

# Constructing Meaning

Cultivating creativity, seeking and solving visual problems, and developing critical judgment all require hours of hard work. Why are these skills so highly valued by artists and designers and so strongly emphasized by college teachers?

The answer is simple. At a professional level, art and graphic design projects are done in order to communicate ideas and express emotions. Turning elusive concepts into effective communication is not easy. Clay, ink, metal, fabric, and other physical materials must somehow stimulate an audience to see, understand, and respond to a visual message. In this chapter, we will explore the essentials of visual communication and identify some of the strategies artists and designers use to construct meaning.

## BUILDING BRIDGES

### Shared Language

A shared language is the basis on which all communication is built. For example, if you are fluent in English and I am effective as a writer, the ideas I want to communicate in this chapter should make sense to you. On the other hand, if English is your second language, some of the vocabulary may be unfamiliar. In that case, you may have to strengthen the bridge between us by looking up words in a dictionary.

Figure 7.1 demonstrates the importance of shared language. For a reader of Chinese, the flowing brushstrokes form characters that communicate specific ideas. For those of us who know only English, the calligraphy is visually



7.1 Huai-su, Detail of Autobiography, Tang dynasty, 7th – 10th centuries. Ink on paper.

enticing but conveys no specific message. We cannot understand the characters.

## Iconography

Many visual images rely on cultural references to build meaning. **Iconography** (literally, "describing images") is the study of symbolic visual systems. Iconography plays a major role in all forms of visual communication.

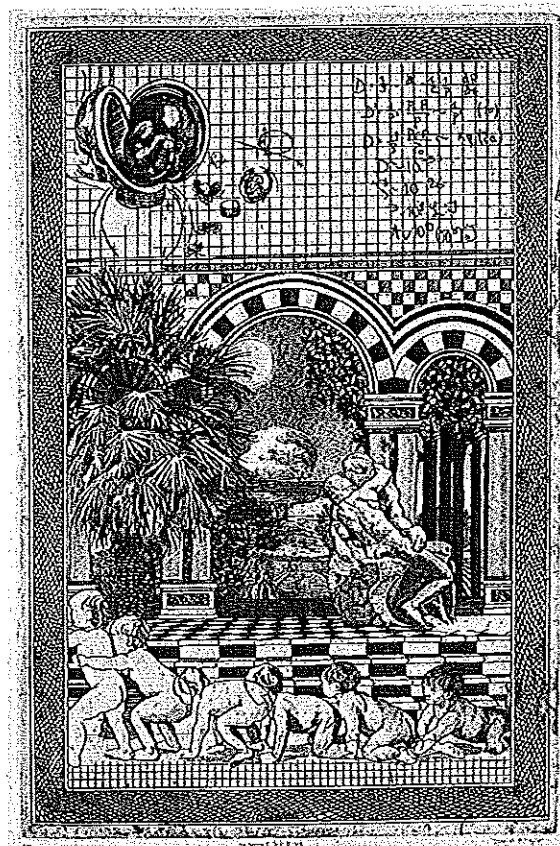
Deborah Haylor-McDowell's *The Serpent Didn't Lie* (7.2) is loaded with cultural references. An anatomical diagram copied from Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks appears in the upper left corner, while the nude couple near the center is based on *The Kiss*, a sculpture by August Rodin. In the upper right corner, Haylor-McDowell has reproduced Einstein's computations for the theory of relativity, and, in the foreground, a baby takes his first steps. A snakeskin border surrounds the image. What does it all mean? Haylor-McDowell says:

Ignorance may spare us the pain of difficult decisions. However, the price we pay is high. Can humankind's greatest gifts, emotion and intellect, mature in a world that is free of suffering? In the absence of adversity, will our humanness be lost?

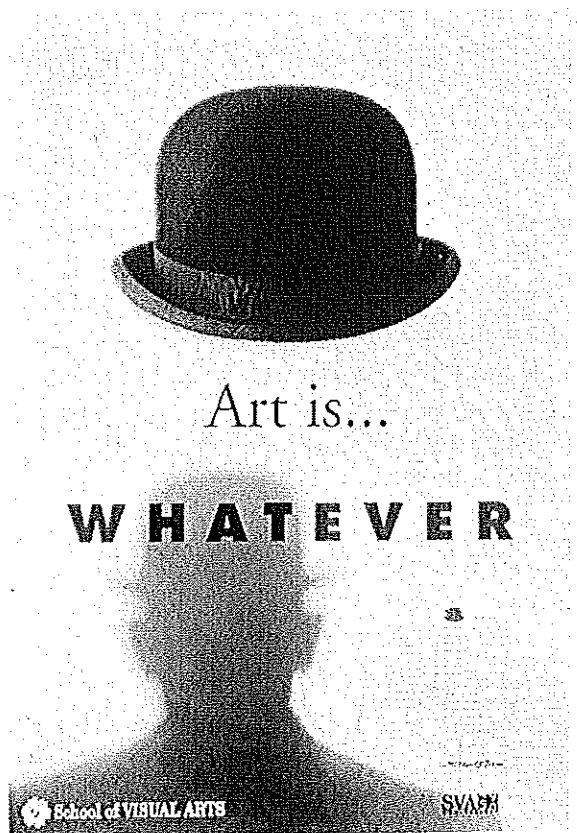
*The Serpent Didn't Lie* is based on a biblical text dealing with good and evil in the Garden of Eden. What is the price we pay for knowledge? The images I used in the composition deal with the complexities and responsibilities of our pursuit of knowledge.

