Shape, graphic synthesis and contemporaneity? The case of the rock engravings of Monte Bego

Maria Linda Falcidieno

“The image durability is therefore a guarantee of human self-awareness”. From these words, taken from the text of the call for paper of this issue of XY, we must start to read today the incredible rock engravings of Mount Bego, which constitute a heritage handed down intact thanks to the support that houses them and that show a vitality and a valid also for our age, thanks to the visual efficacy and the ambiguitv and clarity of the meaning. One of the most usual and complex operations in the graphic field, in fact, is certainly that of the visual synthesis of shapes, in such a way as to transform them from three-dimensional objects in iconic signs. In this sense, all of contemporary design world of signs and the instructions for use refer to exactly this principle, through the formulation of pictograms able to immediately understandable even articulated and that is exactly what happens with the representations of Mount Bego. Staring from 1897, Clarence Bicknell, an Englishman who had moved to Bordighera on the Italian Riviera of Ponente, began a campaign of stone carvings detection found on the slopes of Mount Bego, the French Maritime Alps, about 50 km North of the coast between Monaco and Ventimiglia and bring to a heritage of images dating back to the period between the final Neolithic period (3000 BC) and the Iron age, with the largest production dating back to the Bronze age (1800–1500 BC). The operated graphical summary for transmitting information is breathtaking in its immediacy and contemporaneity: the images reduce to two-dimensional form mostly objects, but also animals and men, as well as some geometric shapes instinctively interpreted as maps ahead of its time and give the opportunity for a comparison of the signs of engravings of Mount Bego and some symbols in current use today. The purpose of the work is to make evident the processes of identifying the characteristic elements, which constitute an object perceptually and which are by always heritage of man, remain almost identical over time, to witness the permanence of the signs that respond to these processes; this, as mentioned, also thanks to the permanence of the support on which this sign was developed.

Keywords: geometry, icon, symbol.

One of the most common and complex operations in the graphic field is certainly that of the visual synthesis of shapes, in such a way as to transform them from three-dimensional objects into iconic signs; in this sense, the entire contemporary design world of signs and the instructions for use refers exactly this principle, through the formulation of pictograms able to immediately understandable even articulated, immediately understandable. Staring from 1897, Clarence Bicknell, an Englishman who had moved to Bordighera, in the Ligurian Riviera of Ponente, undertakes a campaign to detect the rock engravings on the slopes of Mount Bego, on the French Maritime Alps, about 50 km North of the Coast between Monaco and Ventimiglia and shows a wealth of images dating back to the period between the Neolithic end (3000 BC) and the Iron Age, with the greatest output dating at the Bronze Age (1800–1500 BC).

The graphic synthesis used to convey information is astounding in its immediacy and contemporaneity: the images reduce above all objects, but also animals and men as well as some geometric shapes instinctively interpretable as ante litteram planes, to bidimensional and give the rise to a comparison among the signs of the incisions of Monte Bego and some symbols of today’s use.

The purpose of the work is to make evident the processes of identifying the characteristic elements, which perceptively constitute an object and which are – from time immemorial – our human heritage.

From many sides and across the history of man’s work, the design was seen and described as a potential universal language, shared on the basis of a visual communication, which tends to represent what was known by experience and, therefore what was imagined and conceived, abstraction and invention starting...

Forma, sintesi grafica e contemporaneità? Il caso delle incisioni rupestri del Monte Bego

Maria Linda Falcidieno

«La durata dell’immagine è perciò per l’uomo garanzia di autoconsapevolezza». Da queste parole, tratte dal testo della call for paper di questo numero di XY, si deve partire per leggere oggi le incredivoli incisioni rupestri del monte Bego, che costituiscono un patrimonio tramandato intatto grazie al supporto che le ospita e che dimostrano una vitalità e una validità anche per la nostra epoca, grazie all’efficacia visiva e all’univocità e chiarezza del significato. Una delle più consuete e complesse operazioni in ambito grafico, infatti, è senz’altro quella della sintesi visiva di forme, in maniera tale da trasformarle da oggetti tridimensionali a segni iconici; in tal senso, tutt’i mondi progettuali e delle istruzioni per l’uso si rifà esattamente a tale principio, attraverso la formulazione di pittogrammi in grado di rendere immediatamente comprensibili informazioni anche articolate.

Parole chiave: geometria, icona, simbolo.

