

Mini-Course in Visual Communication

A sequence of problems to indoctrinate students in the concept of graphic design as communications



Introduction

I began constructing this course at the Minneapolis School of Art in 1958. I have taught the course off-and-on ever since. It is most effectively taught as a two-semester course. The origins for the course grew out of my education at Yale where Alvin Lustig emphasized Graphic Design as visual communications.

The underlying premise for this course is built on the rationale that poets and writers communicate with words, musicians with sounds and designers with color, shape, and line.

The theoretical concept is based on direct, as opposed to indirect communications. For example, to communicate *cold*, you would use colors, shapes and line qualities that reflect the meaning of the word. The image generally is abstract. Indirect communication of *cold* might be representation of an ice cube or a human figure with wavy lines around it. To read the communication, you first would have to know what an ice cube was, or that wavy lines are a symbol for shivering which suggests cold. Students quickly discover that a dictionary is a valuable tool for doing visual communication problems.

Although this is a form of *illustration*, it should be stressed to students as *communication*. Reaction to this course by students has always been good. It is an excellent counterpoint to basic design as it is fast paced, varied in content, challenging and tends to create competition among students to come up with the best solutions.

Visual Communications always worked well with other first-year courses. There was carry-over from basic design, drawing and color. Where other theoretical courses dealt mainly with perceptual qualities, Visual Communications stressed conceptual development. I always thought this course provided a good balance between the two. There is strong evidence that what students do in Visual Communications applies to upper level problems and work following graduation.

Problem Objectives

- 1 Communication through visual images. Graphic Designers should always ask themselves: *What am I trying to communicate? Am I communicating that message? Can I communicate more directly and simply?* The main emphasis in this course is learning how to develop, explore and evaluate concepts and present them visually.
- 2 Formal values connected with composition, shapes and color. Formal values should be strongly emphasized in this work.
- 3 Developing good hand-skills working with cut and torn paper.
- 4 Learning design process, how to make refinements.

Materials

Cut and torn colored paper. *Do not used colored construction paper!* Rubber cement, spray mount, scissors, x-acto knife, colored paper similar to Color Aid, and railroad board are the principal tools and materials.

Cut and torn paper were chosen as the medium because it prevents students from tickling the image; it forces them to work more abstractly and it is a working process that encourages a great deal of decision-making as they lay down and pick up elements before doing the final design. Also, it is a relatively fast way of making images.

Working Procedures

This class met only one-hour a week. I took an hour from the Basic Design class. This worked well as Basic Design incorporated refinement, tight restrictions and it was tedious; Visual Communications was fast paced, varied, colorful, individualized and was a good counterpoint to Basic Design. It also balanced perceptual and conceptual student development concurrently.

The one-hour class period was used for critique—students put work on the board and it was critiqued by both the teacher and students. The time was also used for presenting the next problem. My belief is that the work is best done outside of class so there is less tendency for students to borrow ideas from one another.

The first problems are done with 1-inch squares and communication is established through arrangement. By using 1-inch squares, it forces students to work abstractly without detail, and establishes the importance of juxtaposition, color and abstraction in visual communication. Students can focus on communication without having to also cope with color, shape or content at the same time.

Working with squares reinforces the premise of abstract communication. The simple addition of color as an added communication device is a small but valuable step. Once the concept of abstract communication is recognized by students, the limitations can gradually be relaxed.

I began building a slide file of professional work employing strong communication concepts which periodically was shown to and discussed with students so they might better understand their role as visual communicators.

Students keep the work until semester reviews. They are encouraged to do work over, and over again. If students do not do work over, especially weak pieces, for semester review, it should count against them.

Criteria

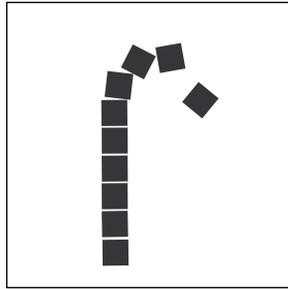
There are three main criteria:

- 1 The quality of communication concept. Simplicity and directness of communication are essential. Is the image uncomplicated and the communication clear?
- 2 Formal values or aesthetics of the image—composition, shape, color, etc.
- 3 Craft of putting the image together.

