

Another 60s revolution

Rob Roy Kelly brings Swiss design education to the U.S. at the Kansas City Art Institute 1964-1974

In the summer of 1969 when I was in my second job, two newly minted KCAI graduates were hired by our Chrysler Corporation Corporate Identity Office. Their portfolios were amazingly sophisticated. They described their vigorous school community and great teachers. I was envious – nothing like that had been going on at my state university.

Last fall, I decided to investigate this pivotal design education program. I spent 4 months of intensive re-searching, conducted 15 phone interviews, collected faculty and student design work, wrote a 4500 word essay and a 1500 word article for Print Magazine, and assembled 175 digital images of work and people.

Basic facts

- Rob Roy Kelly was the driver in this story.
- A major leader in graphic design education, he died in January 2004 at age 78.
- Kelly was the first to name a program “Graphic Design” in the U.S. in 1957 at Minneapolis College of Art.
- Kelly built the country’s first fully rationalized undergraduate graphic design program at the Kansas City Art Institute between 1964 and 1974.
- He instituted a rigorous curriculum of sequential courses composed of sequential projects.
- He introduced rigorous visual foundation courses that preceded applied professional practice studios, influenced by Josef Albers and Armin Hoffman.
- He hired faculty educated at exceptional schools – Yale, Royal College of Art and Basel.
- He was likely the first program chair to recognize the value of faculty with MFAs.
- He brought the first European graduate of Basel’s Kunstgewebeschool to teach full-time in the U.S. – Inge Druckrey, who was quickly followed by Hans Allemann and later by Ferdinand Steidle.
- He pioneered pro bono civic work as undergraduate degree projects.
- He insisted that his faculty maintain active design practices in school studios adjacent to student studios.
- The program produced some of the first “Swiss School” work seen in the U.S.
- He encouraged KCAI seniors to pursue graduate study at Yale and Basel.
- His KCAI graduates excelled in their careers, including April Greiman, Jerry Herring of Houston, and Samina Quareshi, former head of the NEA Design Arts Program.

The narrative

A Midwestern pluralist and pragmatist, Rob Roy Kelly found his way from his Minneapolis art school’s advertising art program to graduate school at Yale. There he took classes with Alvin Lustig and Joseph Albers in a program that still was called “Graphic Arts,” and wouldn’t be renamed “Graphic Design” until after Kelly’s graduation. But at Yale Kelly encountered the term “Graphic Design,” what he describes as “the first real alternative to advertising.”

Kelly was deeply influenced by Josef Albers’s teaching, looking at images abstractly to see what was happening in terms of color, form or space. Alvin Lustig was also influential.

After receiving his MFA in 1955, Kelly returned to Minneapolis School of Art. In 1957 he established the first course of study formally titled “Graphic Design” in the U.S., separating from the school’s ongoing Advertising program.

In 1964, when Kelly moved to Kansas City Art Institute, he totally revamped the courses and hired 3 of his former Minneapolis students, including the new Yale MFA Gordon Salchow. In ensuing years he hired more Yale MFAs and 2 from London's Royal College of Art.

Albers' 1957 retirement from Yale ended the lineage of graduates imbued with the Albers rarefied perceptual orientation. Kelly wrote, "In looking for another source of teachers who could fill that gap in our faculty, I discovered the work of Armin Hoffman's students. I was greatly impressed with the . . . visual sophistication and intelligence . . . in their work"

Alvin Eisenman, the longterm head of Yale's graphic design program, recalls that Herbert Matter had brought Armin Hoffman to Yale for a brief visit in 1955 while Kelly was a graduate student. Then in 1956 Yale invited Hoffman to fill their annual overseas guest teaching position, thus beginning Yale's long-term connection with Armin Hoffman and Basel's Kunstgewebeschool.

So Kelly looked to Basel and asked Hoffman to send him a teacher in 1966. Inge Druckrey accepted a position at KCAI, becoming the first European graduate of the Basel's Kunstgewebeschool to teach full-time in the U.S. In the fall of 1966 she team-taught a basic design course with Gordon Salchow, whom Kelly had brought to teach at KCAI the previous fall. Hans Allemann arrived the following year and also team-taught with Salchow, as well as with Druckrey.

Gordon Salchow feels the most dramatic period was 1965 to 1969. "There were significant faculty appointments, pioneer programming, educational initiatives, civic projects. The . . . chemistry was swinging."

In 1972 the recently appointed KCAI president announced Kelly's dismissal as department chairman. He cited the previous year's merger of the departments of graphic design and industrial design into an interdisciplinary Department of Design and noted that he had consulted with Charles Eames, who observed that "the distinction between 2-dimensional design and 3-dimensional design has disappeared in the profession."

By fall 1974, both Kelly and his faculty were gone. The KCAI Bulletin described a new open structure with few prerequisites for an assortment of eclectic design courses.

