

# Constructing Meaning

Seeking and solving visual problems, cultivating creativity, 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?

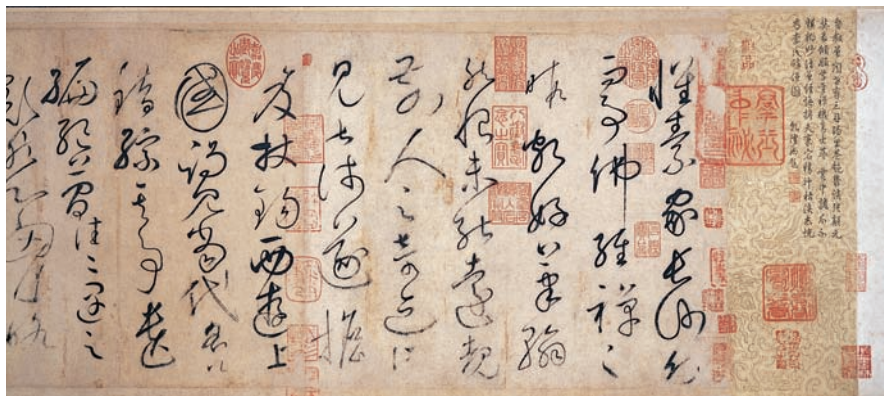
The answer is simple. At a professional level, art and graphic design projects are done in order to communicate ideas and express emotions. Turning elusive concepts into effective communication is not easy. Clay, ink, metal, fabric, and other physical materials must somehow stimulate an audience to see,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

## 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 8.1 demonstrates the importance of shared language. For a reader of Chinese, the flowing brushstrokes form characters that communicate



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

specific ideas. For those of us who know no Chinese, the calligraphy is visually enticing but conveys no specific message. We cannot understand the characters.

Historical and cultural “literacy” can create another type of bridge. As an American, I live within a framework that is driven by a capitalist economic structure, a two-party political system, and social systems based on Judeo-Christian values. South African William Kentridge brings a very different frame of reference to his artwork. Born in 1951, he experienced apartheid firsthand as the son of white civil rights lawyers and has extensive knowledge of the history of many African genocides. In *Black Box/Chambre Noir* (8.2), he uses a miniature theater with the type of mechanism used in ink-jet printers, six automations enter and exit the stage. Projections of historical documents, combined with fragments of music from Mozart’s opera *The Magic Flute* and Namibian songs, expand the tragic story. While viewers are immediately drawn to the fascinating structure, we cannot fully understand the meaning without expanding our knowledge of African history.

## Iconography

Many artworks depend on cultural and historical references to build meaning. **Iconography** (literally, “describing images”) is the study of such symbolic visual systems.

Deborah Haylor-McDowell’s *The Serpent Didn’t Lie* (8.3) is loaded with 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 Auguste Rodin. Einstein’s computations for the theory of relativity appear in the upper-right corner, 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?



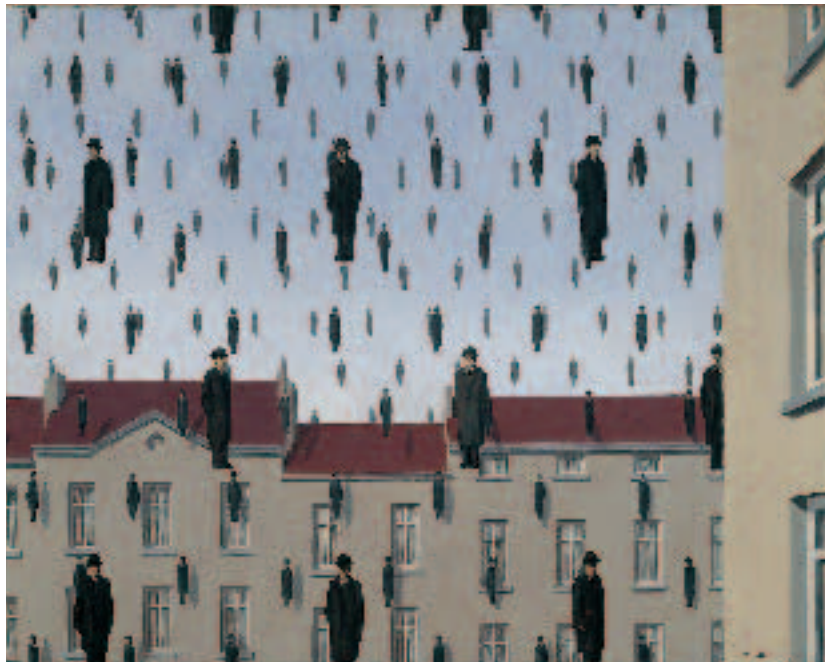
8.2 View of William Kentridge’s *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, 2005. Miniature theater with mechanized objects, projections and sound, dimensions variable.



