ABSTRACTION

Abstraction is a process of distilling general qualities from specific, concrete examples. To abstract something is to extract its essence without concern for literal depiction or imitation.

So common is abstraction in the contemporary visual environment that we often forget how adept we are at reading it. In an email message we come across a semicolon, followed by a dash, and then a closing parenthesis. Rather than reading these as misplaced punctuation marks, we recognize them as a small winking face, shorthand for an emotion. It takes only these three tiny marks, properly sequenced, to communicate a complex human emotion, illustrated through a distinct facial gesture. Emoticons substitute for intangibles (humor, irony, sadness) that are characteristic of human interaction and their use in text-based electronic communication is a study in creative abstraction.

Paleolithic cave paintings, such as those at Lascaux, France, include three types of signs: animals, human figures, and abstract symbols. Scholars offer a variety of interpretations for these symbols ranging from star maps, to visions seen during hallucinations, to predictions of successful hunts with abstracted wounds expressing the danger of various animals. In any case, it is likely that Stone Age humans were able to process their life experiences through abstract forms that went beyond imitation of the way things looked. It is notable that no geographic features or vegetation appear in the paintings, making it likely that the forms were more than a physical record of the environment and instead had spiritual significance.

Figure 5.12
Library of Congress logo Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv Sagi Haviv
The Library of Congress logo abstracts a book and the American flag. While the objects are recognizable, they are simplified to essential characteristics.

Abstraction, therefore, is an overall reduction in the physical information about an object or concept that still carries the meaning of the thing or idea. Avant-garde artists and designers used abstract form to break with conventions. They recognized the twentieth century as

significantly different from previous times and sought a visual language that expressed the concerns of a new age. Nineteenth-century art relied on illusionary techniques for representing depth in space and nostalgic subject matter (pastoral landscapes and heroic portraits) that seemed at odds with the social unrest of the new century and the technological advances made possible by the Industrial Revolution. In contrast, modern artists and designers advocated the direct experience of abstract form (purely geometric compositions, for example), unencumbered by artistic conventions such as perspective and style. They also rejected content that suggested the individual circumstances of the artist in favor of simple abstract forms thought to rise above any specific cultural experience. The Futurists, for example, used abstract symbols, letterforms, and diacritical marks—the marks over and under letters that tell us how to pronounce something—to visualize the mechanical sound patterns of factory machines. And Bauhaus designers created an abstract visual vocabulary in products, architecture, and communication that expressed German industrial prowess and modern manufacturing as the country recovered economically from World War I.

