Identification and analysis of the visual vocabulary that formulates our thoughts and dictates our reactions to the world around us.

- An interpretation of the unconscious codes and secret languages that shape our most ancient emotions.
- Over 1600 visual symbols, including photographs, fine art paintings and line illustrations, with authoritative in-depth commentary, definitions and explanations.

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INTRODUCTION

The word "symbol" is derived from the ancient Greek *symballein*, meaning to throw together. Its figurative use originated in the custom of breaking a clay tablet to mark the conclusion of a contract or agreement: each party to the agreement would be given one of the broken pieces, so that when they reconvened the pieces could be fitted together like a jigsaw. The pieces, each of which identified one of the people involved, were known as *symbola*, so that a symbol not only represents something else but also hints at a missing "something", an invisible part that is needed to achieve completion or wholeness. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the symbol carries the sense of joining things together to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts, as shades of meaning accrue to produce a complex idea.

A sign, on the other hand, may be understood as something that stands for, or points to, something else in a more literal way. A sign exists to convey information about a specific object or idea, while a symbol tends to trigger a series of perceptions, beliefs and emotional responses. For example, as a sign, the word "tree" means a particular type of plant that develops a permanent woody structure with a trunk and branches, roots and leaves. As a symbol, the tree may have many meanings: it can represent fruitfulness and the bounty of nature, endurance and longevity or the web of family relationships; as a Christian symbol it can refer to the cross, and in many traditions it represents the "tree of life" that links the everyday world with the world of spirit.

Neither signs nor symbols have intrinsic meaning. The same tree can be described by many different words in different languages, and its meanings as a symbol are formed through human interaction with it. Both signs and symbols have become part of human social and cultural identity, changing and evolving as we do. They are vehicles for information and meaning, operating on many different levels - the universal and particular, intellectual and emotional, spatial and temporal, spiritual and material. They are a way of making sense of experience. If we could not classify the world using symbolic codes and structures we would be overwhelmed by sensory data. We need a way of describing what happens to us in order to understand it.

As well as being an essential part of human society, signs and symbols appear in nature, and may refer to pre-conscious information, as in the case of smoke signifying a fire nearby, or tracks signposting the presence of a particular animal. This book is primarily concerned with signs that have a conscious or unconscious meaning for humans, but as we are rooted in nature, we will see that there may be deeper connections between natural phenomena and the symbols that are meaningful to us.

While signs and symbols can serve as maps or pointers in everyday, or consensus, reality, the symbols of the dream or spirit worlds can help us to navigate the psychospiritual terrain of non-consensus reality. Spirits and dream figures are understood to guide us or compensate for some part of our wholeness as yet un-lived. The significance of such symbols and signs fundamentally depends on our freedom to respond to them.

The ability to give meaning to signs and symbols led to the possibility of communication and reflection, and has enabled human beings to pass down their histories, mythologies and worldviews by means of storytelling, art and the written word. Signs and symbols have played a crucial part in furthering our scientific understanding of the world and have helped us to develop increasingly complex technologies, advancing from the invention of primitive tools to computers and spacecraft. Religious and spiritual traditions have used symbolism to help on the journey towards an understanding and experience of the divine and towards "right living". In psychology, approaches have been developed that use symbolism to work towards the alignment of mind, body and nature.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book explores the use and power of symbols, whether they are exploited for individual or social well-being, or towards divisive or manipulative ends. It is divided into three sections. Part One provides an overview of the uses, meaning and development of signs and symbols as seen from a number of different perspectives: historical, cross-cultural, sociological and psychological. Part Two looks at the applications of symbols in many areas of life, and includes chapters on culture and communication, abstract symbols, myth and the cosmos, plants and animals, the human life cycle, and the earth. Finally, Part Three, the reference directory, contains more than 1,000 signs and symbols, each with its own ideograph and a brief explanation of its meaning and application.

It is hoped that the information in this book will stimulate readers' interest in this profound and complex subject, prompting them to look beyond the superficial meaning of everyday objects and ideas to arrive at a greater understanding of the ways in which so much of daily life, and the way we communicate with each other, is informed by the richness of signs and symbols.
The first letter of the alphabet, used to signify the best, first.

**ACTIVE INTELLECT**

Unknown origin, also one of the signs for water.

**ADINKRAHENE**

Most important of the Ghanaian adinkra symbols, signifying the importance of playing a leading role.

**ADONI**

Hebrew word meaning a lord who is not God.

**AEROPLANE**

Spiritual aspiration, and the transcendence of human limitations.

**AIR**

The element. Kabbalistic sign.

**AKOBA**

Ghanaian adinkra symbol meaning vigilance and wariness. The akoben is a horn used to sound a battle cry.

**AKOMA NTOSO**

Ghanaian adinkra symbol meaning understanding and agreement.

**ALCHEMY, the art of**

The sun sign is at the centre, surrounded by the four elemental triangles, crowned with the Christian cross, and then placed in a circle representing the eternal or spiritual dimension.

**ALCHEMY, the art of variation.**

Used in the 17th century, this sign was created under the influence of Pythagorean geometry mysticism.

**ALCOHOL**

Alchemistic sign.

**ALCOHOL**

Early chemical sign.

**ALGOL**

The fixed star, used in some Kabbalistic mystery contexts on magical amulet seals.

**ALGOL**

The first letter of the Greek alphabet, associated with beginnings. Linked with God, who is said to be the alpha and omega – the beginning and the end. Also once a secret sign of the Christian faith.

**ALPHA**

The fixed star, used in Kabbalistic magical amulet seals.

**ALTHO**

Typographical sign used in printed texts, meaning the beginning of a new train of thought.

**ALUM**

Alchemistic sign.

**AMALGAM**

Alchemistic sign.
Amalgamation: Alchemistic sign.