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



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



8.5 René Magritte, *Golconde*, 1953. Oil on canvas, 31% × 38% in. (80.65 × 98.11 cm).

*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 (8.4) 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* (8.5), 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 specific viewers. George Balanchine was a master choreographer renowned for his love of classical ballet as well as his modern sensibility and commitment to endless invention. A powerful yet restrained poster was needed to publicize a performance of his work (8.6). The dancers in blue are carefully balanced by simple text on a blue background. By contrast, in *Dancing Downtown 2003* (8.7), the soloist wears a loose dress that accentuates her physicality. She dances with wild abandon. Both shows attracted diverse audiences, but the Balanchine poster was targeted at those seeking more traditional ballet, while *Dancing Downtown 2003* was targeted at those seeking a more exuberant and contemporary approach.



8.6 *Serenade* by George Balanchine, Los Angeles Ballet. Poster. Design by Catherine Kanner, photo by Reed Hutchinson.



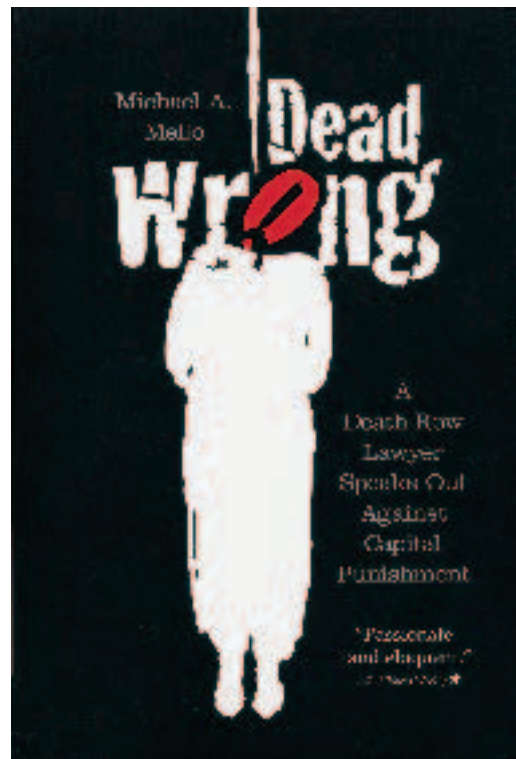
8.7 *Dancing Downtown*, 2003. Poster. Designed by Noon.

