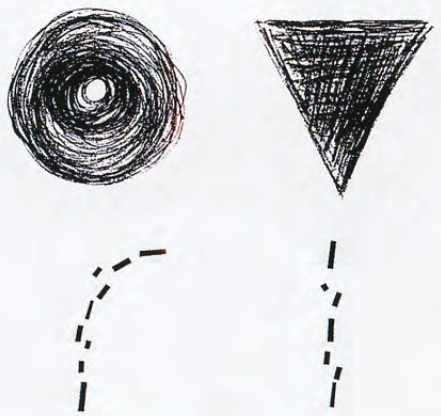
Image Modes and Mediation

Regardless of an image's degree of literal representation or abstraction, a designer might choose to represent an idea by using photographs, illustrations (drawings or paintings), or a hybrid: manipulated photographs or drawn images in combination. How a designer decides to involve image results from evaluating the content and its conceptual functions. The images must provide informational clarity, but they must do so in a way that resonates and delivers secondary and tertiary messages–associational or branded messages–as well.

■ The form of an image's representation is called its "mode," and this includes not only its degree of simplicity and abstraction but also its medium. A designer must consider a number of things in choosing the right image mode, or modalities, to use. Among these are the evocative, emotional qualities of the project's content; the number of different modes needed to differentiate specific messages; the expectations of the viewing audience for certain image experiences over others, because of



SYMBOLS ARE highly mediated forms of image, drawing on common understanding and cultural contexts that elevate them beyond mere representation. Consider these two sets of symbols, used as signage to indicate which restroom to use.

Art: Tecaji *Slovenia*

All these images depict the same subject—a figure—but using different modes. The modes range between literal and stylized, and each mode intrinsically mediates the image to varying degrees. The "pure" photograph is the least mediated in this study. The two drawn images are inherently more mediated than the photographic image—the designer has invented his or her own depiction of the subject—but between the two, the naturalistic drawing is less mediated than the other.

their demographic makeup or the social and historical context of the project's content; and production issues, including such technicalities as budget, lead time, and fabrication concerns. How far from its "natural" state the image gets (how much the "pure" depiction of the subject gets altered by the designer) is described as how "mediated" it is. ■ The level of an image's mediation can be evaluated in a couple of ways. First, it can be considered in terms of its physical expression, or how it's made; for example, a realistic drawing shows a greater level of mediation than a photograph of the same subject. Second, an image's level of mediation can be considered in how complex the messaging in the image is—a somewhat literal drawing of an image is less mediated than a highly contrived photograph or collage. ■ The way an image refers to its subject is also an aspect of its form that must be considered by the designer, who might choose to represent, or signify, particular subjects by using images that are realistic or representational but not pictures of the subject itself. This kind of image is called an "index" and refers to its subject through association; an image of an egg, for example, "indexes" a bird.

THE CHOICE OF IMAGE used for one of several wall panels in a French cultural center—Guignol, a puppet character from a child's story—is symbolic of French culture. Its historical stature is altered through mediation: representing the image in a digital pixel pattern that makes it contemporary.

Apeloig Design *France*

A

B

THE QUESTION OF MEDIATION and credibility comes to the fore in comparing these two illustrations. Both are fabrications—but which one seems more real? If you decided that the corncob person does, you're probably not alone. Despite the impossibility of this subject matter, it has been rendered in a photographic style that makes it seem more believable as "real" than the abstract, invented space and painterly texture of the drawn image on the right.

