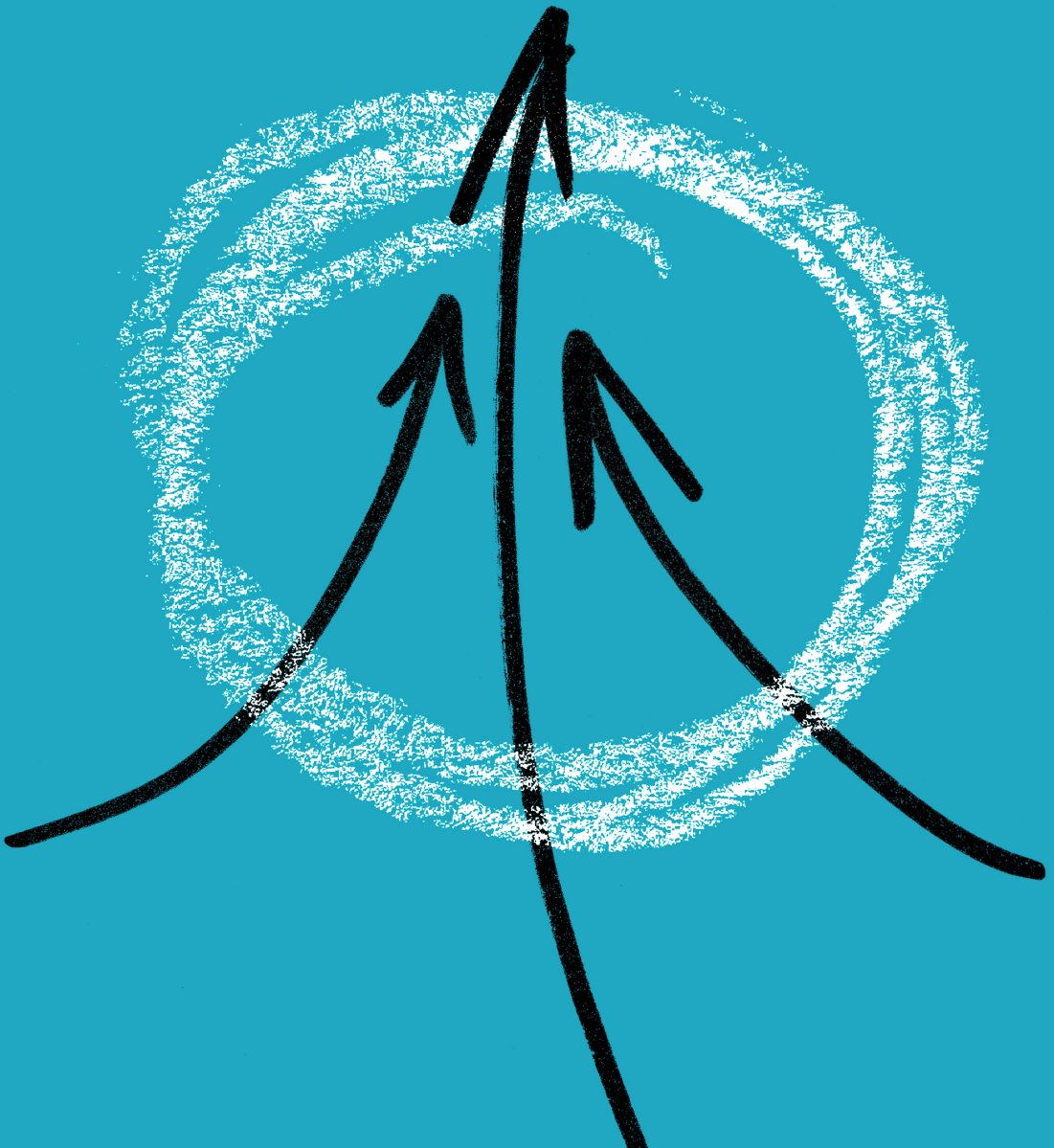# Drawn Together Through
VISUAL PRACTICE

An Anthology Edited by
Brandy Agerbeck, Kelvy Bird, Sam Bradd & Jennifer Shepherd

This anthology contains exciting and varied contributions to the growing literature on visual language and its power to "draw us" together. The authors offer a wide range of experience, powerful illustrations and the core message that visual language enables us to learn, think, and grow in new ways – especially when considering the complex relationships that words alone can't illuminate. Drawn Together through Visual Practice reflects the power of this field to help transform organizations and communities in life-affirming ways.
– *Juanita Brown PhD, Co-Founder, The World Cafe*

After 45 years of drawing on the wall it is extraordinary to see this field bloom in such rich and contributive ways. The authors are the cambium layer—advancing and shaping it with practice and questions—providing inspiration for all of us who are living into this emergent, hopeful, phenomenon.
– *David Sibbet, The Grove Consultants International*

