

Books

SYMBOL SOURCEBOOK

An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols

by Henry Dreyfuss

McGraw-Hill Book Company . . . \$28.50

Reviewed by David Smith
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In a world on a collision course with itself, certain traditional luxuries are no longer permissible. Old-fashioned ideas of ethnic superiority, colonialism, dominion are in these times intolerable, if not impossible. But as we work toward encounter, we are faced with the fact that there are nearly six thousand languages and dialects used in the world, making—as Henry Dreyfuss points out—“intercommunication among them range from difficult to impossible.” But even were that intercommunication possible, most of us are moving too fast to manage it, to read the signs along the way. Our need is not so much for a universal language, that hope of the Esperantists and others, as it is for a basic and universal system of easily recognizable, unmistakable, and readily figured out visual symbols. It is Henry Dreyfuss’s aim to promote such a means of communication. Over the years he has been intimately involved in the creation of many of these symbols as a product refinement designer for many of America’s leading manufacturers; and now, as the author of the *Symbol Sourcebook—An Authoritative Guide to International Graphic Symbols*, he has taken the first step toward making systematically available what Margaret Mead calls the “clear and unambiguous signs which must be developed so that members of any culture can communicate across language barriers.” It is not a dictionary, which would indicate something like completeness of the system itself, but it is a sourcebook, a first systematic step; and as such it is an impressively creative and authoritative job.

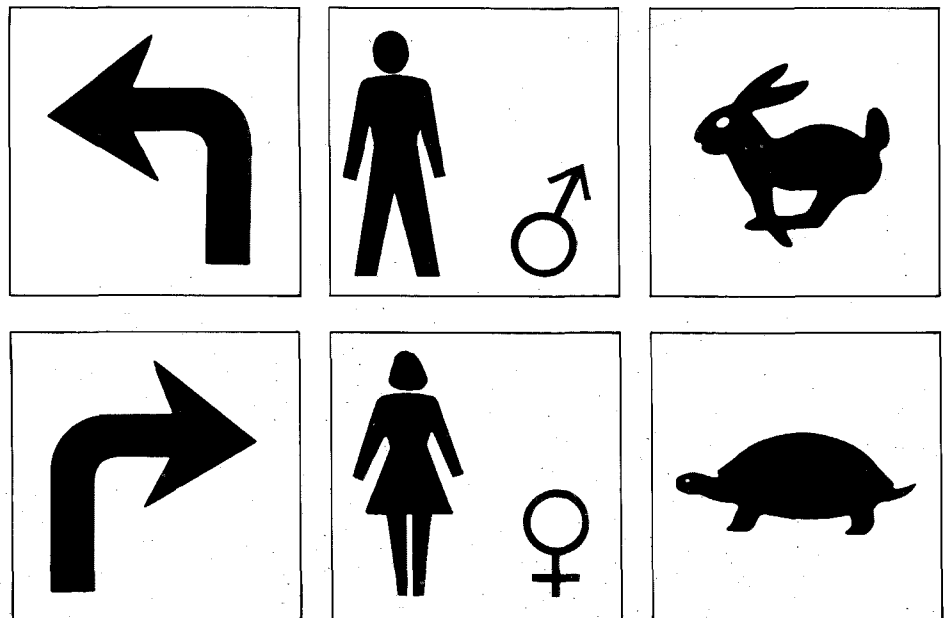
Henry Dreyfuss is a noted industrial designer. He has been an associate in industrial design on the Caltech faculty since 1947 and a member of the Institute’s board of trustees since 1963.

One of the problems is the very magnificence and subtlety (and in some cases the difficulty of manipulating accurately) the languages we have developed. They are the repositories of our civilizations, the basis of group memory which is necessary to the maintenance and propagation of our civilizations. The complexities of religion, politics, seduction, philosophy are all within their grasp, and yet, as it turns out, they aren’t very good for conveying rapidly and absolutely clearly to anyone and everyone certain basic information. Semiosis breaks down because of the ambiguities, which are, of course, at the root of the richness of language. The yellow, diamond-shaped sign which says “Slow/Trucks,” warns us more by its color and shape than by its language, which is, at best, confusing. Are the trucks going slow? Am I to go slow because of the trucks? Southbound on the Hollywood Freeway one encounters a sign which reads, “Merging

Buses.” The elephantine and surrealist-ically erotic possibilities of the message cause mind arrest and reverie, neither of which is an aid to alert driving.

Fortunately, the need for a better system of graphic symbols for traffic control has been recognized, and the international system developed in Europe to surmount cross-linguistic barriers is being installed apace in California to surmount speed-induced intra-linguistic difficulties. Even the exits on Los Angeles freeways are now being numbered, numbers being not only nearly universal but also much less confusing graphic symbols than “La Cienega and Washington Blvd.” But these local problems serve only to point up international and more general need for new systems of basic communication.

