

The Unvoiced Aesthetics of Japanese Typography

An Observation



Street life · Misaki, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 04.11.2023 11:55

Introduction

This thesis explores unspoken and purely visual elements in Japanese typography¹ from the perspective of a typographer familiar with languages written in the Latin alphabet. It delves into the subtle, typographic features of Japanese script that are relevant in written form and highlights their significance in the broader context of typographic design and communication. The goal is to observe these elements and showcase how they contribute to the overall aesthetics of written Japanese.

This approach is not about cultural borrowing, but rather about the exploration of typographic diversity² and its potential to enrich Latin typography. This exploration is aimed at understanding how diverse typographic elements can coexist and enhance each other. It reflects a broader perspective on the potential for typographic elements to evolve and adapt in a globally connected environment.

This thesis was written as part of the CAS Design Cultures 2023 program at Zurich University of the Arts and based on a field trip to Japan (28.10.2023 – 13.11.2023) where most observations were documented.

Stefan Huber · Zurich, Switzerland · 2024



Manhole cover · Ueno Park, Toyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 09.11.2023 13:16

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Menu · Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 08.11.2023 19:17

Reference mark ☀

The reference mark ☀, known as the «komejirushi» in Japanese, is a symbol used in Japanese typography with specific usage. It serves to highlight additional information, similar to the usage of footnotes in Western texts. It is typically found in academic texts, annotated works, or in instances where additional information is necessary but not always integral to the primary text. Its distinct appearance, resembling a flower or asterisk. Its name literally translates to «rice symbol», as the symbol resembles to the kanji for «rice» (米)³. The visual appearance is unique, and it adds both functionality and contextual value to the text.

Observation · Fine print with reference mark

In the context shown, the reference mark is used as an indicator for fine print. There is not a specific point where the mark is referencing to but just a general remark. Here it is used across the languages.



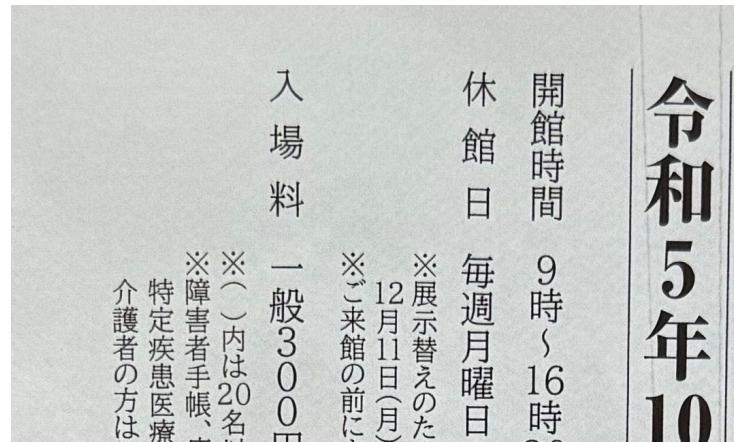
Menu · Izuei Main restaurant, Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 30.10.2023 19:04



Street bulletin board · Tokyo, Japan ·

Photo: Stefan Huber · 30.10.2023 09:54

On this small poster found on a street bulletin board, the reference mark is used to further specify some general information or to lead people where they can find more information.



Detail view

Translation⁴ (partial)

JP: 開館時間 9時～16時30分（入館は16時まで）

休館日 毎週月曜日（祝休日の場合は翌平日）

※展示替えのため10月16日（月）～20日（金）、

12月11日（月）～15日（金）は休館いたします

※ご来館の前にホームページ等で最新情報をご確認ください

EN: Hours: 9:00 – 16:30 (admission by 16:00)

Closed: Mondays (or the following weekday if the Monday is a national holiday)

* The museum will be closed for exhibition changes from October 16 (Mon.) to 20 (Fri.) and from December 11 (Mon.) to 15 (Fri.), Closed on Monday, October 16 through Friday, December 11 through Friday, December 15 for exhibition changes.

* Please check the website for the latest information before visiting the museum.

