

ISOTYPE

International picture language

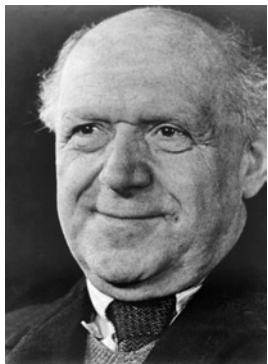
ISOTYPE

(International System Of TYpographic Picture Education) was a method for assembling, configuring and disseminating information and statistics through pictorial means.

Its initiator, Otto Neurath, described it as a 'language-like technique' characterised by consistency in the use of graphic elements. The basic elements are pictograms – simplified pictures of people or things, designed to function as repeatable units.

From its beginnings in Vienna of the 1920s, Isotype spread to the Netherlands, Britain, the Soviet Union, the United States and elsewhere. Its potential for communicating with people of all ages and nationalities was explored in a wide range of projects and publications through the 1960s.

The story of Isotype presents a case study of the Modern Movement. It also reveals a pioneering method of visual communication that has exerted an undeniable influence on the design of information.



Otto Neurath, the leading figure of Isotype, was a polymath whose lifetime of work encompassed political economy, sociology, philosophy, urbanism and visual communication. He was founding director of the Social and Economic Museum of Vienna.



Marie Neurath was the principal Isotype 'Transformer', a role that prefigured the modern information designer. In the 1950s and 1960s she became a prolific author (as well as designer) of children's books on science and history subjects.



Gerd Arntz gave Isotype its distinctive graphic style. He went to work at the Social and Economic Museum of Vienna in 1928 and established the linocut as the museum's means for producing pictograms.

(Photograph by Wolf Suschitzky)

Society and economy

Isotype was forged in the optimism of the first Austrian Republic. It was developed from 1924 at the Social and Economic Museum of Vienna, where it was first called the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics.

The Social and Economic Museum was funded by the Social Democratic municipality of Vienna and shared its socialist agenda. It was not what is usually thought of as a museum: its director Otto Neurath stated that instead of a treasure chest of rare objects, it should be a teaching museum. The principal exhibits were charts made with the Vienna Method in order to 'represent social facts pictorially', as a way of communicating with both young people and adults.

The museum had a global-historical outlook, which it explored in publications designed to show the world's complex economic interconnections.

Sociological graphics

The Social and Economic Museum of Vienna employed three graphic artists connected with the 'Group of Progressive Artists' centred in Cologne: Gerd Arntz, Peter Alma and Augustin Tschinkel. Shown here is a small selection of 'free work' by these three artists and by Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, the Cologne group's leading figure. The museum collected work of this kind as part of a larger archive of 'visual education', entitling it 'sociological graphics'.

Gerd Arntz recognised influences ranging from Greek vase painting to French Purism. In contrast to the abstraction of Russian Constructivism, he described his own work as 'figurative constructivism'. This naturally suited the purposes of the Vienna Method of Pictorial Statistics, which required simplified icons that made clear connections to physical objects.

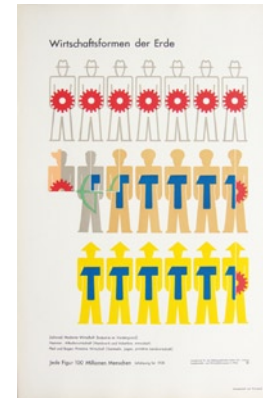
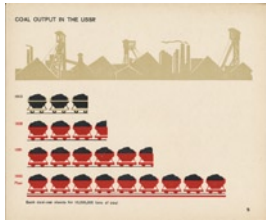


Chart from *Gesellschaft und Wirtschaft* (Society and Economy). 1930. Titled 'Economic forms of the Earth'.



Franz W. Seiwert, 'Helft der Internationale Arbeiter-Hilfe' (Help the Workers International Relief). 1924.

Picturing Soviet progress



Charts from *The Struggle for Five Years in Four*. 1932.

In 1931 Otto Neurath helped the Soviet authorities establish an institute of pictorial statistics in Moscow. It was named the 'All-Union Institute of Pictorial Statistics of Soviet Construction and Economy' or, more commonly, the Izostat Institute.