## Immediacy

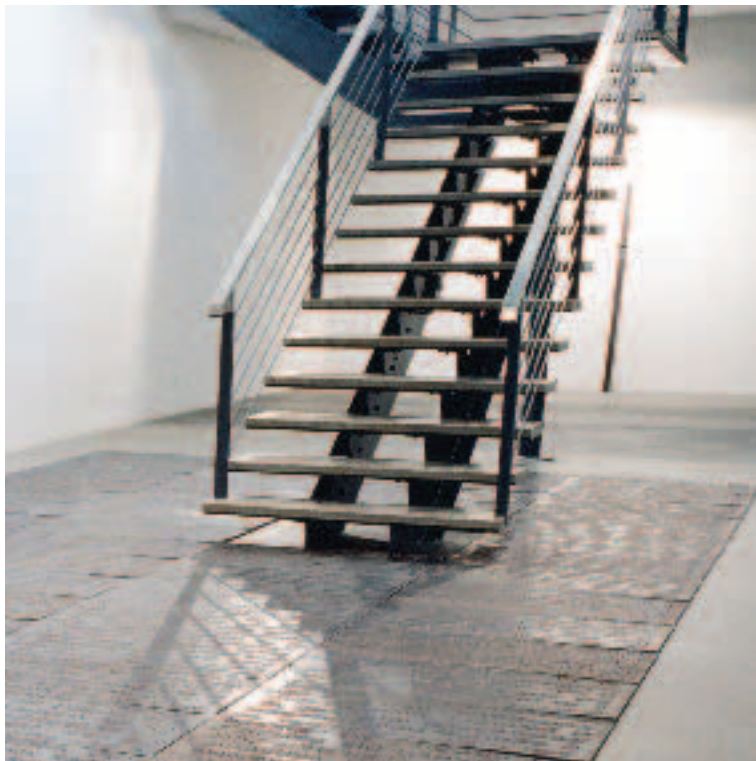
When the bridge between the image and the audience is explicit, communication can occur almost instantaneously. When the iconography is elusive or complex, communication takes longer and is more varied. Each approach can be effective in the right time and place. When we are driving a car, our lives depend on the immediate message we receive when a traffic light turns red. The “Stop!” is clear and concise. When visiting a museum, we often seek greater complexity and emotional resonance.

Graphic designers generally aim for a combination of immediacy, clarity, and resonance. For them, an effective poster or billboard can be understood at a glance. Figure 8.8 is an excellent example. The bold, white hanged man immediately attracts attention, and the book title itself is simple and direct. The position of the figure’s head adds another layer of meaning to this critique of capital punishment.

By contrast, *Some Words* (8.9) by Markus Schaller requires extended viewer involvement. Created



8.8 Mark Maccaulay. Book jacket.



8.9 Markus Schaller, *Some Words*, 2007. Steel, dimensions variable.

## 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 8.10 is widely used on shipping crates to communicate fragility. Glass is actually a very versatile material that can be cast as bricks, spun into fiber-optic 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.

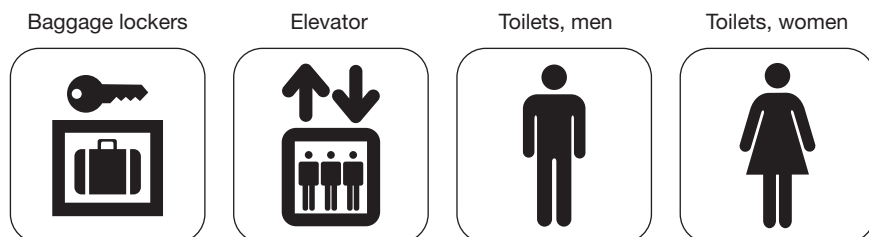
Racial stereotyping, which is never benign, tends to exaggerate negative generalizations. Even when a positive assumption is made (such as “Asian Americans are brainy overachievers”), the overall effect is demeaning. Rather than learning about an individual person, we make judgments based on our preconceptions.

from a sequence of stream-of-consciousness texts inscribed onto 70 iron panels, this installation was designed as a meditation on the very process of thinking. Viewers entering this visual labyrinth had to be willing to puzzle over the words presented and explore their own cognitive response. The message here is neither explicit nor immediate. As with Haylor-McDowell’s work (figure 8.3), the viewer must piece together a complex set of clues, then reach his or her own conclusions about the nature of knowledge and the development of literacy.

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 8.11. 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 designers used a dress to create a stereotypical female.



8.10 “Fragile” pictogram.



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

## 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 8.12. 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.

*Na Zha Cradle* (8.13) is equally surprising. Cradles are “supposed” to be soft, safe, and comforting. This cradle is metallic, threatening, and dangerous. Metaphorically commenting on the aggressive capitalism that has driven the Chinese economy in recent years, Shi Jinsong suggests that there is a price to be paid when society progresses too quickly.

