

The Educational Years



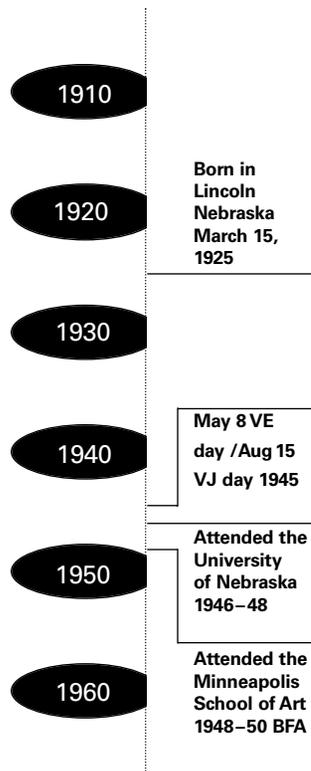
My own educational experiences reflect most of the conditions and practices of the period between the end of WWII and the early sixties. Design education was quite different from what it is today. I think it is important that students and

young teachers know the evolution of design education as a means for better understanding present conditions in Graphic Design.

I consider myself extremely fortunate in my own educational background. My schooling began at the University of Nebraska under the GI BILL in 1946. At that time, the GI BILL paid for your tuition, books and supplies, and provided \$65 a month for living expenses. The benefits applied to the school of your choice, and if you transferred to another institution, the benefits went with you. I chose that institution because both of my parents had attended. My father had earned a degree in Geology from the university.

At the University of Nebraska, I began with a double major, one in Geology and the other in Advertising Design. My father was a geologist and I had grown up reading his books. The text on geology was not particularly interesting, but the sections on paleontology were fascinating. I learned all the major geological periods and read everything available on prehistoric life, especially on dinosaurs. I was particularly impressed by the illustrations, exhibit backdrops and dioramas of Charles R. Knight at the American Museum of Natural History. I wanted to do that type of art, but it would be necessary to have a degree in geology before studying paleontology.





Only Fine Art and Advertising Design were available to me, and even though I had no interest in advertising, it seemed more related to my goals than Fine Art. However, my teachers in Advertising Design were painters. At that time, I was allowed to take only three credits of studio art each semester; all the rest of my classes were academic. After two years at the University of Nebraska, I felt frustrated because my interests were in art. My problems were compounded because I was not doing well in Geology classes, and I also held two outside jobs. I worked at Dewey & Wilson Displays, a silk screen shop. My job was artwork and cutting lacquer stencils. My second job began as an elevator operator but soon broadened to collecting rents and cleaning offices evenings and weekends.

My grades dropped. The Veterans Administration called me in for an interview. I was told that decision time had arrived; either it was school or job, not both. The best solution for me was to transfer to a school where more art classes were available, and to not take an outside job. I knew only two art schools, one in Minneapolis and the other in Kansas City. Two letters of application were addressed, one to “Art School, Minneapolis, Minnesota” and the other to “Art School, Kansas City, Kansas.” At the time, I did not realize there were two Kansas Cities and one was in Missouri.) By chance, both letters arrived at the proper destination. Both schools sent letters of acceptance. I could not make up my mind as to which letter should be accepted. A coin was tossed, heads for Minneapolis and tails for Kansas City. Kansas City won, but on reflection, it was decided that fishing was better in Minnesota, so I went to The Minneapolis School of Art in 1948. So much for big decisions! Later, when I moved to the Kansas City Art Institute as a teacher, I always believed it was fate catching up with me for renegeing on the coin toss.

In 1948, when I enrolled at The Minneapolis School of Art, the registration line ran from the office through the hall out the front door, down the steps to the sidewalk, and to the end of the block. Over six hundred students enrolled in the day program, most of them on the GI BILL. The largest enrollment prior to WWII had been a hundred and thirty students in both day and night classes. Walker Art Center also had a school of art at that time, and they were equally inundated with students. When it became my turn to register, they noticed that I had studied art at the University of Nebraska for two years, and I was asked if I wanted to teach or to be a student? Wisely, I affirmed the latter.

With few exceptions, the majority of regional art schools such as the Minneapolis School of Art were founded between 1870 and 1900. The oldest schools were the Philadelphia Academy of Art in the eighteenth century, Maryland Institute of Art at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Cooper Union only slightly later, Cranbrook Academy in the 1920s and Art Center in the 1930s.