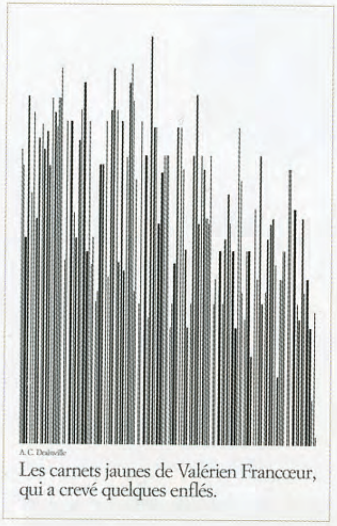
A Christopher Short *United States*

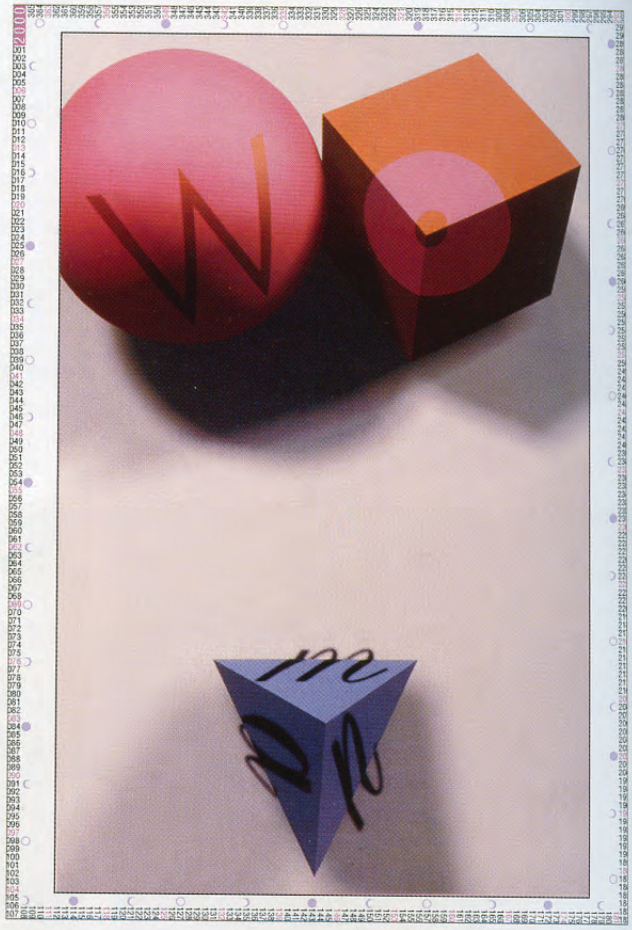
B Cyr Studio *United States*

Semiology and Stylization A designer might often need to represent ideas in a stylized way, selecting the most important elements from a subject and arranging them in as concise and simplified a message as possible. The most common occurrence of this kind of image is a logo–an image that is used to identify an organization and differentiate it from competing groups. The purpose of such a distilled, elemental form is quick recognition and easy recall; the more information that can be packed into the shape of the mark, the better. Stylizing an image emphasizes its nature as a "sign"–a visual representation of an idea. ■ The study of relationships between signs and what they represent or "signify" is called "semiology," a branch of anthropology developed in the 1800s. In selecting the details of the idea or subject to be represented, the designer looks for elements that are the most universally recognizable–for example, the fundamental shapes and qualities of a cat (ears, tail, a common posture, whiskers, paws, and so on)–rather than those that are specific–

A RHYTHM OF LINES abstracts a bar code into a graph.

Thomas Csano *Canada*





CAREFUL POSITIONING of geometric elements and letterforms creates a concrete anatomical image out of pure form.

Studio International *Croatia*

AN ICON OF A HAND becomes doubly symbolic as the string around the finger–a symbol for remembering something–is transformed into a power cord.

Templin Brink Design *United States*

particular ear shapes, markings, or short or long hair. In arranging the elements, even for that of a recognizable object, the designer's goal is to invent a specific graphic language–an internal logic of positive and negative relationships, an emphasis on curved or angular forms, and an integration of line and mass–that will make the mark live as its own, unified image, rather than simply reproducing the likeness of the object. In one sense, the distilled, stylized mark is neutral because it seeks to communicate on an objective, universal level; simultaneously, however, it must have its own identity as a form.

■ In giving the form its own identity, the designer is selectively interpreting particular aspects of the message and skewing the communication in one direction or another. Following the cat example above, the designer might emphasize a crouching position, possibly communicating readiness for action, or might emphasize the cat's claws, a message that might mean power or aggression. The angularity of the drawing, or how weight is distributed, might add interpretation, such as restful and contemplative, or quick and agile, qualities. The universality of a mark, along with its particular degree of invented stylization, will place the image at different points along the continuum of representation and abstraction. Further, the very selection of the image's subject might involve overlays of meaning that involve conceptual, cultural, or emotional issues.

HIGHLY RESOLVED integration of car and bicycle icons begins to suggest some relationship between them; the addition of the cautionary yellow striping evolves the message further.

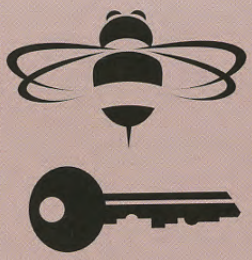
Thomas Csano *Canada*

SOME IMAGES ARE complex, visual signs with several layers of meaning; these are called supersigns. The elegant W and M lockup, while still clearly letters, has also formed an iconic representation of wires. In turn, this representation takes on the quality of a symbol when qualified by the client's descriptive title.

Raidy Printing Group *Lebanon*

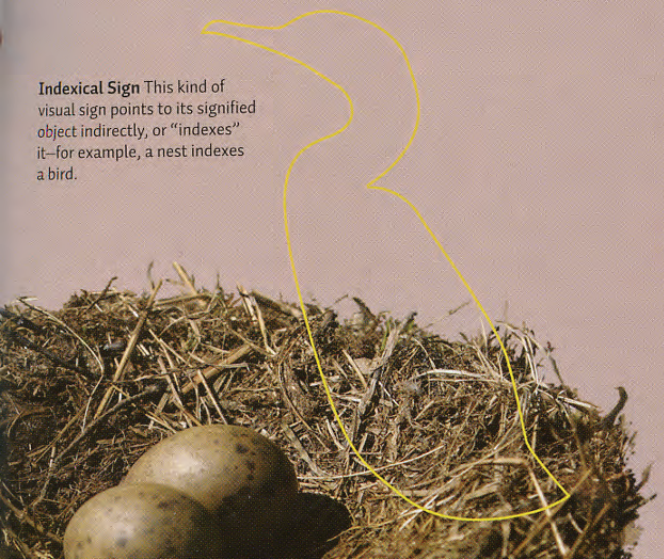
THIS SUPERSIGN uses a letterform as a base, altered only by the addition of two small dots to create added meaning.