## Key Questions

### BUILDING BRIDGES

- Are there any symbolic or cultural 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? Are the form and content of your design appropriate for that audience?



8.12 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 Kulis. Production Company Director: Jim Lotter.



8.13 Shi Jinsong, *Na Zha Cradle*, 2005. Stainless steel, 24 × 31.9 × 24.3 in. (61.4 × 81.7 × 62.2 cm).

## 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 four very different uses of human anatomy. *Arterial Fibrillation* (8.14) was developed for the cover of a medical journal. With equal training in art and science, medical illustrator Kim Martens combined anatomical accuracy with 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.

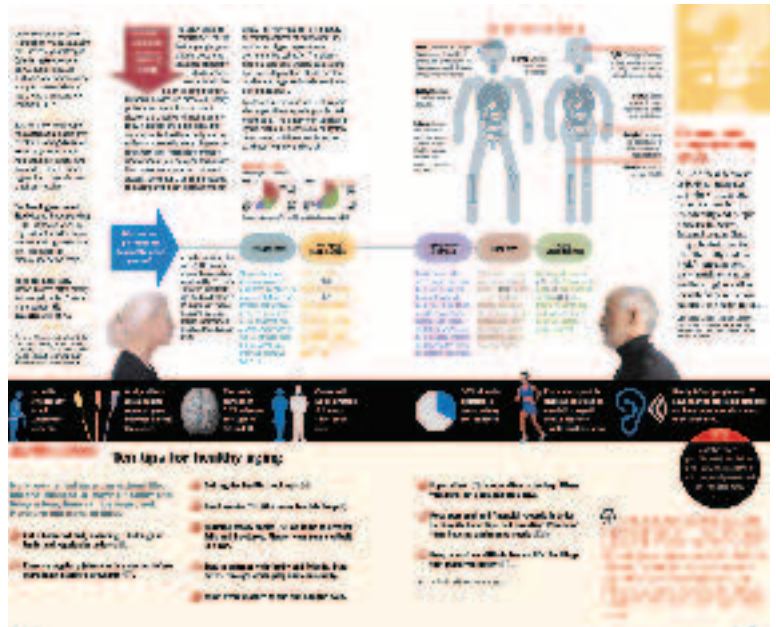
Designed as an anatomical roadmap, *Understanding Healthcare* (8.15) had to present complex information in a clear and concise way. To make the text accessible to a general audience, the designers used a loose grid dominated by vertical columns at the top and a strong horizontal band at the bottom. Arrows and other visual cues help the reader navigate from page to page.

*Booster* (8.16) is dominated by a series of X-rays of the artist's body. In this unconventional self-portrait, Robert Rauschenberg combined a collection of personal X-rays with various examples of technological notation, including an astronomer's



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

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. By contrast, the woman in Kiki Smith's *Virgin Mary* (8.17) seems both vulnerable and graceful. She displays her flayed body unapologetically, extending her open hands in a type of blessing.



8.15 United Healthcare Brochure. Design Firm: Pentagram, NY. Courtesy of Richard Saul Wurman.



8.16 Robert Rauschenberg, *Booster*, 1967. Lithograph and serigraph, printed in color, composition 71% $\times$  35% in. (181.7  $\times$  89.1 cm).



8.17 Kiki Smith, *Virgin Mary*, 1992. Beeswax, microcrystalline wax, cheesecloth, and wood on steel base, 67% $\times$  26  $\times$  14% in. (171.5  $\times$  66  $\times$  36.8 cm).





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



8.19 Alfred Eisenstadt, *Winston Churchill, Liverpool, 1957*. Gelatin silver print.

## CONTEXT

The compositional context in which any image appears profoundly influences meaning. In figure 8.18, the juxtaposition of a quiet line of flood survivors 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 8.19, 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 8.20, the same gesture communicates a very different idea. As part 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* (8.21), 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 the context.