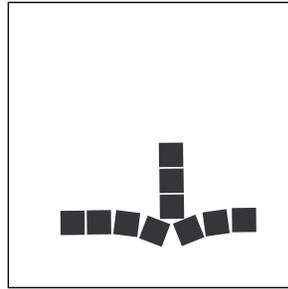
It is extremely important that there be follow-through with the concept of the Graphic Designer as a visual communicator. Throughout the program, students should be held accountable as to what are they communicating, and are they communicating it clearly and directly?

Courses

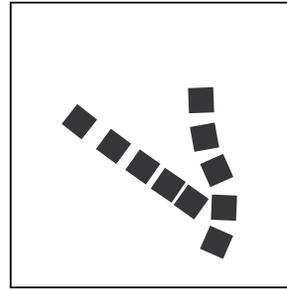
Visual Communication part I



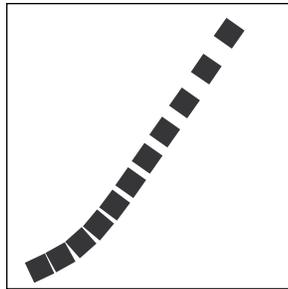
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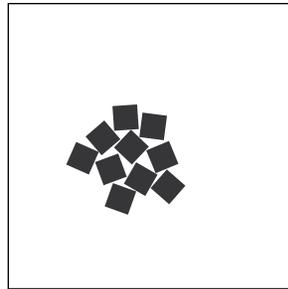
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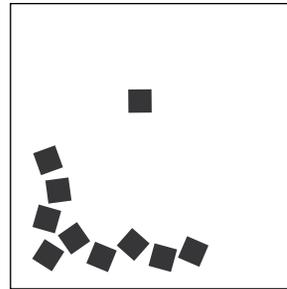
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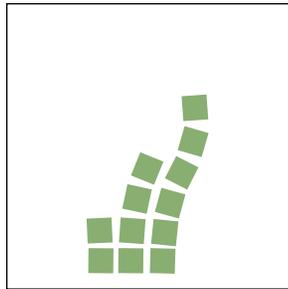
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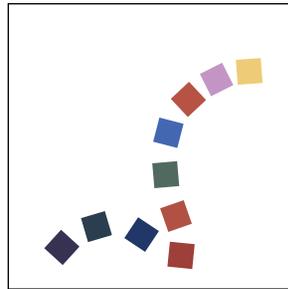
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Visual Communication

10-inch square railroad board and ten 1-inch black squares. At least two weeks doing communications using the 1-inch black squares.

Choose words such as pressure, flight, conflict, tumble or any word that lends itself to visual communication. The squares cannot touch or overlap—the integrity of each square must be retained. *Student examples:*

1 **Tumble**

2 **Pressure**

3 **Conflict**

4 **Flight**

5–6 **Fear**

Color as Communication

10-inch square railroad board and ten 1-inch squares using color of students' choice.

Choose words where color plays a communication role such as growth, sorrow, or any words that fit this problem. Students should do color communication for at least two weeks.

7 **Growth**

8 **Happy**

Word Communications

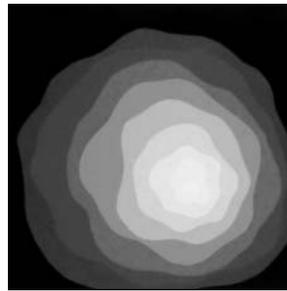
Simple word communications with free imagery in colors of the students' choice on 10-inch square railroad board. This works quite well if students are given words with opposite meanings.

Hot & cold, wet & dry, soft & hard, gigantic & small, or other comparable opposites. Words can then vary and are made more difficult.