Observation · Reference mark in english texts

Trains	Accommodations	Green	Ordinary
"NOZOMI" and "MIZUHO" trains on the Tokaido, Sanyo and Kyushu Shinkansen ^{※1}	Green Car	★	×
	Ordinary Car	★	★
"HIKARI", "SAKURA", "KODAMA" and "TSUBAME" trains on the Tokaido, Sanyo and Kyushu Shinkansen lines and all trains on the Tōhoku, Yamagata, Akita, Hokkaido, Joetsu, Hokuriku and Nishi Kyushu Shinkansen lines	GranClass ※5	*	*
	Green Car	○※2	*
	Ordinary Car	○※3	○
	Ordinary private Compartment	*	*
	Green Car	○※4	*
Limited express and ordinary express	Ordinary Car	○	○
	Green private Compartment	*	*
	Ordinary private Compartment	*	*
	Sleeping Car	*	*
	Green Car	○	*
Local and rapid trains	Ordinary Car	○	○

- ※1 You cannot use reserved seats (including Green Car) and non-reserved seats on "NOZOMI" and "MIZUHO" Shinkansen trains (★).
- ※2 There are no Green Cars on most "HIKARI" and "KODAMA" trains on the Sanyo Shinkansen line (Shin-Osaka–Hakata), on some "SAKURA" and "TSUBAME" Series 800 trains on the Kyushu Shinkansen line, and on all "KAMOME" trains on the Nishi Kyushu Shinkansen line.
- ※3 It cannot be used for "TRAIN DESK" cars on the Tōhoku, Hokkaido, Joetsu, and Hokuriku Shinkansen lines (starting from the sales on April 1, 2023).
- ※4 When using a "DX Green" (JR Kyushu) or Premium Green (JR East), it is necessary to pay a separate limited express charge and applicable "DX Green" or "Premium Green" surcharge.
Also, when using a "36+3" or "Shikoku Tosa Toki no Yoake no Monogatari (Kirameki no Sho/Yuhi no Sho)," it is necessary to pay a separate limited express charge and applicable Green Car surcharge for "36+3" or "Shikoku Tosa Toki no Yoake no Monogatari (Kirameki no Sho/Yuhi no Sho)".
- ※5 If you use the GranClass car, only the basic fare is covered with your JAPAN RAIL PASS for both Green Car and Ordinary Car and you are required to pay the limited express charge and the GranClass car surcharge additionally.

[Website Japan Rail Pass · Train accommodations · archive copy](#)

Screen capture: Stefan Huber · 20.1.2024

On the website of Japan Rail Pass the reference mark is extensively used. In this particular place, it is used as an indicator for numbered footnotes. Where in Latin typography the number stands by itself, in this case (also Latin typography but obviously set in another cultural understanding/background) the reference numbers are accompanied by the reference mark.

Type	Green		Ordinary	
Duration	Adult	Child	Adult	Child
7-day	70,000 YEN	35,000 YEN	50,000 YEN	25,000 YEN
14-day	110,000 YEN	55,000 YEN	80,000 YEN	40,000 YEN
21-day	140,000 YEN	70,000 YEN	100,000 YEN	50,000 YEN

* "Child" refers to children who are 6 to 11 years old at the time when the JAPAN RAIL PASS is used. (Persons who are 12 years and older are deemed to be "adults.") However, if the child is 11 years old at the time the payment is made when purchasing through the online sales service or when the Exchange Order is issued at the time of purchasing overseas, the child will still be considered 11 years old even if the child is actually 12 years old when using the PASS.

[Website Japan Rail Pass · Types and prices · archive copy](#)

Screen capture: Stefan Huber · 20.1.2024

On another page, the same reference mark is used to indicate a footnote. In this case, the reference mark is used in a similar way as in Latin typography for a footnote. The big difference is that the reference was not set in the table, but only added in the footer.

Comparison with Latin Alphabet Typography

When comparing the ✠ mark with typographical practices in the Latin alphabet, the closest equivalents are the asterisk (*), dagger (†), and double dagger (‡). These symbols are used in a similar manner, directing readers to footnotes or endnotes for additional information. However, the ✠ mark differs in its design and cultural context.

But even in cultures that use the Latin alphabet, not all markings are used uniformly. For instance, in English academic writing, the dagger (†) is often used as a secondary footnote marker after the asterisk (*)⁵. In German texts, the usage is similar, but there is a greater tendency to indicate deceased individuals, particularly in bibliographies, and this practice is more consistent. Nevertheless, both languages employ the dagger sparingly to maintain text clarity.

