

Exhibit Review

Give Me A Sign: The Language of Symbols at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York

Craig Berger

Chair
Communication Design
Pathways Department
Fashion Institute of Technology

craig_berger@fitnyc.edu

It is rare to see an exhibition focused on symbols, iconography, and visual language. While symbols are essential in almost every form of media from smartphones to brochures, they are particularly central to the world of spatial wayfinding, urban signs, and visitor information.

The exhibition *Give Me a Sign: The Language of Symbols* at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York running through August 1, 2024 provides visitors a fascinating history of how symbols are developed as a communication tool. While the exhibition has flaws in omission and completeness, the overall perspective is excellent and provides a glimpse into how symbols are used as a tool and, by extension, how symbols play a central role in visual communication.

The exhibition is built around the 50th Anniversary of the *Symbol Sourcebook*, a book joined with an exhibition by Henry Dreyfuss in 1972. Dreyfuss was an advocate for standardization and education of symbols as a shared international language. The book came out at a crucial time. International travel had boomed starting in the 1950s and with the arrival of the jet age people were traversing the globe with little ability to read signs, maps, and other navigational devices. The need for internationally understood symbols created an entire new field of design and research with authors like Romedi Passini and designers like Lance Wyman focused on how symbols can be best utilized in wayfinding, as well as designers like Massimo Vignelli seeking to rationalize transportation systems and maps.

While the exhibition is excellent and serves as a great introduction for designers and a general audience new to symbol and pictogram design, it misses a few marks crucial in making the exhibition more successful including highlighting the success of symbols as a language and the designers, associations, researchers, and advocates responsible for building a discipline around it. Also, an exploration of the difficulties and failures in development including political, cultural, and technological factors. The Cooper Hewitt Museum builds extensive educational programs around its exhibitions, so many of the items being introduced in this review may have been covered in later lectures and programs. This review will provide context for many of these additional topics as well as an extension of the topics covered in the exhibition.

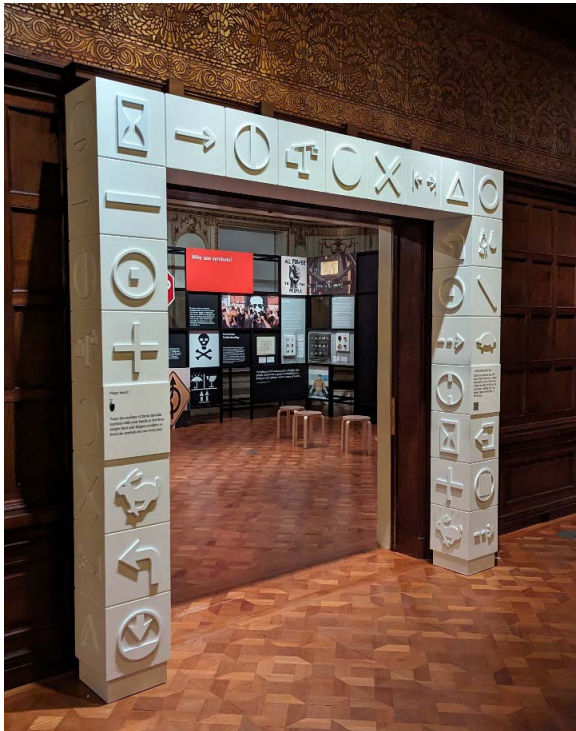


Figure 1 /

The exhibition impressively integrates graphics, illumination and modular systems in a historic building environment (All images by the author.)

IMPRESSIVE DESIGN

The most successful and impressive part of the exhibition is the design. Cooper Hewitt is renowned for its beautifully designed permanent and traveling shows, particularly when dealing with the difficult limitations of working in a historic museum space. The exhibition design by Studio Matthews utilized modular systems, freestanding landmarks, and custom fixtures as a support for simple and beautifully developed graphic elements. The exhibition has a few artifacts like the symbol sourcebook poster, which is given the recognition it deserves in the exhibition. The exhibition design stands out with the interactive activities table where visitors can design their own symbols. The structure fits the larger sensibility of the show, and its central position supports engagement. Subtle lighting is a highlight of the exhibition, building a sense of place with minimal interventions. The designers have also included additional playful interactives, including one that links body movement to Olympic symbols.

SUCCESS IN INTRODUCING THE IMPORTANCE OF SYMBOLS

Utilizing the Symbol Sourcebook as a catalyst for the exploration of symbols as language is an excellent decision as a foundation for the structure of the exhibition. The Symbol Sourcebook represented the first large-scale compilation of symbols from around the world along with an overview of semiotics. This allowed researchers and designers to see the similarities of symbols across countries and cultures. The visual artifacts incorporated in the exhibition are stunning. It clarifies the revolution this book created along with the achievement of accumulating and publishing this data in a pre-digital era. It also sets up the second major success in the exhibition; the adaptation of symbols as a consistent language and identity within the Olympics.

