

CONTENTS

Introduction	13
PART ONE:	
Early Signs and Symbols	17
Palaeolithic Cave Art	22
<i>The 'Secret' Cave Under The Sea</i>	28
The Rosetta Stone	32
<i>What Does the Rosetta Stone Actually Say?</i>	38
Heraldic Symbols	41
<i>Oxford v Cambridge: Coats of Arms</i>	46
The Fleur-de-lys	49
<i>Hurricane Katrina and the Symbol of Solidarity</i>	53
PART TWO:	
Symbols of Ideology, Identity and Belonging	55
Yin and Yang	60
<i>Three Major Religions and Their Symbols:</i>	
<i>The Christian Cross</i>	63
<i>The Star and Crescent</i>	64
<i>The Star of David</i>	66



The Heart	68
I ♥ NY	72
The Swastika	75
<i>The Curious Incident of the First World War</i>	
<i>Bond Scheme</i>	82
The Hammer and Sickle	83
<i>African Variations of the Hammer and Sickle</i>	88
The Shamrock and the Four-Leaf Clover	89
<i>The Battle to Become the 'Luckiest'</i>	
<i>Man in the World</i>	93
The Skull and Crossbones	95
<i>The Totenkopf and German Military Insignias</i>	98
The Peace Symbol	99
<i>The Sign of Satan?</i>	103
The Olympic Rings	107
<i>Olympic Pictograms</i>	110
The Smiley	114
<i>The Smiley in Popular Culture</i>	119



PART THREE:

Symbols of Value, Ownership and Exchange	121
Currency Symbols:	
The Pound Sign	126
The Euro	128
The Dollar	129
<i>\$ for Esclavo</i>	132
Maths Symbols:	
Pi	133
Per Cent	135
The Octothorpe	136
<i>The Greatest Athlete You've Never Heard Of</i>	139
Symbols of Ownership:	
Copyright	143
Trademark	145
Gold and Silver in Symbology	147
<i>Elvis And Liberace: Excess All Areas</i>	151
Fire Insurance Marks	153



PART FOUR:

Symbols of Protection, Direction and Survival

159

Road Traffic Signs	164
The London Underground Map	169
Sign Languages	173
<i>Alexander Graham Bell and the Oralism Movement</i>	178
Hoboglyphs	180
<i>How the Hobo Code Inspired Mad Men</i>	183

PART FIVE:

Symbols of the Present and the Future

185

The 'At' Symbol	190
<i>The Sign With No Name</i>	193
The Ampersand	194
The Bluetooth Symbol	196
<i>Apple Mac Command Symbol</i>	198
The Power and Standby Signs	200



The Pioneer Plaque	202
<i>The Pioneer 'Controversy'</i>	207
Select Bibliography	211
Picture Acknowledgements	212
Acknowledgements	213
Index	215

INTRODUCTION

‘In our thinking we make use of a great variety of symbol-systems – linguistic, mathematical, pictorial, musical, ritualistic. Without such symbol-systems we should have no art, no science, no law, no philosophy, not so much as the rudiments of civilization: in other words, we should be animals.’

Aldous Huxley

In his foreword to Jiddu Krishnamurti’s philosophical work *The First and Last Freedom* (1954), the science fiction novelist Aldous Huxley makes a clear distinction between the explanatory symbols used in science – ‘well chosen, carefully analysed and progressively adapted’ – and those adopted by religious and political groups for the calculated exclusion of outsiders. Arguing that such symbols are often accorded a level of respect they don’t deserve, he goes so far as to say that, ‘as the history of our own age makes so abundantly clear’, symbols can even be fatal.

It is important to remember that Huxley was writing in

SYMBOLS

the aftermath of the Second World War, a period in which political and religious groups had rallied against one another beneath flags and logos of various descriptions, but his point remains just as salient today, as humankind enters a post-industrial era ever more dominated by seismic leaps in technology. New signs, such as the Bluetooth symbol, and new meanings for old signs, such as the Twitter hashtag, are constantly appearing and changing the way in which we communicate with each other about the evolving world in which we live.