Example · References in western typography

Gemäss Jan Tschichold (+1974)

In German writing, the dagger is often used to indicate a deceased person.

In this Example, it signifies the year 1974 as the year of death.

According to Jan Tschichold†.

In English writing, the dagger is often used to indicate a footnote.

In this example, the reader would expect an additional text at the end of the page or at the end of the text.

Takeaways from the Reference Mark

The presence of symbols with a similar purpose in structuring texts in both Japanese and Latin scripts highlights a universal demand in typography. This demand is for the inclusion of supplementary information without overpowering or disrupting the main text. Different cultures have discovered diverse methods to fulfil this requirement effectively.

Example · Reference mark as fleuron

※※ **HELLO** ※※
apple apple **WORLD** apple apple

Decorative marks in the form of fleurons (printers' flowers) are sometimes used in Latin texts. One of the most common fleurons is the Aldus leaf ♀, also known as a floral heart. The geometric and symmetric character of the Japanese reference mark could be used as a modern form of a fleuron.



Street life · Ueno Park, Toyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 30.10.2023 15:36

Brackets

Latin Alphabet

Brackets found in the Latin alphabet, serve not only linguistic but also typographic purposes. Their use varies based on context and the specific types of brackets employed.

Brackets in the Latin alphabet are used to organize text, clarify meaning, and ensure readability, while also fulfilling specific linguistic functions in various professional and academic contexts. Their typographical roles complement these linguistic functions by providing visual cues to guide the reader's understanding and interpretation of the text.

Some common uses of brackets in Latin alphabets follow.⁶

Example · Brackets in Latin Alphabet

**I live in Paris
(the capital of France).**

Parentheses are used to insert non-essential yet informative asides, offering a subtle typographical division that maintains the sentence's structure.

**Her theory was
accepted
(see Smith [1999], p. 57)**

Square brackets have a more specific role, often used in academic and technical writing or as a second order of structure inside Parentheses.

**Structure of a sentence;
{Subject} {Verb}
{Object}.**

Curly brackets are predominantly used in specialized fields like mathematics to group items or alternatives, providing a distinct visual separation in complex textual structures.

**
This is important
**

Angle brackets, common in technical and computer-related texts, enclose specific elements, offering a clear technical (but also typographical) distinction for specialized content.

Observations of Japanese Brackets

Japanese typography features a range of typographic symbols⁷, each serving specific aesthetic and functional purposes within the script. This aspect of typographic design showcases the variety and distinct roles these elements play, contributing to the overall structure and style of the script.

Japanese script features various brackets⁸, such as corner brackets 「」 / 『』, lenticular brackets 【】 , and tortoise shell brackets () . Each type of bracket serves a specific purpose and is chosen based on the context and content of the text. The functional aspects of these brackets are diverse. For instance, corner brackets are commonly used for direct speech⁹ or titles, while lenticular brackets often enclose definitions or explanations. This functional specificity enhances the meaning and clarity of the written text.

Observation · Handwritten corner brackets

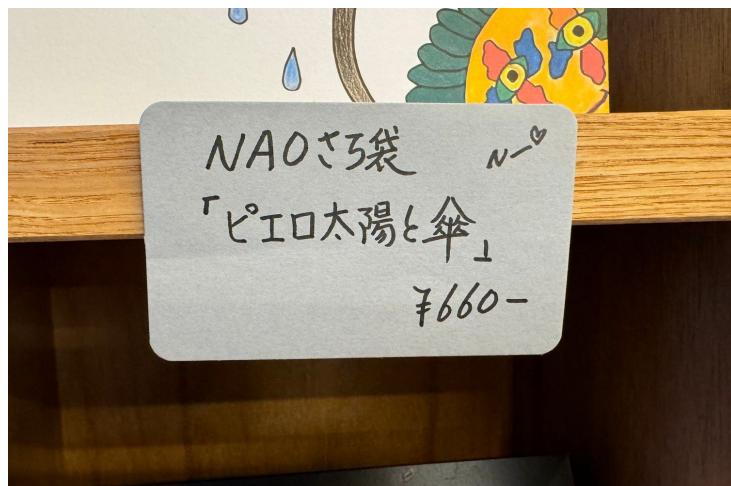
Corner brackets 「」

Corner brackets can have multiple functions. In the shown case, they are used as a handling for a title of a specific artwork. Similar to the usage of quotation marks in english/german.

