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IS IT POSSIBLE TO DESIGN PICTORIAL SYMBOLS  
WHICH CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AT THE FIRST GLANCE?

A Letter and an Appeal, and a Demonstration to the men engaged in the designing of pictorial symbols, and working in the various organisations, notably

Ioograda, International Council of graphic design Associations, Europe  
International Committee for breaking the Language Barrier, New York,  
Union International des Chemins de Fer, International Union of Railways, Paris  
British Railways London,  
International Olympic Games Committee, Montreal World Fair 1967,  
E.P.F., I.S.O., I.M.C.O., and the others of over 300 organisations

written by C. K. Bliss, Inventor, and Author of Semantography

Gentlemen,

Firstly, let me thank you all for having recognized that a system of pictorial symbols which can be read in all languages is the only solution to the Language Babel which engulfs mankind, and threatens to engulf us all in wholesale destruction. For 23 long and bitter years I believed that I shall go down the grave a crank. Now at last in my 69th year I see that other men have realized what I have realized 50 years ago, when I discarded Esperanto, when I realized that this and any other foreign tongue is difficult to acquire, and cannot withstand the force of the mother tongue. People babble from the cradle to the coffin as their mothers have babbled to them when they were babies.

Now at last I see my work vindicated by your work, and your endeavours. But I see crestfallen that you all believe that pictorial symbols can be designed which can be understood at first glance. The few symbols designed by <sup>the</sup> above organisations, and to be used in public transports seem self-explanatory to you, but they aren't, as I shall demonstrate in this letter. But apart from these few symbols there are hundreds of meanings used in international transport, international hotel, and international business which cannot be pictured in symbols recognizable at first glance. Take just one, the most important meaning for every hotel manager.

THE MANAGEMENT ACCEPTS NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR VALUABLES LEFT IN THE ROOM

This sentence, and any other sentence and meaning can be easily expressed in my symbols, which are basically pictorial. Moreover, only less than one hundred basic symbol elements are necessary to write anything needed and wanted, including even the Lord's Prayer. Actually, I operate mostly with only about 50 symbols. Of these, about 24 are already internationally used, namely the 10 symbols for the numbers 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0, the symbols for mathematical operations + - x : =, the symbols for interpunctuation , . ? !, the symbols for electricity ( a lightning flash), medicine (the rod and snake of Aesculapius), etc.etc.

It seems unbelievable, but a few glances through my work prove that I have solved the problem. All the years since 1942 when I worked alone, I believed that the men who need these symbols will take me into their arms, will be glad that I have done all the work, and will be happy to introduce and use my symbols. Instead, I find myself fighting against some of you, because you reject my work beforehand, before you even had a chance to study it. Your reaction is quite natural. Everyone who is brimming with ideas for pictorial symbols, must be chagrined and disappointed to learn that someone else has done all the work already. And naturally, all sorts of arguments are brought forth to discredit my work. And one of these false arguments is that pictorial symbols must be designed which can be understood at first glance. I ask you now for a fair study of the following paragraphs. I ask you for a fair trial.

# INSTANT UNDERSTANDING WITHOUT LEARNING

These 4 words express your belief about the design of pictorial symbols. That this is a fact can be best demonstrated by one condition given by Icograda for the competition for the design of pictorial symbols, open to all students of graphic design schools. This condition reads:

"Les symboles doivent être directement intelligible à  
de personnes de toute nation, de tout degré  
d'intelligence et de tout âge."

The organisers of this competition must have realized the very limited scope of such symbols which should be directly understood by persons of all nations, of all degrees of intelligence, and of all ages. Consequently they have limited the competition to only 24 meanings like ENTRANCE, EXIT, NO SMOKING, etc.etc. ending with the use of the arrow symbol for indicating direction. They must have realized perhaps subconsciously that meanings which defy picturealization, like NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR VALUABLES LEFT IN THE ROOM, etc, which should be left out of the competition, and should be investigated at a later date by research.

But truly some assumptions must be made as to the degree of the intelligence of the tourists of all nations for whom these pictorial symbols are to be designed. As they all must handle money, it is imperative that they know the meaning of the 10 first symbols of mathematics, namely the numbers 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 0. Furthermore they must know something of the mathematical operations of addition and subtraction, and consequently, they must also know the symbols for these operations namely + and - . Otherwise, they could not even approach a ticket window to buy a travel ticket. At once, half the peoples of all nations of this our world are "out of the picture" because they never went to school, and never had any instruction in numbers and mathematics. Furthermore, all children below school age, even in the so-called civilized countries with compulsory school education, must be discounted. At once, YOUR symbol designed to mean money ( an oblong rectangle with 100 within it, and a circular ring with 5 in it) designed to mean money in paper and coins becomes meaningless to say threequarters of the world's population.

