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INTERVIEWS

## Symbols and Seeing: Mark Fox and Angie Wang in Conversation

*The partners of Design is Play talk about their new book on signs and signifiers.*

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by **Steve Kroeter**

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*Symbols: A Handbook for Seeing by Mark Fox and Angie Wang (The Monacelli Press, 2016). Cover and selection of featured symbols.*

We sat down with [Mark Fox](#) and Angie Wang—designers and educators specializing in trademarks and typography who work as partners in [Design is Play](#)—to talk about their recently published book, [Symbols: A Handbook for Seeing](#) (The Monacelli Press, 2016). In the conversation, Mark and Angie gave their thoughts on sharpening sensory awareness by paying attention to the visual signs in the world around us, symbols across various cultures, and a few of their favorite books on the subject.

**Designers & Books:** The subtitle of the book is “A Handbook for Seeing.” Does this refer specifically to “seeing” symbols—or are you suggesting the use of symbols as a way to attain a more knowing way of seeing generally?

**Mark Fox & Angie Wang:** “Seeing,” as opposed to “looking,” is the crux of all of the classes that we teach at California College of the Arts in San Francisco. One of the strategies we use to get our students to see, to pay attention, is to have them create work by hand in the material world: drawing, inking, cutting paper, composing layouts using xeroxes, etc. (This type of imperfect, analog work invites refinement. The screen environment and its illusion of “finish,” on the other hand, resists refinement.) We have found that, in order to do good work, we must first fall in love with something: an idea, a typeface, a form, a color, a method of reproduction. And in order to fall in love, we must first pay attention.

At its most basic, our book can be understood as an encouragement to pay more attention to the signs and signifiers that populate our world—to fall in love. And yes, we are suggesting that a greater awareness of symbolism will sharpen the senses—and one’s critical faculties. (It has certainly sharpened ours!) Simplistic, binary thinking in a multicultural society is counter-productive at best, and dangerous at worst.

We believe that a knowledge of and appreciation for symbols that carry multiple or even contradictory meanings aids in the maintenance of an open mind. In the introduction to her excellent book [\*An Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols\*](#), J.C. Cooper puts it this way: “Exclusiveness is a primitive and immature characteristic; the symbol is inclusive and expansive.... A symbol may also have both an esoteric and exoteric meaning, so that the most obvious and usual interpretation is not necessarily complete and can be merely a half-truth: it may both reveal and conceal.”

**D&B: How long was the book in the making? How did you divide up the work between the two of you? Was it suggested by your work with your students?**

**MF and AW:** We worked on the book in fits and starts over five years and assumed different roles: Mark conducted written research and is the lead writer; we both contributed visual research; and Angie edited the writing and is the lead designer. We are both practicing graphic designers with a particular love for the mechanisms by which meaning is conveyed. For Mark, this is manifested in his obsession with glyphs, in particular in non-lingual marks. (In our studio practice, Mark specializes in the design of trademarks and icon systems.) For Angie, this is manifested in her lifelong love of languages. Born in Taipei, Taiwan, Angie speaks both Mandarin and English, and majored in Japanese at UC Berkeley. We think that a book exploring symbolism authored by practicing designers brings a unique perspective to an established category. Most books of this nature are not

written from the point of view of an image maker, and we believe that our “curatorial eye” is crucial to the selection of the book’s images. The book showcases symbolic images that are emblematic of different cultures, epochs, and motivations: images and artifacts created to evangelize, control, sell, teach, protest, initiate, and even entertain.

The range of media includes both the “high” and “low:” oil paintings and biscuit packaging, monuments and mass-produced ashtrays. The juxtapositions of images on the page are meant to challenge readers’ assumptions about the breadth of ideas expressed by symbols and as well as the breadth of their forms. A multicultural approach to a book of symbolism is standard; a cross-disciplinary approach, however, is novel—and coincidentally reflects recent trends in exhibition curation at major museums. In a *New York Times* article from December 2015, Ann Temkin, the Museum of Modern Art’s Chief Curator of Painting and Sculpture, is quoted as saying that the museum is “reflecting a more widespread shift from thinking in categories—or thinking in so-called canonical narratives—to thinking about multiple histories. Having a sense of curiosity, rather than a desire for pronouncement.”

**D&B: In your research how much variation have you found in the importance of symbols from culture to culture? Are there cultures that you would characterize as particularly symbol rich and others not so much?**

**MF & AW:** Every culture is rich with symbolism, but the visual forms that these symbols take vary widely according to the forces that shape that culture: among them religion, language, and media. For instance, the traditional Islamic prohibition against creating figurative images—*aniconism*—forced artists to work with abstract forms, including geometric patterning and calligraphy. Our book includes a hexagonal fritware tile from the Ottoman empire that reduces the idea of a tiger and leopard, symbols of fearsome power, to a motif of disembodied stripes and spots. Chinese culture, in contrast, is rich with figurative iconography, but it is perhaps unique in the number of its symbols that originate in the spoken language’s many homophones. One example: in Mandarin the sound *fu* can be understood as both “bat” and “blessing.” The bat is thus a symbol of good luck in China, and it is used in combination with other homophones to convey coded messages of good wishes. A bat (*fu*) shown upside down (*dao*) sounds like the phrase *fu dao*, or “blessings have arrived.”

Technologies of production and reproduction may play a role as well. It is not uncommon for cultures that weave to develop a geometric iconography suited

to the material constraints of fibers on a loom or plant matter in the context of a woven basket. (See the traditional arts of the Berbers of Morocco, the Wixárika of Mexico, and the Navajo of the American Southwest.) The rectilinear forms of the Germanic runic alphabet are due to the fact that runes were originally scratched or carved in wood, and not written with a brush or broad nib pen on parchment.

**D&B: For someone interested in knowing more about the importance and meaning of symbols can you recommend a few books, in addition to your own?**

**MF & AW:** The aforementioned [\*Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Traditional Symbols\*](#), first published in 1978. Its concision makes it an indispensable introduction to symbolism. We also recommend [\*The Complete Dictionary of Symbols\*](#), edited by Jack Tresidder, and [\*The Penguin Dictionary of Symbols\*](#), edited by Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant. Books of symbolism with a specific focus—Aztec and Mayan iconography, Celtic coins, Berber carpets, Egyptian hieroglyphics, Japanese shunga prints—can be found in our book’s bibliography.

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