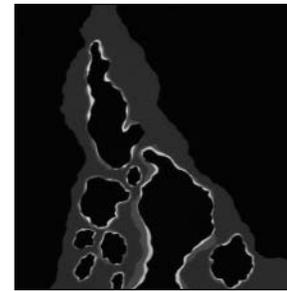
In order to ensure success with later problems, it is necessary to be extremely demanding at this stage of the course on all three criteria—concept, formal values and craft. When warranted, students should be made to redo problems until they reach a reasonable performance standard.

It should be strongly stated to students that they are expected to continue refining the work on their own for end of the semester reviews. Part III should continue for six to eight weeks.
Student examples:

- 1-4 **Hot**
- 5-8 **Cold**



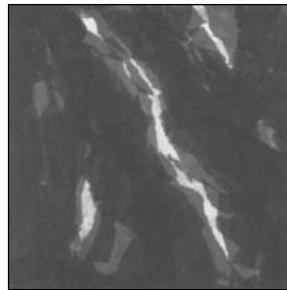
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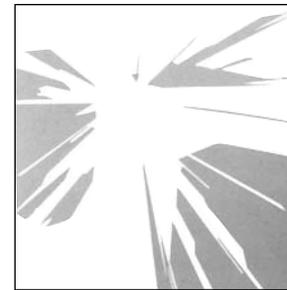
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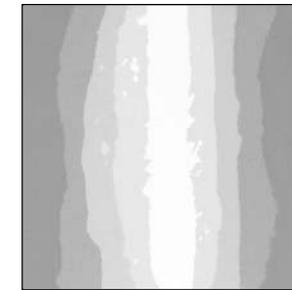
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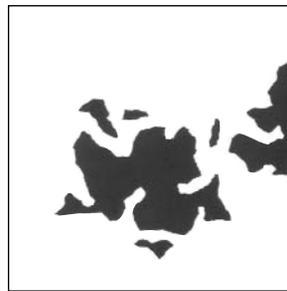
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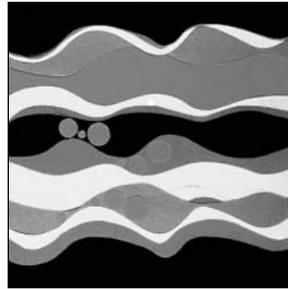
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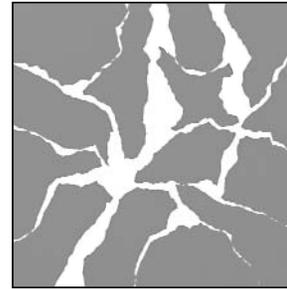
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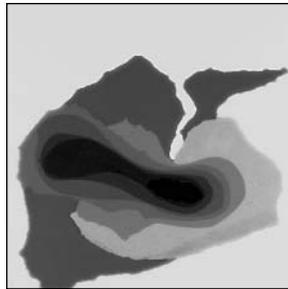


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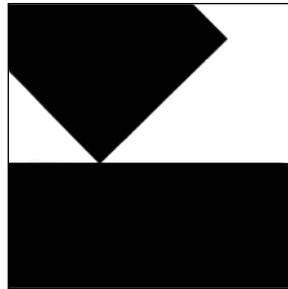


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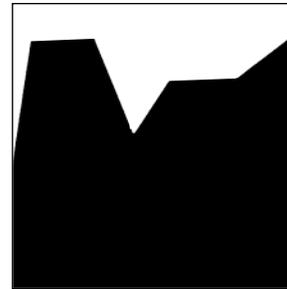
9-10 **Wet**
11-12 **Dry**
13-14 **Hard**
15-16 **Soft**



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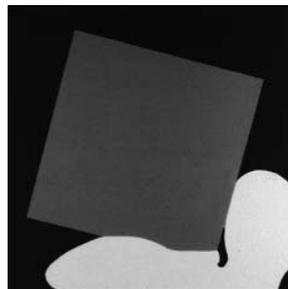
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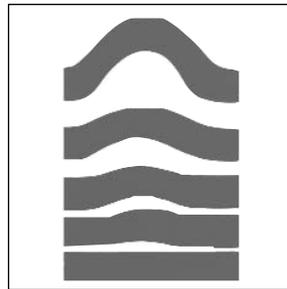