The earliest directors at the Minneapolis School of Art had been European drawing masters or painters. During the daytime, the art school functioned as a finishing school for young ladies studying drawing, watercolor, oil painting and sculpture. At night, the studios were used to instruct tradespeople in commercial engraving and illustration, lettering or calligraphy and other trade-based skills. During the 1940s, Ed Kopietz was the Director at the Minneapolis School of Art, and he came from an advertising background.

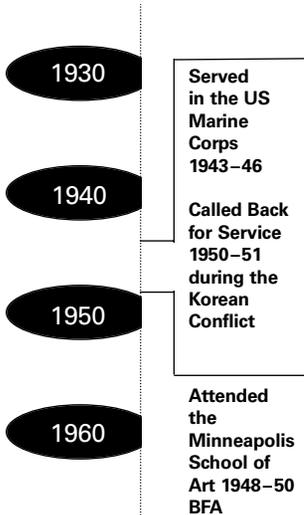
In the 1950s at most art schools, there were no departments, and even when there were, the Director had absolute power over teachers, students and curriculum. I recall an occasion where I sassed the Registrar. I immediately found myself called to the Director's office, and just as quickly, suspended for two days. The Director had total responsibility for the school, and made final decisions on everything. Other administrative officers were an Assistant Director, Business Manager and Registrar and three secretaries. The Business Manager with an assistant usually operated the school supply store in addition to keeping financial records.

For students and faculty members, the Director's secretary was an especially important person as she was often the intermediary between them and the Director. The majority of teachers were practicing artists and none had a degree in art. There were many part-time teachers in both Fine Arts and Advertising Design. I believe that to some extent or another, this pattern applied to most art schools, especially those which were regional. It is my impression that art schools in large metropolitan areas such as New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles operated differently and did not change as abruptly as the regional schools.

My declared major was Advertising Design. However, the majority of classes were in Fine Arts. Many hours of drawing were required as well as several courses in painting. Advertising Design was regarded as an unfortunate aberration of art by the majority of faculty members, especially the painters. The Minneapolis School of Art was very much a Fine Arts school. As the art school at the time consisted only of the Morrison building, many classes were taught in museum corridors with freestanding dividers between classes.

“More academic problems for faculty and students are resolved by doing away with administrative offices instead of creating a new ones.”

Rob Roy Kelly



A substantial number of teachers were drawn from the ranks of local PWA and WPA artists who had practiced art full time under government subsidy from the early 1930s until WWII. The student body was composed mainly of veterans, and it was overwhelmingly older and male. On Friday nights, the veterans literally took over the Nicollet Bar & Grill. The owners had to clear out the basement, install additional booths and put up with a rowdy bunch of art students.

On those nights it was only art students, artists and people interested in art that were involved. Walter “Fritz” Mondale was dating Joan at that time, and they would show up for the discussions fairly regularly. Charles Schultz and friends were regular patrons. What we now call foundations, was a two year program consisting of classes in basic design, color, painting, sculpture, calligraphy and drawing. The only academic course was Art History, and this was taught by painting or drawing instructors. Most studio courses were required with few electives. The school awarded certificates to qualified students after four years. Tuition was between three or four hundred dollars for an academic year.

The school closed at 5pm and no students or teachers were allowed on the premises after hours, only museum security guards. As a student and young teacher, I regularly stuck a matchbook in a basement window-lock of the Morrison building before leaving at the end of the day. High bushes hid the windows, and I would return in the evening or on weekends and crawl through the window to work. I knew when the guards made their rounds and hid in the rest room.

Enrollment of veterans declined about 1950 as quickly as it had begun. Schools were overcommitted and faced serious problems because of the sudden decrease in revenue. Some art schools closed down. This was when the Walker School of Art was phased out. Other schools were incorporated into rapidly expanding multi-campus state systems. A number of art schools saw accreditation as an avenue to survival, and they began to move in this direction. Accreditation changed single purpose art schools forever.

As a student, I witnessed and participated in the transition of the Minneapolis School of Art from a pre-war museum art school to an accredited educational institution. With the move toward accreditation, a President replaced the Director as chief administrative officer, and most presidents came from academic backgrounds rather than art. At the Minneapolis School of Art, the new president, Wilhelmus B. Bryan, had formerly been the Dean of Humanities at Macalester College and Dean of Students at Princeton. The Assistant Director became Dean of the College, and in rapid succession, new administrative offices were established such as Director of Admissions, Dean of Students, Director of Alumni, Director of Business Affairs and Development Officer. Ever since, the process of adding new administrative functions and administrators has continued without abatement. Department Head positions were created, faculty committees took responsibility for most academic affairs, academic rank was installed (not tenure), and academic courses introduced into the curriculum. Many academic teachers were borrowed from neighboring institutions and taught humanity classes part-time at the art school. The basic introductory program was reduced from two to one year, and Foundations was staffed with full-time teachers assigned only to that program.