THE OLYMPICS AS A CODIFICATION OF SYMBOL DISCIPLINE

The other successful area of the exhibition is linked to the design of symbols for the Olympics. This is one area of the exhibition where the Symbols Sourcebook, the discipline of symbols design, and the actions of stakeholders meet. The exhibition properly highlighted the evolution of Olympic symbols and the culmination of that movement in 1968 by Eduardo Terrazas, Lance Wyman, and Beatrice TrueBlood (later refined in the sourcebook). These symbols have been the subject of multiple exhibitions in the past, most famously in Mexico City in 2018 for the 50th Anniversary of the games. Highlighting them in the exhibition is an excellent way of showing the importance of consistency and discipline to symbol effectiveness.

THE MISSING DISCIPLINE

The exhibition's height is with the Olympic Symbol development, but this is where the depth of the exhibition breaks down. Other major areas of the exhibition are dedicated to symbols adopted as part of political movements, the development of the accessibility symbol, and emoji development and adoption. The exploration of the adoption of the fist symbol is effective, but accessibility symbol development is a missed opportunity. The exhibition includes its development in 1968 as part of the

Scandinavian Student's Organization, and its adoption as an international symbol, integrated into national design guidelines around the world. The exhibition then makes a leap thirty years to the Accessible Icon Project's attempt at modifying the symbol. This update has received a great deal of press and is part of the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection. What was not included in the exhibition was the controversy surrounding the adoption of the symbol by disability organizations, national, and local governments. The symbol was not adopted by the United States Federal Highway Administration or the US Access Board. Some local government bodies including the City of New York have adopted the symbol as an alternate but it is rarely used (Note: The author served on the Access Board ISO standards committee in the first year the symbols were discussed as a possible standard).

Including this controversy would have added another important layer to the exhibition. Symbols are an important part of the visual vocabulary of placemaking, and face an important regulatory buy-in, particularly in transit, health-care or vehicular sign projects. This discussion could also be applied to current controversies including development of symbols to reflect gender neutrality or arguments over emojis used in video games like the recent controversy in South Korea. Even a small reference to these discussions would add an additional layer of depth to the adoption of symbols.

The other missed opportunity was in the areas of symbol design and refinement, which is perhaps the most successfully designed part of the exhibition. This impressive section of the exhibition is an interactive activity for the design of symbols with the chance of submitting the designed symbol to the sourcebook. This section could have been greatly enhanced by elements successfully displayed in the Olympics section, showing how the designed symbol elements could be better refined into a language.

FROM INCEPTION TO REFINEMENT TO ADOPTION

The Symbol Sourcebook launched a revolution in symbol design, advocacy, and advancement that created an enormous leap in the development of visual language not often seen in our schools and design firms today.



Figure 2 /

The Sourcebook



Figure 3 /

The Olympic Symbols are a High Point in the Exhibition for Profiling the Refinement of Symbols

Highlighting this ecosystem of research, design, and advocacy would provide the exhibition with a more lasting impact. It would also potentially answer a question that many exhibition viewers may ask. Is the heyday of symbol design and development behind us?

This question could be answered with small additions profiling the development of symbols the Sourcebook inspired. Design and advocacy could include the groundbreaking work by Tom Geismar with AIGA to develop and implement Airport Symbols, most of which are adopted by airports around the world today. The work promoted by the Society for Experiential Graphic Design (SEGD) with designers like the late Jack Biezeck for the development of healthcare symbols (Note: Craig Berger was the project lead for the Hablamos Junto healthcare symbols project) and Meeker and Associates led Recreation symbols for the Army Corp of Engineers. These projects illustrate how symbols are developed and adopted.

Finally, a more in-depth exploration of refinement based on the work of the Symbols Sourcebook should include the work of Mies Hora whose Official Signs and Icons has continued the refinement efforts by turning thousands of symbols into consistent and usable systems. For digital, the work of Shigetaka Kurita is a must to show the first refinements of emojis for digital use during a period when phones and screens were very primitive.



Figure 4 /

The excellent interactive symbols design exercise at the center of the exhibition could also serve as a foundation for semiotic research.

Research in semiotics and symbols cognition would also be an important element to add considering its importance to the development of symbols as a visual language. The exhibition designers developed a wonderful exercise, asking visitors to recognize lesser-known symbols, but this could have been an opportunity to expand the field of symbol recognition research. This is an expansive topic and would be worthy of its own exhibition, but more context would have been helpful.

None of these critiques should serve to minimize the success of the small but highly educational exhibition. The museum has a difficult task in trying to engage the public in conceptual design ideas and their impact on society. The exhibition provides a glimpse of the potential to expand designer vision.