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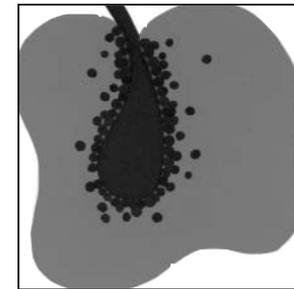
- 17–18 **Magnetic**
- 19–20 **Transfusion**
- 21–22 **Full**
- 23–24 **Impact**



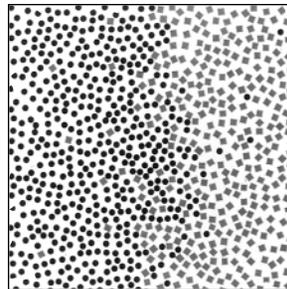
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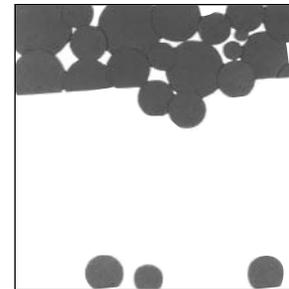
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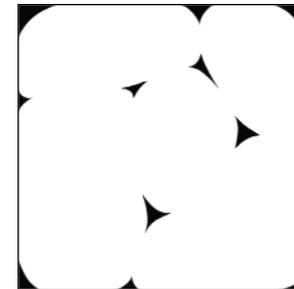
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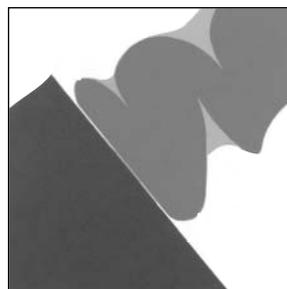
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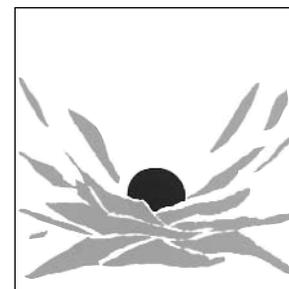
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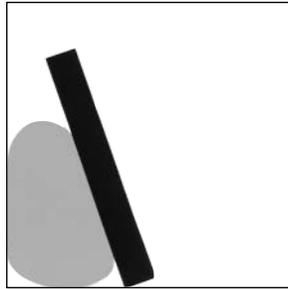
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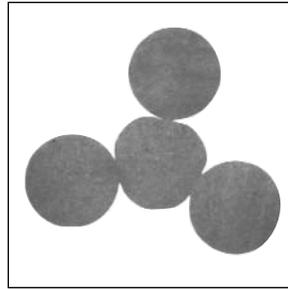
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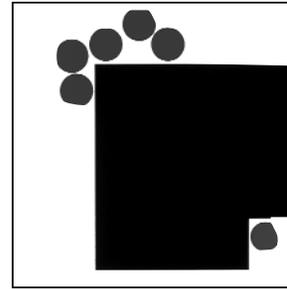
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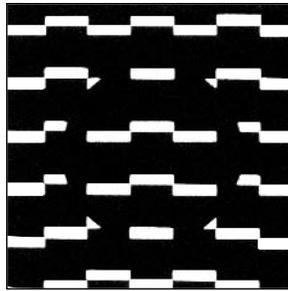
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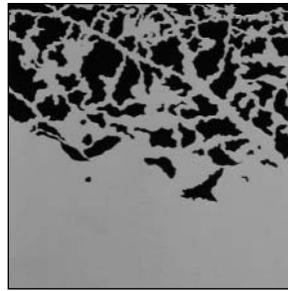
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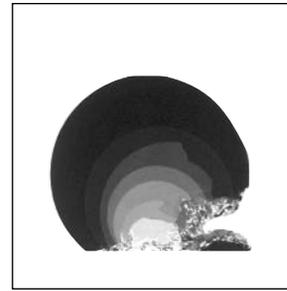
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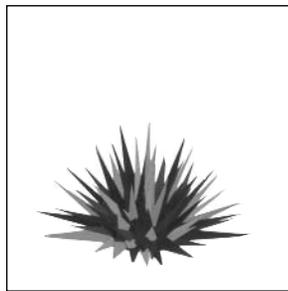
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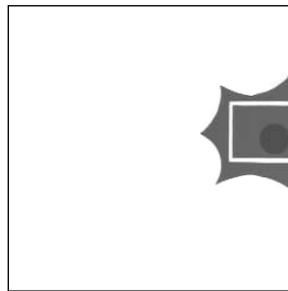
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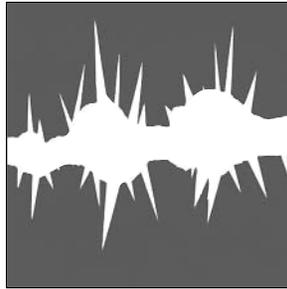
25–26 **Squeeze**