Through a sophisticated use of iconography, the artist created a puzzle that is filled with ideas for us to unravel and explore. For those who understand the cultural references, this print presents a survey of types of knowledge in a compelling visual form. For those who do not understand the references, the print is simply a beautifully crafted collection of architectural and figurative fragments.

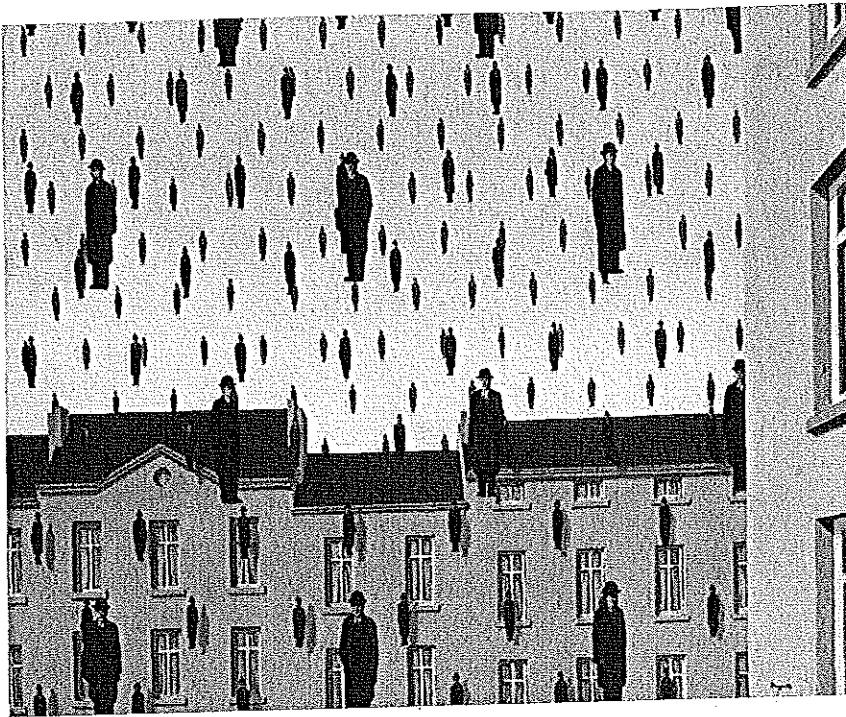
Graphic designers are especially aware of the importance of iconography. On a purely visual level, Milton Glaser's 1996 poster for the School of Visual Arts (7.3) is intriguing and evocative in itself. The hovering hat, shadowy figure, and curious text raise all sorts of questions. When we compare the poster with surrealist René Magritte's *Golconde* (7.4),



7.2 Deborah Haylor-McDowell, *The Serpent Didn't Lie*, 1997. Etching, 15 × 23 in. (38.1 × 58.42 cm).



7.3 Milton Glaser, *Art is . . .*, 1996. Poster.



7.4 René Magritte, *Golconde*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 31¼ × 38½ in. (80.65 × 98.11 cm).

the ideas expand much further. In this and other paintings by Magritte, the man in the bowler hat represents anyone who is courageously navigating through the chaos of contemporary life. When we make the connection between Glaser and Magritte, the School of Visual Arts poster becomes poignant as well as provocative. Like the man in the bowler hat, each art student must find a path through the complexities of contemporary life in order to develop a meaningful approach to art and design.

