

The Power of the Icon

Icons were created in the beginning of mankind, continue to evolve, and are commonplace everywhere we look. According to the Webster's College Dictionary an icon is a picture, image, sign, or representation that stands for something by virtue of a resemblance or analogy to it (646). The icon is a simplified symbol that most people understand regardless of age, education, or language. Icons are powerful in their ability to transcend age, education, and language barriers in the expression of simple ideas.

The first icons were pictograms that cavemen painted with earthen pigments or carved into rock by using crude tools. These visual images were man's first attempts at written communication. These icons expressed simple events such as hunting, cooking, and eating (A History of Graphic Design, 5). The visual images presented ideas and emotions that these early, crude languages may not even had words to express. Presently, without knowing a single word of their spoken language, we can understand their daily activities, trials and triumphs.

Early civilizations used icons to record history and transmit information. They are known to have recorded stories and preserved records using simple drawings of everyday objects such as body parts, animals, dots, lines and arrows. For example, the oldest pictorial representation of skiing was discovered carved on a rock in Rodoy, Norway, dated approximately 2500 BC to 2001 BC (The Timetables of History, 3). This discovery allows us to understand and learn about how this early civilization traveled. The icon also allows us to understand their implementation of tools and how far they may have traveled in a single day.

The first alphabet was developed from icons. This was a process of several centuries that started with images of everyday objects such as figures, weapons, body parts and animals. The symbols were initially drawn with primary elements and basic strokes and they slowly evolved into more abstract icons. As the images became simplified and abstract with less detail, they slowly became the first alphabet (Western Civilizations, 21). According to the book "The Timetables of History," the Phoenicians created the first alphabet, which consisted of 24 letters (4). This written communication helped to record historical events, keep accounting records, document ownership, and write mythological stories.

The use of the icon has proved to be limited. Since it is best for suggesting basic ideas, complex thoughts could not have been communicated without written text. According to the book, A History of Graphic Design, a culture becomes civilized once it has a written language. "The invention of the written word brought people the

luster of civilization and made it possible to preserve hard-won knowledge, experiences and thoughts. With the path of civilization, the invention of writing brought about an intellectual revolution that had vast impact upon social order, economic progress, technology and cultural developments" (6). Written text is used to express philosophy, religion, and scientific thought which cannot be done with simple icons. The written word can explore and explain these ideas more thoroughly and precisely than visual text. For example, Plato and Aristotle the philosophers, da Vinci the mathematician, and Martin Luther, the theologian needed written text to record and teach. Visual text would not have sufficed for all of their communications.

We may consider ourselves civilized, but we still rely on icons to illustrate important information and directions with our international transportation signage. The United States has set goals to resolve the variety of signage that sprung up in the early 1920's and unify them into a cohesive system. The new standards have guidelines using specific shapes, colors and fonts. The American Institute of Graphics Arts was commissioned in 1974 to create 34 icons for worldwide transportation facilitates (AIGA). With the objective to bridge language barriers and simplify basic messages the icons were very successful and became the foundation for other symbol systems that need updates. Unfortunately, the United States still has too many signage systems that are exclusively text-only messages, which are unsafe for our non-English speaking foreign visitors or immigrants. One example is the "Exit-Closed" sign (Heller).

An interesting pattern is discovered when studying transportation signage. In a literate culture it is standard to use both an icon and a text message. For example, the United States standard uses a symbol and a text message for safety signs. The Transportation Association of Canada has based their signage system on the United States, using the icon and text message. However, in Canadian jurisdictions that have populated areas of mixed languages, the sign system becomes icon dominant. Information designer Deborah Row, who studies worldwide signage, has discovered that under-developed countries with a greater proportion of illiterate citizens rely more on pictorial symbols to navigate (Heller). Whether a society is multi-lingual or illiterate, the icon is relied upon to communicate these important traffic safety messages.

As we log-on to the information highway, the icon is in full use literally right in front of our eyes. The Graphical User Interface has evolved from DOS with C:/ prompts, blinking lines of text, and a strange shade of green to a Windows, user-friendly environment with interactive icons, colored windows and a point and click interface.

The colorful, icon interface enabled non-techies to operate personal computers. This transformation resulted in the personal computer being sold to the masses and becoming an ordinary fixture in nearly every home. Icons have universal meanings that any people of all ages can understand. Toddlers can point and click icons on the computer screen before learning to talk. Seniors are able to send emails to far-away relatives with ease because of the user-friendly interfaces with simple icons. Had the Graphical User Interface not evolved most of the population would not have found the route onto the information highway.

Approximately 25 years ago a new icon was invented. The “Smiley” emoticon has appeared in email messages across the world (Kharif, 1). The creator, Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University, first added his smiley to an Internet post in 1982. An emoticon is actually an ASCII glyph used to indicate an emotional state in email or news. Now there are numerous dictionaries and even academics that study this new icon trend. Some believe there are approximately 2,200 emoticons that have been created (Kharif, 2). This modern icon lets the author emphasize feelings and emotions that may not be clear with just the written text. Since email messages are often informal, they can be easily misunderstood. The emoticon helps the author add a “tone” to the written text. There are many critics of the emoticon. Dr. Naomi Baron, a linguistic professor, feels our emails have become too casual. “As we round the millennium, the written word is undergoing major shifts in form and function. Messages that once were delivered orally in person or through carefully phrased formal letters are now dashed off in email with the same abandon with which we jot down grocery lists or leave casual voice mail” (Baron, preface). She declares, “The emoticons days are numbered, and the majority will fade, like slang of a generation” (Kharif, 2). Even the creator, Scott Fahlman, states, “Perhaps the smiley face has done more to degrade our written communication than to improve it” (3).

Without the creation of the icon where would we be? Icons have been used in prehistoric to modern times. Icons have recorded history, were the foundation of our alphabet, and are a universal language that we all understand. Our anxiety is eased when icons alert us that food is around the corner, a warm bed is near, and most importantly a bathroom facility is over the next hill. The power of the icon has revolutionized the use of the personal computer and helped non-techies log on to the information highway. This simplified image is a common thread that weaves throughout the history of mankind. We find many purposes for icons that are helpful, practical, and then sometimes overuse it as a crutch in our communications. Instead of saying that it was a pleasure to take a class or that an essay was well written we simply use an icon. :-)