Una delle più consuete e complesse operazioni in ambito grafico è senz’altro quella della sintesi visiva di forme, in maniera tale da trasformarle da oggetti tridimensionali a segni iconici; in tal senso, tutto il mondo progettuale delle segnalichete e delle istruzioni per l’uso si rifà esattamente a tale principio, attraverso la formulazione di pittogrammi in grado di rendere immediatamente comprensibili informazioni anche articolate. A partire dal 1897, Clarence Bicknell, un inglese che si era trasferito a Bordighera, nella riviera ligure di Ponente, intraprende una campagna di rilevamento delle incisioni rupestri presenti sulle pendici del monte Bego, sulle Alpi Marittime francesi, a circa 50 km a nord della fascia litoranea tra Monaco e Ventimiglia e porta a conoscenza un patrimonio di immagini risalenti al periodo compreso tra il Neolitico finale (3000 a.C.) e l’età del Bronzo (1800–1500 a.C.). La sintesi grafica operata per trasmettere informazioni è strabiliante nella sua immediatezza e contemporaneità: le immagini riducono al bidimensionale per lo più oggetti, ma anche animali e uomini, oltre che alcune forme geometriche istintivamente interpretabili come planimetrie ante litteram e danno lo spunto per un confronto tra i segni delle incisioni del Monte Bego e alcuni simboli oggi di uso corrente. Lo scopo del lavoro è quello di rendere evidente come i processi di individuazione degli elementi caratterizzanti, che percepitivamente costituiscono un oggetto e che sono – da sempre – patrimonio dell’uomo, rimangono pressoché identici nel tempo, a testimoniare la permanenza dei segni che rispondono a tali processi; ciò, come detto, anche grazie alla permanenza del supporto su cui tale segno è stato elaborato. Da più parti e trasversalmente nella storia del fare dell’uomo, il disegno è stato visto e descritto come un potenziale linguaggio unico...
from thought, whose mechanisms are common to mankind. Clearly, the potential and limit of such sharing has been investigated through reading the main matrices of the image, that is by the definition of icon and symbol, so, the reference contexts for the image from the point of view of the immediate sharing of information were the realization tendentially realistic and with clear references to the perception of the mechanisms of physicality, starting from the main sensoriality of the view, and the abstract sign, out of the heritage of the immediately experienced.

Models and stereotypes, on the one hand, codes on the other: in this way the two apparently contradictory domains might be defined. Apparently: as there are many influences and interrelations and it is perhaps impossible to think of coded images without any kind of references to something linking them to their meaning, either also as a psychological reference or as a combination of ideas. This has been widely dealt with. Here, it is necessary at least to recall the main assumptions, as they are the starting points to think of the mechanisms underlying the extremely synthetic visual ideas that, starting from the concrete point of view, come to essential forms, which don’t take away anything but which add to the expressive capacity of the sign and the consequent immediacy to understand its meaning. Many possible ways of investigation: from the analysis of elaborates prepared by children not yet fully educated, and therefore not yet conditioned by the learning of consolidated methods and representation techniques that affect and limit the instinct and the choice of the elements to be represented, to the analysis of the visual languages, also of the past, based on the role of ideograms, to the reading of contemporary pictograms, which are based on learned and critical graphic synthesis. In any case, the attempt is always to identify, through a critical reading, the active constants of the process of simplifying forms, which transforms the realistic representation into a scheme and, in some cases, into a coded sign. The present research line takes all these considerations and uses them as a starting point, trying, on the contrary, to find the reason of the synthetic representation, which seems to have a sort of fil rouge through epochs, cultures and styles, looking at the structure of the forms to represent.

Nothing new, in general terms, but a lot of novelty as for the discipline of communication and, therefore, of communication design; in architecture, in fact, many results were achieved in terms of theoretical–methodological considerations and uses them as a verifier, trying, a posteriori, to represent genuine and of the immediate sharing of informations, that is by the definition of icon and symbol, so, the reference contexts for the image from the point of view of the immediate sharing of information were the realization tendentially realistic and with clear references to the perception of the mechanisms of physicality, starting from the main sensoriality of the view, and the abstract sign, out of the heritage of the immediately experienced.

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A posteriore, considerazioni fatte e le utilizza come verifica, cercando invece nella struttura delle forme da rappresentare le ragioni e delle idee sintetiche che sembra avere una sorta di fil rouge che attraversa epoche, cultura e stili.