Now let us remember how much learning we had to go through until we comprehended the meaning of the numbers and their operations. It took us years of hard work in the primary school. Today, as grown-ups these symbols  $1 + 2 = 3$  seem "self-explanatory" to us, and readable in all languages. But surely, they are not self-explanatory. They are not "directly intelligible" to peoples of any age, and any degree of intelligence. In other words, it is impossible to design symbols according to the formula "Instant understanding without learning". We must assume some learning, and if we introduce new symbols to the world, we must ask the people to do a little learning, so that the new symbols become "self-explanatory." For the reader who is still not convinced, here is another example of an international symbol used for centuries all over the world.

→

What is this? Is it the picture of a weapon designed to wound and kill?

Show this drawing to men of a primitive tribe who use only the bow and arrow. They would not guess at first glance that this is an arrow. The tail feathers, which are a necessity for any arrow, are not pictured at all. You would have to do some explaining, and the tribal hunters would have to do some learning, until they have learned that this is an actual picture of an arrow they know so well.

After this instruction you must tell them to forget that this is the picture of an arrow. It is only a directional sign. Until they have comprehended this, you would have to do a lot of teaching. Indeed, the idea of a "directional sign" is already a complex meaning, and it has to be explained.

Now let us remember our own childhood. How did we fathom the meaning of the arrow? We saw it many times, even before we learned to read and write. But we saw also something else. The arrow never stood alone. There always were some words printed or painted with it: → TO THE TOILET, → TO THE EXIT, etc. And so, throughout the years of our childhood we learned the hard way by many examples that the arrow is a directional sign, and it must always be accompanied by other signs, phonetic letters which tell us whereto the arrow is pointing. Or in other words: the arrow symbol is "not selfexplanatory."

Please think about all this, and realize that it is impossible, even with actual pictures, to design symbols which can be immediately understood. A little instruction at first is necessary.

□

Now, what do these 3 lines really mean, and have they a meaning?

As they stand, they are meaningless. They may be childish scrawls without any meaning. But they may be the lines forming a phonetic letter in a very schematized way (as graphic designers indulge today) of the Hebrew or Cyrillic (Russian) alphabet. In short, we don't know what these lines mean. We need some instruction, and we need to do some learning of our own. How is this to be done in the case of travellers, many millions of tourists who roam today all countries. This instruction can be given in a folder available in all travel bureaus, in all hotels, etc. etc. Or it can be contained in a few pages inserted in all travel guides, under the heading LET'S LEARN THE MEANING OF THE PICTORIAL SYMBOLS WHICH WE ARE GOING TO SEE IN THE FOREIGN COUNTRY WE SHALL VISIT. And this folder, or those pages could contain the above shown 3 lines and underneath the word DOOR

□

DOOR, GATE

At once we would say "Yes, this is the basic outline of a door. Yes, we understand this symbol. It is indeed "self-explanatory!" Yes, it is "self-explanatory" but only after it has been explained with a word we know DOOR. We may go further in these explanations to the travellers of all nations. Designers could make beautiful pictures of all sorts of doors and gates, and then follow-up with the schematized drawing of 3 lines as shown above. Furthermore, we could print underneath the word DOOR, the word for door in say 10 languages. Thus our travel folder would be of help for the tourists of at least 10 different linguistic regions. And here is one example how such a travel folder would look like, how it could be devised to show the meanings of various things, and then the words and pictorial symbols of my Semantography

|            |                 |          |              |            |
|------------|-----------------|----------|--------------|------------|
| □          | →               | ↓        | }            | ┌┐         |
| door, gate | proceed forward | downward | flames, fire | staircases |

Any traveller would soon get very familiar with these meanings. Then he will be prepared to learn the meanings of combinations of these pictorial symbols:

|          |      |           |                        |
|----------|------|-----------|------------------------|
| └┐       | └┐→  | }└┐       | →}┌┐↓                  |
| ENTRANCE | EXIT | FIRE EXIT | TO FIRE STAIRCASE DOWN |