## Audience

Just as films are targeted and rated for specific audiences, so many forms of visual communication are designed for a particular type of viewer. Illustrator Kenny Kiernan specializes in cartoons for preteens (7.5). The subject matter is light-hearted; the iconography is simple; the drawing style is exuberant. A very different approach was used for figure 7.6. Realizing that disfigurement is of greater concern than death for many teenagers, the designers have focused on the scarred face of a traffic accident survivor. Seeking to discourage drunk driving, they have targeted the teenager's greatest fear in order to drive home their message. Caillebotte's *Place de L'Europe on a Rainy Day* (see figure

6.1A, page 148) presents yet another approach. It captures a quiet moment in time and space. There is minimal action, just the movement of groups of people within an architectural setting. This painting is compelling to a mature viewer yet lacks the action and excitement sought by a younger audience. To engage children, many museums use storytelling or other bridge-building activities when presenting paintings of this kind to school groups.

## Immediacy

When the bridge between the image and the audience is explicit, communication can occur almost instantaneously. When the iconography is elusive or complex, communication takes longer and is more varied. Each approach can be effective in the right time and place.

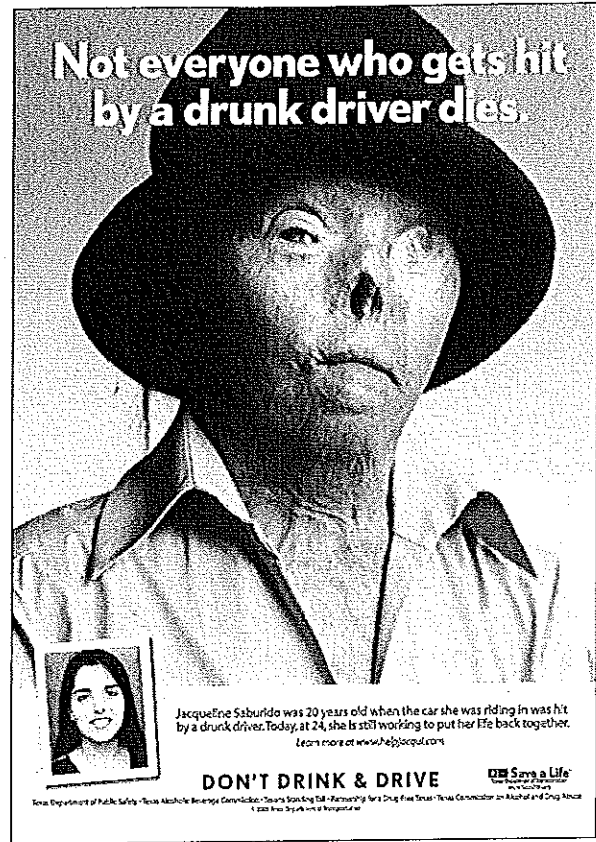
When driving a car, our lives depend on the immediate message we receive when a traffic light turns red. When visiting a museum, we often seek greater complexity and emotional resonance.

Graphic designers generally seek a combination of immediacy, clarity, and resonance. For them, an effective poster or billboard can be understood at a glance. Figure 7.7 is an excellent example. The bold, white hangman immediately attracts attention, and the book title itself is simple and direct. The position of the figure's head adds an additional layer of meaning to this critique of capital punishment.

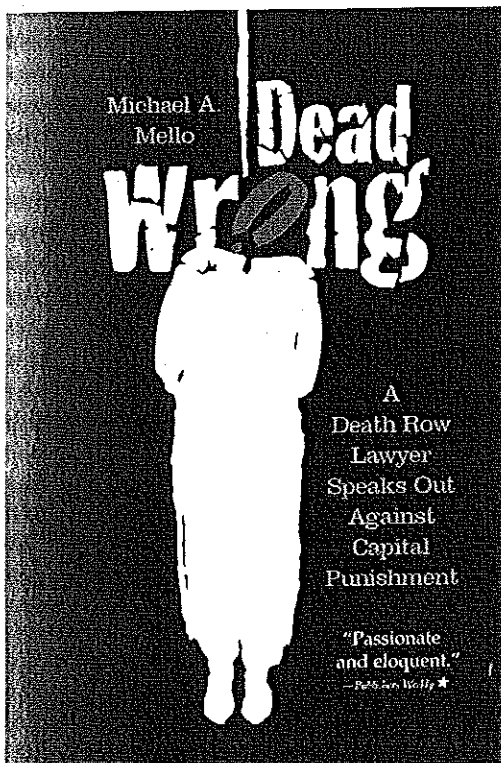
By comparison, *Solstice Greetings* (7.8) by Georgiana Nehl and David Browne requires extended viewer involvement. The collage includes a map, international postage stamps showing birds in flight, various pieces of patterned paper, a color chart, and butterflies, both dimensional and drawn. A tiny watch, two insects, three globes, two cubes, a child's jack, a circle, and a spiral orbit around the egg at the center of the composition. The message here is neither explicit nor immediate. As with Haylor-McDowell's work, the viewer must piece together a complex set of



7.5 Kenny Kiernan, *Rock Stars*. Vector art created in illustrator.



7.6 Sherry Matthews & Associates, photography, poster.



7.7 Mark Maccaulay, book jacket.



7.8 Georgiana Nehl and David Browne, *Solstice Greetings*, 1998. Color photograph of constructed assemblage, 5 × 5 in. (12.7 × 12.7 cm).

clues, then reach his or her own conclusions about journeys, the passage of time, and the transience of life. The message is conveyed using layers of iconography.

