

We Tried a Universal Icon Language in 1925. It Did Not Work Then Either.

Isotype is the most serious picture language anyone ever built. Its own inventor kept the words.

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Isotype = a picture language built in Vienna from 1925, to explain statistics to people who could not read a table.

The problem: every couple of years a team strips the labels off its own toolbar and calls the result clean. That argument has already been run, with real money and decades behind it, and it closed the other way.

The people who spent twenty years building a picture language never once suggested you remove the words.

What Isotype Settled, a Century Early



The meeting where everyone agrees the icons are obvious, and nobody agrees on which one is which.

1. It Was Not a Side Project

What happened: Otto Neurath started it at the Social and Economic Museum in Vienna in 1925. The artist Gerd Arntz joined in 1928 and cut the pictograms. Neurath set the whole method out in a 1936 book, *International Picture Language*, written in the 850 words of Basic English.

Why it matters: This is the best-funded version of the icon-only case anyone has ever attempted. The working archive sits at the University of Reading, and the Wien Museum gave it a full show that ran from November 2025 to April 2026. If the idea worked, it would have worked here.

2. Its Best Rule Is Still the Right Rule

What happened: To show more of something, Isotype repeated the same small figure. It never drew a bigger one.

Use it: Size is ambiguous. Did you double the height, or the area? Counting is not ambiguous. Every good unit chart since has copied this, and most bubble charts still get it wrong.

3. The Slogan Oversold the Method

What happened: Neurath's line was "Words divide, pictures unite". That is the quote designers repeat.

What he actually did: Robin Kinross, writing about that 1936 book, puts it flatly. "Words are never banished. Pictures are there to help." Isotype was a helping language. The panels carry labels, keys and sentences. Designers took the slogan and left the labels behind.

4. Even Regulated, Tested Icons Miss

What happened: Safety symbols are the most tested pictograms on earth. ISO 3864 asks only that 67 percent of people read one correctly. ANSI Z535.3 asks for 85 percent.

What the numbers say: A 2023 study in Heliyon showed 22 ISO 7010 signs to 139 factory workers. Only 59 percent of those signs cleared the 67 percent bar. A 2022 study of 73 Philippine traffic signs found 27 of them failed the same bar. These are symbols people are trained on and legally tested on.

5. Your Toolbar Has It Worse

What happened: Those signs have a standard, a test programme and a driving exam behind them. Your icon has a Figma library and a Tuesday.

Why it fails: Nielsen Norman Group counts home, print and the magnifying glass as close to universal. That is roughly the whole list. In one of their studies a clock icon opened recently visited pages, and not a single participant clicked it.

6. Ship the Label

Ship instead: Icon plus a visible text label, on by default, never on hover. Hover does not exist on a phone, and on a desktop it charges the reader a move they did not agree to. If the label will not fit, the problem is the layout, not the label.

What Got Borrowed, and What Got Dropped

ISOTYPE DID THIS	DESIGNERS KEPT	DESIGNERS DROPPED
Repeat a unit, never resize it	The look of unit charts	The honesty of counting
Pictures beside words, always	The pictures	The words
One meaning per symbol, enforced	Symbol sets	The enforcement
Tested on the public, in a museum	Nothing	The testing

The Audit

Open your product and run this on your icon row.

1. Cover the labels. Can a new colleague name every icon? If not, which ones did they guess?
2. Does any icon in your set mean two things in two places? That is the heart and star problem.
3. Is any label hover-only? Then on mobile it does not exist.
4. Is there an icon nobody has ever clicked? That is a feature you paid for and hid.

Neurath had a museum, an artist, a government and twenty years. He still wrote the words underneath. You have a sprint.

Checked against

Read on 9 October 2026.

- Eye Magazine, Robin Kinross on Otto Neurath's International Picture Language: Isotype began at the Vienna Social and Economic Museum in 1925, Gerd Arntz joined in 1928, the 1936 book was written in the 850 words of Basic English, the slogan was 'Words divide, pictures unite', and 'Words are never banished. Pictures are there to help.'
- Wien Museum, Knowledge for All: ISOTYPE, the Picture Language from Vienna. Exhibition ran 6 November 2025 to 5 April 2026; Neurath founded the Museum of Society and Economics, worked with Marie Reidemeister and Gerd Arntz, and the archive is the Otto and Marie Neurath Isotype Collection at the University of Reading.
- Nielsen Norman Group, Icon Usability: universal icons are rare (home, print, magnifying glass), most icons stay ambiguous, a clock icon in one study was clicked by no participant, and a visible text label should always be included.
- Heliyon (2023), Safety sign comprehension of fiberboard industry employees: 22 ISO 7010 signs tested on 139 workers, only 59.1 percent of the signs reached the 67 percent comprehension score that ISO 3864 sets as acceptable; ANSI Z535.3-2022 asks for 85 percent.
- Applied Sciences (2022), Traffic Sign Comprehension among Filipino Drivers and Nondrivers: 27 of the 73 traffic signs tested did not meet the 67 percent comprehension standard set by ISO 3864-1:2011.