Nulla di nuovo in termini generali, molto di nuovo in termini di ricerca teorico-metodologica che avanzano lo scopo di individuare le costanti attive delle strutture antropiche attraverso il tempo, sia in età contemporanea, sia in epoche passate: trattatistica, manualistica, teorie di progettazione, teorie per la lettura del costruito e dell’ambiente.

La linea di ricerca qui proposta prende tutte le considerazioni fatte e le utilizza come verifica, cercando invece nella struttura delle forme da rappresentare le ragioni e delle idee sintetiche che sembra avere una sorta di fil rouge che attraversa epoche, culture e stili.

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A titolo di esempio, si ricorda la teoria sulle tipologie storico-processuali introdotta per lo studio delle forme da rappresentare e del linguaggio adottato per la trasmissione dei pensieri e dell’istinto ed è perciò impossibile pensare a immagini codificate che non abbiano riferimenti di alcuno tipo con qualsiasi che le legghi al loro significato, fosse anche un rimboscolo psicologico o di associazione di idee.

Di questo si è ampiamente trattato; in questa sede è necessario almeno richiamare i principali presupposti, poiché da li si parte per ragionare sui meccanismi che stanno alla base delle forme visive estremamente sintetiche, che a partire dal concetto, giungono a forme essenziali, che nulla tolgono, anzi, aggiungono, alla capacità espressiva del segno e alla conseguente immediatezza di comprensione del significato.

Molte le strade di indagine possibili: dall’analisi di elaborati redatti da bambini non ancora completamente scolarizzati e, quindi, non ancora condizionati da apprendimenti di metodo e tecniche di rappresentazione consolida te, che ne condizionano e limitano l’istinto e la scelta degli elementi da rappresentare, all’analisi dei linguaggi visivi, anche del passato, basati sul ruolo di ideogrammi, alla lettura “a posteriori” di pitagorismi contemporanei che si basano su sintesi grafiche colte e critiche.

In ogni caso, il tentativo è sempre quello di individuare, attraverso una lettura critica, le costanti attive del processo di semplificazione delle forme, che trasforma la rappresentazione sintetica in schema e, in alcuni casi, in segno codificato.
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The language adopted for the transmission of theories, theories to read the built and the passing of time, both in contemporary and in past ages. Treatments, manuals, design theories, theories to read the built and the environment, important authors and thoughts have reasoned on the built reality to deduce recurring guidelines and behaviors. The language adopted for the transmission of thoughts and the spreading of information was that of simplifying the forms, even from precise and in-depth surveys.

These will be, therefore, schemes, that is works containing the indispensable minimum of the information considered as indispensable for the set purpose.

As an example, it is recalled the theory of historical-process typology introduced for architectural research, and how such a methodology of study and analysis has been successfully applied to furniture components, thus proposing the same approach of identifying main and recurring components regardless of the geographical environment and the historical-cultural period. The research in question has paved a way of undeniable validity and originality, which, in any other context, can be recognized in the libraries of rendering programs. These approaches in part already represent a clear passage from the realistic representation in which the graphic product tends to the exact and individual return of the object, always different from any analogue other, just as being physically identified, to a synthetic rendition, inevitably abstract, be it either type, or model, or stereotype, disconnection and removal from the reality.

What is the difference with the world of pictograms and icons, which are a form of contemporary effective and diffused communication? Perhaps conceptually little or nothing, since even those graphic-visual projects respond to the same just described characteristics.

In all this, it seems legitimate, albeit unexplored, to insert the rock carvings of Monte Bego and the similar ones in the panorama of visual communications that express objects, concepts, figures with remarkable efficiency, clarity and extreme synthesis; such a path of analysis can be developed taking into account what has been previously expressed, thus disengaging from the traditional readings that focus on the individual expressive ability, on the graphic ingenuity, to consider, on the contrary on the assumptions that make an un-realistically represented subject recognizable and visible.

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Scholars have cataloged various types of engraved drawings, ranging from figures, animals, objects, to a lot of ‘maps’, that is to view parts of territory; in each group it is almost always possible to recognize the matrix of representation, which becomes type/model, icon/pictogram.

Human figures, the elements that make the subject recognizable are the fundamental parts of the human body and are the same that can be found in the contemporary cases of some schematic representations, but that however point out unequivocally to the image of the real head and bust, limbs often with the emphasis on what is considered, at the moment, of more important interest (for example, the head, in the case of a tribal leader).