## Stereotypes

A **stereotype** is a fixed generalization based on a preconception. On a benign level, when we use a stereotype, we ignore individual characteristics and emphasize group characteristics. For example, the broken wine glass in figure 7.9 is widely used on shipping crates to communicate fragility. Glass is actually a very versatile material that can be cast as bricks, spun into fiberoptic cables, and polished to create lenses. However, we are most familiar with fragile wine glasses and bottles. Relying on this *general* perception, the shipping label designer used a stereotype to communicate fragility.

Racial stereotyping, which is never benign, tends to exaggerate negative generalizations. Even when a positive assumption is made (such as "Asian-Americans are brainy overachievers"), the overall effect is demeaning. Rather than learning about an individual person, we make judgments based on our preconceptions.

Stereotypes are often used to create the bridge on which communication depends. Because they are based on preconceptions, stereotypes require little thought. The viewer responds automatically. In some situations, an automatic response is ideal. Four airport pictograms are shown in figure 7.10. Can you determine the meaning of each? If the designer is successful, even an exhausted traveler from New Zealand will be able to determine at a

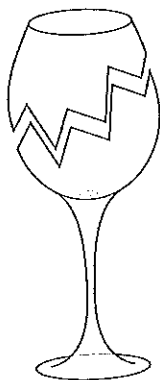
glance where to find a baggage locker, an elevator, or a toilet. Especially notice the use of the male and female stereotypes for the toilet pictograms. Despite the wide range of clothing worn by female travelers, the designer used a dress to create a stereotypical female.

## Clichés

A **cliché** is an overused expression or a predictable treatment of an idea. Phrases such as "Let's level the playing field" and "Think outside the box" are powerful the first time we hear them. However, when we hear them repeatedly, they lose their impact and become clichés. Visual clichés are equally predictable. Skulls representing death and seagulls representing tranquility may be effective at first but tend to become worn out when used repeatedly.

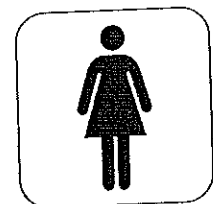
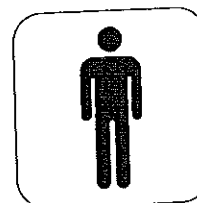
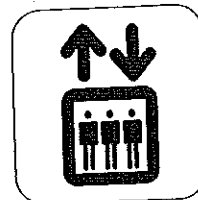
## Surprise

A shift in a stereotype or cliché upsets our expectations and challenges our assumptions. The resulting shock can surprise or delight an audience, making the message more memorable. Originally based on the cowboy stereotype, the Marlboro Man has been reinterpreted in figure 7.11. This ad, which begins like an ordinary cigarette commercial, quickly shifts from the heroic cowboy to a man with a hacking cough. At this point, the narrator suggests that "cowboys are a dying breed" because of the cancer caused by smoking. By breaking the stereotype, the designers attract the viewers' attention, challenge the conventional cigarette ad, and strengthen their nonsmoking message.

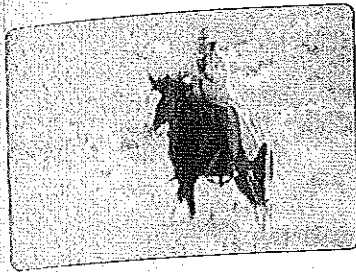


7.9 Fragile pictogram.

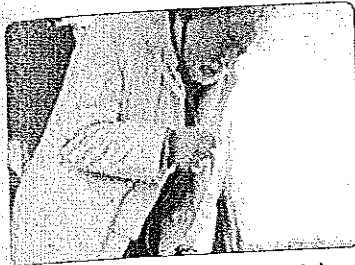
Baggage lockers  
Elevator  
Toilets, men  
Toilets, women



7.10 Roger Cook and Don Shanosky, images from a poster introducing the signage symbol system developed for the U.S. Department of Transportation, 1974.



NARRATOR: No wonder cowboys are a dying breed. If



...you need help quitting, tune into project QUIT, and take

control of your life.

