

A foot



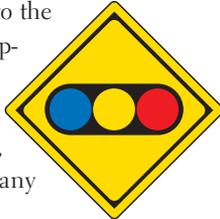
Shopping street near where the author once lived. Notice the “billboard” high up on the telephone pole as well as the eye level advertising sign with the blue-green box that notifies people of the local address.

in two worlds

Seeing the familiar with a different set of eyes

by Steve Long

A long term foreign resident of Japan has just recently returned from an extended visit to the States. He is sitting in traffic at a Tokyo stop-light. The light changes but the cars ahead don't move. An old instinct re-asserts itself as he hits the horn and shouts, "Oi! Kimi! The light's not going to get any bluer, you know!"



Bluer?

BLUE MEANS "GO"

In Japan, the traffic lights are *Aka* (red), *Kiiri* (yellow) and *Ao* (blue)—actually the blue is more of a blue-green. This color carries over to the emergency exit signs, large blue-green rectangles with large Japanese Kanji and English or a large pictogram of a person running through an open door. Let's consider for a moment the color of exit signs in North America. The color red typically means "stop" and "danger", except in the case of our little red North American emergency exit signs where the color means "go" and "safety." Two different cultures, two different solutions to the same problem.

Traffic lights and exit signs came to mind as I prepared for a return visit to Japan this past summer. From 1981 to 1996 I spent more than ten years living, studying and working side by side with Japanese people, primarily involved in the modern theater arts. On my return to the U.S., I was fortunate enough to be introduced to the creative and relatively more profitable world of computer graphics.

So, with my trusty Olympus XA-2 in hand, I now decided to take a look at a familiar world with different eyes.

Because of my work with professional theater groups, I am aware that each group has someone responsible for the design of all four-color printed flyers and brochures. I know that this person hands the design off to a service bureau, but I don't know much beyond that. This trip was too short to delve into that world so I'm left with showing what



The text version of the *Ao* Japanese emergency exit signs (above right) can be found in older public buildings. The pictograph version (lower right) is found in newer structures like Narita Airport.

things look like on the outside and hoping that a Japanese creative in the field of graphic arts will fill us in on what's going on behind the scenes.

I was, however, able to get a peek at how Japanese graphics services operate. While out on one of my errands, I came across what could best be described as a storefront service bureau, called a “Communication Plaza” by this chain of print service providers. The employees probably thought it strange to see this foreigner walking in, descending on their information pamphlets, leafing through the magazines in the waiting area.

Among the pamphlets I collected was a price list detailing a wide range of services. The price list also had some English sentences on the front cover to promote their company.

English in Japan is a curious thing. It's something the Japanese must learn in school, even though the world immediately around them speaks Japanese. In Japan, English grammar tests are among the battery of paper tests that stand in the way of attending the high school of your choice (required education in Japan finishes at the end of ninth grade) as well as university. At the same time, because everybody is familiar with English, the language serves as a design element in products and product advertising.

I'll never forget walking down a major street in my early days in Japan and seeing a woman walking in the opposite direction

wearing a white T-shirt with the word “MILK” emblazoned across the chest in giant letters. Or a little girl wearing a white polo shirt with the words “Lusty Bunny” in petite pink embroidered lettering just above the pocket.

Notebooks and pencil cases, *bento* (lunch) boxes, cases for *hashi* (chopsticks), and bags of all sorts display English phrases or even full paragraphs. The English runs the gamut from “stream of consciousness” collections of words to sentences that come across as almost normal. It would be interesting to learn something about the how and why of English usage in Japanese graphic design and how that has changed with the addition of English alphabet web addresses in advertising.

The English alphabet is also used for Japanese magazine names like DTP World, the magazine that I found in that service bureau's waiting area. The magazine was available at major bookstores, so I was able to get a copy and take a leisurely look at what's on the mind of graphic arts professionals in Japan. Slightly shorter than A4 size and 184 pages long, what struck me first about the magazine were the various listings at the back—almost 300 service bureaus (including branches of chains), more than 100



CANON TO THE LEFT, CANON TO THE RIGHT

Two hour commutes are not unusual for those working in central Tokyo. In the 90s they introduced cars with wider doors and seats that fold up during ‘crush’ hour to provide more standing room.

Whether crowded or relatively empty (as in the picture at right), trains give advertisers lots of opportunity to entice you with their services or products. Six to eight rows of glossy paper advertising hang down the center of the car, changed weekly or even more frequently. Ads above the luggage racks are made of a heavier paper and meant to be in place for longer periods of time; paper and sticker ads occupy the ends of cars, with their “Priority Seats” for the old, pregnant or disabled in silver-colored fabric. More ads are displayed above, around, and even right on the doors as shown in the photo below.



DTP schools (also including branches), and long lists of photo libraries and print shops.

Being a dynamic language, Japanese adds new words over time as the society or particular industries change. Words that come from outside Japanese are *katakanized*—processed through the Japanese syllable system—and then may be shortened. For example, with the continuing Japanese economic crisis, the word *risutora* appeared in the language, its origin being our word “restructuring”—and it carries exactly the same meaning of “layoffs”.