The field of visual practice has long been nurtured by the quiet presence of artists devoted to listening and serving the groups with whom they work. It is high time that they turned and faced the room and shared the depth of artisanal practice and craft that underscores their devotion to the work. This collection is a stunning revelation of the heart of this practice. Whatever your role in group work, you will be made better by listening to these voices and stories of experience, sensitivity and careful attention.
– *Chris Corrigan, Art of Hosting and Harvest Moon Consulting*

A first-rate look at the new world of visual practice. I know from personal experience that capturing content and discussion in real time imagery can help create communal understanding and memory. The images give participants a shared visual vocabulary that help capture complex ideas and enable the move to new discoveries and innovations. The book is a delightful dive into understanding the background and development of this new teaching/art form. Enjoy.
– *Deborah Ancona, Seley Distinguished Professor of Management, Faculty Director of the MIT Leadership Center, MIT Sloan School of Management*

I've seen visual practice map ideas, refresh memories, and provoke insights in many meetings involving dozens of professionals from business, government, and education. So it's a special delight to discover this collection representing the art, craft, and inspiration of visual practice from multiple perspectives.
– *David N. Perkins, Carl H. Pforzheimer, Jr., Research Professor of Teaching and Learning, Harvard Graduate School of Education*

Graphic facilitation is a powerful way for a group to come to know themselves and the work they want to do together. It is no wonder that it so quickly became a part of any good meeting, conference, or problem solving session! Drawn Together is a valuable book, timely and well thought through. It should be read and employed by all wanting to improve and accelerate the rate of change and innovation within an organization, executive team or community. The more diversity in the room, the more powerful visual imagery becomes.
– *Gail Taylor, Co-Founder of MG Taylor, Inc., Founder of Tomorrow Makers, Inc.*

At last! A compendium of stories, helpful approaches and mind sets that reflects the diversity, the richness of scope and the broad impact of the growing field of visual practice/visual language. Our visual practice not only encompasses 'making the invisible visible' and 'making the visible visual' through many artistic means, but also, it incorporates all the human elements of working together, listening, and inclusion that our world is crying for. The potential is unlimited. This is a must read for people who are looking for ways to make substantial change and impact in our world as a group or as an individual and who are looking for paths to go 'from my way to our way'.
– *Susan Kelly, Visual Practitioner*

Drawn Together offers me tools to reflect and improve on developing campaigns for Lush, and encourages personal reflection on my process. A tremendous job bringing together a picture of the evolving work and sharing best practices.
– *Carleen Pickard, Ethical Campaigns Specialist, Lush Handmade Cosmetics, North America*

Contents

Imagery That Travels Well

Making yourself understood across cultures with the help of visual language

Peter Stoyko

I'm a nomad. I travel the world working as a social scientist. Much of that work involves studying the subtleties of culture. I'm also an information designer. I translate research findings into explanatory graphics. I collaborate by drawing. I think visually. Over the years, I've discovered that showing is better than just telling regardless of where I am. Visual messages are more compelling and are less likely to get lost in translation. Yet imagery can just as easily cause confusion, unintended humor, and insult. I've had my share of embarrassments. So I decided to use my research skills to better understand how visuals work in different cultures. My goal has been to find better ways to communicate with diverse audiences.

This chapter shares a few of the lessons I've learned. The first lesson is an overriding one. It's about ethics. A traveling researcher holds a privileged position. While I am in the field, the onus is on me to operate with care and respect. Culture runs deep with people: it's the social core

around which a person's identity forms. My first duty is to do no harm. My second duty is to approach other cultures with mindfulness, critical self-awareness, and humility. That includes a heightened sensitivity to my own biases and blind spots. Sadly, history is full of blunderers and bigots who blithely trample through unfamiliar places with an ignorant smugness. Yet even well-traveled cosmopolitans with noble intentions regularly experience culture shock. That's the emotional discomfort and rush to judgment that happen when we are outside our comfort zone of familiar norms and settings. Thus, what follows is as much about examining our own cultural assumptions as it is about discovering cultural points of interest.

Speaking of cultural assumptions, we take our own culture's visual language for granted. We forgot that we had to learn the meanings of commonplace images, and so we treat those meanings as self-evident. Often, they aren't. That blind spot can get us into trouble when communicating with others who have had very different upbringings. Let's revisit a few episodes from the learning process.

Episode 1. Visual vernaculars

As children, we learned about imagery from picture books, comics, toys, and cartoons. Those experiences helped us associate ideas and objects with images of varying degrees of abstractness. How else would we know that an enclosed shape with edges made of connected semi-circles is a cloud? Real clouds don't really look like that. Even the fluffy ones don't. How would we know that the cloud shape with a trail of circles is a thought balloon, a (misnamed) metaphor based on the idea that a cloud can represent what a comic character is thinking? If that same cloud shape is attached to a stem, how would we know it represents a tree? We know because cultural products teach us. Now think about people from distant places. Would someone who has spent a lifetime amongst the desert palms recognize that shape as a tree? If there are no fluffy clouds in that desert, would they recognize the cloud? Perhaps. But the question you should be asking yourself is, "Where would they have learned those lessons?"

