

# Signs for All Times

Pictograms such as those depicting restrooms, public phones and restaurants were introduced in Japan at the time of the 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games. Their roots, however, reach back much further than that, as pictogram designer **Yukio Ota** explains.

**P**ictograms are a visual language that readily conveys meaning to anyone in the world, transcending language barriers. The 1964 Tokyo Olympic Games turned out to be a prototype that showcased their impact to the entire world. A total of sixty pictogram designs symbolizing sporting events,

facilities and so on were highly acclaimed for their effectiveness and quality. Pictograms came to be used at all Olympics and World Expos held thereafter.

At the time, there were active international movements in favor of using pictograms to provide guidance to the public. In 1964, the United

Nations established a design subcommittee within the International Council for Breaking the Language Barrier (ICBLB). In 1965, which was International Cooperation Year, the public was invited to create and submit designs for seven types of pictogram, symbolizing men, women, lavatory, information desk and so on, by the end of the year. It was during this time that the pictograms used at the Tokyo Olympic Games became a model for the pictograms that followed.

Why, then, was the quality of these pictograms so high? Masaru Katsumi, who served as the art director for the pictograms used at the Tokyo Olympic Games, stated, “It was the tradition of crest designs in Japan that we attempted to put to good use in our design policy.” I, too, believe that the outstanding designs were born in Japan because crests have been part of the daily lives of Japanese people for a long time.

The use of family crests in Japan commenced during the Heian period (794–1185), when the nobility displayed them on cow carriages and other items as family symbols. During the period of warrior families that followed the Heian period, family crests were displayed on armor, standards and banners on battlefields to discern friends from foes, and as an easy-to-spot symbol for deeds of valor. Not only the ruling classes of the nobility and warriors, but also common people such as shop owners and artistic per-

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—Tama Art University Professor  
Yukio Ota



formers used family crests as a symbol of the family, kin or trade. Even today, many people dress themselves in formal attire adorned with the family crest on ceremonial occasions. Family crests have been passed down for over 1,200 years as a part of Japanese culture.

I believe that one of the reasons why family crests have also been passed down through the generations among common people in Japan, unlike in the West where they have mainly been passed down by the nobility, is because the quality of the design created to symbolize each family has been maintained. These are designs that are convincing and satisfying to everyone who sees and uses them. A family crest needs to have a design that can serve as a symbol of solidarity, equal in quality compared to others and exceptional in all aspects, while at the same time being capable of cultivating a sense of affection and pride among users across generations. This is something astonishing.

How were these family crests created? We use a technique of Japanese painting referred to as simplification. Simplification is a process whereby the necessary and unnecessary elements of the object are singled out to eliminate all unnecessary elements, and a design representing the essential characteristics of the motif is created. Simplification is carried out to condense the meaning into a form. If there is any unnecessary element in the form, its meaning is difficult to discern. If properly simplified, the meaning will be conveyed with more impact, accompanied by an image that transcends the meaning. This is where the richness of the design is found. Richness results in appealing effects, and the beauty and power of an orderly form is imprinted deep in the mind of viewers at a single glance. As such, designers of family crests were required to possess the ability to narrow down the elements used in the form to make the essential characteristics visible. Furthermore, they were required to work selflessly, without even including their names. Only when these requirements had been met were the Japanese family crest designs created and handed down from generation to

generation. The Japanese people have always cherished the crest designs thus created, and have kept them with them in their daily lives.

## Olympic Symbols

Yoshiro Yamashita, who designed the symbols for the sporting events at the Tokyo Olympic Games and Sapporo Winter Olympic Games, notes the following three basic policies that were maintained for finalizing the designs: (1) design the symbols like those of a visual language; (2) represent the essential features of each sporting event; and (3) make the designs simple and clear. The ultimate aim of the designs, he says, was to eliminate everything other than the essential elements.

The same applies to the emergency exit sign that was approved as the world standard symbol in 1985. The International Organization for Standardization (ISO) almost adopted the pictogram design submitted by the (former) Soviet Union. However, the design submitted by Japan at a later date was highly acclaimed, and it was adopted as the international standard. The chairperson of the Subcommittee at the time is recorded to have commented, "We are grateful for the submission of such an outstanding design. Good designs are worth considering, even if they are received late." This also indicates how highly the design was rated.

Pictogram designs should not be created to suit the designer's taste. The characteristics of the motif need to be fully condensed into a simple form and clearly represented. This is quite difficult for commercial designers, who are expected to express their identity as artists. It is extremely difficult, and even distressing, to identify the indispensable representation of the theme and force oneself to abide by it. Many abandon the effort unconsciously during the process. In such cases, the users of the pictogram cannot identify themselves with the representation. Each time they see the pictogram, they have to eliminate the interfering identity of the creator, and then elucidate and discern what is represented. As such, it is extremely important for the creator to be selfless in the

process of creation. It is also worth noting that the act of using pictograms is the act of eliminating national language barriers. Along with the anonymity of the creator, the design work involves a process of blending into international society. When designing a pictogram, the creator needs to gain technical and cultural insights into the two aspects of selflessness and the necessity of eliminating everything other than the necessary elements. The same applied when the family crests mentioned above were designed.