LSD *Spain*

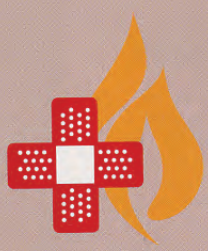


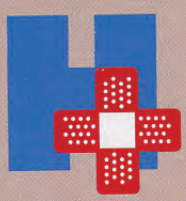
Icon A visual sign that shares a structural similarity with the object it signifies is called an icon. Usually, icons are devoid of detail and are literal representations of their signified object. In these examples, note which elements have been selected and which have been edited out.

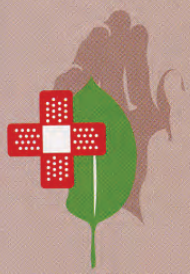
Symbol A representational or abstract image whose form is physically unrelated to its signified object or idea is a symbol; it derives its power from the arbitrary agreement of the culture that uses the symbol. A dove, for example, is a symbol of peace in Western culture. The context in which a symbol appears might alter its symbolic meaning: consider the difference in meaning between the same symbol element in these three environments.



Indexical Sign This kind of visual sign points to its signified object indirectly, or "indexes" it–for example, a nest indexes a bird.







Supersign This is a complex sign that superimposes more than one sign (and often more than one type of sign) in a single, gestalt combination in which all the signs included are visible and accessible immediately; a logo is a good example. A supersign might involve an icon, symbol, index, word, and representation in any combination. The more complicated the supersign, the less effective it is. These three examples show how a particular component might combine with others and thereby take on different functions and meanings.

Graphic Translation One particular kind of stylized illustration–known as graphic translation–evolved from the poster tradition of Switzerland and Germany in the early part of the twentieth century. Graphic translation combines some attributes of both icon and symbol. It depicts subjects in a literal way, like an icon, but also in a self-consciously abstract way that takes on symbolic qualities. A translation attempts to convey the concrete, fundamental "truth" of a subject, without details that are specific to that one particular instance of it; for example, a translation of a cat strives to be about the idea "cat," but not about a specific cat; that is, how long its hair is or the markings of its particular breed. ■ Unlike an icon, however, which is strictly about shape, the textural and volumetric qualities of the subject are important considerations in finding an appropriate language with which to

THE GEOMETRIC form language chosen to translate the unicorn's head not only creates the animal's mane but also emphasizes the powerful thrust of the horn.

Sang-Duck Seo *Iowa State University, United States*

Compare the graphic translations (top) of three different objects presented here with examples of the same objects in the form of icons (bottom).

Note the differences in construction, formal complexity, and conceptual overlay between the translation and its respective icon.

THE TRANSLATION LANGUAGE used to portray U.S. President Abraham Lincoln uses the interaction of light and shadow but renders these shapes with texture that suggests this image is a statue of Lincoln, further enhancing his status as a historical and cultural icon.

Metropolitan Group *United States*

translate it: the cat translation must indicate that cats, in general, are soft or furred, that they are slinky and athletic, and so on. A translation might be simple and stylized, or it might be relatively naturalistic, taking on characteristics such as surface detail or effects of light. ■ Graphic translation differs from conventional illustration in that its visual language, or "form language"–the marks used to make the drawing–is reduced to the point that there's nothing extra, only the shapes and marks needed to describe the subject. ■ The medium used for the drawing is important only if its characteristic marks help describe the subject's form or feeling. A scratchy texture made by charcoal, for example, might be appropriate in describing the fragility or dryness of an autumn leaf, but the texture does not exist for its own sake. ■ Most often, a translation is developed simultaneously with other visual material in a layout–the designer chooses translation as the illustrative option in advance–so that its shape, details, and textural qualities are dynamically integrated with photographs, typeface selection, abstract elements, and their positioning, in combination with the qualities of the translation.

THE REPETITION of concentric black arcs used to describe the butterfly's wings alludes to their movement.

Sohyun Kim *Iowa State University, United States*

THE ICONIC OUTER FORM of the lightbulb is elevated to translation status by virtue of its indistinct, sparkling inner contour–a formal adjustment that suggests the bulb's function. The filament is made symbolic through translation into circuits that also appear to represent leafy branches.

Templin Brink Design *United States*

These leaf translations all share an overall quality of recognition–the selection of details communicates the idea "leaf" in its simplest, distilled entirety–but the language of the translation is changed in each, affording knowledge of different aspects of the idea "leaf" as well as specifically integrating a given translation with the formal qualities of different typographic options.

IN A NOD TO illustration styles of the mid-twentieth century, this translation focuses on a simplified breakdown of light and shadow to clarify the form, while specific details–the bright buttons and the shine of the boot–add information.

Research Studios *United Kingdom*