Our visual vocabularies grow as these arrangements of basic shapes take on meanings. Every time we engage with a new mode of visual expression, such as a comic book or a video game, we add to that vocabulary. Not only that, we also learn new *vernaculars*. When referring to ordinary conversation, a vernacular is a way of speaking. We talk differently depending on the social situation. We may use office jargon when talking formally with colleagues in the workplace. Later on, we may use street slang when bantering with friends at home. That jargon and slang, plus the phrasing that goes with them, are vernaculars. Unless you know the vernacular, you'll struggle to understand what's being said—it won't seem all that coherent nor appropriate. A *visual vernacular* is similar. It's a collection of shared meanings and interpretive conventions that helps us make sense of what we see in a given context. Every genre of video game and movie has a vernacular. Every artistic tradition does too. After enough exposure to each mode of visual expression, the related visual vernacular becomes second nature and interpretation doesn't require conscious effort.

Let's look at a concrete example. The following is the comic vernacular.

SPEECH BALLOON　　　**THOUGHT BALLOON**　　　**WHISPER BALLOON**
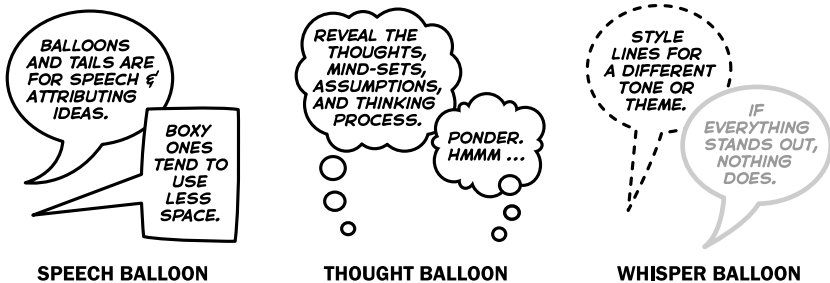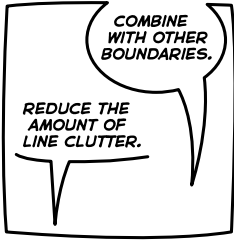
OPEN BALLOON

BURST BALLOON

SYMBOLIC CAPTION

CONNECTED BALLOON
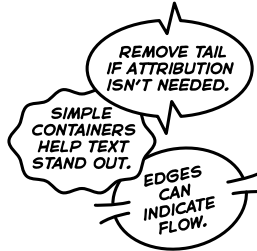
TAILLESS BALLOON
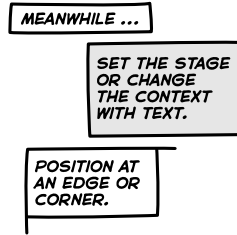
NARRATION BOX

NARRATION BOX

THEMED LETTERING

EFFECTS LETTERING

EFFECTS

MOTION LINE
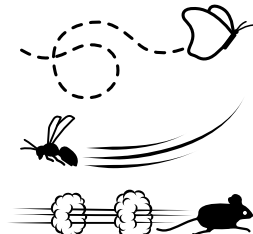
MOTION LINE (TRAIL)
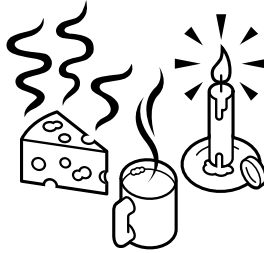
MOTION LINE (SHAKE)   **EMANATION LINE**   **SURFACE LABEL**
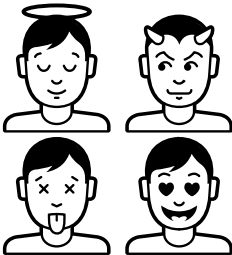
SYMBOLIC EXPRESSION   **SYMBOLIC BACKGROUND**   **SEQUENTIAL STATES**
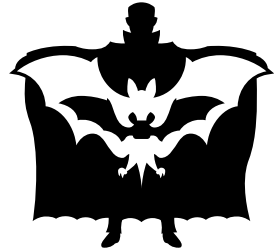
Comics would be confusing if you didn't know these elements. What are those wavy lines above the cheese? Those lines represent smell, something invisible in real life. The lines are very wavy to symbolize that the smell lingers as it emanates upwards. They are heavy lines to symbolize that the smell is pungent. If that seems obvious to you, it's because you've seen many examples of the form over the years from cartoons, picture books, and comics.

I itemize all the elements of different visual vernaculars for teaching purposes. These inventories or *codexes* can inspire students by showing what communicative options are available. Making the inventories helps me become more self-aware as a communicator by revealing all the meanings and conventions I take for granted. That process also allows me to detect vernacular differences across cultures. Comic traditions are fairly similar around the world. American comics, Japanese *manga*, Franco-Belgian *bande dessinée*, and editorial cartoons share a vernacular. Yet differences exist.

MOTION LINE
(FOREGROUND OBJECT BLUR)

MOTION LINE
(BACKGROUND OBJECT BLUR)

Historically, American comic book artists use motion lines to depict the blur of a foreground object moving across the comic frame. Manga artists, in contrast, use motion lines to depict the blurring of objects in the background, as if the comic frame is a camera that moves with the foreground object. Knowing these vernacular differences can ease communication across cultures. It's like knowing the local words and sayings of your audience.