8.20 Minnesota Children’s Museum, Pentagram design, New York, NY. Tracy Cameron and Michael Bierut, Designers.



8.21 Sean O’Meallie, *Out-Boxed Finger Puppets Perform the Numbers 1 Through 5 in No Particular Order, 1999*. Polychromed wood, 17.5 × 42 × 11 in.

## 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 word *as* or *like*, as in “She has a heart as big as Texas.” A **metaphor** is more explicit: Speaking metaphorically, we would say “Her heart is Texas.” As you can see, a substantial shift in meaning occurs when 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 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 especially common in advertising design. The massive wave that threatens the computer user in figure 8.22 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. Editorial cartoons also rely on metaphors. In figure 8.23, a congressional hand puppet vows independence from the very lobbyist who is controlling his vote.

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

Get more help with the upgrade to software and hardware.

**iomega**

8.22 Iomega Corporation, “Y2K’s coming. Don’t just sit there.”



8.23 Jimmy Margulies, Editorial Cartoon, 2006.



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

Picasso's *Guernica* (8.24) 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 sources of light. In so doing, he focused on the meaning and emotion of the event, rather than its appearance.

## AESTHETICS

### Definitions

In *Design in the Visual Arts*, Roy Behrens noted the difference between the words *anesthetic* and *aesthetic*. 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 expands. As a result, an aesthetic experience tends to heighten meaning, while an anesthetic experience tends to dull meaning. Dentists use anesthetics; artists and designers use aesthetics.

Aesthetic theories reflect community values, and thus vary greatly from culture to culture. For example, an exalted conception of Christianity dominated civic life during the Middle Ages in Europe. To express their faith, architects developed ingenious building strategies to create the soaring Gothic cathedrals we associate with that period (8.25). By contrast, intimacy and a sense of community were highly valued by the Unitarian congregation that commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright's



8.25 Notre-Dame Cathedral nave vaults, Chartres, 1194–1230.



8.26 Frank Lloyd Wright, Unity Temple interior, 1906. Oak Park, Illinois.

Unity Temple (8.26). The sanctuary is essentially a cube, with rows of seats facing inward from three sides. Congregants face each other while at the same time maintaining close contact with the minister. The Pompidou Center (8.27), by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, offers a third approach to public architecture. From the outside, it looks more like a roller coaster than a major art museum. To emphasize the importance of technology in contemporary life, the blue ventilation ducts, red elevators, and green water pipes are highlighted rather than being

hidden. Because cultural values are so variable, before we conclude our discussion of meaningful design, we must delve into contemporary aesthetics.

## Postmodernism

Contemporary art and design are widely categorized as **postmodernism**. This emphasizes the extent to which today's artists and designers seek solutions that challenge or exceed modernism. Thus, to understand contemporary aesthetics, we must first examine the basic characteristics of the previous aesthetic period.

In the arts, **modernism** is a general term that encompasses a wide range of individual movements. Beginning in Europe in the latter part of the nineteenth century, modernism became the dominant force in art and design from around 1915 to 1975.

In a sense, modernism rose from the ashes of World War I. After this devastating conflict, traditional attitudes and images seemed inadequate and out of date. Architects began to strip away traditional ornamentation to reveal the underlying structures and spaces in their buildings. Designers such as Marcel Breuer, Raymond Lowry, and Charles and Ray Eames used plastic, metals, and glass to mass-produce objects and images for an expanding consumer market. Artists such as Wassily Kandinsky, Naum Gabo, and Piet Mondrian valued abstraction over traditional representation. The international art world became a hotbed of experimentation.

Many modernists shared four fundamental beliefs. First, they were fascinated by **form**, which may be defined as the physical manifestation of an idea. "Less is more" became a mantra for designers, while "the form is the content" became a catchphrase for many painters. Second, modernists readily embraced new materials and methods of production. Especially in architecture, traditional materials such as wood, brick, and stone began to be replaced by concrete, plastic, and glass. Third, the early modernists strongly believed in the social significance of the arts. They wanted to bring art and design to the general population, rather than working for an elite. Finally, many modernists sought to understand and express universal truths. No longer satisfied with a conventional representation of reality, they began to develop a new visual language based on distillation and abstraction.