27–28 **Hide**

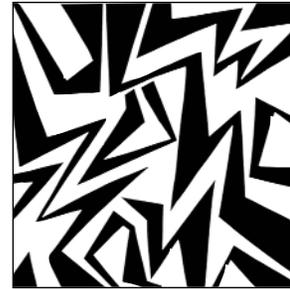
29–30 **Decay**

31–32 **Protect**

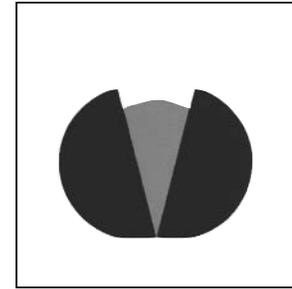
- 33-34 **Pain**
- 35-36 **Birth**
- 37-38 **Paradox**
- 39 **Assist**
- 40 **Gigantic**



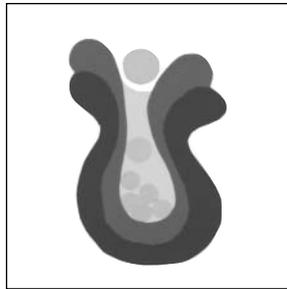
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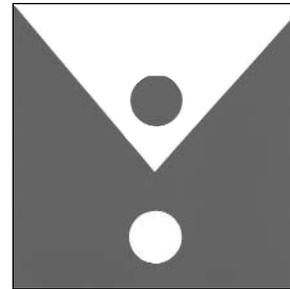
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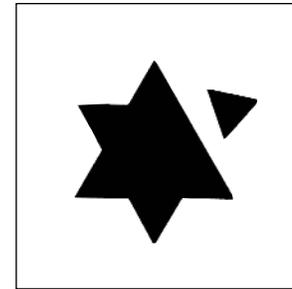
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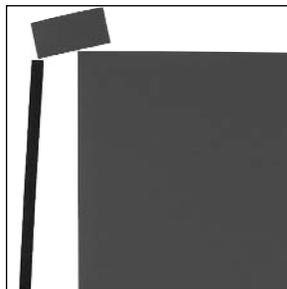
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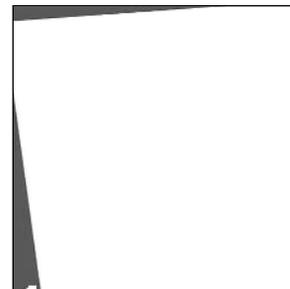
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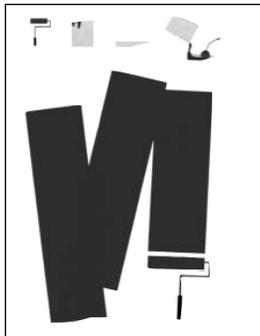


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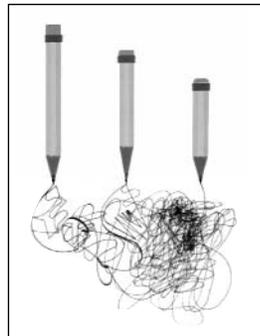