Episode 2. Visual tropes

As we grow up, we become accustomed to pictograms on signs, symbols on product labels, and icons on screens. Other vernaculars are added to our visual vocabularies. Yet we don't have to learn each image one by one. Commonalities emerge. These commonalities allow us to take some interpretive shortcuts.

Take an example from signage. A circle suspended over a four-pronged shape is a head. Once we learn that, we recognize human figures called "bubbleheads" in different poses without having to relearn each figure from scratch. Bubbleheads are easy to grasp because they are based on the stick figures of kid's drawings, figures which people have been drawing since the days of ancient cave paintings and sand sketches. Even if we change the shape of the bubblehead's body by tapering the limbs, it's still recognizable. Use negative space to differentiate near and far limbs, in the same way that a shadow is cast over receding objects: still recognizable.
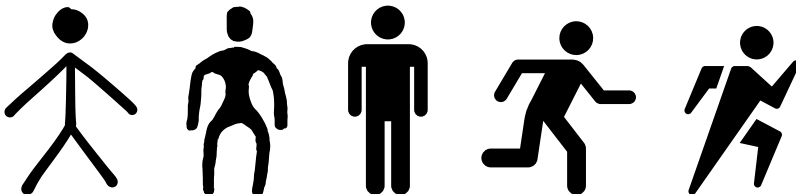
That's what it means to learn a *trope,* a non-literal signifier of something. When we learn visual tropes, we learn a set of interpretive rules—rules about how particular shapes can be arranged to form symbolic images. With bubbleheads, the circle suspended above a four-pronged shape is a trope that represents "head" and signals that a human figure is being represented. A detached head can't *literally* float above a living body. A human head isn't *literally* shaped like a ball. A person can't run if an arm and a leg are *literally* severed. Those are stylistic embellishments we learn to interpret. We then apply those interpretive rules to other bubbleheads.

As another example, add a triangular shape to the torso of any bubble-head and we specify its gender as female. We learned that the triangular torso represents a dress and dress-wearing is a norm for females. Does that gendering trope reflect a norm in your society? Would that same interpretation be made in societies where everyone wears a gown-like garment? Or in places where knee-length, A-frame dresses don't exist?

You can see how tropes can be *ethnocentric*. That involves treating your own culture as universal and just assuming that everyone understands you. Tropes can also be anachronistic by locking in outdated norms and fashions into widely used imagery. They become part of the cultural memory, in other words. Yet these norms and fashions may never have caught on in distant places.

How reliant are we on visual tropes to communicate? That depends on how realistic the images are.[1]

| BIOHAZARD | PEACE | TURN ON AND OFF | CORRECT (OR MAYBE NOT) | FORGIVENESS |
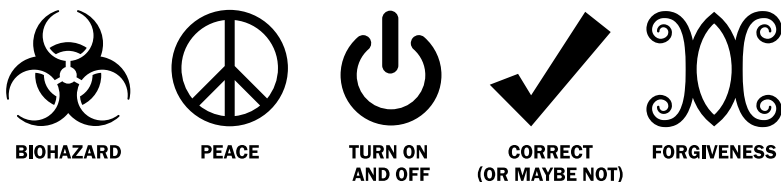
Ideograms

Some images are purely symbolic *(ideograms)*. Nothing about their shape suggests a meaning by mimicking something in the real world. We learn those symbols in a way that's similar to learning conceptual words. Different cultures have different symbols but, like words, a few symbols may spread across cultures. Despite the abstractness, some common themes also emerge, such as a circle representing "wholeness," "unity," and "totality" in many folk-art traditions. Yet given the arbitrariness of ideograms, you will sometimes encounter conflicting meanings across cultures, such as the meaning of the check mark in Sweden and Finland ("incorrect" instead of "correct").
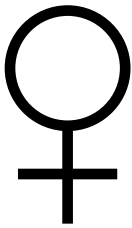
IDEOGRAM   PICTOGRAM   REALISM

Ideograms sit at one end of a continuum. At the other end are *photo-realistic images*. They look like objects in the real world. Not much effort is required for interpretation if you remember seeing a similar object before. That can be a big "if" when communicating across cultures. For example, would showing a photo of a snowman or an igloo to a tropical islander cause bafflement? An item may not exist in another culture, or it may take a radically different form. Either way, photo-realism may be the best way to teach others something new if the image is shown in context (or otherwise explained) and doesn't contain distracting non-essential details ("visual noise"). When we say something "isn't translatable," we aren't just saying the same word and concept don't exist in another language; we are also saying the same exact thing doesn't really exist in both cultures.[2] So show a very typical version of that thing (in context) if possible. Better yet: show two or more versions, so that the person doesn't mistake the specific example for the general concept.