The new academic requirements represented about one third of the credits for graduation. This meant a reduction in the number of studio hours.

The movement of art schools toward accreditation began in 1952, and in 1959 under the leadership of Dr. Bryan, the first art schools became accredited, The Minneapolis School of Art, Chicago Art Institute and Cranbrook Academy. When the call came through to President Bryan from the North Central accrediting offices notifying us that The Minneapolis School of Art had been accredited, he immediately called the president of trustees. Mr. Bell contacted a catering firm and within the hour, a large truck parked in front of the school. An enormous punch bowl was placed in the front rotunda and there were strawberry tarts and punch for everyone. All classes were dismissed and everyone including some trustees joined in the celebration.

My schooling in Minneapolis was interrupted when I was called back into service for a year during the Korean conflict. Based on my education in art and experience at Dewey and Wilson Display, I was put in charge of the silk screen shop for Post Training Aids at Camp Joseph E. Pendleton in Oceanside, California. One of my colleagues was a graduate of Chouinard in Los Angeles and another was a student at the San Francisco Art Institute. It was a wonderful opportunity to compare notes on teachers and programs and I enjoyed and learned a great deal from them. After completing my service, I returned to Minneapolis, taught a silkscreen course and finished my last year of studies graduating in 1952.

At Lincoln and Minneapolis, each Spring when the school year ended, I was sick and tired of school and wanted only to get the heck out of there and do something different. One summer I went to Cloquet, Minnesota and stayed with a Finnish farm family. I worked on a railroad section crew bulling rail. Many of the crew did not speak English but Swedish, Finnish and Russian. The Johnson's (the original family name was Jutonen, but there were so many in the area, they had their name changed to Johnson) being Finns had no bathtub, just a sauna which we fired up every Saturday. Any baths in between had to be in Pine River which ran in front of the house and it was about forty-eight degrees during the summer.

Another summer, I worked on a survey crew in Locate, Montana on the Powder River. Locate was north of Miles City and was one building which housed a gas station, general store, post office and restaurant. We lived in tents for two weeks at a time and then had a long weekend at home before returning to camp. Another summer, I worked on an asphalt gang in Lincoln, Nebraska paving streets. Without a doubt, this was the most physically-demanding job I ever worked.

“Bureaucracy and education are contradictory terms.”

Rob Roy Kelly

1950

1960

1970

Josef Albers
Head of the
Design Dept
at Yale
University
1950–58

The best thing about these jobs was that by late July, I was eager to return to school. I knew that I did not want to spend my life doing this kind of work. However, I wanted to do the job well enough to be respected by the other workmen. I knew that I was there for the summer, but they were going to spend their life working at the jobs. I learned to respect these people for what they do because I know what is required to do the work. I have always kept this respect, and what I consider some of my greatest compliments have been being asked to stay on the job because I was a good worker. I consider the summer jobs an important aspect of my education.

After receiving my BFA at the Minneapolis School of Art, I remember feeling serious trepidation regarding my readiness to go out into the world. At the time, I was teaching a Silk Screen course and had been asked to continue in that role. The art school was then seeking accreditation, and when I approached the president, Wilhelmus B. Bryan, about going to graduate school, he was supportive and encouraging. There were no faculty with graduate degrees in art, and he knew this was going to be a factor in receiving accreditation.

My problem was that I did not know of any schools with graduate programs. When Dr. Bryan asked me which graduate school I wanted to attend, my response was that it would be necessary to think about it a little longer. Finally, I came up with Cooper Union. Dr. Bryan did some checking and called me into his office, and with a rather puzzled look on his face, informed me that Cooper Union did not have a graduate program.

Before I could make another mistake, Charles Sawyer, the Dean of the School of Art at Yale University visited our school to give a lecture. Evidently Dr. Bryan told him there was a young teacher who wanted to go to graduate school. I was summoned from the Silk Screen studio with ink on my hands and reeking of lacquer thinner to meet Dr. Sawyer. He asked if I would like to attend Yale University. My reply was if I could get into the program. Dr. Sawyer quickly responded by saying, "It is not if you can get in, it is do we have what you want?" I then asked what they had? He mentioned Albers, Lustig, Matter and others. I did not know who any of these people were and did not even know in what city Yale University was located, but I had heard that if you went to Harvard, Princeton or Yale, life would be good to you. In the most positive tone I could muster, I told Dr. Sawyer that Yale University sounded just fine.

