



A Conversation with Kimberly Elam

Ringling College's Graphic & Interactive Communication Head Stays True to Type

BY **MARTY FUGATE**

Kimberly Elam has a passion for typography and graphic design. As the head of the Graphic & Interactive Communication department, she shares that enthusiasm with a host of students every year. Elam's career at Ringling College began in 1990, when she became part of the first wave of pioneers teaching students to use the computer as a graphic arts tool. Elam also gets the word out as a prolific writer. Her published books include: *Expressive Typography: The Word as Image*; *Grid Systems: Principles of Organizing Type*; *Typographic Systems: Rules for Organizing Type*; *Graphic Translation*; and *Geometry of Design: Studies in Proportion and Composition*. Most recently, Elam is developing a series of innovative design education eBooks available at her website, StudioResourceInc.com. Elam received her bachelor's degree in graphic design at the Parsons School of Design and The New School for Social Research in Manhattan and her master's in graphic design at the Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan.

EXCELLENCE BY DESIGN

BY **MARTY FUGATE**

From print to film to video and to the internet, every form of contemporary media has been revolutionized by new technology in graphic design. In each of these fields, Ringling College of Art and Design has been leading the design revolution.

Ringling College's Graphic & Interactive Communication (GIC) graduates consistently win awards of regional, state, national and international importance. They go on to graphic design careers at top-flight companies, including Disney Design Group, Disney Imagineering, Fluid Design, Hallmark, JibJab, Target, Triad Digital Media, Surface 51, Wieden+Kennedy and Young & Rubicam.

This record of career success is no accident. According to the department's chairperson, Kimberly Elam, it's the result of a carefully thought-out, constantly evolving curriculum.

"In the freshmen year, we introduce students to the basic elements of graphic design, whether on the page or on the screen," says Elam. "They learn aspects of design theory, contrasts, an introduction to typography and sequential design. Sophomore students explore typography, image-making and the creation of meaning. Juniors synthesize what they've learned in the creation of books, websites, motion graphics and package designs. By the senior year, they're ready to tackle complex communication problems."

The result? Graduates who are more than ready for the demands of a competitive work environment from day one.

Elam notes, "Our students learn to be problem-solvers. As our department title implies, we teach them far more than graphic design skills; they learn to be graphic communicators."

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That's exactly what the world needs. Clearly, it's also what the world wants. Last year, dozens of recruiters came to Ringling College to pour over the portfolios of its GIC students and arrange follow-up employment and internship interviews.

To further explore the logic behind this success story, this edition of *Perspectives* offers an in-depth interview with Elam, profiles of two current GIC students and two recent GIC alumni, and an exploration of the stellar careers of five of the department's graduates. It all goes to prove that excellence never happens by accident.

It's always by design.

TOP KIMBERLY ELAM IN HER OFFICE IN THE NEW ACADEMIC CENTER (FORREST MACDONALD).

When did you first decide to make graphic design your life's work?

I was visiting a friend in high school. I met her father and, in the course of polite conversation, I asked him what he did for a living. He said, "I'm a commercial artist." I asked, "What's that?" He showed me his studio and told me there were many different breeds of commercial artists, but his specialty was creating fashion illustrations for newspapers and magazines. I was fascinated!

What fascinated you?

The fact that the profession existed in the first place. I had no idea it was possible to make a living with art or design. I talked with him some more and I think that really planted the seeds in my mind. I thought: "My goodness! I could actually make a living doing something like this in the future."

What drew you to Ringling College?

It became clear to me that the computer was revolutionizing, among other things, the fields of typography and graphic design. It was clear to some of the visionary minds at Ringling College, too. The school was definitely ahead of the curve in the early 1990's. They could see the future coming.

Why was Ringling ahead of the curve?

The answer is a person: Dr. Arland Christ-Janer. He was Ringling's president when I arrived in 1990. Although he was close to 70, his thinking was young and he was very excited about the tremendous possibilities of computing. A group of early adapters at Ringling College shared his vision; they worked together to turn it into reality. Today, the computer is the primary graphic arts tool designers use.

You don't miss the old days of acetate, press type and proportion wheels?

Not at all! As soon as I saw that the computer could draw an extremely fine quarter point rule with mitered corners, I was sold. Today's graphic design students can't imagine the old way of doing things. In fact, our students do so much of their work in the computer that we've had to build in courses and projects dealing with hands-on processes.

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It's amazing how the future turned out the way Ringling's visionaries expected.

Well, it did and it didn't. Preparing for the future is one thing. Predicting it is another. Things never turn exactly out the way you planned, especially regarding any form of human creativity.

I suppose that's a challenge to anyone planning a graphic design career.

It is, but it's also an enormous opportunity.

How so?