But, according to my ideas, the traveller would not need any folder, and any instruction at all, if these pictorial warning symbols have been adopted internationally in all countries. In the discussion of the copyrights of my symbols I have stated time and again that I give my symbols free for the use of all nations. Only those commercial firms or others, who make a profit by painting or printing these symbols, only they would have to make a contribution, paying a small royalty, which money should be wholly used for the printing of folders, etc. to acquaint everybody in every country with the meaning of these symbols. The second condition of the copyright is that the meaning in the native language must always be shown underneath the symbols, thus

|                                                                           |        |        |         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|
| └┐                                                                        | └┐→    | └┐→    | └┐→     |
| EXIT                                                                      | SORTIE | SALIDA | AUSGANG |
| (in countries speaking English, French, speaking Spanish speaking German) |        |        |         |

A traveller speaking French has learned the meaning of the door and the compound meaning SORTIE in his country where he has seen them displayed many times. When he visits a country where only English is spoken, he would see the word EXIT underneath the symbol he knows so well. He would grasp the meaning, and he would learn the English word for SORTIE in the bargain.

That the men of the organisations mentioned at the title have become aware that they just cannot design symbols which convey the meaning immediately, is proved by the fact that they were forced to put some English or French words, already understood internationally, underneath their symbols as for instance TAXI, INFORMATION, RESERVATION, etc. This fact itself is a silent admission that it is impossible to design pictorial symbols which are instantly understood.

And this holds true even with the most common meanings as MEN and WOMEN for TOILETS. To prove this, I am adding on page 4 to 6 excerpts from two of my letters to two men responsible for the organisations mentioned in the title of this paper. I urge the reader kindly to read these excerpts.

G M GENTS GENTLEMEN MEN MESSIEURS HERREN L W LADIES WOMEN etc.

What do these letters and words mean?

At first sight, they are nothing more than disjointed letters and vocables, utterly incomprehensible to people who cannot understand English, French and German. Only to those who can read all three languages, only to those does the above line begin to make sense. They are different vocables for the members of the human species. But still what do the single letters G M L W mean in this context? Only after some thought could we realize that these are phonetic symbols for doors to men's and women's TOILETS. But suppose we add the word TOILET to each of the words above on each of such doors. Would anyone who understands English, or French, or German know now what these doors mean when he or she sees them in say a department store? Just think of a poor farmer who never has seen a town, nor a department store. He or she may know that TOILET means a woman's dress. He may guess that the door leads to the department for women's dresses.

Now the International Committee for breaking the language barrier has recommended pictorial symbols to be instantly understood in all languages to people of all nations. They recommend among others a tophat and a handmirror, or the ancient astrological signs for Mars and Venus. And they add the pictures designed by the International Union of Railways, and the British Railways, a man with legs apart, and a woman with legs closed and wearing a skirt. The last symbol is already outdated, because millions of women at work, or at leisure, and even at parties are not wearing skirts, but long-logged trousers.

Anyway, you may say that these considerations are nothing more than "splitting hairs". Everyone would know that these words or those pictures mean clearly TOILETS FOR MEN AND WOMEN. And everyone means everyone - if not in Asia and Africa, but surely in Europe. Well, we are mistaken. In a letter to an American hotel official who is vitally interested in pictorial symbols for international travellers, I recounted a story which happened only recently, and which is still happening in Italy and Australia. Here is an excerpt from my letter.

"You have read perhaps the novels of the Italian writer Silone who described the abject poverty of the people in the poorest provinces of Italy Calabria, Apulia, Sicily, etc. They don't know of any toilet. Even the burgomaster, the priest, the teacher have no toilet in their house, not even an outhouse in the backyard. They all go to some bushes. But there is a strict law about those bushes. There is a bush for the authorities, a bush for the intelligentsia, and a bush (the farthest) for the peasants. What has happened to those poor peasants who emigrated during the last years to Australia I shall tell later.

I have travelled through the whole of Italy, and on small railway stations and in carriages of local trains I found a small cabinet with no words on the door, and inside only a hole in the ground, nothing but a hole. And the travelling public do what they do behind the bushes. In the affluent, industrialized north of Italy they have some toilet bowls, and some travellers immediately knew what they have to do, though they found it uncomfortable and precarious. They climbed on the toilet seat with their shoes and did what they do behind the bushes. The authorities were forced to put up some signs: PLEASE DO NOT STAND ON THE TOILET BOWLS. But how many are illiterate and cannot read?