Between pure symbols and photo-realistic images lay stylized illustrations such as pictograms. These are recognizable insofar as 1) we understand the visual tropes used to simplify and stylize them, and 2) they have a close enough resemblance to a known object that we can make a confident guess. That assumes the illustration has an *iconic* relation to its subject, meaning it is supposed to resemble something in the real world. Many pictograms have an *indexical,* or indirect, relation to their subject.[3] For example, the image can be linked to an idea by association or by analogy. That adds interpretive complexity because the viewer has to make that extra link——a link which may be culturally specific.

Take the concept of "travel" for instance. The act of traveling can be shown directly (by example) with an illustration of an airplane circum-navigating the Earth. In terms of tropes, the illustration is made up of a vehicle silhouette (airplane) with a trail-line showing its elliptical path in three-dimensional space (circumnavigation) around a sphere with a map grid imprinted on its surface (globe). The concept can also be illustrated by association as a well-traveled suitcase. The idea of "well traveled" is indicated by the cliché of tourist stickers from various places spread randomly on the surface of the suitcase. Or "travel" could be indicated
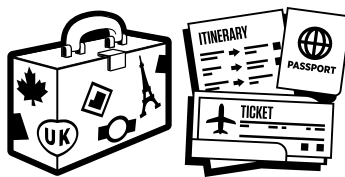
"TRAVEL" (ICONIC) **"TRAVEL" (ASSOCIATION)** **"TRAVEL" (ANALOGY)**

by a selection of travel documents. These objects are associated with travel because we take them on journeys. The concept can be illustrated by analogy too, such as an image of birds flying in a migration pattern. Some concepts can't be represented directly, which is why these indirect methods are useful. The challenge, however, is that associations and analogies are merely suggestive, not obvious, and certainly not obvious to people everywhere. Northern cultures may equate migrating birds with seasonal vacation travel. Indeed, Canadians who travel south in the winter are called "snow birds." But how obvious is the analogy to someone living near the equator? Or for whom seasonal travel is an

alien concept? You may have to add additional cues to make the linkages more apparent.

Now think of everything that can go wrong when drawing pictograms that are simultaneously stylized, indexical, combined with symbols, and represent objects that are not recognized outside your culture. My favorite example comes from 1960s America.[4] A human figure is shown overlapping an igloo. The igloo represents "refrigeration." The combined image is intended to mean "refrigerated morgue." What would Inuit people think of their traditional shelter being depicted as dead-body storage? Would they think "refrigeration," given that an igloo is supposed to be a warm shelter? What would someone think if they don't know anything about the Arctic? Would it even occur to them that a building is being depicted? And that the human figure is inside the building? And that the figure is a dead person?
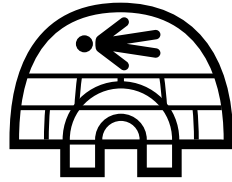
Episode 3. Assigned meanings

We eventually come to understand some stylized illustrations at a glance. That includes pictograms on road signs and warning labels. These tend to be the "controlled" part of our visual vocabularies; controlled in the sense that the look and meanings have been standardized by an authority. Some stylized illustrations are international standards, such as airport wayfinding pictograms. Yet controlling the approximate look of an illustration and affixing an official label does not guarantee the same interpretation everywhere. Take the case of emojis, the standardized icons used in phone text-messages. Emojis can take on unintended meanings in certain places. If enough people reinterpret an image through conversation, then a local meaning can emerge.

TRIUMPH?
STEAMING MAD?
OVER EXERTION?

GRATITUDE?
HIGH FIVE?
PRAYER?

EGG PLANT?
PHALLUS?

SLEEPING?
CRYING?
SNEEZING?

With emojis, it's often the context of the message that offers clues as to the intended meaning of the communicator, not just the officially stipulated label. Xu Bing's *Book from the Ground* takes that idea to an extreme.[5] The book is written entirely in graphic sentences to communicate with a global audience. Official meanings are often disregarded. The storyline offers contextual clues to aid interpretation.

The "reading" experience is more akin to decoding—the opposite of glanceable interpretation. Some imagery is not as universally recognizable as Bing presumes. Yet these visual sentences are easier to decode than an unfamiliar foreign language. That's why a similar technique is used to make step-by-step instructions for international products. Not everything can be communicated in this way. Expressiveness is limited. Artistic flair would help but at the cost of ambiguity. Complex and abstract concepts could not be added without *logograms,* or images and image combinations that represent words. Chinese writing is made of logograms. Ancient Egyptian *hieroglyphics* are logograms too. Needless to say, these scripts aren't very intuitive.

