The Power of the Pictogram

Developing the Legacy of the Tokyo 1964 Games

By Julian Ryall

As Tokyo prepares to host the 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games—the largest sporting event on the planet, attracting athletes and spectators from more than 200 countries and regions—a great deal of thought will go into breaking down the language barriers that inevitably arise.

The best way of doing that, organizers of similar events in the past have discovered, is by creating universally understood pictograms that communicate the same message to everyone who sees them.

The use of graphic images to convey information was first attempted at the London Olympic Games in 1948, although on a relatively small scale and solely as a series of illustrations depicting each of the sports.

In May 1959, however, the International Olympics Committee (IOC) selected Tokyo as the venue for the 1964 Games, the first time the Olympics were held in Asia and in a country whose language was largely unintelligible to international visitors. The challenge, then as now, was to make Japan accessible and understandable.

The Japanese system of symbols was conceived by a team of designers led by Masaru Katsumi and graphic designer Yoshiro Yamashita. The pictograms included 20 easy-to-understand images for the different sports—the pictograms for judo, swimming, and fencing are among the most eye catching—as well as 39 additional pictograms for various kinds of information, ranging from a symbol for a first-aid station to banks, telephone kiosks, and toilets.

And while Katsumi oversaw the designs for the Olympic stadium, the specific task of making Tokyo's Haneda Airport accessible for a massive influx of foreign travelers fell to Aisaku Murakoshi.

"Back in the early 1960s, Mr. Katsumi was my master, but he asked me to design the pictograms for the airport," said Murakoshi, who is eighty-five years old but still serves as the chairman of a Tokyo-based graphic design company.

The organizers gave them a straightforward assignment. Murakoshi said, "They told us that people from more than 90 countries would be coming to Tokyo and that it would be impossible to make signs for every part of the airport in 90 languages. So, instead, we needed images that would be easily understood by people from 90 countries. The most important part was having images that were very simple but conveyed all the information needed.… And they would have to work across cultures, across age differences, across backgrounds, and so on."

Murakoshi designed 24 images that were used at Haneda Airport—and, to this day, he still describes it as "my best project ever."

The pictograms had the desired effect with spectators and athletes in Tokyo in 1964 and have influenced the design of universal signage at every subsequent Olympic Games.

The use of graphic designs was unparalleled, and the sheer simplicity and accessibility have been described as "utter brilliance" and "revolutionary." Design critics have also stated that the 1964 Games pictograms permanently changed the idea of graphic design and was one of the earliest steps on the road to replacing words with images on the global stage.

From Tokyo, the concept quickly spread to shared images used to communicate thousands of everyday facilities and services around the world: from the symbol that appears on a map to denote a museum to that for a hotel or a zoo, from the sign for an emergency exit in a building to that for an elevator, from a stop sign to road signs that indicate the speed limit, a roundabout, or a slippery surface.

"It may be because of the history of our traditional art, followed more recently by anime and manga comic books, but I believe Japanese designers are among the best in the world for this sort of work," said Makoto Watanabe, a lecturer in communications and media at Hokkaido Bunkyo University.

"These pictograms utilize the same concept of conveying movement as we see in ukiyo-e woodblock prints and, later in manga, in a flat, two-dimensional space," he said. "Just look at the image for an emergency exit of a green man moving toward an open door, a pictogram that has become universally accepted. Wherever you see it, that image communicates the need for speed, for haste, in the event of emergency, as well as the idea of safety being nearby," he said. "To do that, in a small space and using just two colors, is quite remarkable."

New pictograms are constantly being added to the international visual shorthand—the image of a wi-fi hot spot is among the newest—but designers are already looking toward 2020 to flex their communication and artistic skills. With a heritage that can be traced back to 1964, a new set of pictograms is expected to be devised for the second time that Tokyo is hosting the Olympic and Paralympic Games.

The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, 2013

Images from *Design Project for the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games* exhibition catalog, published by The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo, in 2013. The image on page 5 shows a prototype of facility symbols and the images above are from the design guide sheets used for the Tokyo 1964 Olympic Games.

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