7.11 Agency: Ruhr/Paragon, Minneapolis. Production: Lotter, Minneapolis. Details: TV, 30 seconds, color. First appearance: February 1988. Account Supervisor: Anne Bologna. Creative Director/Art Director: Doug Lew. Associate Creative Director/Copywriter: Bill Johnson. Agency Producer: Arleen Kullis. Production Company Director: Jim Lotter.

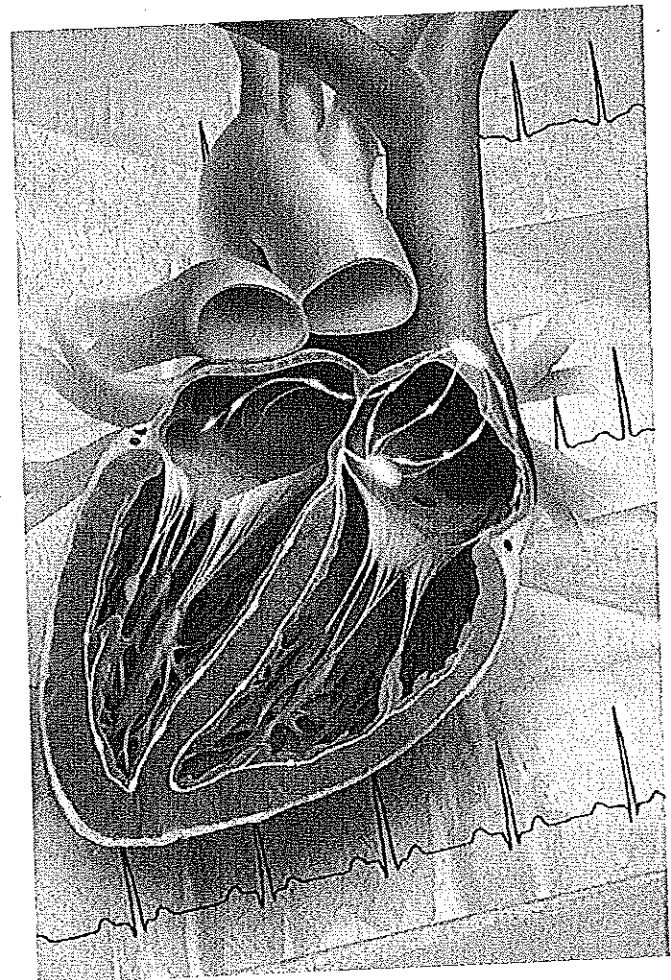
## Key Questions

- Are there any symbolic meanings embedded in your composition? Are these meanings consistent with the message you want to convey?
- Have you used a stereotype or a cliché? Does this strengthen or weaken your message?
- What audience do you want to reach? Is the form and content of your design appropriate for that audience?

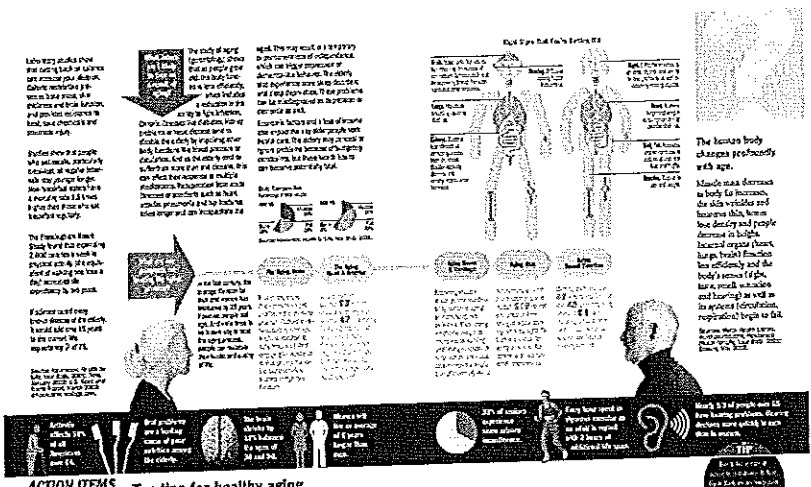
## PURPOSE AND INTENT

Any number of approaches to visual communication can be effective. We simply choose the style, iconography, and composition best suited to our purpose.