A MAN SWALLOWS A PORTION OF MEDICINE

THEN DRAWS WATER FROM A WELL INTO A VESSEL

THEN WASHES DOWN THE MEDICINE
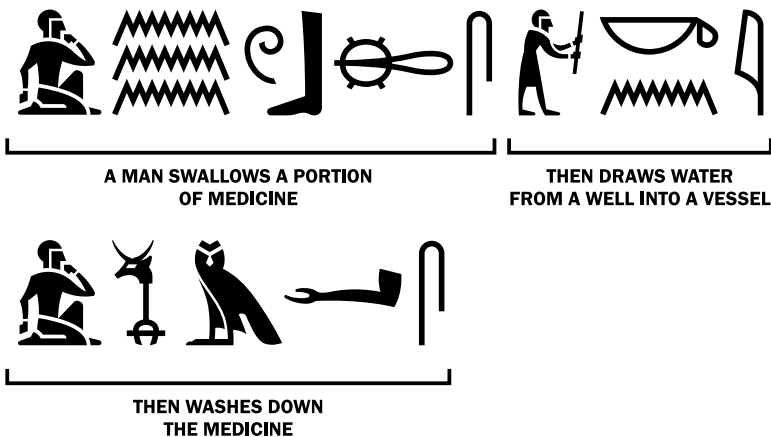
Note that context can play a bigger role in some cultures. For example, Japanese and Korean are highly contextual languages. A "yes" can mean "no" depending on the context. People are expected to be aware of the underlying norms of the social situation. Likewise with visual communication. Experiments have shown that, when presented a visual scene, Japanese people tend to pay much more attention to the scene's background imagery compared to Americans.[6] That tendency is about detecting contextual appropriateness in a society with relatively conformist social pressures. The earlier example of Japanese manga using motion lines to depict background blur instead of foreground blur is not a coincidence. It's a more fundamental difference in what gets noticed.

Sometimes, visual communicators in those societies rely more heavily on a widely understood social context when using imagery. When I lived in Tokyo, it took me a month to figure out the social context needed to interpret the following pictogram, found on the door of a barber shop in my neighborhood. The barber shop was located next to a commuter train station, a place where overworked and drunk salary-men would disembark during the evening commute to run errands before returning home. I wasn't able to interpret the pictogram ("no drunks allowed") until I saw that social problem play out in several instances. If the context wasn't so obvious to locals, the illustrator might have added some context to the pictogram, such as showing a figure with an alcoholic beverage in hand.

That example brings us to the topic of "uncontrolled" images, those without an officially stipulated, widely recognized meaning. New symbols are invented all the time and are placed on such things as consumer packaging, control panels, and computer applications. That includes the illustrations that visual facilitators and sketchnote artists think up on the spot. Most aren't self-explanatory and so require clarifying labels. Or a subtle distinction isn't obvious. Or an object is recognizable but could be interpreted many ways other than the communicator's intended meaning. For example, a picture of a burger and fries could represent "fast food," "junk food," "American cuisine," or "dinner." Viewers will draw their own conclusion unless the intended meaning is stipulated.

Save **FRONT** **REAR** JUNK FOOD
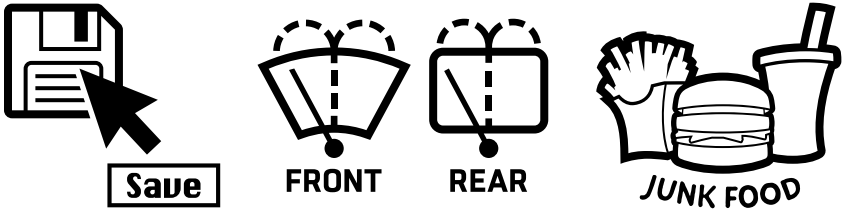
Are word labels a failure of visual communication? No. Each symbol has to be learned somehow. Object resemblance, contextual clues, and familiar tropes only help so much. Labels aren't ideal for communicating across languages. Yet adding a slightly familiar image to a vaguely familiar word might be just enough to get the point across. Even for native speakers of the language, the label has *reference value*; that is, after the label is read once or twice, the viewer becomes familiar enough with the associated illustration that a glance is enough to jog the memory. The viewer can then parse the images on a page, or the icons on a computer interface, or the pictograms on a control dashboard with great efficiency.

Problems occur when the labels are confusing buzzwords or are mismatched with images. Vague and misleading jargon can be used to evade scrutiny, especially in the worlds of business and politics. Visuals can add clarity. Yet some word usages, such as euphemisms, are deliberately designed to suppress imagery in the mind's eye. Pairing a vague word with mildly suggestive imagery doesn't communicate much. Sometimes bad image-label pairings are simply a matter of laziness. Advertisers and website designers are often guilty of using a handful of overused stock icons to represent all sorts of tenuously related concepts.

SEND DIRECT MESSAGE? **CLIENT SUPPORT?** **SET UP ACCOUNT?** **SEND FEEDBACK?** **ACCESSIBILITY OPTIONS?**

A rule of thumb: if the word-image pairing isn't obvious to someone like yourself, it will probably stump those who are very different. I tell my clients to give up the "zombie" clichés. These are overused words and visuals that have so many potential meanings that they could mean anything. Audiences will ignore an image of two hands shaking

or mechanical gears, for instance, instead of pondering the message associated with it. Visualization isn't just scavenging through collections of generic icons and "clip art." Properly brainstorm and research all of the imagery connected to a concept—all of the symbols, associations, and analogies. Select the ones that balance freshness with travel-worthiness.

Shared imagery

These episodes reveal that people perceive images quite differently across cultures. Don't let that intimidate you. Some visuals travel well despite all the cultural variation. There are universals, at least for most intents and purposes. These come in three forms.