Even as Kelly's vision vaporized at KCAI, several other schools were building related programs that remain leaders in graphic design education today – most notably Philadelphia College of Art under Ken Hiebert, which has included Hans Allemann and Inge Druckrey on its faculty for many years. Gordon Salchow's excellent program at University of Cincinnati continues to thrive.

After leaving KCAI, Kelly spent time at Rochester Institute of Technology and University of Cincinnati before settling into Carnegie Mellon University and finally Arizona State University. There Kelly's legacy and Basel methods continue to thrive.

And at today's Kansas City Art Institute, a new faculty member is Kelly Salchow, named after Rob Roy Kelly by her parents, Gordon and Kathy Stewart Salchow.

Pedagogy

The beginning of a "Swiss" method

Teaching in Kansas City challenged Druckrey and Allemann to adapt their own student experiences with Armin Hoffman at Basel, and to codify a methodology. Allemann points out that when Hoffman taught them in Basel in the early 1960s, Hoffmann's own teaching was still developmental. At KCAI, these two collaborated to develop sequential projects, building on "bits and pieces of Basel."

They also had to invent a vocabulary to talk about design. Druckrey says, "Everyone would ask us, what's this grid about? We hadn't talked about the grid. We just applied it." Allemann says, "Our own teachers never explained anything to us, and we learned through the process. In the U.S., students had questions. I learned how to talk about design, because I never verbalized before, and there were no books to turn to."

The two Basel teachers found that the predominant American teaching style in the 60s was to assign a project and send the students off to execute it, with faculty only interacting with students in critiques. Their Basel approach was to spend class time in the student studios working closely with students as their projects developed, emphasizing process.

Kelly synthesis

Kelly focused on the needs of high-level professional practice following a sequential visual foundation sequence, for which he drew on Albers' Yale projects and then incorporated Basel elements.

Gordon Salchow has pointed out that Kelly's educational vision had three distinct elements: an American Midwestern conceptual pluralism and pragmatism; the Swiss emphasis on form making, process and depth; and a personal commitment to social issues and colleagues.

Faculty role models

Kelly believed a key educational resource was for faculty to actively practice design on campus. An informal studio called Staff Design was across from the Graphic Design Department. The faculty was expected to work evenings and weekends on their design.

Through Kelly's efforts, city agencies commissioned work, and faculty designed publications for KCAI and the neighboring Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Students frequently assisted, and also joined faculty on design teams for large projects.

Civic projects

Kelly persuaded a number of Kansas City departments to commission faculty/student teams to execute large projects. These frequently became the focus of student degree projects, including:

- Police Crime Alert
 - Heart of America Kansas City seal and identity program
 - Kansas City Zoo
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Form

The formal influence of Druckrey and Allemann's Basel method and aesthetic is evident in the highly refined student and faculty work:

- A predominance of black and white
- Abstracted natural forms – the Basel graphic “translation”
- Compositional progressions, repetition of lines and shapes
- Geometric shapes
- Soft gray tonal full bleed photographs
- Asymmetric compositions with flush left, rag right typography
- Minimalist sans serif fonts

Panel discussion

Gordon Salchow

- “Commercial Art” was the common term in the 1960s. “It was career-based vocational training,” whereas Rob Roy Kelly envisioned “education-based problem solving.”
- By the 3rd year of RRK's KCAI program there were 5 fulltime faculty and 85 majors.
- Team-teaching was stressed.
- Annual salaries were typically \$4500. [A typical 1967 entry level design studio annual salary was \$6000, or \$3/hour for a 40 hour week.]
- Armin Hoffman stressed process studies. “Critical thinking comes as the result of critical seeing.”

Inge Druckrey

- Basel was intuitive, whereas KCAI was analyzed and explained. This was a healthy experience for KCAI students.
- Basel graduates had highly trained eyes. “We could see!”
- “Representational images have to be seen as abstraction.”
- “The ability to see sounds simple. But it's an intelligent thought-related process. It takes along time to develop, like a musician.”
- “When Helvetica was used the first time on a NYC garbage truck – beautiful!”

Hans Allemann

- Gabriel Garcia Marquez says that “life is not what one lived, but what one remembers”
 - Hans was 23 years old in August 1967 when he landed at Kansas City. Rob Roy Kelly and Inge Druckrey met Hans at the airport and took him straight to a faculty meeting where he was assigned to the Building and Grounds Committee.
 - Not being able to speak English well was “an advantage and a disadvantage.” Hans' most used words to students were “tension, nope and good.” These were supplemented by the nonverbal Armin Hoffman gesture of the hand on the shoulder.
 - Hans says that students asked him, “What's this Swiss grid?,” as if it was a magic recipe.
 - The Basel approach “has been accused of being just formal. It's really about looking at things and understanding. Life issues are at the base.”
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