Ant: Hard work, organized community. The anthill is a symbol of industrious life in Tibetan Buddhism; in parts of Africa it is associated with fertility and creativity.

Anti-clockwise spiral: Dynamic symbol of life force, cosmic and earthly.

Antares: The fixed star; Kabbalistic magical amulet seal.

Antimony: Alchemistic, also used in medicine.

Apollo: This symbol of the god is based on the shape of the lyre, which was Apollo's instrument.

Aqua regia: Alchemistic sign for "king's water".

Anchorage: Synonym for the political movement.

Ankh: A cross topped with a loop; ancient Egyptian symbol of immortal life. Later adopted as a Christian symbol by the Egyptian Coptic Church.

Antelope: In Africa associated with the moon and fecundity; for the Bambara (Mali) the animal was sent by the creator god to teach humans agriculture.

Anvil: In Polynesia and parts of Africa, associated with the female principle and fertility; in Scottish folklore, linked with magical powers of the blacksmith.

Apple: Symbol of bliss, especially sexual; emblem of love, marriage, spring, youth, fertility and immortality. Linked with the forbidden fruit of the Garden of Eden and so a Christian symbol of temptation and original sin.

Aqua regia: Alchemistic sign for king's water, variation.

Aquarius: Zodiac sign.

Ansar: Rune for A.

Anti Nuclear Campaign: The emblem of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, made up of the semaphore signs for the letters "N" and "D".

Ape: Respected in ancient Egypt, Africa, India and China, but distrusted in the Christian tradition, where it is a symbol of vice and lust.

Approximately equal to: Mathematical sign.

Arachnus: Zodiac sign.

Aragon: Planet, mystical Kabbalistic sign for the first Olympic spirit.

Anchorage: In early Christianity, a secret sign for the cross; hope, salvation. Also a symbol of the sea; of steadfastness and safety; and of the self.

Anchorage: Symbol of divine will in several traditions, heavenly creatures in Jewish, Christian and Islamic traditions, thought to be evolved from Semitic and Egyptian winged deities. Seen as messengers, warriors, guardians or protectors.
Arch Triumph and victory; grand human achievements.

Aries Zodiac sign.

Arcturus The fixed star, Kabbalistic magic amulet seal.

Ark of the Covenant One of the symbols of the Jewish faith, a chest that was God's pledge of divine protection. The ark was kept in another symbol of Judaism, the Tabernacle.

 Armour In medieval Europe, armour symbolized the knightly virtues of courage, protection, honour and strength; symbol of warrior class in China and Japan.

Arrow Wavy Sea currents.

Arrow, weapon In Islam stands for the wrath of Allah, in Christianity for martyrdom and death. Bundled or broken in Native American symbolism, arrows stand for peace.

Arsenic Alchemistic sign.

Ass The god, later oss, rune for rapids or waterfall.

Auroch The rune Ur, sign for auroch.

Asterisk Typographical sign for footnote.

Autumn Old Germanic time sign.

Atom Also uranium, nuclear reactor (on maps), nuclear research, nuclear physics.
Axe Almost universal symbol of decisive power and authority. Associated with the creative force of the thunderbolt. Linked with ancient sun and storm gods. Used to invoke thunder and rain in West Africa; symbol of the union of families in Chinese marriage.

Banana Freudian phallic symbol.

Basilisk A medieval symbol of lust and disease.

Bat Associated with death, symbol of fear and superstition, linked with witchcraft and the occult in Western folklore. In Africa and ancient Greece it was a symbol of perspicuity. Can signify madness. Underworld divinity in Central American and Brazilian mythology.

Bath Associated with bathing and thus with purification, both spiritual and physical.

Beans Symbol of fecundity, used as love charms in India and to ward off evil spirits in Japan.

Basket Womb symbol; in the Americas, stories about baskets and basket-making are related to women.

Bear Emblem of masculine courage and primeval force; while she-bears symbolize care and warmth - although Jung linked them with dangerous aspects of the unconscious. In Christian and Islamic traditions the bear is cruel and lustful.

Bell The voice that proclaims the truth, especially in Buddhist, Hindu, Islamic and Christian traditions. In China it symbolizes obedience and cosmic harmony. Small tinkling bells can represent happiness and sexual pleasure. Worn on Hebrew dresses as a sign of virginity. Linked with the feminine principle, also protective. Marks the passing of time and proclaims good news, warns of danger and tolls for death.

Biohazard Warning, USA.

Belt or girdle Female chastity, marital fidelity or seductiveness. Magic girdles appear in myth as emblems of strength and became a symbol of honour in England. The rope girdles of monks allude to the scourging of Christ. The Hindu girdle is an emblem of the cycles of time.

Birch Beneficial, protective, sacred to Germanic gods. Cosmic tree of Central Asia. In shamanic rites it symbolized human ascent to the spirit world.

Birds Symbol of the human soul, representing goodness and joy, standing for wisdom, intelligence and the swift power of thought. Aboriginal stories suggest they bear information. In Western art birds can symbolize air and touch.

Identification and analysis of the visual vocabulary that formulates our thoughts and dictates our reactions to the world around us

A fascinating guide to hundreds of symbols, signs and ideographs, illustrated with photographs, artworks, diagrams and drawings, and presented with authoritative text, commentary and definitions

Lavish illustration reflects how signs and symbols have been interpreted and represented through thousands of years of art, mythology and religion, from the Babylonians and Sumerians to the modern world

An erudite, accessible text explains, decodes and categorizes the signs, including in-depth analysis of some of the most important symbols of all, such as the wheel, the cross, the gateway, the rainbow, the dragon and the sun

Contains a directory of over 1000 illustrations of iconographic symbols, in addition to hundreds of colour images featuring these primal metaphors