# DESIGNING EFFECTIVE ICON SETS
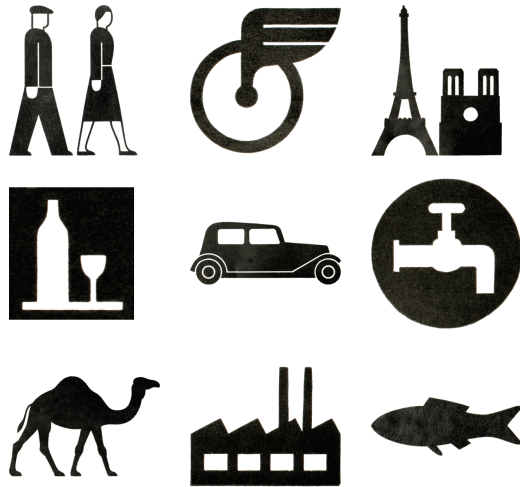
http://www.gerdarntz.org/isotype
International System of TYpographic Picture Education
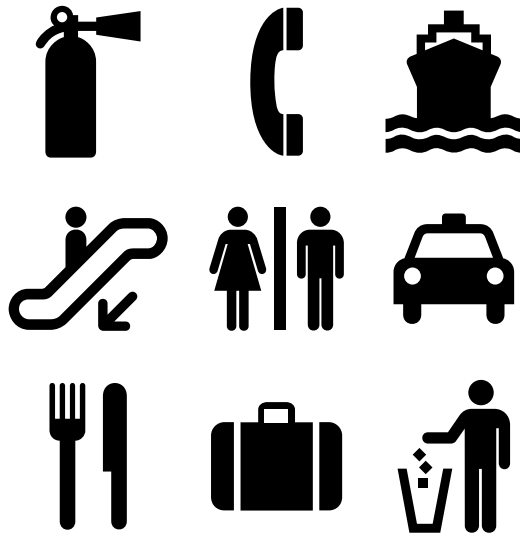
http://www.aiga.org/symbol-signs/
Department of Transportation

There are two basic ways to communicate the objects, actions, and feelings in our lives: words and images. Words are effective for communicating complicated ideas but are limited in their scope. Symbols, on the other hand, are limited in capacity but hold the power to communicate across language barriers. The Isotype Institute, led by Otto Neurath in the 1920s and 30s, pioneered pictorial forms showing social, technological, biological and historical connections *(top left)*. Symbols made an even greater comeback after WWII because of increased globalization. In 1974, the Department of Transportation (DOT) developed a symbols template for transportation which became standard in airports around the world, as well as traffic signs, and most transportation facilities *(bottom left)*. Below are four questions to consider when designing symbol/icon sets for effective communication.

Q1: How many symbols per set?

- Evaluate it case per case.
- One symbol is too many if it does not communicate well, and hundreds of symbols can work effectively if they are well designed and used properly. However, remember that symbols are a language and too many of them can make it difficult to learn.

Q2: Are they distinguishable?

- You may want all your symbols to be the same color or you may want to distinguish them with different colors. Either way, experts say to never use more than six colors in a set.
- Symbols should look similar enough to each other to look like they are from the same family (weight, style, etc.), but not so similar that they cannot be differentiated from one another.
- Symbols can convey unique places and personalities but their paramount goal is communication.

Q3: Are the symbols easy to remember?

- Consider if you should use symbol standards, like the established DOT, as these images are easier to understand and remember. In this case, the user is already familiar with the icons for generic services, activities, and regulations. Therefore, they have become a learned convention.
- Make sure the symbol means the same thing in all languages.

Q4: Can the user read the symbols?

- Remember that legibility is tied to familiarity; a clever design is not clever if it does not communicate to the user. Therefore, highly legible symbols are generally simple and direct.
- Consider the following factors: size, viewing distance, lighting, color, and contrast.
- Symbols that are too complicated to be recognizable or too simple to have meaning become decoration rather than communication.

*Content for this handout was largely derived from the book, Wayfinding: Designing and Implementing Graphic Navigational Systems by Craig M. Berger