A Symphony of Symbols, the Harmonic Language

The new sports pictograms for the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 build on their unique heritage for a truly inclusive experience.

by **Kirsty Bouwers**

The largest sporting events in the world, the Olympic Games and Paralympic Games, have an inherent challenge: communicating information to athletes and spectators from across the globe. How do you manage to clearly convey what is when or where, without having to translate it into a dizzying variety of languages? After being introduced on a large scale at the Tokyo 1964 Games, pictograms have been the go-to solution for every Games since. The 50 sports pictograms of the 33 Olympic sports and 23 for the 22 Paralympic sports represented at the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 pay homage to and build on this legacy, based on the branding vision of "Innovation from Harmony."

Japan has had a strong connection to the visual for millennia. From traditional woodblock prints to modern-day manga, visual communication has been an enduring part of everyday life. Even the Japanese writing system, using kanji (Chinese characters), partly relies on the visual to convey meaning. The latest additions to this Japanese communications line-up are emoji, the symbols now used across the globe to show emotion without resorting to text.

The Tokyo 1964 pictograms fit neatly into this lineage as both a typically Japanese solution and as game-changers. The first Olympic and Paralympic Games to be held in an Asian country, perhaps it was the first Games to have to deal with such serious language barriers. To overcome these barriers, Japanese gestated pictograms were proposed which used simple lines and shapes. Pictograms were developed not only for the various venues, but also for strategic locations such as airports, emergency facilities, banks, toilets, and more. Their introduction put the spotlight on graphic design to convey information, which set the tone for its future use across the world.

The sports pictograms for the Tokyo 2020 Games are a continuation of this unique history. Two years and a tremendous amount of development went into making the designs, says graphic designer Hiromura Masaaki who worked on the design. Building on the pictograms of the Tokyo 1964 Games, which emphasized the point of "transmitting information accurately," he evolved and developed, while respecting the accomplishments of his predecessors, an innovative set of pictograms for a new era. Based on a huge amount of video and photographic materials, he created original versions and, in consultation with sports federations and related parties, produced sample sports pictograms that captured the most impressive and attractive moments of each competition.

The resulting sports pictograms all utilize the same shade of blue used for the Tokyo 2020 emblems, creating a harmonious look, while showcasing the unique dynamism of athletes. They will be used on posters, tickets, and websites, as well as appear on maps, signboards, guidebooks, and more. As they are part of the core brand identity, they will be used prominently at every competition venue during the Games, with various licensed products set to be embossed with these new pictograms.

In another nod to 1964, these pictograms are also going to make life easier for foreign tourists moving around Tokyo on their way to one of the many events. The idea is to use them at stations and along the way to venues to create a clearly signposted route that will make the journey much smoother.

Various initiatives are underway in preparation for the Tokyo 2020 Games so that everyone can enjoy the best experience. This includes making it free from both hard and soft barriers, and the use of pictograms is one example. Harmonizing visitors' experiences by creating a lovely symphony of symbols? 2020 is set to be full of such innovations.