Animals: even in this case the incisions present images of clear reading and interpretation, which emphasize the most identifiable details of the animal (e.g. horns or mass, in the case of big animals).

Objects: here the case appears extremely variable, referring to the hunting tools and we can discover spears, tips and so on, always recognizable through identified individual elements (for example the instrument part intended to hit).

Maps: these are more complex representations, even from the point of view of interpretation, since the iconic component is overtaken by the need to introduce a code to represent what belongs to a larger scale with the reduced size of a figure.

Here too, as for the engravings, the way could be considered as a kind of ‘flourish’ of symbols, unreadable if not accompanied by accurate and long legends (planes, thematic papers and so on), to arrive, by adopting new technologies and the advent of Internet, no longer to the representation of a territory, but at the representation of structures, so as to arise a ‘flourish’ of symbols, unreadable if not accompanied by accurate and long legends (planes, thematic papers and so on), to arrive, by adopting new technologies and the advent of Internet, no longer to the representation of a territory, but at the representation of a larger scale.

Maps are therefore a ‘flourish’ of symbols, unreadable if not accompanied by long and accurate notes (the maps of plane, the plane thematic papers and so on), which make it possible to introduce a code to represent what belongs to a larger scale.

In short, the reproduction mechanisms of representation of objects in those times when techniques and methodologies were already developed for a scientific and advanced technical–methodological transcription: the representation of structures, such as objects, figures, and territories has always been characterized by a crescendo of difficulties, as the subject size became less and less controllable. 

At sight, the difficulty of proportioning, measuring and, consequently, summarizing what is perceived, has involved both the need to introduce – albeit in an unconscious way – codes and symbols, the presence of discontinuities and variations, sometimes with even coarse mistakes.

Nowadays, the situation has first evolved with a ‘flourish’ of symbols, unreadable if not accompanied by accurate and long legends (planes, thematic papers and so on), to arrive, by adopting new technologies and the advent of Internet, no longer to the representation of a territory, but at the representation of structures, so as to arise a ‘flourish’ of symbols, unreadable if not accompanied by long and accurate notes (the maps of plane, the plane thematic papers and so on), which make it possible to introduce a code to represent what belongs to a larger scale.

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alized in a manner following the period’s capabilities, but also such as pictograms, as they contain the schematization of elements that make the object recognizable even in the substantial reduction of forms; such as icons, when they propose, as almost a metaphor, specific components that refer to the object; and, finally, as symbols, when the uncontrollable dimension of the object that you can not ‘touch with your hand’ necessitates the introduction of a filter that distanced the realistic vision in favor of signs that only make visual reference. One last consideration must be made about the main components that can be identified in the representations described above, with the exclusion of the realistic ones: as seen, a component which is clear is related to the characterizing elements of the object, which are emphasized in order to be of priority to the context and to guide the perception of the observer; a second consideration is, however, about the methods of representation, which are mostly applied to the two dimensions. At the same time, this attitude is clearly legible and is present in pictograms and icons that, as a rule, for clarity of understanding of content and legibility even at reduced reproduction scales, offer bi-dimensional drawings, often full-size, even if they are chromatically treated. These short notes want to make the present experiences of the world of representation a subject of topical interest. These experiences have often been seen, studied and interpreted above all from an artificial, suggestive and artistic point of view, while it seems appropriate and useful for the specific knowledge of a discipline, to frame the historical landscape of progressive acquisition of skills and experiments, in order to highlight, as stated in the opening, those ‘active constants’ that make those far away phenomena, often reduced to the curiosity or specific interest of the period they belong to, permanent, transversal in time and often in space: as a best example of the rock carvings of Monte Bego, which today allow a very clear reading of the representations that the rock has preserved, to witness a disappear- ce, civilization, but also that which continues to persis- tent phenomena, often reduced to the curiosity or specific interest of the period they belong to, permanent, transversal in time and often in space: as a best example of the rock carvings of Monte Bego, which today allow a very clear reading of the representations that the rock has preserved, to witness a disappearance, even if they are chromatically treated. 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References / Bibliografia


Figura 8

Pittogrammi contemporanei e confronto con i principi di sintesi grafica già espressi in periodi ben lontani nel tempo (a sinistra un’immagine dalla Encyclopédie di DIDEROT e D’ALEMBERT, disponibile da: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k9975a/668.image). © L’autrice.

Figura 9