

The background of the entire image is a photograph of a rock wall covered in ancient, reddish-brown paintings. These paintings depict various animals, including several large bulls or aurochs, a few horses, and a human figure in a dynamic, dancing pose. The rock surface is uneven and textured, with cracks and variations in color from light tan to dark brown.

Sensational Symbols



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From ancient paintings to emojis, humans have used symbols to communicate with one another for thousands of years.



If someone asked you to think about the most important ways humans communicate with one another, speaking and writing would probably be at the top of your list. After all, we use these methods every single day! But if you've ever drawn a stick figure, sent someone a smiley face emoji, or even flashed a thumbs-up, then you've used another very important communication tool: visual symbols!

Ancient Art

Experts think that the first written languages may have appeared about 5,000 years ago. However, the origins of writing go back much, much further than that! Long before there was writing—in fact, at least 40,000 years before—ancient humans around the world were creating paintings. This was during the Ice Age, when the Earth's climate was much colder and the world was covered in thick ice sheets called glaciers. The paintings, often done on cave walls, were made using natural colors found in charcoal, clay, soil, and rocks. They featured images and symbols of animals, the world, and activities such as hunting. They also may have included symbols that helped people communicate with one another.

DID YOU KNOW?

Modern humans weren't the only ones who made cave paintings. Neanderthals, another species of humans that were distantly related to us but went extinct, or died out, made them, too.



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On top of creating works of art, ancient humans often traced their hands on cave walls by blowing or spraying paint through hollow bones or reeds. Historians aren't completely sure why early artists did this, but they do have some theories, or explanations that they think are correct. This practice may have been a way for artists to "sign" their art, much like painters do today. Or it may have been a way for ancient humans to use symbols to communicate with one another! In fact, some historians think that these images of hands might have been an ancient form of sign language. To communicate different meanings, artists may have folded down certain fingers before tracing their hands.

Some of these symbols may have helped lead to the invention of writing. Historians discovered that, in addition to artistic images and hand tracings, geometric shapes such as triangles and circles were also painted on cave walls around the world more than 30,000 years ago. And some of the same symbols were used again and again! This could mean that they were more than just decorations, and may even have been very early versions of recording information or communicating with symbols.



Many different colorful emoji faces.

Modern Meanings

Using symbols to communicate isn't just a thing of the past. People around the world rely on symbols every day as part of their written languages. While many languages have alphabets, which use letters to represent sounds, others use something called logograms, or



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logographic writing. Logograms are symbols that are meant to look like images. They represent entire words or things. Some of the first logographic writing systems appeared in about 3000 BCE in ancient Egypt, where people used hieroglyphs. Soon, logographic writing began to appear in other parts of the world, such as ancient Mesopotamia (in what is now Iraq), China, and Central and South America. Many of these writing systems are still used today!

However, you don't need to know how to write in one of these languages to communicate with symbols. Think about a time when you wanted to cross a busy street. Many streets have crosswalk signals that flash a red hand for you to stop and then show an image of a walking person to indicate when it's safe to cross. These images, known as pictograms, are used to communicate around the world and across different languages, without any words at all.

FUN FACT

The word "pictogram" comes from the ancient Greek words for picture and writing.

And symbols have become an almost daily part of global communication with the rise of emojis. As the internet became common in the 1990s, people started to use keyboard keys to create simple images to chat

with one another. Over time, these typographic images developed into small pictographic images meant to communicate ideas, things, and emotions—or emojis for short. With more and more communication happening online or over text, emojis let people convey tone and feeling along with what they were writing. They also let people communicate more quickly, rather than typing out long replies!

Even though technology, language, and writing have changed a great deal since the Ice Age, some forms of communicating have stayed the same. In fact, who knows—maybe even a person living 30,000 years ago would have understood the meaning behind an emoji!