



These heart images were collected over a number of years from different sources. I am unable to identify all the authors, however, I can acknowledge the following: Bruce Blackburn, Jerzy Czerniawski, Milton Glaser, David H. Hwang, Al Klenk, Edward Lutczyn and Wolfgang Schmidt.

Speaking of the Heart: Some Annotations

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Cute, symmetrical, red heart-shapes signify love and affection, kindness, care and joy. They are conventional, but unmistakable, a part of no official system of symbols but almost universally understood nonetheless. In many cultures of many periods the heart has been treated with reverence and the idea that it is the essence or soul of the human being is widespread. The countless graphic representations of the heart appear to be inexhaustible, persistently appealing to our collective sense of myth and form. Its trans-cultural acceptance enables designers and other visual artists to breathe new life into the dried husk knowing that the heart symbolism is within common experience.

I ♥ NY

"I love New York" was arguably one of the most ingenious promotional campaigns in recent decades. Modern people are commonly disheartened by the inhuman monotony, facelessness, brutal violence and fast pace of large cities; but here we see a heart, know the acronym, and decipher the logo; we feel warm-hearted and accepting as a consequence. In contemporary "media-scape" the heart symbol can be found on Valentine's and birthday cards; on posters, logos, ads, bumper stickers and wrapping papers; and we impose its shape on anything from candies, cakes, balloons, jewelry to buttons, garments, gift boxes, and even household and furniture items.

For most of us, the real human heart is a terrifying, bloody, pumping muscle that throbs and shudders inside us until the moment when the organ is genetically programmed to break down. It is falsely thought of as the middle of us. It is set askew – nothing symmetrical about it – in our chests, attached to veins and passages that we all must struggle to keep open. In the past, people have thought of hearts as somewhat independent, almost as little beings that are imprisoned within the body, pounding when we are upset. The ancient Greeks speak of the hearts "leaping," "kicking," "swelling," and "jumping out of the chest." By contrast ours today "rise" with hope and "sink" with disappointment. Only when it means well is a "heart in the right place."



The heart remains the innermost core of the personality, the seat of whatever is sincerely felt, meant, and desired. Our hearts have become the seats of compassion, but the main desire, the noblest movement of the heart, we now feel to be love. The verbal language of hearts underscores the physicality of the emotions: we speak of hearts "burning with love," as being "pierced," "wounded," "bleeding," "broken" or "stolen," and people may be "closed" or "open" hearted. Countless painters and other visual artists since the Middle Ages have made metaphors such as this literal.

Visual language, like verbal language, can be a medium of prose or poetry. It is possible to create an image by stringing elements together in a rather loose way as an assembly of marks and symbols. It is not dense and it is not profound. The poster "Stop Aids Now" can exemplify the point. By contrast, we can also arrange symbols in such a way, that they overlap: the image statement is very dense, it captures a plurality of meanings in a small space, and through this density it becomes profound. In a poem, this kind of density creates illumination by making identities between symbols and meanings whose identity we have not understood before. The "Amnesty International" poster qualifies as an example of a visual poem. The connection between the organizations name, the fence with the heart shape and the wide-open landscape behind not only illuminates the symbols but also illuminates our lives and perhaps the way we view political prisoners and existing systems of justice, including our own.

As active players in the politics of daily life that speak from within culture and do not position themselves outside and above it, designers continue to use the heart symbol as a multivalent metaphor, plugging in, as we do as readers, to a very venerable iconographical tradition. The common 'life cycle' shared by all symbols are traceable to three phases, namely invention, maintenance and decline. By making the heart symbol an integral part of a signifying statement, for example by fusing it with other symbols, graphic designers not only serve a clients immediate need to convey a message to a targeted audience. Indirectly, and at the same time, they also evoke the shared bond that exists between people and their cultural symbols, thus renewing, maintaining and frequently expanding their feelings of identification in a common social life.