My enrollment in graduate studies at Yale was in 1953. My entrance into Yale was more or less through the back door because of Dr. Sawyer's intervention. I did not even have an undergraduate degree, only two years at a state university and a certificate from an art school. I seriously doubt if I would have been accepted coming through the normal application process. For me, the two years at Yale were a period of complete bewilderment. Having grown up in a number of small towns in Nebraska, I probably experienced more cultural shock coming to Yale than most foreign students. I never felt comfortable or part of Yale, and still do not to this day. While I sensed that everything being said and done was extremely important, I did not understand it. It was a number of years after graduation before my Yale experiences were finally assimilated.

At Yale, Josef Albers introduced me to the meaning of *visual*. To be able to look at images abstractly without regard for content, and to see what was happening in terms of color, form or space. Basic design terminology took on new meaning for me that had never existed prior to Yale. I learned the significance of nuance those small but important considerations that I had not been aware of before Albers. I began the Color class with Albers and finished the course with Sy Sillman. I took basic drawing with Albers, and both of these courses were revelations for me, and had an enduring influence on my own development.

For anyone with an interest in teaching, Josef Albers was an exemplary role model. He had enormous experience and insight into teaching and students. He was the most effective and inspirational teacher I have encountered in my career. I am certain it was Albers and not coincidence that led to so many of his graduates going into teaching. My experiences at Yale were the foundation for what I was to do as a teacher, and it prepared me to appreciate at a later date the teaching of Armin Hofmann.

While I was enrolled at Yale, Josef Albers was invited to the Minneapolis School of Art for several days of meeting with faculty and giving lectures. He never traveled by air, so he took the train to Minneapolis. I was chosen to assist him while he was in Minneapolis. I flew out and picked him up at the train station. I was his companion, guide and driver while in Minneapolis. The one event that is still most vivid for me was Albers' meeting with the drawing teachers. They asked him to explain his philosophy on drawing. Albers clearly outlined his views and sequencing of a drawing program. The teachers were quite defensive, and began to challenge Albers' opinions. Gustav Krollman, an elderly Austrian drawing master, was especially vocal. After a few moments of verbal attacks, Albers would listen to the comments and then say, "Gentlemen prefer blondes." This infuriated Gustav Krollman. After these exchanges had gone on for a few minutes, Gustav finally blurted out, "You damn Prussians are all alike!"

After the meeting was over, Albers wanted a break so we went out and sat in the park. I asked him what he meant by "Gentlemen prefer blondes." He said that he had fought these battles thirty years ago and now he had to conserve his energy for more positive purposes. They had asked for his views and he had given them. They disagreed indicating that they preferred something else, so they should do what they preferred and he would do the same. There was nothing to be gained by argument.

**"Seeing, has more
to do with
understanding
than it does with
observing."**

Rob Roy Kelly

1950

1960

Attended Yale
University
1953–55 MFA

Albers was very Germanic in that he used himself to punish or reward students. When critiquing painting students it was customary for him to ask a student what they were trying to do. If the student responded in terms of color, space or form, Albers engaged in meaningful discussion with the student. If the student responded in terms of feelings, or some esoteric rationale, Albers would throw up his arms and in a loud voice exclaim, “Gott in Himmel! Don’t show me your intestines.” He would avoid that student for several weeks. It did not take students long to learn how they should reply to Albers’s questions.

On several occasions, I would pass Albers on the sidewalk and speak to him with a good morning or good afternoon. He never acknowledged that he even knew me. Several of the Graphic Design students asked Albers if we set up a non-credit painting class, would he critique us once a week. He agreed to do so. When the class began, there were about nine of us. In six weeks, it was down to four who regularly participated. I was one of the four. The next time I met Albers on campus and spoke, he gave me a hearty greeting, put his arm around my shoulder and asked me what all I was doing. A remarkable man.

There were other experiences at Yale that made a strong impact on my development. In the first year, Graphic Design students were required to take six week courses in Printmaking, Photography and Typesetting/Printing. All of these were new to me and I found Printmaking of especial interest. In the second year, I had a work-grant appointment as an assistant to Gabor Peterdi in the printmaking studio. My book project was a manual for beginning students in intaglio which was done in conjunction with Peterdi. My thesis was an experimental project in lithographic printing on metal plates using a hand-operated lithographic proofing machine. However, I was most comfortable working with woodcut. My visual interests were in natural forms and landscape.