What, then, is a visual language? It is a language that enables the essential meaning to be understood visually at a glance, irrespective of differences such as whether the viewers are adults or children, or differences in levels of education, knowledge, or academic degrees. It is a skill that everyone acquires by accumulating experience in daily life. Pictograms are prototypes that aim to establish the most important type of communication using visual language. Today, people representing 135 countries and regions are studying how to unify pictograms and turn them into a common language.

As typically represented by the signs that indicate an emergency exit or tsunami danger, pictograms include signs for saving lives. These are common assets of society. For this reason, pictogram designs need to be perfected so that no one in the world can ever misunderstand their meanings. In the pursuit of this objective, it would be unforgivable if pictograms were used to achieve personal benefits. We need to be extremely prudent about how they are used.

Today, everyone is a member of a global community that extends beyond national borders, whether we like it or not. To achieve results through global cooperation, relationships could not be established between people if we did not understand each other's languages. In this regard also, pictograms need to be cultivated with great care as a communication means common to everyone on Earth. It is my sincere hope that everyone will view pictograms this way. □

# Family Crests

There is a wide variety of family crests, which are categorized into the following: plant crests with motifs such as hollyhocks, linen leaves, rice plants, plum flowers, chrysanthemums, cherry blossoms and bamboo; animal crests depicting horses, birds, wild geese, cranes, and doves; natural phenomenon crests derived from thunderbolts, beaches, the moon, stars, waves, and mountains; structure/artifact crests of paving, round fans, fan-shaped fans, carriages, bows and arrows; and patterned crests of fish scales, tortoiseshell, and bull's eyes. It is said that there are over 20,000 types of family crest designs, of which the prototypes number 200. The multiplication of the prototypes by several hundredfold is a reflection of the Japanese family system. According to the system, the first son inherits the household from his father, and the other sons establish new households by separating from the household of their birth. At the time of separation, an approved version of the family crest of the main household was created.

Family crests originally began to be used when noble families and warrior families started designing them based on the above motifs and displaying them on cow carriages and standards, banners and armors, to show the might of the family. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333) when warriors came into political power, their family crests began to be used on clothing as well. Warrior families began to display their family crests on formal attire. During the Edo period (1603–1867),

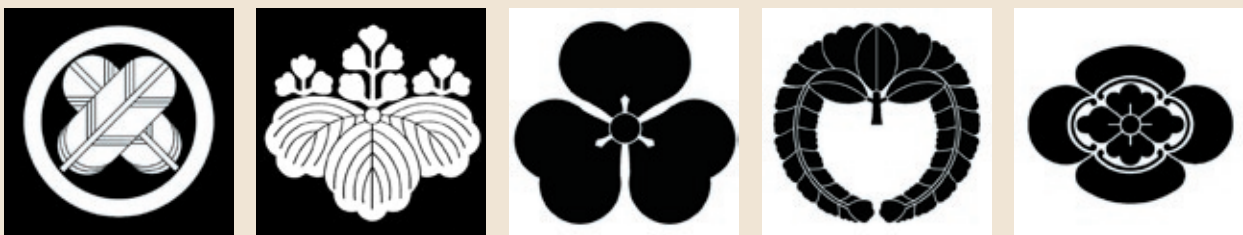
particularly in the Genroku years when peace prevailed and cultural activities flourished, family crest designs became more decorative and delicate. Family crests representing a family or lineage were disseminated widely, not only among warriors and the nobility who were allowed to have a surname, but also among common people as a logo mark, or a crest design inscribed on tombstones.

As noted, there are around 200 prototypes of family crest designs. Among them, wisteria, paulownia, hawk wings, melon, and oxalis, from which the greatest number of family crests are derived, are referred to as the five major motifs.

Wisteria motifs are designs derived from wisteria flowers and leaves, and many families whose names use the Chinese character meaning wisteria, such as Fujiwara, Kato, and Saito, use wisteria motifs. The paulownia motifs, based on paulownia flowers and leaves, were used as family crests for royal families, along with chrysanthemum motifs. They were graciously bestowed by the royal families to the Shogun families, and then to their subordinate warriors. Today, they are relatively popular. Motifs that became popular among warrior families during the Edo period include hawk wing motifs, melon motifs derived from cut melons and melon plants, and oxalis motifs, which is another plant design that became popular following paulownia.

All the designs are simple yet beautiful and elegant. This must be why family crests have been passed down to this day, and why they are at the source of pictogram designs originating in Japan.

Hitoshi Chiba



Five examples of Japanese family *mon*, or crests