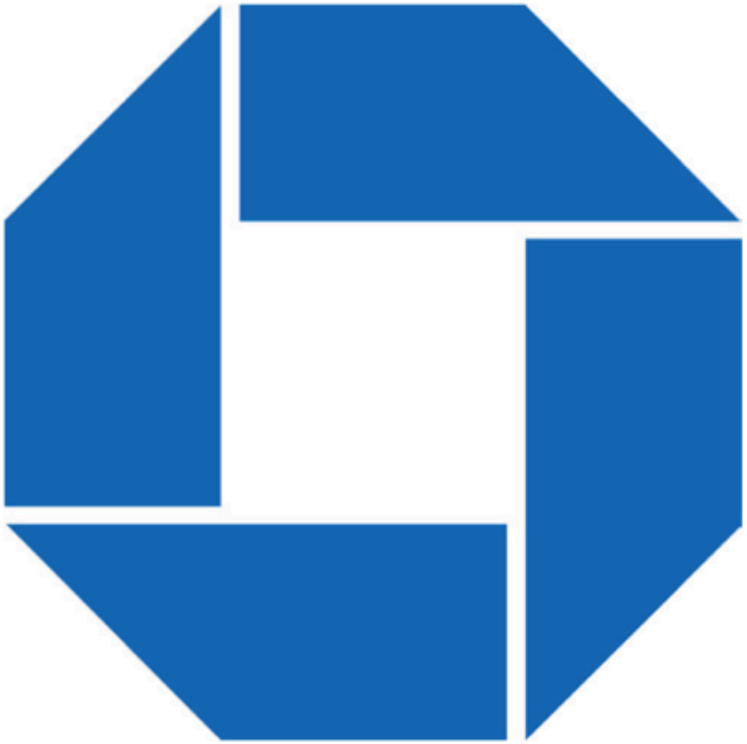

Figure 5.13
Chase Bank logo, 1961 Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv Tom Geismar
The Chase logo is one of the earliest purely abstract logos that made no tangible reference to an object or person. Throughout the twentieth century, such logos purported to embody the qualities of the organizations they represent. As the number of these logos proliferated it became difficult to differentiate one from another if not supported by a careful campaign to associate the mark with the company.

In these and other modernist movements throughout the first half of the twentieth century, artists and designers used abstract form in an attempt to achieve universal meaning, independent of particular cultural knowledge for its interpretation.

Since the twentieth century, abstraction has been the formal basis of communication strategy in more than one sense. First, there is abstraction in the use of a symbol or logo to represent all the things a company or organization does; the very idea of logos and corporate identity is an abstraction. Second, there is abstraction in the form of the logo, which not only represents the company and its activities but also the character of the organization. Some logos are *iconic*; they physically resemble the things they stand for. Chermayeff & Geismar & Haviv's logo for the Library of Congress not only signifies that the agency deals with books, but also evokes the American flag as a reference to its role as the nation's library (Figure 5.12).

On the other hand, the firm's logo design for Chase Manhattan Bank bears no obvious resemblance to banks or banking (Figure 5.13). As one of the earliest modernist symbols for an American corporation, its abstract form communicated the forward-thinking attributes of the company, a message that had to be learned over time by customers.

For a number of years, information designer Nicholas Felton abstracted his life in annual reports. With the cool objectivism of a corporation, Felton converted personal experiences into abstract representations of data including miles traveled, beverages consumed, and trips to the movies (Figure 5.14). Other years' reports recorded the number of Felton's face-to-face conversations, letters sent by mail, books read, and photographs taken. Numbers, in this case, are an abstract representation of a rich and complex life.