First, there are meanings that come from common experience. For example, people throughout the world attribute the same meaning to basic facial expressions: smiles, frowns, looks of surprise, looks of dread, and so forth. It's only when expressions become subtle that culture-specific shades of meaning come into play. Likewise with basic figure poses, such as running or jumping. Once you enter the realm of gestures, however, assuming common meaning can be very dangerous indeed.[7]

"A-OKAY" BUT RUDE IN **BRAZIL**	"LIKE" OR "GOOD" BUT RUDE IN **THAILAND**	"UNITY" OR "DEFIANCE" BUT RUDE IN **PAKISTAN**	"LUCK" BUT RUDE IN **VIETNAM**

The second source of common visual language is the global economy. Like it or not, cultures are converging. Think of all the sources of shared visuals: the advertising industry and consumer packaging; the iconography of web page, computer, and phone interfaces; the charts and graphs of the workplace; video games; blockbuster films; music videos; maps and wayfinding graphics; the art of international youth subcultures, such as street graffiti, sticker-bombs, and T-shirt motifs; the list goes on. Note, however, that this influence depends somewhat on how urban, affluent, and plugged-in your specific audience is. There are generational differences too.
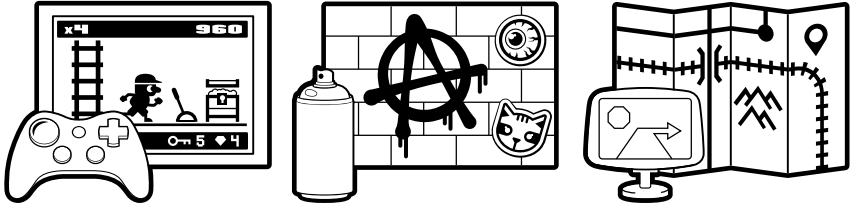
Third, a few images are "in good currency" throughout much of the world. That could be because of ancient cultural influences or modern international standards. For example, a skull and crossbones represents "danger," "poison,"and "deadly harm" pretty much everywhere. That doesn't preclude local alternatives, such as an image of a scorpion on warning labels in South Asia. These simply work like synonyms, ones which don't travel as well.

Visual rhetoric

Just as wording can be used for rhetorical effect, so can visuals. Therein lies much danger. I've had experiences using ethnocentric visual analogies in other cultures where the audience didn't get too bothered. Some audiences are intrigued by an exotic foreign analogy. In contrast, sometimes I have chosen a shared image only to have audiences get agitated or uncomfortable. What's going on? Subtle cues and stylistic choices can offer subtle shades of meaning, insinuations, and connotations. Some of these nuances push cultural hot-buttons. Others have a more subtle effect: they are felt but not necessarily noticed. Those impressions have to be managed. Let's explore some specific cases.

Visual hyperbole is extravagant exaggeration that isn't meant to be taken literally. Most visual metaphors are somewhat hyperbolic. Hyperbole is found in all cultures, but formulations differ, as do peoples' attitudes towards them. In some places and social situations, hyperbole is considered a lazy and deceptive form of overstatement. In others, it's an acceptable form of assertion and emphasis that isn't taken at face value.[8] Some illustrators use visual hyperbole to grab attention, add humor, and make sure the point gets across. Depending on the cultural sensibilities of the audience, visual hyperbole can be inspiring or it can insult people's intelligence.

Visualized figures of speech *(idioms)* cause the most miscommunication. Drawing idioms is a *piece of cake* and *it's more fun than a barrel of monkeys.* I think you *catch my drift:* our language is full of these *turns of phrase,* most of which invoke imagery in a way that's *over the top.* That's what makes idioms so tempting to draw: most already offer a visual analogy with rhetorical punch. Unfortunately, such analogies tend to be obscure. As they say in Japan, *don't let your daughter-in-law eat your autumn eggplant.* In other words, as the French say, *don't get rolled in flour.* See what I mean?

Most drawings of people have some element of caricature: certain facial features get exaggerated, even if they are not distorted in grotesque or cartoonish ways. How deftly that is done can mean the difference between authenticity and insult. The way we draw people is full of bias that is hard to see until the tables are turned. That struck me when I went to a faux-European village in the suburbs of Chengdu, China. I came across a sculpture that was supposed to depict a Dutchman, yet I could see how the artist struggled to get rid of certain habits of the conventional style used to sculpt Chinese facial features.

The portraiture style …   *… Applied to a Dutchman*

That distortion is not just a problem of style but of noticing. I study the work of artists from other places. Then I try to reproduce their work, not to copy, but to see what they see. I incorporate some of those lessons into my style when drawing people with ancestral backgrounds and ethnicities that are noticeably different than my own.