Translation¹⁰

JP: 「ピエロ太陽と傘」

EN: «Clowns, suns and umbrellas»



Shelf label · rébon Kaisaiyu, Tokyo · Photo: Stefan Huber · 30.10.2023 10:26

Lenticular brackets []

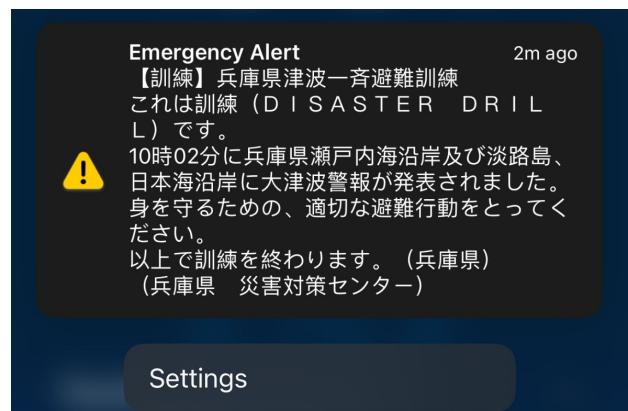
In the screenshot, there is a message displayed for a tsunami evacuation drill sent through cell broadcast. The lenticular brackets are used to categorize and emphasize the following text, acting like a title.

Cell broadcast is a world wide used method in emergency communication systems for sending messages to multiple mobile telephones (although it is not commonly used in Switzerland).

Translation¹¹ (partial)

JP: 【訓練】兵庫県津波一斉避難訓練

EN: [Drill] Hyogo Prefecture Simultaneous Tsunami Evacuation Drill.



Settings

Alert for a disaster drill · Zenbo Seinei, Awaji Island, Japan

· Screenshot: Stefan Huber · 02.11.2023 10:04

Takeaways brackets

With the introduction of global text exchange encoding (Unicode) and its convenience of accessing numerous characters from various languages, it is only appropriate to embrace the diversity of typographic elements, such as diverse brackets, in Latin texts. The distinct shapes and aesthetics that the Japanese forms offer can provide fresh perspectives. By incorporating these elements into Latin typography, we can enhance the visual appeal of our texts, particularly in formats where our options for text formatting are limited, such as social media. Having a wider range of expression in such contexts is greatly appreciated.

「TODAY」 Vegan Kitchen!



Museum Scene · 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan ·

Photo: Stefan Huber · 07.11.2023 12:18

Markers of Approval and Disapproval

In typography, the symbols used to represent concepts can vary significantly between cultures. In the Western world, the cross (X) and checkmark (✓) are commonly used to denote incorrect and correct items, respectively. The cross (X), has evolved to become a universal sign of error or disagreement in the context of the Latin alphabet. Similarly, the checkmark (✓), originating as a mark of confirmation or correctness, is well understood in the western world. In Japan, different symbols are used for similar purposes.

Observations of the Japanese symbols

The circle (○), known as «maru» in Japanese, signifies approval or completion. It is used to indicate that something is correct or acceptable, akin to the checkmark in the Western context. A double line (×), known as «batsu» in Japanese, is used for marking something wrong or incorrect. It is similar in use to the Western cross.

Other Symbols: Japanese typography may also use other symbols for specific contexts, like in grading or feedback forms. The symbol of a bullseye (◎) is called «nijūmaru» and often used to denote excellence or superiority, A triangle (△) can carry the meaning «so-so» and is named «sankaku»

For instance, a triangle might be used to denote something that needs attention or improvement.

Observation · self-explanatory symbols according to culture



Information screen · Train station Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 31.10.2023 06:09

Example of the usage of maru (○) and batsu (✗) in the daily life without further explanation.