The graphic design field has exploded. If you go back about 20 years, we used to prepare graphic design students to work in the print industry almost exclusively. We taught them to create brochures, posters, books, annual reports, newspapers, magazines and so on—and that was pretty much the limit of the available freelance graphic assignments and



career choices. Many of today's graphic students will go on to careers in fields that didn't exist back then; they'll be web designers, interactive designers or create interfaces for mobile phones or digital book readers. Print hasn't gone away, but it's only part of the equation now.

Apart from creating new graphic design jobs, has the digital revolution changed the ground rules of graphic design itself?

Yes—and it still is. It's radically transforming the way we think about art and design.

Is it really all that radical? Most design for the screen is still tied to the metaphor of the book, the page, or the scroll.

Initially, that's been true. Design for the screen began as an adaptation of sequential print media. Graphic design doesn't change that quickly. It builds over time. Design for new media moves from the familiar to the unfamiliar. You can't make the leap to something radically new all at once. Today's digital media is still rooted in earlier forms derived from print media. But it's steadily evolving into its own distinctive media with its own rules.

In the sense that the first movies were filmed plays? Then film developed its own visual syntax?

That's a good analogy. I think we can see the same thing happening with emerging digital media. New media usually evolves in a similar pattern. You tend to see some glimmers of interesting new directions. The initial reaction is usually irritation. Then some people become intrigued with the new ideas. They work with them more. Other

people notice and work with them, too. Eventually, more and more people work within a new set of ground rules. The result is a birth of a full-blown style. The field is constantly changing and evolving, no doubt about that.

If you look into your crystal ball, what evolutionary direction do you see for digital media?

I think we've just barely scratched the surface of what is possible. Some of the most exciting work is in the arena of multimedia where print, digital video, animation, and motion graphics come together. As these media merge, communications become richer, more meaningful, and engaging. Instead of creating simple web pages, people begin to create entire web environments.

It's random access. Jump in anywhere.

Exactly. And today's users are co-evolving with the new media. They're learning to access and create content in a non-linear fashion. They're developing new habits of reading and thinking, which aren't the habits left over from print media. As the tools change the users, the users change the tools—or the designers creating them. As users become fluent with the screen as a non-linear information environment, designers adapt to their new habits of mind. The models of the past have less and less influence on graphic design for the screen. Ultimately, digital media springs off in various directions. It's evolving into something we can't fully imagine today. That's one of the reasons I'm so excited about it.

TOP KIMBERLY ELAM OFFERING ADVICE TO A STUDENT IN ONE OF THE NEW GIC CLASSROOMS (FORREST MACDONALD).

KIM ELAM'S TYPOGRAPHIC PLEDGE:

I WILL NOT STRETCH OR SQUISH TYPE.
I WILL NOT OUTLINE TYPE.
I WILL NOT STACK TYPE.
I WILL USE PRIME MARKS AND QUOTATION MARKS APPROPRIATELY.
I WILL APPROPRIATELY USE HYPHENS, EN DASHES AND EM DASHES.
I WILL HONOR THE CLASSIC FAMILIES OF TYPE.

I PLEDGE NOT TO COMMIT CRIMES AGAINST TYPOGRAPHY.

Which excites you more: the changes in graphic design or the evolution of typography?

Both. Typography is the heart and soul of graphic design; you really can't separate the two. Type is the lifeblood of communication and visual culture.

You obviously love typography. Why?

What's not to love? I love everything about it. What surprises me is that most people, even highly educated, artistic people, don't share a passion for it. Typography is underrated at very best.

"AS THE TOOLS CHANGE THE USERS, THE USERS CHANGE THE TOOLS."

I suppose most people don't even notice it. To the casual reader, typography is off the radar.

That's true. Of course, type exists to serve content, not to call attention to itself. At its very best, typography is invisible and by that I mean that it's so well done that the reader is fully engaged in the content and not thinking about the font or the way the type was set. I think it's a sign of good typography that you don't notice it. But when you do become aware of it, typography has a music and a power all its own. Typography is language made visible. It's the way that human beings communicate words in visual form. And, if you look at letterforms very closely, the proportions and details and nuances are extremely beautiful. Creating good typography is much more than styling: Getting it right demands reading, analyzing, organizing, editing and, sometimes, writing.

How do you immerse your students in the love of typography?

I try very hard to instill in them a deep appreciation for typography and its associated nuances and details. My students almost exclusively work with classic families of type. Typically, they want to focus on the letterform in isolation—as abstract design elements—but I make them pay more attention to space, composition and meaning. Type is a communications tool. I want them to see each font in that context.

I understand your students take a typographic pledge of allegiance?

Yes. I lost all shame and developed the pledge to set the tone for good typographic practice.

How do you keep up with all the new developments in graphic design?

Well, first of all, it's something I love. Second, as an educator, I'm confronted with wave after wave of new graphic design students. Making them aware of what's state-of-the-art is part of my job—and if I miss something, my students have a way of bringing it to my attention. They're full of the joy of new discovery. To the students, everything is new. It makes it new for me, too. That's one thing I love about teaching at Ringling. It never gets old!