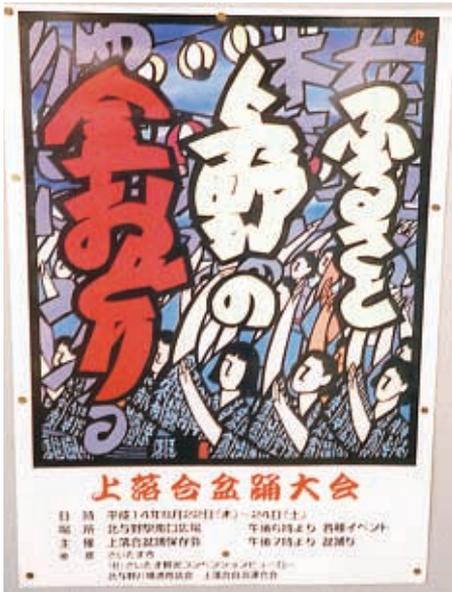
In going through the table of contents in DTP World, the word creation process created occasional confusion. One column was titled *Biba!*, *Irasutoreitaa* which translated becomes “Viva! Illustrator”. Another title referred to *Q* (the letter), which turned out to be *QuarkXPress* (version 4.1). One word in another title stumped me completely, but the meaning was obvious from the contents of the article which referred to a collection of tips and tricks for graphic designers—suggestions such as using *Flash* in concert with *Illustrator* to turn a photo into an illustration, or using colored cellophane on top of photographs to create color ef-

fects at the scanner. The tips used all the big guns—*Flash*, *Illustrator*, *Photoshop*, *QuarkXPress*, as well as *Streamline*. Another article translated as “Let’s Give *InDesign 2* a Try!”

With English column heads like “*Illustrator MANIAX*” and translated article titles like “*Diary of My Fight with Fonts*” and “*The Woman Trapped in Ice is Hoping for Rescue*” (an article on how to create that image using *Photoshop 7*), there was a sense of fun that continued in the highly informative content.

THE NAIL THAT STICKS OUT... MEANS YOU’LL ALWAYS FIND YOUR CAR KEYS

The phrase is actually, “The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Those who have had long term dealings with the Japanese have probably heard the phrase more than once, and it would seem to support the stereotypes that some have of the Japanese as a completely group-oriented, uncreative, even humorless society. I spent one year out of my ten in Japan working for a real Japanese company, and I can see how our limited exposure to the world of Japanese business would seem to support our stereotypes.



LEISURELY LOOK

Visitors on business are busy with the task that sent them to the other side of the world. Tourists are busy getting lost. Here’s a chance to visit and take a closer look at the different kinds of advertising that surround visitor and native alike on trains and in train stations.

Which of the ads pictured here is designed to:

- encourage summer train travel?
- advertise a sports drink?
- advertise the summer lottery?
- advertise a local festival?
- promote awareness of and encourage action to prevent the unauthorized use of one’s portrait on the Internet?

(Answers below)



(clockwise from upper right) Sports drink, Summer Train, Stop Unauthorized Use of Portraits, Summer Lottery, Festival.

Fortunately I spent most of my time in the presence of creatives (including children) and developed a different sense of what that phrase is about.

I remember that sometime in the early 90s there was an explosion of CGI on television and in print ads. Regular cell animation programs were using CGI for spaceships and special effects. The national public broadcasting network had a children's program that combined regular cell animation, CGI and live actors. At least two characters in this program appeared both in regular cell animation form in a cell animated world and as CGI characters interacting with human beings in a 3D world. Game shows and celebrity talk shows were sprouting animated CGI mascots that would take the program to commercial and bring it back. Beloved 2D comic book characters were now appearing in print and TV

OUT STANDING When asked about my first impressions of Japan, I always mention the shock of seeing all the American fast food and convenience stores. Among these imports, the Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises stand out—literally—with their larger-than-life statues of Colonel Sanders (below left) placed in front of each store. Usually he has a cane, not a “Help Wanted” sign, and at Christmas he sports a Santa Claus hat. The Colonel joins a (fortunately) short line of statues and other objects that take up space on the narrow sidewalks, advertising the presence of a particular shop. Among these are Pekko-chan (top right), the trademark character for Fujiya confectionery shops (her dress changes with the seasons), and the Tanuki (bottom right), always the sign of a place to eat, drink and be merry.



CGI characters which could have appeared as mascots (clip art from DesignEXchange's Gu Mantan Designer Library Series.)



ads in 3D form. It was as if Japanese graphic artists had a new toy and wanted to see what they could do with it.

“The nail that sticks out gets hammered down.” Truth is, where a “nail” is threatening or dangerous, any culture will move to get rid of it somehow. The knee-jerk reaction suggested by the phrase assumes that everyone different is

beaten down. My experience leads me to believe otherwise. I get the feeling that in the case of neutral or beneficial “nails”, society expects the “nail” to hammer itself in. There will be an initial period of significant pressure to comply, followed by a willingness to wait for the individual to come to his or her senses over the matter.

While waiting, the society is quite happy to take advantage of any benefits the “nail” offers, until it hammers itself in—which, in the case of many creatives, never happens.

Quite early on in my time in Japan I got the feeling that within Japanese creatives there is a very strong sense of “I can do nothing other than this.” This internal “push” counters the external pressure to conform. Those who can tolerate the situation stay in Japan, band together with like-minded others, and create. The benefits of this work slowly spreads throughout the society.

However, this particular view is from the outside. A Japanese creative in Japan might have a different view of what's going on and why.

It's amazing what happens when you see the world with a different set of eyes. Even things to which you have become accustomed reveal new meaning, like the fact that in North America, under certain conditions, red means not “stop” but “go.”

Enjoy the view. 🍵

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