Destination	NAGOYA	KYOTO
HAKATA	○○	△○
SHIN-OOSAKA	○○	○○
NAGOYA	✗○	- -
HAKATA	○○	△○
HAKATA	○○	○○
SHIN-OOSAKA	○○	○○

Detail view

Example · Japanese symbols entering western culture



Sony DualShock 4 (DS4) controller for the PlayStation 4 · Photo: Evan Amos

Many western people use on a daily basis the PlayStation Controllers produced by the Japanese company Sony. The symbols on the buttons are a good example of the use of the Japanese symbols in a western context. The circle (○) is used to confirm and the cross (✗) to cancel (reversed layout in western games).

Another case commonly used – also in western culture – is the emoji «Face With OK Gesture» (👌) that represents a two-armed OK gesture.¹²

In the given example, the culturally independent iconography of cash and cash-less payment encounters a cultural barrier when combined with the use of culturally dependent symbols.



Train station, Osaka, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 31.10.2023 11:36

Takeaway markers

The exploration of Japanese and western typographic symbols unveils a interplay between culture, communication, and design. In Japanese typography, the use of «maru» and «batsu» emphasises the importance of understanding cultural nuances in typography, especially for designers and communicators working across different cultural contexts. It underscores the power of typographic symbols in bridging or highlighting cultural divides.



Storage space · teamLab office, Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 08.11.2023 15:32

Setting aesthetic accents

Directional Dynamics

Japanese typography, unique in its versatility, allows for both horizontal and vertical orientations in text layout. This dual-directional approach not only accommodates linguistic nuances but also offers a dynamic typographic landscape. Historically, vertical writing (*tategaki*) was the norm, running from top to bottom and right to left. However, influenced by Western styles, horizontal writing (*yokogaki*) – running from left to right and top to bottom – has become widespread in modern Japan, particularly in digital media.¹³

The choice of direction can also be used to separate or accentuate¹⁴ specific elements within a text. This interplay between vertical and horizontal orientations adds a layer of visual interest and meaning, making the text not just a carrier of information but also an element of design.

Observation · Writing structures create visual hierarchies



Ticket: The 90th Anniversary
Exhibition of Dokuritsu Art
Association · The National Art Center,
Tokyo · Photo: Stefan Huber · 28.10.2023 17:47

This ticket is a compelling example of how writing direction can impact the aesthetic and functional aspects of Japanese typography. The ticket makes immediate use of vertical writing for the central information, which is the name of the event. This is accentuated by the bold, black characters against the pink background, ensuring high contrast and legibility. The choice of vertical orientation for the main text is balanced by the horizontal text used for supplementary information. The contrast in directionality creates a dynamic interplay that guides the viewer's eye. It is also interesting how the English text is integrated.

Translation¹⁵ (partial)

- JP: 独立展
- この券で入場当日に限り、第90回記念 独立展（東京会場）をご自由に入出できます。
 - 各会場に入場の際は、この券をご提示ください。

独立美術協会

EN: independent exhibition

- This ticket allows you to freely enter and exit the 90th Commemorative Independent Exhibition (Tokyo venue) on the day of admission.
- Please present this ticket when entering each venue.