But what is it that drives societies and cultures to construct symbol systems in the first place, with all the helpful yet potentially dangerous information they represent? Such systems proliferate today as much as they ever have, but it is only in the last century or so that philosophers, in a dense and often impenetrable field of study, have given considerable thought to what it all means. The Swiss philosopher Ferdinand de Saussure contended that the meaning ascribed to particular signs is, at root, quite arbitrary: the physical symbol has no direct relation to the thing it is meant to represent. It is this disconnect that allows, say, the swastika to be transformed from an ancient symbol of well-being to the insignia of the repressive Nazi party. Anyone presented with a swastika image nowadays

INTRODUCTION

perceives a dark and hateful message entirely unrelated to its original meaning, but all the symbol itself really is is a simple geometrical pattern.

The search for meaning behind the ‘signifiers’ of human existence is intricate and difficult, and to avoid getting too embroiled in the complexity of these theories (and counter-theories) I have included a bibliography and suggestions for further reading at the back of this book. Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have made particularly interesting additions to Saussure’s line of thinking.

Above all this book is an attempt to look at some of the common (and less common) signs and symbols that we see around us every day, and to trace their historical backgrounds and uses as tools of human communication and understanding. The text is structured thematically, taking as a point of departure elements from earlier civilizations, such as Palaeolithic cave paintings and Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphics. Subsequent sections address more abstract signs and symbols, including familiar political and ideological emblems, symbols relating to concepts of value and exchange, cultural totems of identity and the increasing use of symbols in technology and communication.

The choice of the symbols is arbitrary and miscellaneous – quite pointedly so. There are certainly

SYMBOLS

numerous other signs and symbol systems that merit analysis and study but I have selected those that have had an enduring impact on human society and culture, or which may well prove to be of importance in the future. As technological advances continue to streamline the pace of life, and to bring different cultures and languages closer together, the use of signs and symbols can only become more widespread. While we ought to bear in mind the warnings issued by Aldous Huxley in the mid-twentieth century, it is exciting to see – and speculate on – where our increasing reliance on non-verbal communication will take us.

Joseph Piercy

PART ONE

**EARLY SIGNS
AND SYMBOLS**

Since the earliest known civilizations, humankind has created signs and symbols. But although we have clear evidence of primitive man's attempts to represent his world through cave paintings and rock art inscriptions, we do not know for certain the motivation behind these creations. Nonetheless, they remain important as a starting point for any examination of the use of signs and symbol systems. Similarly Egyptian hieroglyphics, though in essence a form of alphabet, rely on the use of pictograms to convey semantic meaning and communicate ideas, all of which places them firmly in the realm of the symbolic. Medieval heraldry is also an ideographic system and interesting for its primary purpose as a means of constructing symbolic identities by transposing human characteristics on to animals.



Palaeolithic Cave Art

The oldest surviving evidence of the human capacity to reflect or attempt to record the nature of life and consciousness, and to communicate through visual and symbolic imagery, can be found in Palaeolithic cave art.

In December 1994, three French speleologists (cave explorers) led by Jean-Marie Chauvet were studying geological aspects of the Ardèche valley in southern France when they happened upon a series of interlocking chambers previously hidden by rock falls. The floor of the chambers contained animal bones, prints, fossilized remains and clear evidence of human occupation. As they ventured further into the complex, Chauvet and his colleagues discovered hundreds of well-preserved paintings and engravings on the walls of two vast chambers linked by a short passageway. The first chamber contained images painted mostly in red

EARLY SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

dyes, whereas the majority of the images in the second chamber were predominantly marked in black charcoal and ochre.



Prehistoric cave paintings were not merely decorative; they also communicated to other hunter-gatherers where dangers or sources of food might be found

The Chauvet Cave paintings are chiefly depictions of animals, with thirteen different species represented in various forms and combinations, including woolly rhinoceroses, cave bears, lions, mammoths, wolves, horses and a large black cat thought to be a panther. For Chauvet, an enthusiastic amateur treasure hunter, the discovery was the culmination of several decades of exploring the caves of