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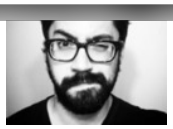

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I'm the author of *Steal Like An Artist* and a few other books.

This tumblr is a scrapbook of stuff I'm reading, looking at, listening to, thinking about.

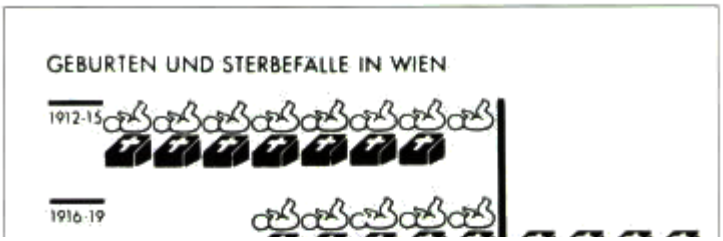
More about me

OTTO NEURATH, GERD ARNTZ, AND THE ISOTYPE MOVEMENT

from the Megg's History of Graphic Design

The Isotype movement

The important movement toward developing a "world language without words" began in the 1920s, continued into the 1940s, and still has important influences today. The Isotype concept involves the use of elementary pictographs to convey information. The originator of this effort was Vienna sociologist Otto Neurath (1882–1945). As a child, Neurath marveled at the way ideas and factual information could be conveyed by visual means. Egyptian wall frescoes in a Vienna Museum and diagrams and illustrations in his father's books fired his imagination. Neurath felt that the social and economic changes following World War I demanded clear communication to assist public understanding of important social issues relating to housing, health, and economics. A system of elementary pictographs to present complex data, particularly



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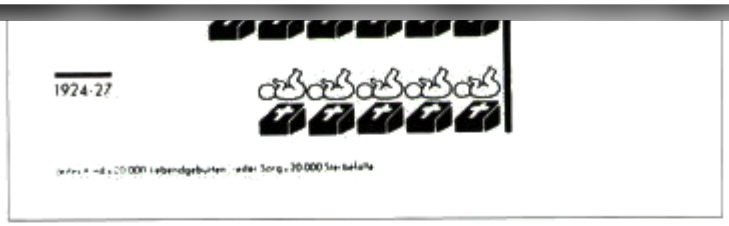

16–42. Otto Neurath and the Vienna Method, "Geburten und Sterbefalle in Wein" (Births and Deaths in Vienna) chart, c. 1928. Neurath called the Isotype a "language picture" that enabled the reader to make connections. The impact of World War I on mortality and births is dramatically evident.

statistical data, was developed (Fig. **16–42**). His charts were completely functional and shorn of decorative qualities. Neurath had ties with the new typography movement, for Tschichold assisted him and his collaborators briefly in the late 1920s, and Renner's new Futura typeface was adopted for Isotype designs immediately after it became available.

Originally called the Vienna Method, the name Isotype (International System of Typographic Picture Education) was selected after Neurath moved to Holland in 1934. The Transformation Team, headed by scientist and mathematician Marie Reidermeister (1898–1959), converted verbal and numerical data compiled by statisticians and researchers into layout form. These layouts were handed over to graphic artists for final execution. One problem was the need to produce large quantities of symbols for charts. Initially the pictographs were individually drawn or cut from paper. After woodcut artist Gerd Arntz (1900–88), whose constructivist-inspired prints included archetypal geometric figures, joined the group in 1928, he designed most of the pictographs (Fig. **16–43**).



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16–43. Gerd Arntz and Otto Neurath, "Gesellschaftsgliederung in Wien" (Social Stratification in Vienna) chart, 1930.

Often reduced to as little as one-half-centimeter tall, these pictographs were designed to express subtleties such as a drunken man, an unemployed man, or an emigrant man in charts and diagrams. Arntz cut the pictographs on linoleum blocks, after which they were printed on a letterpress and then pasted into the finished artwork. An inventory of 1,140 pictographs was designed by 1940, when the Isotype group fled to England. Pictographs were now duplicated by means of type-high letterpress line blocks. Because of their Germanic background, Neurath and Reidermeister were interned briefly, then were allowed to resume their work in England. In 1942 they were married.

Important among Neurath's many assistants was Rudolf Modley (1906–76), who came to America during the 1930s and established Pictorial Statistics, Inc., which later became the Pictographic Corporation. This organization became the North American branch of the Isotype movement. Modley believed a symbol should follow principles of good design, be effective in both large and small sizes, have unique characteristics to distinguish it from all other symbols, be interesting, function well as a statistical unit for counting, and work in outline or in silhouette.

The Isotype group's contribution to visual communications is the set of conventions they developed to formalize the use of pictorial language. This includes a pictorial syntax (a system of connecting images to create an ordered structure and meaning) and the design of simplified pictographs. The impact of their work on post–World War II graphic design includes research toward the development of universal visual-language systems and the extensive use of pictographs in signage and information systems.

#isotype #gerd arntz #otto neurath

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