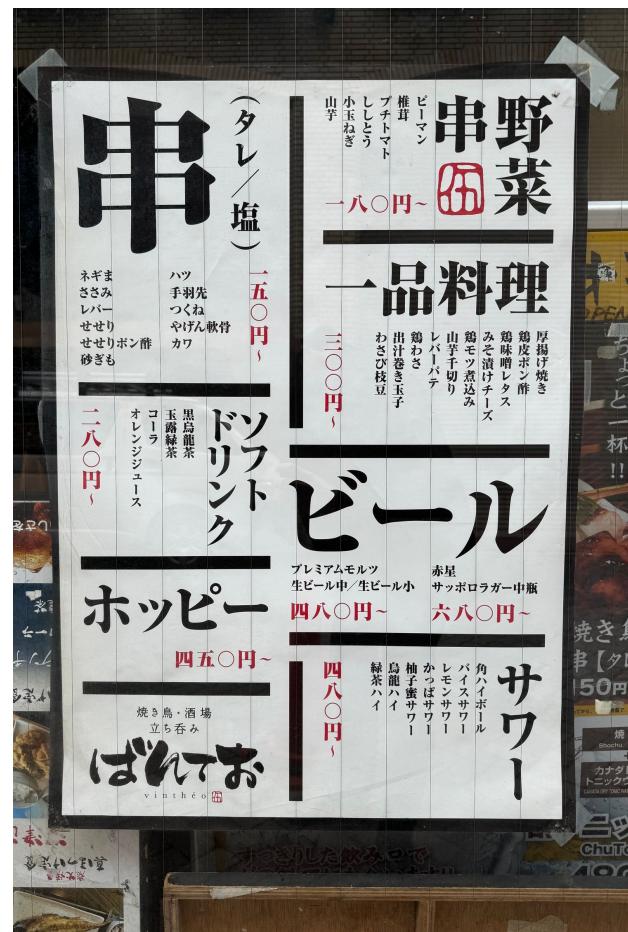
Independent Art Association

Sizing and colours

Similar to the Western world, size and colour are important factors in Japanese typography for creating aesthetic accents and directing the reader's focus. However, unlike Western typography, where cursive fonts are often used for emphasis or style, Japanese script does not have a direct cursive equivalent. As a result, alternative methods are necessary for typographic characterization. Font weights are commonly used, and there are many different typefaces available.

Similarly, colour is not only used for visual appeal, but also to establish hierarchy and guide the reader's attention.

Observation · Font size and colour guide the reader's eye



A great example of how size and colour are used to create a visual hierarchy is this poster. The colour red is used to highlight an other text hierarchy.

Poster behind window · Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber ·

29.10.2023 10:47

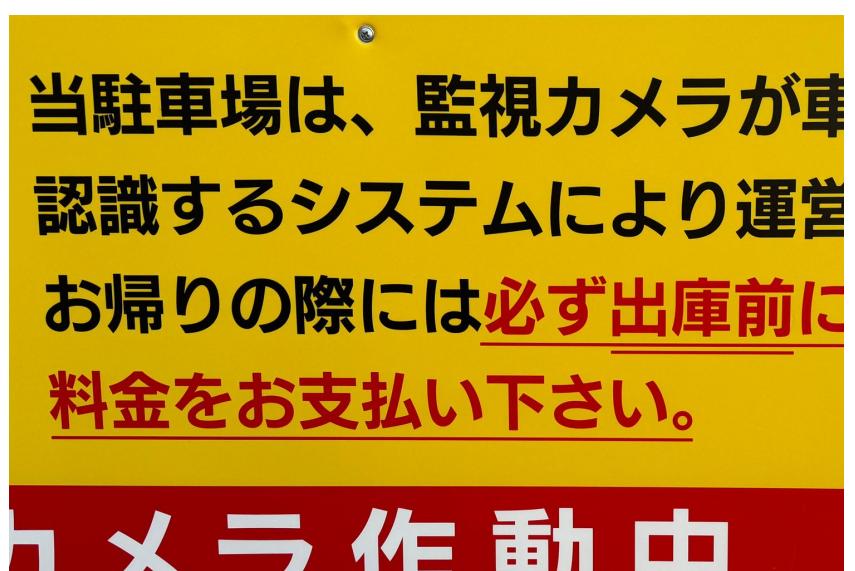
Underlines and sidelines

In Japanese typography, both horizontal and vertical script orientations have a unique influence on the application and visual impact of underlines and sidelines within the text. This is done as a way to accentuate certain parts. Unlike Latin typography, which follows a horizontal flow, when text is set vertically, sidelines are used instead of underlines to highlight or emphasize specific characters or phrases.

Observation · Lines to emphasize importance

A triple accentuation on a signage:

- 1 Coloured in red.
- 2 Underline within the red section.
- 3 Second underline within the underlined and red section.



Detail view Signage · Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 30.10.2023 09:49

Takeaways for setting aesthetic accents

The integration of both horizontal and vertical orientations in Japanese typography elevates its aesthetic and functional aspects, offering valuable insights for Western typography. This approach presents a unique text arrangement method, pushing the boundaries of traditional Western layouts and fostering inventive design practices. Despite the challenges posed by digital platforms, such as limited web support for vertically oriented text, embracing these approaches in Western typography can inspire imaginative designs that skilfully blend experimentation and modernity, leading to a richer typographic landscape.

Observation · Lines to emphasize importance



Sidelines and underlines are used in both scripts to create artistic accentuation in a similar manner, regardless of the language.