Let's consider three very different approaches to human anatomy. *Arterial Fibrillation* (7.12) was developed for the cover of a medical journal. With equal training in art and science, medical illustrator Kim Martens combined anatomical accuracy with



7.12 Kim Martens, *Arterial Fibrillation*, 2000. Photoshop.



7.13 Richard Soul Wurman, A page from *Understanding Healthcare*. Design Firm: Pentagram Design.

artistic imagination to create this design. Intent on sales, the art director for the magazine requested an image that was both physically correct and visually enticing. Designed as an anatomical roadmap, *Understanding Healthcare* (7.13) had to present complex information in a clear and concise way. To make the text accessible to a general audience, the designers used a loose grid, dominated by vertical columns at the top and a strong horizontal band at the bottom. Arrows and other visual cues increase visual impact and help the reader navigate from page to page. *Booster* (7.14) is dominated by series of X-rays of the artist's body. In this unconventional self-portrait, Robert Rauchenberg combined a collection of personal X-rays with various examples of technological notation, including an astronomer's chart, diagrams analyzing the movement of drills and arrows, graphs, and an empty chair. The title adds further meaning, suggesting a connection to booster shots, booster rockets, and booster seats, which increase the height of an ordinary chair so that young children can sit at a table comfortably. Reduced to an X-ray image and surrounded by fragments of technological information, the artist becomes a cog in the machinery of mass culture.



7.14 Robert Rauschenberg, *Booster*, 1967. Lithograph and serigraph, printed in color, composition 71% x 35% in. (181.7 x 89.1 cm).

## CONTEXT

The compositional context in which any image appears profoundly influences meaning. In figure 7.15, the juxtaposition of a quiet line of hungry people with a propagandistic billboard makes us rethink the phrase "There's no way like the American way."

The social context in which an image appears is equally important. In figure 7.16, Winston Churchill, the prime minister most responsible for British victory during World War II, extends two fingers to create the "V for victory" gesture he used throughout the war. If we are familiar with Churchill and know about the desperate struggle of the British people during the war, we immediately make the correct connection. In figure 7.17, the same gesture communicates a very different idea. As part



7.15 Margaret Bourke-White, *At the Time of the Louisville Flood, 1937*. Getalim silver print.

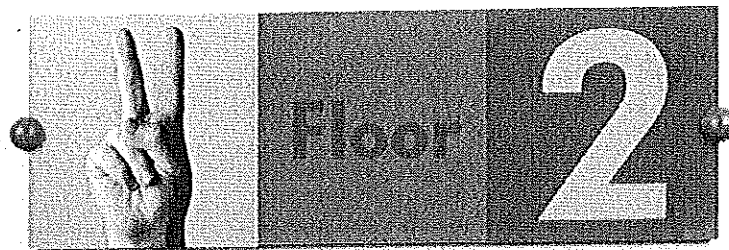


7.16 Alfred Eisenstadt, *Winston Churchill, Liverpool, 1957*. Getalim silver print.

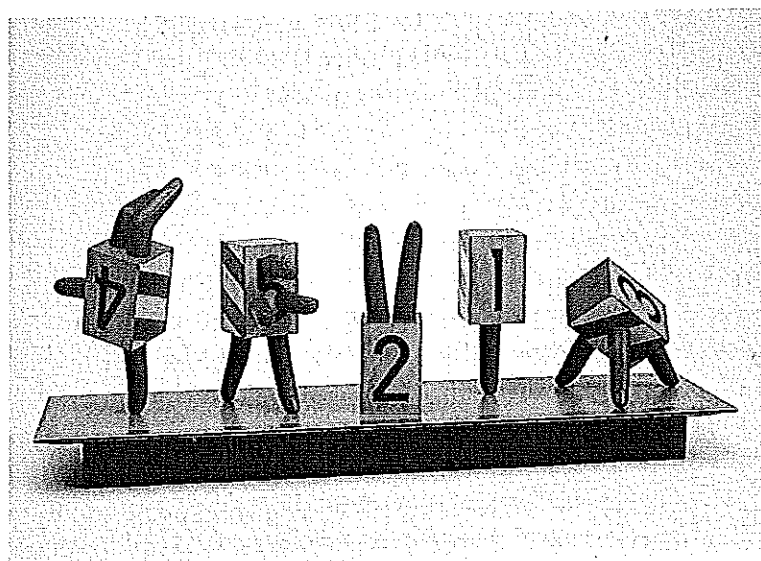
of the signage for the Minnesota Children's Museum, the extended fingers now communicate the number two. Realizing that many young visitors to the museum may not be able to read, the designers used both a number and a gesture to communicate location. Finally, in Sean O'Meallie's *Out-Boxed Finger Puppets Perform the Numbers 1 Through 5 in No Particular Order* (7.18), the same gesture becomes a playful piece of sculpture as well as an indication of the number two. We now see the extended fingers in the context of a series of whimsical forms. In each of these three cases, the meaning of the two fingers depends on context.