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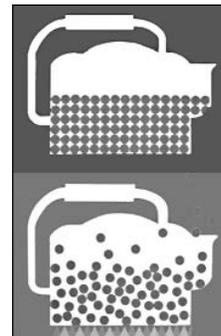
Visual Communication part II



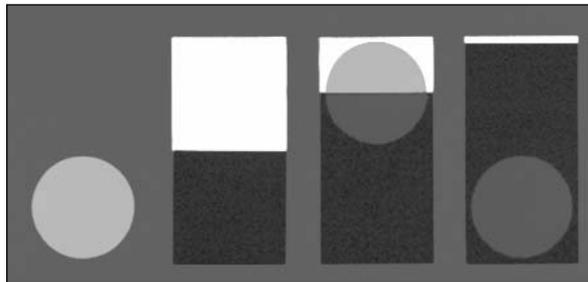
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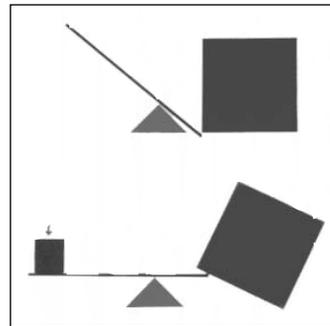
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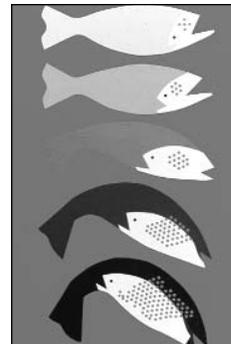
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A Tool: What it Looks like and What it Does

This problem is done in a larger format of the students' choice – more of a poster size. I prefer a square or vertical composition. Students choose a simple tool; they must communicate what it looks like – this may involve multiple images.

As this problem has several levels of communication, students must prioritize each by size, placement or color. Sequence of images is important to the communication. Simplicity and directness of communication are important. Also the formal values, use of color and craft. *Student examples:*

1–2 Tools

A Scientific Principle

Visually explain in a poster format a basic scientific principle such as displacement, fulcrum, etc.

3–5 Scientific

Metamorphosis

In a poster format, explain some form of metamorphosis.

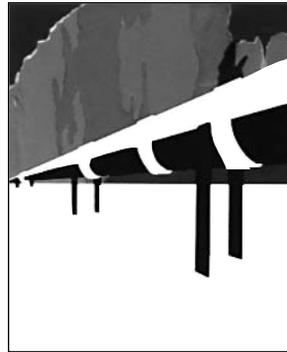
6–8 Metamorphosis

Travel Poster

In a poster format, design a travel poster without words. Incorporate as much information as possible. Should communicate *where, attractions, etc.*

On this and succeeding problems, it works best to have the students put up their solutions, critique them, have a student critique and discussion, and then do them over for the following week. On some of these more complex problems, it may be necessary to put them up for critique more than twice – it is up to the teacher's discretion. It works best to do two or more of the following problems in succession.

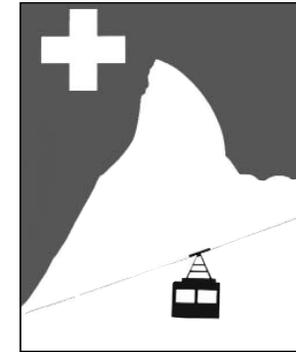
- 1 **Alaska**
- 2 **India**
- 3 **Switzerland**
- 4 **Sydney, Australia**
- 5 **Egypt**
- 6 **Quebec, Canada**
- 7 **Italy**
- 8 **Las Vegas**
- 9 **Japan**