Leaflet · The National Art Center, Tokyo · Photo: Stefan Huber ·

28.10.2023 17:53

Typographic Strategies for Webpage Integrations

Observations in Japanese Typography

In Japanese graphic design, particularly on posters, flyers, and other printed materials, there's a unique approach to directing viewers to webpages¹⁶. Instead of providing a direct URL (Uniform Resource Locator), designers opt for a small illustration resembling a search field accompanied by specific keywords. This method is a practical solution for directing audiences to web content.

The illustration usually depicts a simplified search bar, sometimes with a magnifying glass icon, similar to those found in web browsers or search engines. Next to or within this graphic, designers place keywords that are unique or highly relevant to the content being referenced. This method relies on the assumption that users will enter these keywords into a search engine to find the specific website.

The visual simplicity and elegance of this method reflects the common behaviour exhibited by users when transitioning to digital media – accessing content is typically done by using a search engine. By providing relevant keywords, the sender increases the likelihood that the user will find the desired page.



Poster · Metro, Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 30.10.2023
20:54



Poster detail · Metro, Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber ·
30.10.2023 20:54

Two examples of integrating visual search fields in order to direct users to a search engine and motivate them to enter suggested keywords.

Western Typography

In contrast, Western graphic design typically uses direct URLs or QR codes to guide viewers to websites. URLs provide a straightforward, exact path to a specific webpage. QR codes, while innovative for technical use cases, face accessibility challenges for readers. They depend on specific technology, like smartphones with cameras and Apps understanding QR-codes. This creates barriers for groups like older adults or those without smartphones. Unlike search terms that convey information and can be remembered, QR codes are cryptic and give no hints about their content. Their use also demands immediate, direct interaction with the printed material, which can be inconvenient in public spaces. Unlike URLs or search terms that can be noted or remembered for later use, QR codes must be used at the moment, limiting their flexibility and longevity. While functional, QR codes are often seen as intrusive elements in a design layout, challenging designers to incorporate them without disrupting the visual harmony of the piece.



Poster detail · Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 12.11.2023 13:19

Different forms how to integrate a URL into a design can be chosen. In this example, the URL is integrated into the design as a typographic element and QR code.

Takeaways for webpage integrations

The Japanese method of indicating web content through search terms within a graphic representation of a search field offers intriguing possibilities for Western typography and graphic design. It prompts a reevaluation of how we guide viewers to online content and the potential for more integrated, aesthetically pleasing solutions. This approach also underscores the importance of understanding user behaviours and preferences in the digital age.

For Western designers, adopting a similar strategy could mean creating a more seamless bridge between print and digital media. It encourages a thoughtful consideration of keywords, their typographic presentation, and how they can be visually harmonized within a design. This method also invites designers to explore more iconographic elements in typography, blending text and imagery in innovative ways.



Manhole cover · Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 29.10.2023 14:34

The Final Stroke

In conclusion, the vital role of Japanese typography in design and communication aesthetics becomes apparent when viewed through a Western typographic lens. The subtle elements of this typography offer not only aesthetic charm but also a deeper understanding of the cultural context in which it is shaped.

Takeaways: The importance of subtlety and cultural nuances in typography cannot be overlooked, and the fusion of different typographic traditions can greatly enhance global design narratives¹⁷.