Over the next three years, Neurath and his colleagues, most notably Gerd Arntz, spent many months in Moscow training Russians in the Vienna Method and simplifying the design of Soviet pictorial statistics. The main task of the Izostat Institute was to communicate the claimed economic and social achievements of the Soviet Union to a mass audience. The institute produced charts in Russian and other European languages, and also created displays for Soviet holidays and celebrations.

In 1934, the working relationship between the Soviet government and Otto Neurath broke down. The Izostat Institute remained active until 1940, though its work no longer adhered to Vienna Method principles.

Around Rembrandt

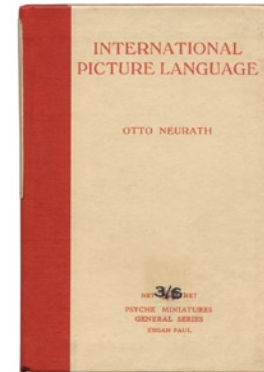
Around Rembrandt (*Rondom Rembrandt*) was the first Isotype exhibition about art. It was innovative in several ways: it did not include original artworks but instead examined the historical background and social context of Rembrandt's work; and it was not housed in a museum or art gallery but instead was shown simultaneously in three branches of a Dutch department store in 1938.

The idea for the exhibition occurred to Marie Neurath when, as a visitor to a major exhibition of Rembrandt's paintings, she was struck by how little had been done to help the public understand them. In *Around Rembrandt* techniques such as colour coding and interactive apparatuses were employed to make the subject appealing and understandable to the diverse audience found in a department store.



Booklet of the exhibition *Around Rembrandt*. 1938.

Basic texts



Cover of *International Picture Language*. 1936.

One of the first projects undertaken by the Isotype team after moving to The Hague was a book explaining their method, *International Picture Language*. It was written by Otto Neurath in collaboration with Marie Neurath. The text was composed in Basic English, a stripped-down version of English with a vocabulary of only 850 words. The book was commissioned as part of a series of texts rendered in Basic by its inventor Charles Kay Ogden.

Isotype and Basic English were both methods of reducing statements to essentials, with the common aim of separating the descriptive from the emotive functions of language. The acronym Isotype (International System of TYPographic Picture Education) was formed by analogy with Basic (British American Scientific International Commercial). A second book, *Basic by Isotype*, pursued the parallels between Isotype and Basic English.

Health, knowledge and modern man

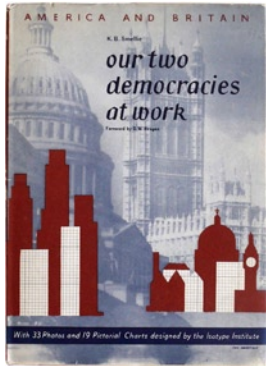
During its years in the Netherlands, the Isotype team developed strong links with the United States and carried out several major commissions for clients there. The director of the National Tuberculosis Association visited The Hague to seek Otto Neurath's advice. From this, there developed a close collaboration on visual material for health education. A similarly fruitful relationship developed with the Chicago publishers of *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia*.

In 1933, Neurath proposed a book about the 'pilgrimage of man' to New York publisher Alfred A. Knopf. This was agreed to during one of Neurath's visits to the US in the late 1930s. The result was *Modern Man in the Making*, a book in which Isotype charts are closely integrated with the text. Neurath considered it to be his masterpiece.



Chart from *Compton's Pictured Encyclopedia*. 1939.

War and the home front

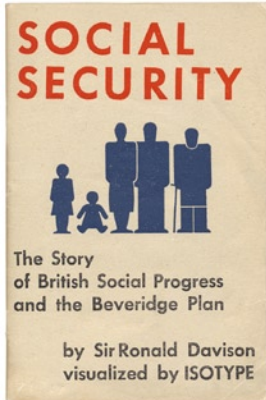


Jacket of *Our Two Democracies at Work*. 1944.