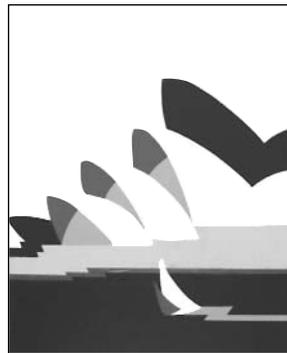
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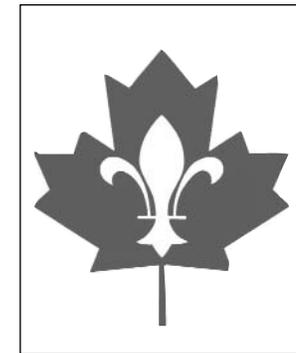
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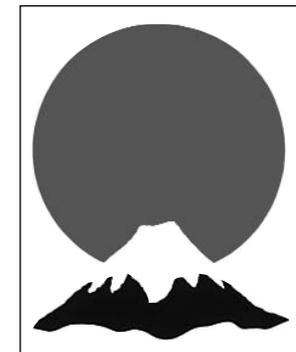
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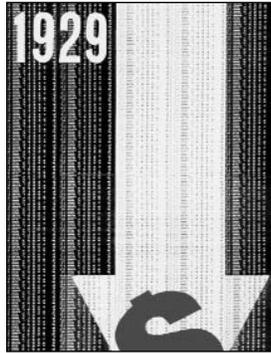
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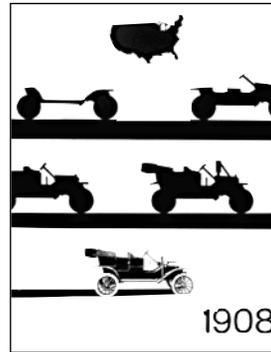
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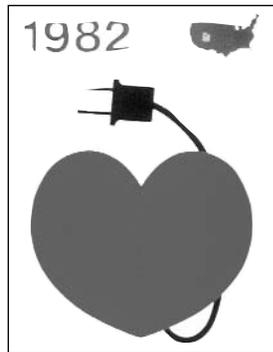
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Historic Event

Choose some historic event, and in a poster format, communicate as much as possible about that event—*where, what, significance, etc.* The date can be incorporated as a design element.

- 1 1929 Stock market crash
- 2 Sinking of Titanic
- 3 Fall of Troy
- 4 First man on the moon
- 5 Wright Brothers first flight
- 6 Ford assembly line
- 7 Hindenburg disaster
- 8 Invention of artificial heart
- 9 Fall of the Third Reich

Visual Communication part III

Symbols

Design symbols for each of the four seasons in abstract forms. Divide a 10-inch square into four equal areas—definition of these areas should not detract from symbols. *Student examples:*

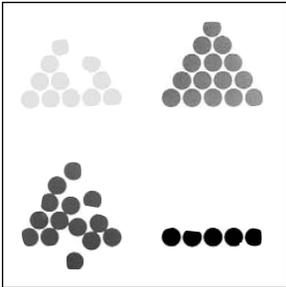
1–3 Nature in abstract forms

Design symbols for each of the four seasons using natural forms.

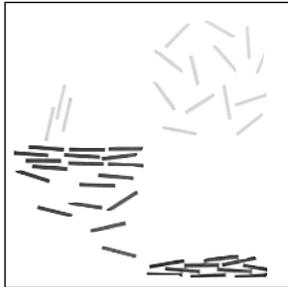
4–6 Nature in natural forms

Design symbols for each of the four seasons in a professional context such as sports—track, baseball, basketball and hockey. Students worked with such professions as photography (aperture openings), nature (according to seasons), insect extermination, etc.

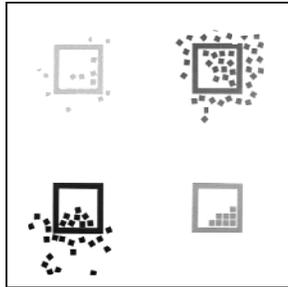
- 7 **Sports**
- 8 **Insect extermination**
- 9 **Photography**