History is full of examples of racist, demeaning caricatures. Know this history in order to understand the caricature prohibitions of various places. Alas, those who take it upon themselves to police these taboos

can sometimes be amongst the least knowledgeable about them. Caricatures also don't travel well. A drawing inspired by African folk-art may delight in Nairobi or Lagos but cause anger in Port-au-Prince or Los Angeles. The artistic inspiration may not be evident. If it is, the caricature may be seen as cultural "appropriation" or "trivialization," prohibitions enforced by those who object to cultural blending and any signs of pastiche. What is an "authentic" depiction? What is socially permissible? In some places, the answer depends on the presumed group status of the visualizer, not the qualities of the visual.

Speaking of visual politics, I'm writing this chapter in Cairo, Egypt. It's hard to imagine a place where visual expression is more contested. Democracy protestors express irreverence with street art, or what some activists call "graphic agitation." The state and various political factions compete to align themselves with various ancient symbols that connote national identity. Modes of dress signal various identity claims, such as class, politics, and religious allegiance. Even the absences are revealing. An election is going on but there's no campaign imagery in sight. The dominant religion, Islam, has strict prohibitions against drawing certain things as a way of preventing idol worship and irreverence. Visualizers need to take account of these cultural "framing contests" and "no-go zones."

While on the topic of identity claims, when drawing people, the subtleties of dress and style matter. Take the example of Muslim dress norms. The style of clothing differs in distinctive ways around the world. Grooming norms and the style of headwear can signal whether someone is from Istanbul or Tehran or Abu Dhabi or Jakarta. It's best not to get those details wrong. Having your social identity misrepresented can cause insult. Having it mistaken for the social identity of another group can cause more serious grievance.

It also helps to understand the cultural influences of your own style. I draw in a variety of styles depending on client wants and project constraints. Many of the vector illustrations drawn for this chapter are very crisp, clean, and geometric. That is my default for icon and pictogram work. My style owes a great deal to German modernist iconographers from the early 20th Century, particularly Wilhelm Deffke, Otto Neurath, and Gerd Arntz.[9] I'm also inspired by modern interpreters of that artistic movement, especially Johannes Plass and Heinrich Paravicini, who

added street-art techniques.[10] Mixing and matching styles from other cultures can seem incongruent. But then again, it can also be the source of creativity. After all, where would we be without the cross-cultural stylistic blending of Pablo Picasso?

Details have different connotations across cultures. Take color for example. Red signifies danger, alarm, or passion in Western societies. It represents good fortune and health in China. Red can mean "win" in the casino-gaming industry but mean "loss" in the financial sector of the economy. In the Caribbean, I sometimes work on politically sensitive projects where collaborators ask me not to use colors associated with any political party—any political party in twelve countries, that is. That doesn't leave much choice. Images may take on unintended connotations based on the associations attributed to small details.

I make a point of investigating some of those associations. It can be as simple as checking the colors associated with national and religious symbols, political parties, and local sports teams. It's good to keep a record of popular color preferences wherever you go. In some countries, a lack of vibrant colors can make your work seem drab. In other places, vibrant colors are considered brash. Many factors are involved: the intensity of natural light in the place; the color of the natural surroundings; cultural traditions; the restrictiveness of the political regime. Color palettes can be very distinctive culturally. Don't just choose colors based on personal aesthetic preferences. Think about the audience's cultural predisposition too.

Conclusion

This crash-course in cross-cultural communication suggests that visualizers should be more inquisitive about the imagery being used, right down to the fine details. That's partly what "design" means: crafting small details with purpose. It is more than that, however. Become more aware of your own cultural influences so as to not give off unintended signals. It also helps to take an interest in other cultures and the way cultural products teach imagery. That's what it means to become a worldly *flâneur,* or someone who spends time in far-flung places to observe the details of life and interpret larger meanings.

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2. H. Becker, *What About Mozart? What About Murder? Reasoning from Cases*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2014, p. 16

3. This distinction can be traced back to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs from the 1860s.

4. This example comes from H. Dreyfuss, *Symbol Sourcebook: An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, New York, McGraw-Hill, 1972.

5. X. Bing, *Book from the Ground: From Point to Point*, Cambridge, The MIT Press, 2014.

6. R. E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently … and Why*, New York, The Free Press, 2003.

7. A good reference for this is R. Lefevre, *Rude Hand Gestures of the World*, San Francisco, Chronicle Books, 2011.

8. I owe this insight to O. Hafez, "Hyperbolic Expressions in Egyptian Arabic and British English," in N. Kassabgy, Z. Ibrahim, and S. Aydelott (eds.), *Contrastive Rhetoric: Issues, Insights and Pedagogy*, Cairo, The American University of Cairo Press, 2004, pp. 172-173.

9. See Bröhan Design Foundation, *Wilhelm Deffke: Pioneer of the Modern Logo*, Zurich, Verlag Scheidegger & Spiess; Otto Neurath, *From Hieroglyphics to Isotype: A Visual Autobiography*, London, Hyphen Press, 2010 [1946]; E. Annink and M. Bruinsma, *Gerd Arntz: Graphic Designer*, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2010.

10. My favorite showcase of their work is R. Klanten (ed.), *Lingua Grafica*, Berlin, Die Gestalten Verlag, 2001. That inspired two sequels, *Lingua Universalis* (2004) and *Lingua Digitalis* (2012).