Another sign of a good book is that it somehow functions beyond its immediate task, and this a *Symbol Sourcebook* does; for while it begins to satisfy the need for a systematized approach to graphic sym-



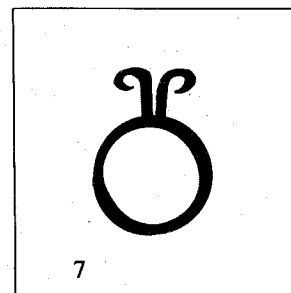
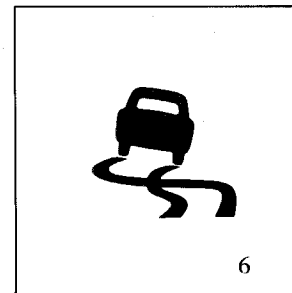
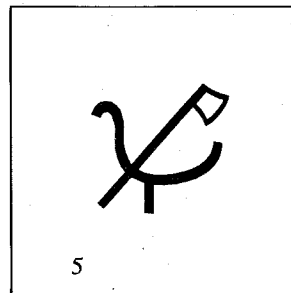
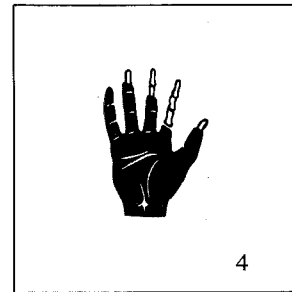
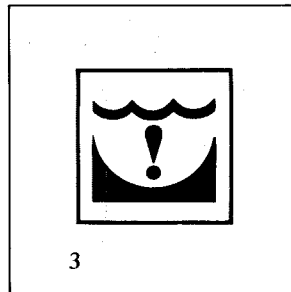
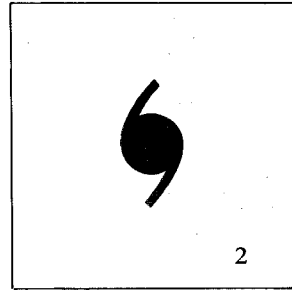
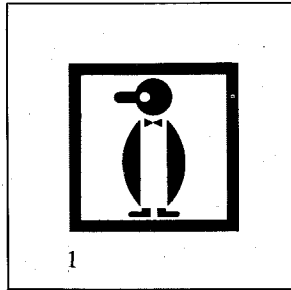
Certain symbols—such as those for Left and Right, Male and Female, and Fast and Slow—are so well known that they are almost universally understood.

bols, it also indicates the complexity of the task. Its very existence should inspire not only designers, but anthropologists, historians, sociologists to work in this field. For instance, since these symbols are often the invention of one man or of a small and finite group of men, their evolving method and structure might usefully be compared by anthropologists to the languages we already have, which are the products of slow accretion modified by the vagaries of cultural and political history. The structural anthropologist might usefully explore how many of the symbol systems are binary, how many trinary, and what such results suggest about human limitations. And the social historian might explore still other areas. For example, though the politics of international industrialism seem largely to have inspired, to have created, the need for this book, an Americanist might well pursue the gradual delexification of American culture and a concomitant rise in graphic symbols not industrial in purpose. One thinks immediately of comic strips, that most artful and American of forms, and of the wonderfully ingenious signs that their makers devised and perfected—the broken heart, the light bulb to indicate an idea (a symbol which has been taken over by a major industrial firm, but one which stems from the heartland of the American mind).

Some of the symbols suggested in the book are confusing but only where they are exploratory, suggestive of possibilities in symbol making. Generally, of course, they are not. Interestingly, the one which is most immediately meaningful is the one Mr. Dreyfuss starts with, the skull and crossed bones, symbol of poison. That fact suggests several possibilities—for one, that use and convention, as in language, help establish immediacy and sureness of meaning. It also suggests that necessity is the mother of invention, and so one of our oldest and most effective graphic symbols is a warning against a venerable and universal danger. But the very existence of a *Symbol Sourcebook*, with its multiplicity of signs and sign systems, stands as proof of the ever increasing need we have for accurate communication at this level, for the number of dangers we face mounts daily. Mr. Dreyfuss's book stands as the best proof possible of its very need.

A New SAT—the Symbol Aptitude Test

Here are some of the less familiar symbols from the multitude in the *Symbol Sourcebook*, and they may not be immediately decipherable. To test your aptitude for sign language, try to determine the meaning of the eight symbols below and check your answers at the bottom of the page.



1. Keep Frozen, 2. Hurricane, 3. Deep Water, 4. Corrosive, 5. Table Poultry, 6. Slippery Road, 7. Spring, 8. Travel Insurance