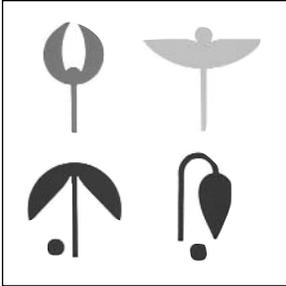
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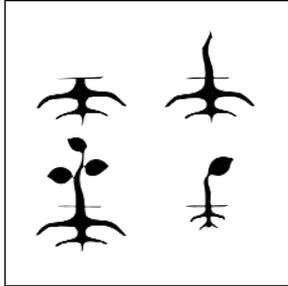
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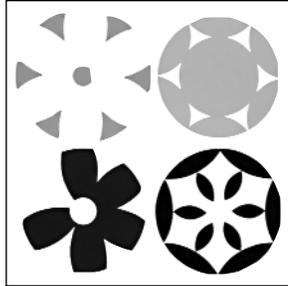
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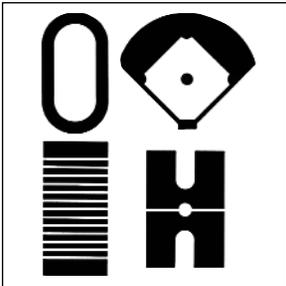
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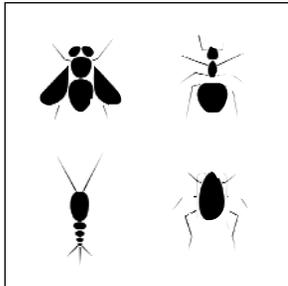
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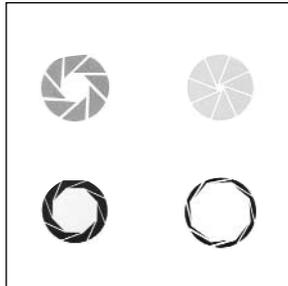
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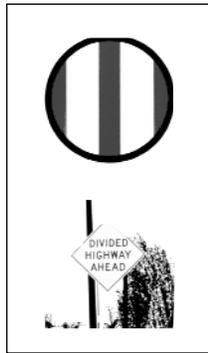
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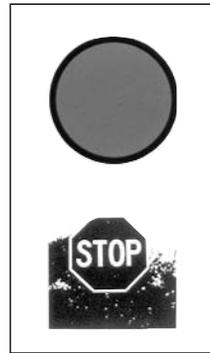
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9



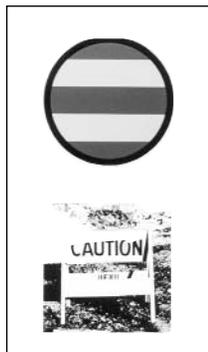
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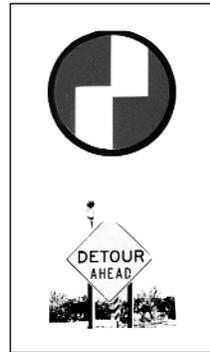
2



3



4



5

On several occasions I gave applied problems in visual communications. One was based on a current program by the *City on Signs That Guide and Protect You*. Another was for television newcasts. It is a common practice to show symbolic images relating to categories of news stories. Students identified several of these situations and developed communication images.

At those schools where Graphic Design incorporated photography and we had facilities, I would give one problem where photographs were used in place of constructed images to communicate specific words.

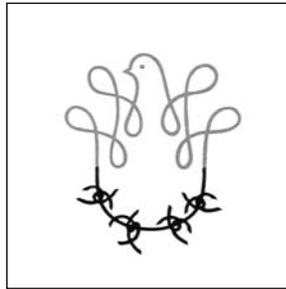
Highway Signs without Words

- 1 **Divided highway**
- 2 **Stop**
- 3 **One way**
- 4 **Caution**
- 5 **Detour ahead**

**Symbols with
Two Communications**

1-3 **Peace and War**

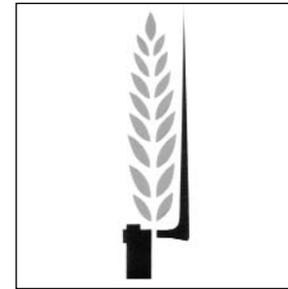
4-5 **Peace and Love**



1



2



3



4



5