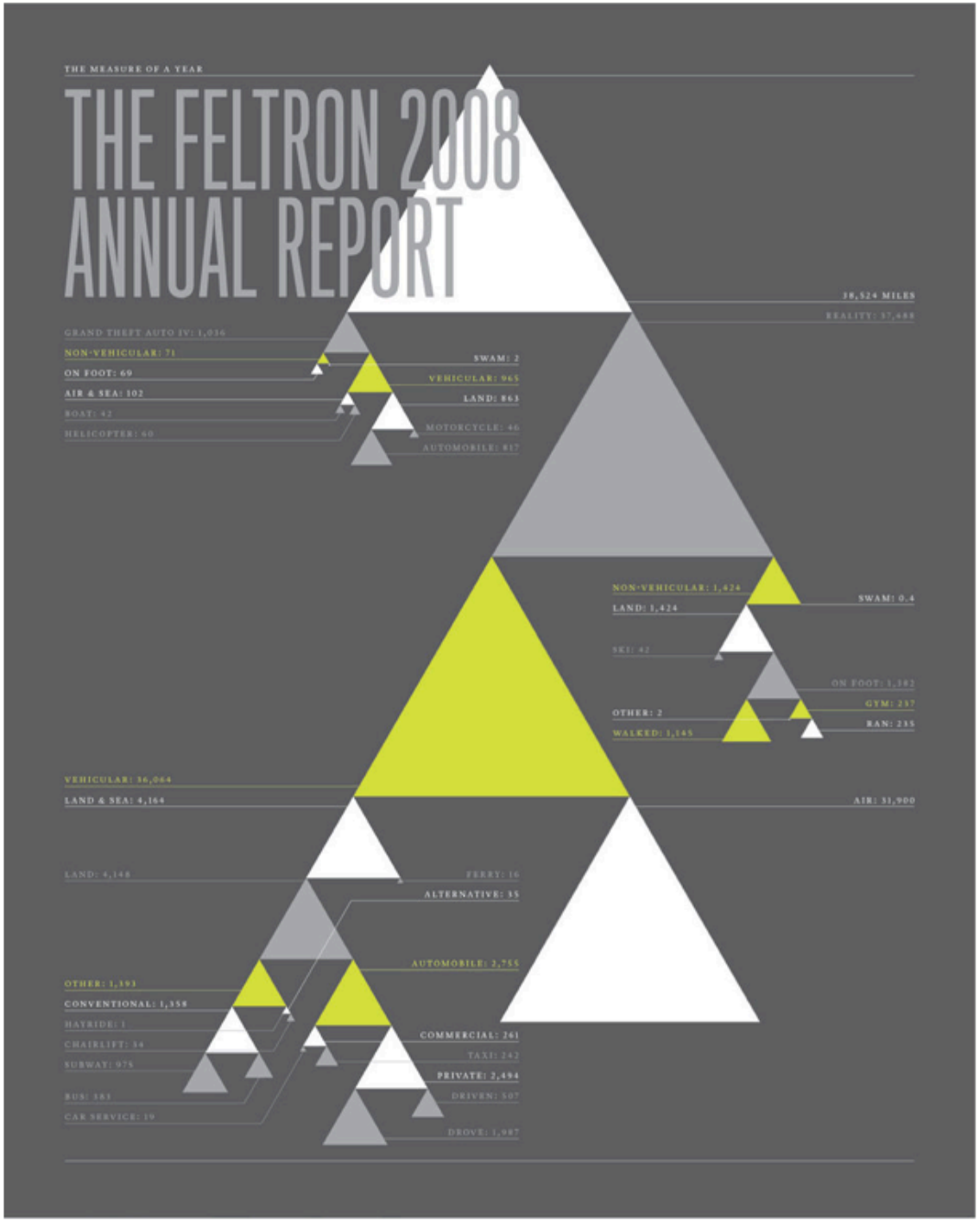
THE MEASURE OF A YEAR
THE FELTRON 2008 ANNUAL REPORT
38,524 MILES
REALITY: 37,488
GRAND THEFT AUTO IV: 1,036
NON-VEHICULAR: 71
ON FOOT: 69
AIR & SEA: 102
BOAT: 42
HELICOPTER: 60
SWAM: 2
VEHICULAR: 965
LAND: 863
MOTORCYCLE: 46
AUTOMOBILE: 817
NON-VEHICULAR: 1,424
LAND: 1,424
SKI: 42
SWAM: 0.4
ON FOOT: 1,382
GYM: 237
OTHER: 2
WALKED: 1,145
RAN: 235
VEHICULAR: 36,064
LAND & SEA: 4,164
AIR: 31,900
LAND: 4,148
FERRY: 16
ALTERNATIVE: 35
AUTOMOBILE: 2,755
OTHER: 1,393
CONVENTIONAL: 1,358
HAYRIDE: 1
CHAIRLIFT: 34
SUBWAY: 975
BUS: 383
CAR SERVICE: 19
COMMERCIAL: 261
TAXI: 242
PRIVATE: 2,494
DRIVEN: 507
DROVE: 1,987

Figure 5.14
Feltron 2008 Annual Report © Nicholas Felton
Information graphic designer Felton designed personal annual reports that documented the content of his year of life. The reports abstracted the richness of everyday life as "data."

In simplifying or reducing something in the world down to a pictorial essence, abstract symbols and images can lead to more efficient communication. A small mark can stand in for a much larger entity (such as the golden arches standing in for the transnational corporation McDonald's) or intangible concepts not easily represented as pictures. Not all abstractions are universally understood. It is incumbent upon the designer to make sure that the use of an abstraction does not limit the overall effectiveness of the message.