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Isotype – representing social relationships pictorially

Abstract:

In developing the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics, Otto Neurath and his colleagues at the Museum of Society and Economy (Vienna) were the first to systematically explore a consistent visual language as part of an encyclopedic approach to representing all aspects of the physical world. The famous pictograms used in the Vienna Method (which came to be known as Isotype) have a secure legacy in today’s public information symbols, but Isotype was more than this: it was designed to communicate social facts memorably to less educated groups, including schoolchildren and workers, reflecting its initial testing ground in the socialist project of “Red Vienna”.

The Vienna museum aimed to enfranchise people by explaining to them how they fitted into the world’s complex of interconnections. The wider potential for international communication was always implicit in Isotype: “Words divide, pictures unite” was one of Neurath’s mottos.

The Isotype team was a forerunner of an interdisciplinary design agency. Academic specialists consulted on raw data to be turned into statistical graphics with the help of cartographers, artists and technicians; but central in this process was a figure named the "transformer", a prototype of the modern information designer, who took raw information and edited it into draft visual form.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the social engagement and methodology of Isotype by focusing on the formative years of its development. One representative example that merits special attention is the atlas of 100 charts, Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft (Society and Economy, 1930). The educational and graphic qualities of such work yield many lessons for information design today.