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Rhode Island a gold mine for study of graphic design

Programs can be found at many area colleges, and a number of well-known designers have established their businesses in the state.

By ELAINE LEMBO
Journal-Sentinel Staff Writer

Gutenberg could never have imagined it:
A pamphlet about breast cancer.

A brochure on AIDS. The sporting symbols for the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta.

All are visual images, and each, in its own way, represents a breadth of careers in the world of graphic arts and design, from the methodology applied to the message to the technical printing process and paper quality of the final product.

As communication evolves from Turn to DESIGN, Page D-9

EDUCATION

Long-distance courses, gain popularity at Salve Regina. Page D-8
New England Institute of Technology adapts to changes in boat industry. Page D-11

From SENATOR PELL 401 528 5453 10-17-94 09:11AM POOL I 845
Design

Continued from Page D-1

the movable type of the 15th century into the computer and information superhighway traffic jams of the 21st, the role of the person who can drive home the messages in a clear yet sophisticated and compelling manner is a critical, and often, lucrative one.

"Obtaining our work is permeated with graphic images," says Hans van Dijk, head of the graphic design department at the Rhode Island School of Design. "More and more corporations and institutions have come to understand that the visual form of the message — either typography or images or some combination — has to have a good quality. There's so much 'stuff' being produced in the world today that there's a definite need for well-trained designers."

Student appeal

The opportunity to parlay creative talent into solid careers makes graphic arts an attractive pursuit. The actual jobs graduates in graphic arts and design are moving into are quite diverse, yet they share the common goal of effective communication. "In our society, communication is central," says a spokesperson at the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) in New York City. "As we shift from manufacturing to service economics, communication has become much more dominant."

At RISD, the graphic design department opened in 1966. In 1973, the graduate-level program was added, and in 1989, the professional, five-year degree program. The department now has 280 students, with 35 undergraduates, totals that are easily double those of the early 1970s, according to van Dijk.

"It's a viable industry and a creative endeavor which you can make a good living at," van Dijk says. "Students see it as a way to synthesize their interests of a creative lifestyle, where they're dealing with symbols, art, making things people will see, not dealing in a visual way, with a very interesting way of living that is well-paid and challenging. Every project brings a new problem — rarely are things the same."

Positions range from the conceptual to the technical. They include art directors in design studios; interior design positions involving making the information of the computer screen easier to use; the more traditionally positional creating graphic designs, of brochures, catalogs, logos, postcards and print advertisements, and typography design, among others.

Design-related firms can be as small as free-lancers who work the home to those who work out of departments in manufacturing and industry. The "work" can be large or small, from offices with 2 to 4 people, 8 to 12, to very large, 50 or 60," says van Dijk. "The largest firms often work for Fortune 500 companies, major industrial or manufacturing firms. Free-lancing gives the opportunity of creating your own lifestyle and work environment. It's attractive.

"Some well-known leaders like Malcolm Grear Designers of Providence, creators of the visual theme for the Atlanta Olympics, scratch the surface of the list. A lion eagle is Peter Alf Anderson, who runs his business, Launch Pad, from his home in Providence. Richard Sanz Worman, who is the founder of the format for Access Guides for nearly every major U.S. city and international cities like London, Paris and Rome, runs an office of five people in Newport. He now runs the annual California TED conference dealing with the convergence of technology, entertainment and design."

Of his work at Launch Pad, Anderson says, "For me right now it's great. I see myself going in an art direction where the clients I have, for the most part, are long-term projects. I can think about them for a long time. I'd rather be creating some of your own, in a day. But there's a real high cost associated with that. You must keep the cash coming in. In this type of industry you really have to romance the client on your own and keep a close relationship going. It's key to having people come back."

Grear's first designs college textbooks, publications for the Dugganheim and Metropolitan Museum of Art, signage systems and identities for corporations and hospitals. Among other clients, "I said, 'I'm probably the best professor one can be,'" he says. "I might disagree with other viewpoint, but I think graphic design is really a profession. Grear, who connects to the arts. It's often confused with commercial art."

"Graphic design is more consultation. Graphic designers don't make tangible products. They're dealing with ideas and should be able to project things into the future. We don't make pictures to hang on a wall like fine artists."

"We're dealing more with timeless ideas. We're not dealing with things that move in and out of vogue. We believe design is a language and we think we're communicating with people."

"I think design is going to become more important," says Grear, who maintains a full teaching load at RISD, where he headed the graphic design department in the 1960s. "We're about purposeful communication, and communication is lack-
FROM SENATOR PELL TO EDUCATION

ARTS, DESIGN PROGRAMS

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE: Bachelor of science degree in industrial technology with graphic arts concentration; master of science degree in industrial technology, graphic arts concentration. Contact Lacore Collins, assistant professor, industrial technology, 458-5703, 458-8008.

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN: Graphic design department. Five-year bachelor of fine arts degree; five-year professional bachelor of graphic design degree; master of fine arts degree. Contact Hans van Dit, department head, 454-6171, Ext. 6170.

BROWN UNIVERSITY: Bachelor degree with interdisciplinary courses in visual arts and computer science. Contract visual arts department at 893-2423 or the multimedia laboratory through Anne Morgan-Spater, 693-7615.

ROGER WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY: Bachelor of arts degree in the College of Arts and Sciences with a concentration in graphic design. Contact professor Sharon E. DeLuca, graphic design, 254-3441.

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY: Bachelor of arts degree with concentration in graphic design. Dan Ludwig, chairman, art department, 847-8850, Ext. 3002.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE OF RHODE ISLAND: Two-year fine arts degree program with concentration in the two-dimensional form, day and evening classes. Contact art professor Tom Morrissey, 273-1234.


Guide and Education Directory, edited by Sharon Helmer Poggenpohl and published by the AIGA Press. (Find it at the RISD store and Barnes and Noble.)

It answers a lot of questions and helps clear up some confusing terminology. "Graphic arts and graphic design are two different things—period," says the AIGA spokeswoman. "Graphic design grew out of graphic arts, and the AIGA is an organization of 8,500 graphic designers. The two disciplines hold hands but they're not the same thing.

"The printer is not a designer. Those jobs got sorted out in an industrialized society. Gutenberg did both, but as people got more and more focused on doing one thing well, some people became designers and some became printers."

The book "answers that question specifically," she says. "It breaks graphic design down into manageable chunks." Chapters answer other questions, like: What is graphic design? What does a graphic designer need to know? Who becomes one? What goes on in design school? How do graphic design programs differ? How does one select a design school? Other chapters tell how to find your first job, give commentary from graphic designers on their work and discuss the future of the industry, and there is a directory of every school in the United States which teaches design and related courses, according to answers AIGA received in a survey of design schools.