Many thousands of poor Italians emigrate to Australia year after year. In the last years the Australian Government assisted some with airfares, but the hostesses of the airplanes reported abject misery and terrible embarrassment among the girls and women. The catastrophe grew to such proportions that the Australian Government was forced - according to reports in the newspapers - to have a movie made to be shown in those poor Italian villages where people have never seen a toilet, and where the idea to sit down on a toilet bowl was just unthinkable. This is a true story, and it happened in the year of grace 1965, and not with jungle tribes of Asia and Africa, but with people of the oldest cultures of Europe. Unbelievable but true. Well, what pictorial symbols should we use for these people? Should we picture a man and woman in the actual pose of sitting on a toilet bowl? It would be meaningless to millions of Europeans, and to many millions of Asians and Africans."

In the same letter I discussed the symbol for TELEPHONE as proposed by the International Union of Railways and British Railways, the outline of a handle-bar type of telephone where the earpiece and the mouthpiece are together, as we know it and use it daily. But who are WE? This I wrote:

6 "The outlines of telephones are changing. That symbol of the handlebar piece containing mouth and earpiece is unknown in thousands of villages and towns all over the world. Even in the telephone-minded United States of America there are thousands of communities on the Tobacco Road to Dogpatch where there is still the old wall-type telephone with a hand crank, where the whole village can listen in when someone makes or receives a call. Even in many small towns of the U.S.A. there are millions of the old type telephone in use where the mouthpiece is on a stand, and the earpiece hanging next to it. People from those villages and towns would not recognize the symbol of the handlebar as a telephone.

But the handlebar symbol is already obsolete. The Bell Telephone Laboratories and Swedish firms have already developed a new telephone which will sweep the world. This new telephone contains the stand, the dial, the mouth and the ear piece all in one handy lightweight piece, which is utterly different in outline from the handlebar type. What shall we do? Take down many thousands of symbol plates every time a new telephone with a new outline becomes the accepted standard? It would be useless and senseless in our age where technology changes at an even faster pace every decade. Soon we shall have the televisionphone, and the outline of this device will change quickly with every new invention.

There is only one thing to do. To invent pictorial symbols which are timeless, which will be recognized even thousands of years hence. These symbols must be schematized pictures of the human organs by which we speak and hear. In addition we can use a symbol for electricity which is already used all over the world: the zig-zag line of a lightning. And all this means: the use of my symbols.

|                                                                                   |                                                                                   |                                                                                   |                                                                                   |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |                                                                                     |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| mouth                                                                             | ear                                                                               | speak & listen                                                                    | electric                                                                          | telephone                                                                           |                                                                                     | eye televisionphone                                                                 |

During the first years of the introduction of these symbols, there should be a short explanation underneath each symbol, showing in small print and pictures a mouth, then the small circle for mouth, then the word MOUTH in the native language of that region. Then the picture of an ear, the schematized outline of an ear, and word EAR in the native language, and so on, so that everyone who has learned to read and write would recognize these pictorial symbols and would then never forget them, because they are basically pictorial. They show the real things. The same explanation could be given in millions of folders and travel guides where the basic pictorial Blissymbols are outlined and explained. After that, they will become "almost self-explanatory."

When I type these lines the calendar shows the month of January. A few weeks ago we had New Year 1966, and the director of the international committee for breaking the language barrier sent out a New Years greeting card saying in 15 languages in the Latin alphabet, and the ideographs and phonographs of Japanese and Chinese HAPPY NEW YEAR. How nice it could have been had that director and his committee made a fair study of my work (which I submitted to them in a number of papers), and had he included my pictorial symbols for HAPPY NEW YEAR ! But alas, this committee tries to break the language barrier for only 37 meanings all in all, meanings like ENTRANCE, EXIT, NO SMOKING etc. They all believe in the use of pictorial symbols like the handlebar type telephone of which they think that it is instantly understood by persons of all nations, all degrees of intelligence, and of all ages.

Are my symbols for HAPPY NEW YEAR abstract? On the contrary. I take them from my symbols for timetables for railways, buses, ships and airplanes. Just look into any timetable anywhere on earth. You will find on every page lots of symbols. Some symbols are little pictures showing two forks or a bed meaning a restaurant car, or a sleeper car. But most other symbols are little crosses, stars, circles, and other geometrical figurations, including letters, which all have no meaning in themselves. To understand these symbols we must look at the explanation paragraph where we learn that some symbols mean that this train does not run on Sunday, that reservations must be made for that train, etc. etc. A day will come when my symbols will be used in all time tables, and then there will not be any need for worried travellers to look for explanations for little meaningless crosses, stars, and figures. How many times does it happen, even to experienced travellers, to mix up such symbols, and to arrive at the railway station, only to learn that that particular train runs only on holidays, and that we have to stand forlorn and frustrated on a train platform, because we have mixed up two different symbols, printed on one page, and explained on quite another page. Now let us look at my pictorial symbols for such time tables:

BLISSYMBOLS FOR RAIL, BUS, SHIP, AND PLANE TIME TABLES AND FOR A HAPPY NEW YEAR

(The reader is kindly asked to see these symbols not as they are drawn here on the difficult wax surface of a duplicating stencil, but as they would look in perfect lines printed or painted by modern printing methods on any surface)

|     |       |     |        |          |         |           |         |
|-----|-------|-----|--------|----------|---------|-----------|---------|
| ○   | —     | ○   | ①      | ⑦        | ♡       | ♡↑        | ○♡↑     |
| sun | earth | day | Sunday | Saturday | emotion | happiness | holiday |

  

|                           |         |         |      |               |       |          |      |
|---------------------------|---------|---------|------|---------------|-------|----------|------|
| └→                        | →┐      | →+      | ○    | └→○           | ♡↑    | └→○      | 1966 |
| start                     | arrival | through | year | start of year | HAPPY | NEW YEAR | 1966 |
| non-stop (sun full cycle) |         |         |      |               |       |          |      |

How nice it could be if all hotels and motels, all railways, buslines, shipping lines and airlines, and all travel agencies would display my symbols for HAPPY NEW YEAR on their buildings, their conveyances, their folders, etc. for all mankind to greet and to read in all the many mother tongues of mankind. How easy and simple it could be. But how difficult, and how impossible it is for most people engaged in the same field to admit and accept the fact that a living man has done it all already, and there remains nothing more to do then to use the Blissymbols for the benefit of all mankind. IT CAN'T BE DONE. Everyone wants to assert his own personality and his own genius, and to hell with the unification of mankind. May be, in a hundred years when nothing will remain of my bones, but when a Babel of Symbols will engulf mankind in another kind of non-understanding, may be then a great conference will be held and the Blissymbols will be adopted to honour a pioneer. But I must be dead first. Indeed some of my "disciples" can't wait for my death. They alter and mutilate my symbols in articles they write for journals, extolling my work, but turning it into the opposite by pushing their own version of my own symbols. There is no use to plead with them, to tell them that they are creating another Babel. And now, dear reader, look at me what I am doing now. I am fighting a heartbreaking battle with the very men who are engaged in the symbol business. For 16 long years I went a-begging to national and international authorities, asking them only to have a look at my symbols which can express any warning needed on the road. But they refused even to look at them, though I said I give all free of charge. And one official was quite frank when he said to me: "Mr. Bliss, you are not going to tell us how to run our business!" And what is their business? It is the slaughter on the roads, the dying of untold victims of their bureaucracy.

And now to end this sorry paper, let me show what I promised to other men engaged in the symbol business, who believe that it can all be done with pictorial symbols which tell the onlooker at a glance what is meant. I put only one question to them: "How are you going to picture the most important meaning for any hotel manager NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR VALUABLES LEFT IN THE ROOM?" Well, here is how I develop my symbol for responsibility, hoping that you dear reader will follow me with an open mind, and benevolent understanding. Well, the meaning of responsibility cannot be pictured because it is not a THING of our outside world. It is a meaning inside our brain, and hence I must draw the picture of the skull which houses the brain:

|       |      |             |      |        |               |                            |
|-------|------|-------------|------|--------|---------------|----------------------------|
| ⌒     |      | ⌒           | 1    | 2      | 1⌒            | ⌒2                         |
| brain | line | drawing a   | self | others | thinking of   | thinking of others, feel-  |
| mind  |      | mental line |      |        | self, egotism | ing responsible for others |

The hotel manager feels responsible for the carelessness of his guests. And therefore he maintains a heavy safe, pays heavy insurance against burglary of the valuables which guests deposit in his safe. This is altruism. And what has this symbol to do with me? Very much. I went through the concentration camps of Dachau and Buchenwald, and through the Japanese Ghetto of Shanghai. I have seen the cruelty of men, but I have not despaired of mankind. Here I am, an old man who can live in peace and serenity through my last years on earth. And here I am writing my heart out, appealing, begging and pleading with the men who can stand up and tell the world of my work, can demand and help the introduction of my work so that it can help mankind. I, who can live for myself, I feel responsible for the others of the human race. I, who have seen many people die because of words, I feel responsible for the others so that they may not be the victims of non-understanding and misunderstanding. And so my days have become a nightmare, and my nights have become torments of suffering. I plead with all of you to help this idea along. I can say no more.

C. K. Bliss