8.27 Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, Pompidou Center, Paris, 1976.

These four fundamental beliefs stimulated innovation in all areas of art, architecture, and design, and an enormous amount of brilliant work was produced. Over time, however, many modernists became trapped by their own success. Constructed from hard, reflective materials and dominated by right angles, modernist buildings often seemed cold and monolithic. Based on an underlying grid and typographical conventions, modernist posters often seemed predictable. Reduced to the most essential forms, modernist painting and sculpture became detached from the chaos and complexity of contemporary life. It seemed that all the questions of modernism had been answered. Something had to change.

The 1966 publication of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* set the stage for postmodern architecture. In it, architect Robert Venturi extolled the energy and ambiguities of renaissance architecture:

I like elements which are hybrid rather than "pure," compromising rather than "clean," distorted rather than "articulated," perverse as well as impersonal, boring as well as "interesting," conventional rather than "designed," accommodating rather than excluding, redundant rather than simple, vestigial as well as innovating, inconsistent and equivocal rather than direct and clear. I am for messy vitality over obvious unity.

At the same time, philosophers Jean-Louis Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, and Roland Barthes began to expand our understanding of the process of communication. They argued that both knowledge and communication are impermanent and conditional: there *are* no universal truths. The audience rather than the artist ultimately creates the meaning of an artwork; thus, meaning changes constantly. Furthermore, they tended to see knowledge as cyclical rather than progressive. They argued that we are pursuing a complex path with multiple branches rather than a grand journey that will culminate in human perfection.

Influenced by these theorists and seeking fresh ideas and approaches, many contemporary artists and designers reject the central tenets of modernism. For the postmodernist, context and content are as important as pure form. Postmodern use of materials tends to be omnivorous and irreverent. An exhibition may be constructed from trash, and fiberglass may be manipulated to mimic metal.

Distinctions between "high art" (such as painting and sculpture) and "low art" (such as advertising and crafts) are considered artificial. And, since all aspects of visual culture are intertwined, the postmodernist may recycle images and ideas with impunity, "appropriating" them for use in a new context. Finally, for the postmodernist there are multiple rather than universal truths, and all truths are continually changing. As a result, where late modernism tended to be stable and reductive, postmodernism tends to be expansive and dynamic. As Venturi suggested, complexity and contradiction can be seen as strengths.

For the past 30 years, the collision between modernism and postmodernism has released an enormous amount of energy. Taboos have been broken repeatedly, and the criteria for excellence continue to evolve.

## Visual Strategies

Five common characteristics of postmodern art and design follow.

**Appropriation** (the reuse of an existing artwork) is often used to create a connection between past and present cultural values. In *We Don't Need Another Hero* (8.28), Barbara Kruger borrowed a Norman Rockwell illustration in which a young girl admires her male counterpart's muscles. The emphatic text shifts the meaning from the original gender stereotype to a contemporary feminist statement.

**Recontextualization** is another postmodern strategy. Constructed from steel pins and placed in a gallery, Mona Hatoum's *Doormat* (8.29) forces us to rethink a commonplace object. As part of a series on racism, this artwork suggests that the opportunities



8.28 Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)*, 1987. Photographic silkscreen, vinyl lettering on Plexiglas, 109 × 210 in. (276.9 × 533.4 cm).



8.29 Mona Hatoum, *Doormat II*, 2000–01. Steel and rubber, 1 × 28 × 16 in. (2.5 × 71 × 40.6 cm).

offered by civil rights legislation may be as ironic as a welcome mat made of pins.

**Layering** is often used to create complex or even contradictory meanings. In *The Red Mean: Self-Portrait* (8.30), Jaune Quick-to-See Smith reinterprets Leonardo da Vinci’s famous drawing of ideal human proportions (8.31). As a Renaissance man, Leonardo was fascinated by both perfection and the grotesque. In this drawing, he mapped out an idealized figure radiating out from the navel in the center.