In 1940, Otto and Marie Neurath arrived in Britain, having fled the Nazi invasion of the Netherlands. They were interned as ‘enemy aliens’ before settling in Oxford in early 1941. There they set up the Isotype Institute and for the remainder of the war contributed to books and films of ‘soft propaganda’ sponsored by the Ministry of Information.

In collaboration with the book packaging company Adprint, the Isotype Institute produced charts for two book series intended to promote mutual understanding between Britain and its wartime allies, the Soviet Union and the United States. The Isotype Institute also produced animated charts for 17 documentary films directed by Paul Rotha, including *A Few Ounces a Day* (1941), *World of Plenty* (1943) and *Land of Promise* (1945).

Explaining a new society

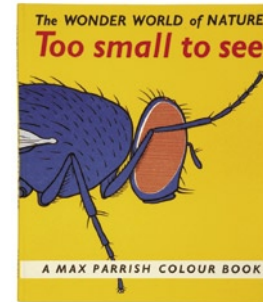


Cover of *Social Security*. 1943.

In Britain, from the early 1940s, Isotype reconnected with the issues of social welfare and planning that had been integral to its development in Vienna. One of its tasks was to visualise information about the budding welfare state. This meant that during the Second World War, Otto and Marie Neurath were entrusted with secret documents only two years after their release from internment.

After the war, the Isotype Institute completed further work in this area, including a series of charts about the newly established National Health Service and contributions to the ‘New Democracy’ series of books examining issues of post-war social reconstruction.

Knowledge for young people



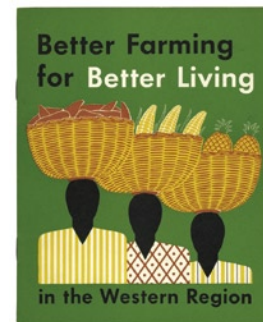
Cover of *Too Small to See*. 1956.

Otto Neurath began working on books for children in the 1940s for the London-based book packaging company Adprint. Many of his ideas were drawn from his childhood experience and memories, and from his views on visual education. He believed that children benefited from pictures that encouraged them to look, compare and reach their own conclusions.

After Otto Neurath’s death in 1945, Marie Neurath continued this work, and under her direction the Isotype Institute produced many series of books for children. These show Marie Neurath’s ability to identify unusual relationships between things and ideas, and to analyse and then synthesise complex information into manageable chunks.

Her approach to making child-friendly visual explanations relied on teamwork, consultation with readers and dialogue with subject experts.

Isotype beyond the West



Cover of *Better Farming for Better Living*. 1955.

Despite the repeated claims made for Isotype’s international effectiveness, very few opportunities arose to test it in the developing, non-Western world. An exception was the Isotype Institute’s work in British colonial West Africa. Between 1953 and 1958, a variety of projects were completed in Sierra Leone, Nigeria and the Gold Coast (Ghana), countries then moving towards independence.

In Nigeria, projects were commissioned by the Western Regional Government. Its programme of social betterment included free health care and primary education, the modernisation of agriculture and infrastructure, and universal enfranchisement.

To help explain its programme to the people, among whom there were many semi- and illiterate children and adults, the government turned to the Isotype Institute. Working in partnership with Buffalo Books, a subsidiary of Adprint, the Isotype Institute produced visual materials adapted to local needs.

Before Isotype



'Modesty' rebus card. 1791.

Throughout his life Otto Neurath collected historical graphic material. Ranging in date from the 17th to the 20th century, the collection includes both printed and original works of art, as well as maps, city plans, battle scenes, educational toys, plates from encyclopaedias and much else. Neurath explicitly considered some items as precursors of Isotype, while others probably appealed to him for their simplified graphic style alone.

Little is known about when or where Neurath acquired this material. Some of the maps, plans and battle scenes were collected before 1940 in Vienna or The Hague. Other items, many with an educational bias, were probably purchased in Oxford and London after 1940. Neurath intended to use some of this material to illustrate his visual autobiography *From Hieroglyphics to Isotype*.

Acknowledgements



University of
Reading

Isotype: international picture language is a V&A display in collaboration with the University of Reading, Department of Typography & Graphic Communication.

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