## CONNECTIONS

Analogies, similes, and metaphors are figures of speech that link one thing to another. An *analogy* creates a general connection between unrelated objects or ideas, while a *simile* creates the connection using the words *as* or *like*, as in "She has a heart as big as Texas." A *metaphor* is more explicit: speaking



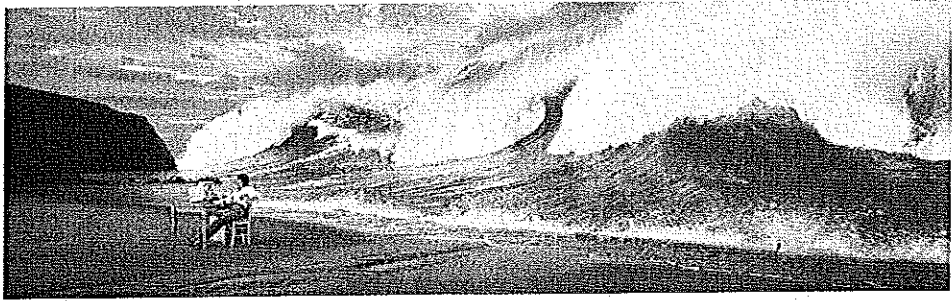
7.17 Minnesota Children's Museum, Pentagram design, NY, NY. Tracy Cameron and Michael Bierut, Designers.



7.18 Sean O'Meallie, *Out-Boxed Finger Puppets Perform the Numbers 1 Through 5 in No Particular Order, 1999*. Polychromed wood.



Y2K's coming.  
Don't just sit there.



Safely move your information from this millennium to the next.<sup>™</sup>  
Get a hold of the way and how much damage it does to your important files and applications is up to you.  
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omega

7.19 Iomega Corporation, "Y2K's coming. Don't just sit there."

metaphorically, we would say "Her heart is Texas." As you can see, the shift in meaning can be substantial when a metaphor is used.

In all cases, the original word is given the qualities of the linked word. For example, when Robert Burns wrote the simile "My love is like a red red rose," he gave the abstract concept of "love" the attributes of a glorious, colorful, fragrant, thorny, and transient rose.

Metaphorical thinking can be used to connect an image and an idea. Take the phrase, "I have butterflies in my stomach." This phrase is widely used to describe nervousness. Substitute other insects for butterflies, such as bees or wasps. How does this change the meaning? To push it even further, start with the phrase "My mind was full of clouds." What happens when "clouds" is replaced by mice on treadmills, rats in mazes, shadowy staircases, beating drums, screaming children — or even butterflies? When my mind is full of butterflies, I am happy, but butterflies in my stomach indicate fear. In addition to expanding your ideas, metaphors can help provide specific images for elusive emotions.

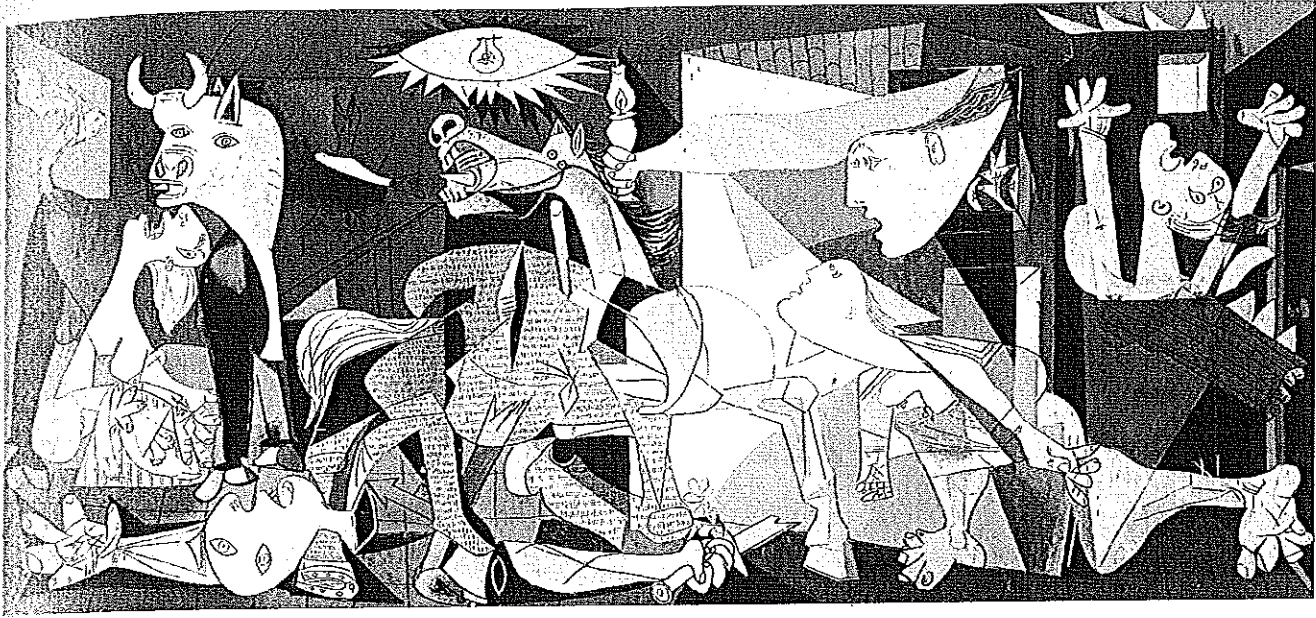
Metaphorical thinking and symbolism have always been used by artists and designers to strengthen communication. Exaggerated metaphors

