

A Reminiscence in Honor of Rob Roy Kelly

Joe Ballay

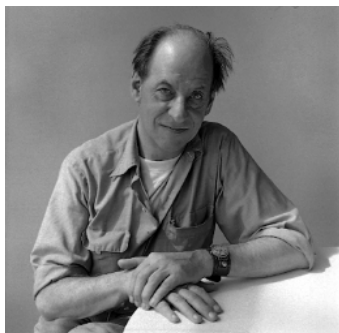


Photo: Charlee Brodsky

The first time I met Rob Roy Kelly he was riding the crest of his teaching at Kansas City Art Institute. We had invited him to be a speaker and critic for a couple of days at Carnegie Mellon University. In that short time I didn't get to know him well, but I was left with the impression of a designer who eschewed style and trends in graphic design in favor of a clear personal vision, common sense, and hard work.

Our paths crossed again at Carnegie Mellon some years later, but this time he was coming to join the faculty of our Department of Design. At this point he had left behind any ambitions to head a program—been there, done that. But he assumed, almost as second nature, the role of a senior faculty member—a voice for reflection and reason, a supporter of design education based on enduring principles.

Whatever Rob got involved in, it was all the way. Many know of his collections; wood type, of course, but also trivets, succulents, and probably others I never saw. As he would travel from his apartment in Squirrel Hill, through parts of Schenley Park to the Carnegie Mellon campus he noticed that many trees in the area were afflicted with burls, areas of bulbous irregular growth along their trunks or branches. His curiosity was piqued and so it began again. To my knowledge, Rob never cut down a tree just to get its burl, but somehow he amassed the largest collection of burls—trimmed, polished, mounted—that I had ever seen.

It would miss the point to interpret these collections as obsessions or mere infatuations. I believe they were an outward expression of Rob Roy's way of seeing and understanding the world. He was one of two colleagues I knew (Arnold Bank was the other) who learned, and taught by focusing on a specific object, phenomenon or principle, and then following it to its utter depth and accounting for everything that it touched along the way. And it touched, almost literally, everything. So wood type led to the origins of the decorative vernacular style, to nineteenth century principles of typography, to printer's records, to the manufacturing and handling of wood type, and on and on.

Of course, his cognitive style affected his teaching too. For several years Rob Roy, Mark Mentzer, and I team-taught the Freshman Design Studio at Carnegie Mellon, Rob doing the 2D design, Mark the drawing, and I did the 3D. I saw in Rob's teaching the beauty of simple things done exceedingly well. One of his projects early in the year was to design a convex shape or "blob." It was to be based on a circle, but not *be* a circle; to deviate from a circle about as much as an orange or peach deviates from a sphere (you might say, something like the shape of a burl). It began simply but became deeper and deeper. At first he pushed the student for something resembling a circle. "Come on! Does that look like a circle to you? It's flat over here. Try again." Then, not to be too easily satisfied, the criticism would shift to, "Ok, that's better, but look how this part of the curve over here needs to have a tension with that part of the curve over there. Try again." And eventually, if the student worked hard enough, it would get down to, "That's pretty good, but what about this little bump here? Did you mean that? It looks like a slip of the brush. Try again and see what you can do about that." While students may have been frustrated along the way with Rob, at the end of the journey they had produced beautiful work and were proud of it. That's good education.