An important experience for me was taking Drawing with Birney Chaet. As an Advertising major at the Minneapolis School of Art, I had logged as many hours as most fine artists sitting before a nude model with a newsprint pad in one hand and a stick of charcoal in the other. I remember yet, whenever the drawing instructor passed by my drawing bench, looking up at the teacher as to say, “How am I doing? Is this good? bad?” I could not evaluate my own work because objectives and criteria were not made clear to me. The best I could do was based on a presumption that the drawing should look like the model.

I am not a good draughtsman and most likely never will be. However, I now have an understanding of drawing and the confidence that permits me to draw whenever it is necessary. What I took away from Chaet's drawing class was an understanding that drawing has more to do with space and form than content, that it is a symbolic interpretation of something else achieved through making marks on a piece of paper, and composition is dictated by me and not the subject. I also learned that drawing is a medium for conveying ideas, information or expression, and the communication should be clear. I can still hear some of Chaet's classroom admonitions, "It is alright to shade, but every line must show!"

I had John McCoubrey for an Art History course which covered late nineteenth century European artists. I had never been in an art history class like this one, and it was fascinating. I was so interested that I never took notes because I might miss something. Needless to say, Professor McCoubrey noticed this omission and consequently, my grade was not particularly good. In fact, I received what was known as a "gentle man's grade" of below 70. As a graduate student it was necessary to make a grade of 70 or better. I went to Professor McCoubrey and asked if I could do a paper to raise my grade the required two points. He said that it was possible to do this but it would have to be a good paper. I elected to do a paper on Daumier. I worked for a week on the paper and took it to him. His response was that it was a terrible paper, and he should deduct from my grade. However, he would give me one more chance. With this incentive, I researched further and worked hard on the new paper. On receipt of my new attempt, he said there was just enough there to have some hope that perhaps I could do a paper. It was agonizing, but I went back, dug deeper and wrote a new paper. Professor McCoubrey's reaction this time was that perhaps if I did it one more time and went a little further with the research, the paper might be acceptable. I took two weeks to do the new paper and solicited assistance from some fellow students. His acceptance of the paper was qualified by remarking that he was giving me the two points against his better judgement. It was a real learning experience for me.

**"Learning is not
always fun as it can
be frustrating and
painful at times."**

Rob Roy Kelly

I took Anthropology with Ralph Linton, and again, he was so interesting that I did not take notes because I might miss something. His lectures were based mostly on recounting his experiences with Southwestern Native Americans and natives of the Solomon Islands at the turn of the century. He gave one particularly interesting series of lectures based on the impact of the automobile on American culture. His health was not good and he collapsed several times during the semester and had to be taken from the hall on a stretcher. Next class period he would be back. During Christmas break he died under the marquee of the Schubert theater waiting for a cab. Next semester we had a young man who was doing field work in the back country of the Philippines when he was called back to Yale. It was back to Coon and the basic text on food gatherers and hunters.

During my two years in Graphic Design at Yale University, much of the instruction was handled by a group of established designers commuting between New Haven and New York. Alvin Lustig and Herbert Matter came in on a regular basis. Leo Lionni, Alexy Brodovitch and Lester Beall gave extended problems and there were numerous visiting lecturers. Alvin Eisenman and Norman Ives lived in the New Haven area, and Gabor Peterdi came in from Norwalk.

The term Graphic Design had never come to my attention until Yale. The curriculum based on typography and printing production, photography, printmaking and Graphic Design was radically different from what was being taught at other schools.

I remember deciding that photography was not for me. It would be an understatement to say that my work for the first semester review was minimal. I borrowed my sister's Brownie camera and did some snapshots. The negatives were wrinkled and the prints were even worse. When called on this at review, I stated that my interests were not in Photography. Eisenman made some remark to the effect that if there was not a change in attitude, I might not be at Yale after the next semester. This remark registered with me. I immediately purchased a Rollicord. In spite of my earlier reservations, I thoroughly enjoyed photography, found it rewarding and developed an appreciation for photographic images that far exceeds my capabilities in this medium. To this day, I cannot wind film on the spool without crinkling it.

At that time, the only Graphic Design program in the country was at Yale, and I think the students felt they were special because of this. They were enthusiastic, worked hard and there was a great deal of interaction among students at all levels. The faculty were superb role models for students both by their work and professional stature. Graphic Design was a new field, the first real alternative to advertising, and most students were excited by their prospects following graduation.

I would briefly note that Yale as an institution was an experience in itself. I had never before known that quality of people, education or institution. Art History, Sterling Library, museums and other university resources and personnel made lasting impressions on me.