Despite its superficial similarity, the aesthetic basis for Smith’s self-portrait is entirely different. Her circular outline simultaneously suggests a target, negation, and the four directions emphasized in Native American spiritual practices. A sign proclaiming “Made in the USA” combined with the artist’s tribal identification number covers the chest of the figure, and tribal newspapers fill the background. While the da Vinci drawing is simple and elegant, Smith’s self-portrait provides a rich commentary on the complexities of her life as a Native American.

All of these examples demonstrate a fourth postmodern characteristic: words and images are often integrated in order to expand emotional impact or to create conflict. For the postmodernist, contradiction and complexity are celebrated as facts of life and sources of inspiration.

Finally, **hybridity** may be defined as the creation of artworks using disparate media and meanings to create a unified conceptual statement. In *I Wish I Could Help You* (8.32), Daniel Sutherland combined abstract painted shapes with a tiny, highly detailed figure and surrounded the entire image with a three-dimensional frame made of wood and hardware. For Sutherland, the deep frame is suggestive of both a shipping crate and a contemporary reliquary. Kathryn Frund combined government



8.30 Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, *The Red Mean: Self-Portrait*, 1992. Mixed medium.



8.31 Leonardo da Vinci, *Proportions of the Human Figure* (after Vitruvius), c. 1485–90. Pen and ink, 13½ × 9½ in. (34.3 × 24.8 cm).



8.32 Daniel Sutherland, *I Wish I Could Help You*, 1994. Oil on canvas on wood with hardware, 75 × 84 in. (190.5 × 213.4 cm).

documents and a carpenter's plumb bob with paint on aluminum to create *Radical Acts* (see figure 3.22, page 75). Jaune Quick-to-See Smith's *Self-Portrait* (8.30) is constructed from newspapers, posters, and identity cards as well as paint. And, as we will see in the interview at the end of this chapter, Roger Shimomura added Mickey Mouse ears to a pair of paintings dealing with racial stereotypes. For the postmodernist, visual impact and conceptual meaning are more important than technical purity.

## DRAMA

Regardless of the medium used or the message conveyed, all communication can be strengthened through dramatic delivery. Even Martin Luther King Jr.'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.
- *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.



# 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.
- Just as films are targeted for specific audiences, so many forms of visual communication are designed for specific viewers.
- 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.
- Appropriation, recontextualization, layering, word/image integration, and hybridity are five common strategies used to create postmodern meaning.
- Dramatic delivery of a message enhances meaning.

# KEY TERMS

aesthetics  
analogy  
anesthetic  
appropriation

cliché  
form  
hybridity  
iconography

layering  
metaphor  
metaphorical thinking  
modernism

postmodernism  
recontextualization  
simile  
stereotype

# STUDIO PROJECTS

To apply the concepts from this chapter in the studio, check out the Projects page in the Online Learning Center at [www.mhhe.com/stewart4e](http://www.mhhe.com/stewart4e). The following is a sample of the chapter-related assignments that are described in step-by-step detail.

*Benign to Sublime.* Transforming a benign still life into a compelling vehicle for the communication of an idea.

*Build a Concept Generator.* A basic cube turns into a conceptual toy.

*Word/Image Synergy.* Using Photoshop or photocopies to combine one or more images with a single word to create an unexpected message.



Detail of William Kentridge's *Black Box/Chambre Noire*, 2005. Miniature theater with mechanized objects, projections and sound, dimensions variable.

# Profile:

## Roger Shimomura, Artist

### Exploring Identity



Roger Shimomura's paintings, prints, and theater pieces address sociopolitical issues of Asian Americans and have often been inspired by 56 years of diaries kept by his late immigrant grandmother. He has had over a hundred solo exhibitions of his paintings and prints and has presented his experimental theater pieces nationally. Shimomura taught as a Distinguished Professor at The University of Kansas for 35 years and has been a visiting artist at over two hundred universities, art schools, and museums across the country. His work is found in nearly a thousand museums and private collections, including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Chicago Art Institute, Smithsonian, and Philadelphia Museum of Art.