Impressum

Author · Stefan Huber, Zurich, Switzerland

Year of publication · 2024

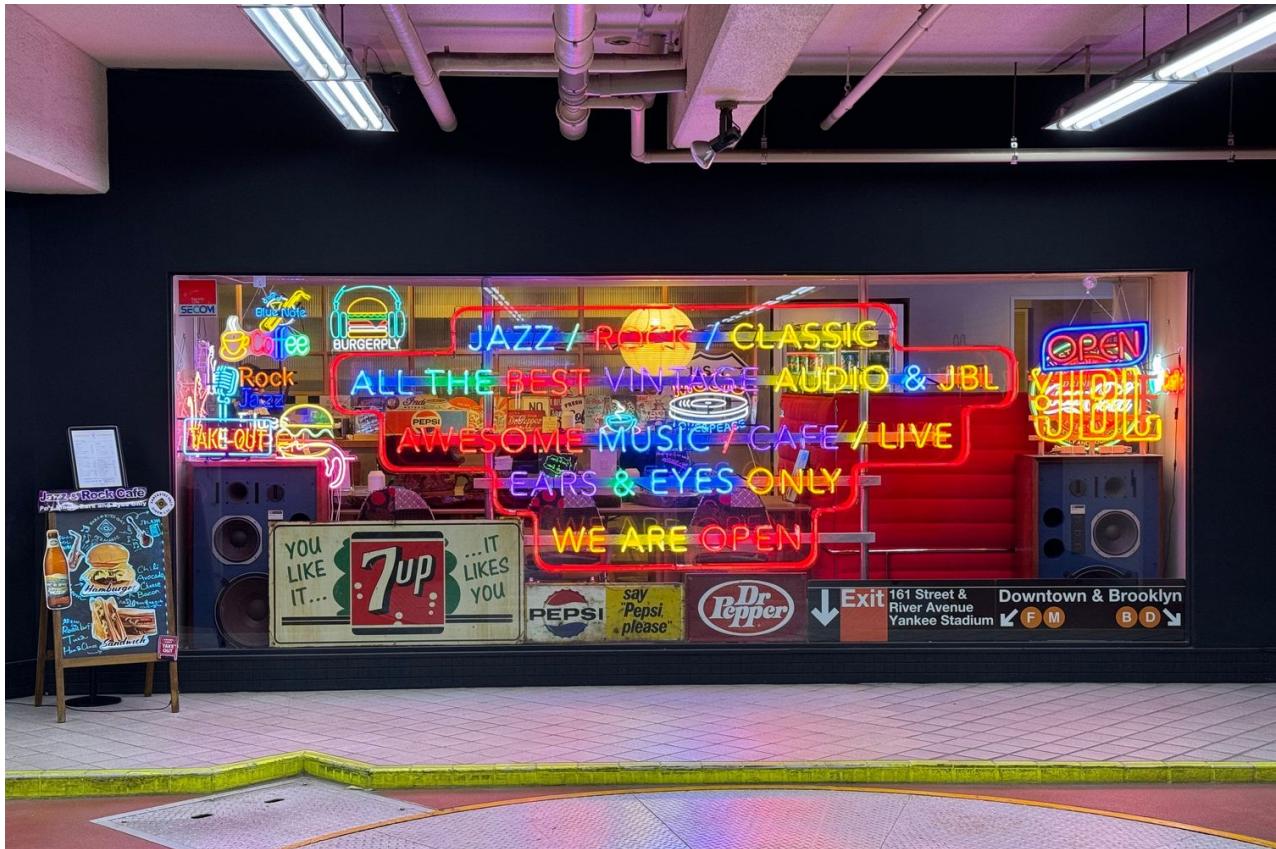
Licence · [Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0](#)

Fonts · Work Sans is a versatile typeface created by Wei Huang that draws inspiration from early Grotesques. It has continuously evolved to meet the demands of modern typography.

To provide comprehensive symbol, emoji, and Japanese character coverage, the font Noto was utilized as a fallback option.

Generative AI was used in co-authorship and is clearly marked with footnotes where the AI had a creative process. Other parts of this work might also be supported with AI, but only as a tool to formulate, translate or expand the author's original thoughts.

Published under typography.japan.signalwerk.ch



Restaurant signage · Tokyo, Japan · Photo: Stefan Huber · 28.10.2023 18:19

Footnotes

- 1 Tanaka Ikko and the Japanese Modern Typography
- 2 ChatGPT · Finding a title for this thesis
- 3 Wikipedia · Reference mark
- 4 DeepL · Translation
- 5 Wikipedia · Dagger (mark)
- 6 ChatGPT · Finding examples for usage of brackets
- 7 Japanese with Anime · Quotation Marks
- 8 Wikipedia · Japanese punctuation
- 9 Wikipedia · Japanese typographic symbols
- 10 DeepL · Translation
- 11 DeepL · Translation
- 12 Wikipedia · OK gesture
- 13 Wikipedia · Japanese writing system
- 14 ChatGPT · finding a title for the chapter «Setting aesthetic accents»
- 15 DeepL · Translation
- 16 ChatGPT · Finding a title for the chapter «Typographic Strategies for Webpage Integrations»
- 17 ChatGPT · Finding a title for the chapter «The Final Stroke»