are often used in advertising design. The massive wave that threatens the computer user in figure 7.19 is a metaphor for the destructive power of the Y2K computer bug that once seemed likely to create massive computer failures on January 1, 2000.

Picasso's *Guernica* (7.20) is also loaded with metaphors. In *A World of Art*, Henry Sayre offers the following description:

The horse, at the center left, speared and dying in anguish, represents the fate of the dreamer's creativity. The entire scene is surveyed by a bull, which represents at once Spain itself, the simultaneous heroism and tragedy of the bullfight, and the Minotaur, the bull-man who for the Surrealists stood for the irrational forces of the human psyche. The significance of the electric light bulb at the top center of the painting, and the oil lamp, held by the woman reaching out the window, has been much debated, but they represent, at least, old and new ways of seeing.<sup>1</sup>

Rather than showing exploding bombs or collapsing buildings, Picasso filled his painting with abstracted animals, screaming humans, and various light sources. In so doing, he focused on the meaning and emotion of the event, rather than the appearance.



7.20 Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937. Oil on canvas, 11 ft 5½ in. × 25 ft 5¼ in. (3.5 × 7.8 m).

## DRAMA

Regardless of the medium used or the message conveyed, all communication can be strengthened through dramatic delivery. Even Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech loses much of its power when delivered in a flat, monotonous tone of voice. Just as a playwright sets the stage for the story he or she seeks to tell, so an artist can set the stage for visual communication.

All of the elements and principles of design described in this book can be used to increase compositional drama. To increase conceptual drama, we can:

- *Personify the idea.* When we identify with a character in a play, we become more empathetic and involved in the story. Likewise, when we identify with a character in a painting or a poster, we are much more likely to remember the idea or emotion being conveyed. For example, the shattered face of the woman in figure 7.6 makes an immediate connection. We look her in the eye and feel her sorrow.
- *Focus on essentials.* It has often been said that theater is "life with the boring parts left out." To be meaningful to an audience, the characters and events in a play must have a strong relationship to direct experience. However, a

playwright rarely shows a character flossing his or her teeth. Too much detail clutters the composition, confuses the audience, and muddles the message. Including the right amount of information in just the right way can add drama to even the simplest idea.

- *Seek significance.* Any event, character, or time period can be used to create an effective play. Likewise, any object, event, or idea can be used in our quest for visual communication. A unique approach to a familiar subject or an insightful interpretation of personal and political events can add significance and increase impact.

## AESTHETICS AND ANESTHETICS

In *Design in the Visual Arts*, Roy Behrens notes the difference between the words anesthetic and aesthetic (or esthetic). An anesthetic is used to induce insensitivity or unconsciousness. In an anesthetic state, we are numbed and disoriented. We may not be able to determine the size or location of objects or the sequence of events. On the other hand, aesthetics is the study of human responses to beauty. In an aesthetic experience, our feelings are enhanced and our understanding is expanded.

## SUMMARY

- A shared language is the basis on which all communication is built.
- Iconography (the study of symbolic visual systems) provides us with a way to analyze the meaning of images and objects.
- Immediacy is often highly valued in graphic design. By comparison, many paintings require extended viewer involvement and longer viewing time.
- A stereotype is a fixed generalization based on a preconception. Stereotypes can easily create a bridge between the image and the audience.
- A cliché is an overused expression or predictable treatment of an idea. Even the most interesting image will lose its power if overused.
- A shift in a stereotype or cliché challenges our assumptions and can increase impact.
- Artists and designers choose the style, iconography, and composition best suited to their purpose. A mismatch between the type of image and its purpose creates confusion.
- The visual and social context in which an image appears will profoundly affect its meaning.
- Analogies, similes, and metaphors are figures of speech that link one thing to another. Metaphors are especially widely used in visual communication.
- Dramatic delivery of a message can enhance meaning.

## Keywords

aesthetics  
analogy

cliché  
iconography

metaphor  
metaphorical thinking

simile  
stereotype