**MS:** How do you define stereotyping, and why is it the focus of your artwork?

**RS:** Racial stereotyping is an oversimplified opinion or mental snapshot of members of that race. It's the focus of my artwork because it has caused harm to not only Asian Americans, but also every marginalized group in this country. This harm ranges from personal pain to larger legal actions that affect the entire community.

**MS:** What are the sources of your images?

**RS:** My sources range from old *Marvel* comic books to films by Kurosawa, from an image of Minnie Mouse to a geisha in an Utamaro print. Anything I see can generate an idea or become part of a composition.

Collecting objects and images that stereotype Japanese people is my current obsession. This includes Jap hunting licenses, slap-a-Jap club cards, postcards, ads, and movie posters featuring the buck-toothed, slant-eyed, yellow-skinned depictions of Asian people.

My collection of experiences is even more important. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, my family was forcibly moved to Minidoka, a concentration camp in the southern Idaho desert. We were released two years later, when I was five years old. All through grade school and junior high, our favorite neighborhood game was not "Cowboys and Indians" but "Kill the Japs,"

bringing to life the values from the comics that I collected at that time. We reluctantly took turns being the "Jap," though we all preferred to be John Wayne, the most prolific Jap killer of the time. As a soldier during the Korean War, I was nicknamed "Pop-Up" because my fellow white officers thought I resembled the pop-up targets we used for target practice. All of these experiences feed into my exploration of stereotypes and racism.

**MS:** *Florence, South Carolina* is part of your "Stereotypes and Admonitions" series. Each painting in this series describes a single racist incident in a very straightforward, almost deadpan way. What is the advantage of this approach?

**RS:** It is the most direct and simplest way to tell a story of injustice. A verbal story accompanies the painting, making the content completely accessible. Hopefully, the work will resonate beyond the viewing, leading viewers to continue the conversation long after they leave.

**MS:** *Yellow Rat Bastard, Or How to Tell the Difference Between the Japanese and the Chinese* is much more complex. Can you talk us through this piece? What is the source and what do the various elements mean?

**RS:** *Yellow Rat Bastard* is a mixed media comparison between Roger (right panel) who is Japanese American, surrounded by his current family, with his friend, Norman Gee, who is a Chinese American painter.

It seems pretty simple. Each artist holds his respective country's chopsticks with either a short- or long-grained rice kernel, and is surrounded by appropriate cultural references. It gets complex when we look more carefully. Roger is married to a blonde-haired, blue-eyed Caucasian, has a daughter-in-law who is Filipina, and a grandchild that is half Filipino and half Japanese. Norman is married to a Japanese American (who studies Chinese Tai Chi). His children are half Chinese and half Japanese, as referenced by his daughter, who holds a bao (Chinese bun) in one hand and Makizushi (sushi roll) in the other.

Racist reminders are referenced by the WWII clichéd depiction of a *Yellow Peril Jap* looming behind Roger's portrait, while Fu Manchu peers out behind Norman's head. Both portraits are surrounded by contemporary pop icons from China and Japan.

Separating the two canvases is a shopping bag with the emblazoned words "Yellow Rat Bastard."

While this term was popularly used to describe the Japanese during WWII, it has been revived today, as the name of a trendy men's clothing store in New York City. Acting as a gesture to defuse the deadly yellow rat, the ears of a benign Mickey Mouse protrude out of the top of the bag. While non-Asian Americans continue to have difficulty distinguishing between the Japanese and Chinese, the unfortunate fact is that many still view Asians as a generically alien race in this country.

**MS:** You are renowned as a teacher as well as an artist. What advice can you offer to beginning students?

**RS:** When my students came up to me and said that they didn't know what to paint, I would tell them to take a hard look at themselves first. It is important to consider whether there is significant value in sharing what you are experiencing in life. Sometimes the simplest approach to making art ends up being the most poignant.



Roger Shimomura, *Yellow Rat Bastard*, 2006. Oil on canvas, 72 × 126 in. (182.9 × 320 cm).



Eva Hild, *Lamella*, 2008. Stoneware, 26 × 23 × 22 in. (66 × 58 × 55 cm).