

Sonderstellung

Debating the Status of Graphic Design Education at the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich

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Whoever wished to train as a graphic designer in Switzerland up to the 1980s had two options: to embark on an apprenticeship as a graphic designer in a commercial enterprise, or to study in the *Fachklasse Grafik* (Graphic Design Class) at one of the arts and crafts schools.¹ This duality of training types goes back to the first half of the 20th century, when the profession was split into two differentiated tracks, and their emergence was not without rivalry. The core of the conflict was an ongoing dispute between the “commercials”—the tradesmen—and the “artists.” These often heated discussions had their origins in the Europe-wide debates on arts and crafts reform, and the associated emergence of training workshops at the arts and crafts schools at the turn of the century.²

Originally, this reform was a counter-movement to industrialization, through which a decline in crafts had become apparent. The most influential of these counter-movements was the Arts & Crafts Movement of the 1890s, which began in England and included social reform plans in addition to a reform of the crafts. Its aim was to counter loveless, industrial, mass production by means of products that expressed uniqueness and inherent beauty. Decades later, the representatives of refined design, based on good craftsmanship that resisted excessive decoration and automation, organized themselves into various national or regional associations such as *Deutscher Werkbund* or later *Schweizer Werkbund*.³ They believed that a better apprenticeship was part and parcel of an appropriate education, and by this they meant that craftsmanship had to be complemented by an artistic school education, with in-school workshops.⁴ As a result, workshops based on this model were established in various schools in the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Basel and Zurich also followed the example of arts and crafts reform schools such as *Düsseldorf*, *Berlin*, *Weimar*, and *Munich*.⁵ Since then, there have been competing demands when training as a graphic designer, with craftsmanship on the one hand and artistic expression on the other. This essay uses the example of Zurich to trace the debates on the establishment and recognition of the *Fachklasse Grafik* in

Switzerland in relation to vocational training, as documented in archival material from the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich and the Gewerbeschule Zürich, the local professional associations,⁶ and the city and Canton of Zurich.

Negotiating two options for graphic design training in Zurich

When Alfred Altherr took over the management of the Kunstgewerbeschule and Gewerbemuseum Zürich in 1912, he had come from Berlin and brought with him the ideas of the German Werkbund.⁷ Shortly after taking up his post, he stated that the workshop, introduced by his predecessor Jules de Praetere, had moved too far in an “artistic” direction, even into “kitsch.”⁸ Consequently, he redefined the tasks and goals of the school: after graduating from the school, graduates should not only become artists but also be able to meet the needs of industry and advertising. Furthermore, Altherr promised that the school’s artistic direction would lead master craftsmen, junior craftsmen, and apprentices to develop exemplary craftsmanship.⁹ Therefore, in 1916, he initiated a reorganization of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich.¹⁰ But instead of setting up its own design school for the applied arts, a “Hochschule für angewandte Kunst” as was done later in Vienna, Altherr took another step towards craftsmanship with his concept of an Arts

and Crafts School. The school workshop concept, originally conceived for further education, became a *Fachschule* (Fachklasse) and was integrated into the Gewerbeschule Zürich. As understandable as this step was at that time, this reorganization devalued the school workshop concept and led to public confusion about the actual function of the school.

As early as 1916, Altherr stated that a certain dualism was noticeable in the expansion of the workshops. Because of the shortage of students (master craftsmen and junior craftsmen), school apprentices in arts and crafts were trained in Zurich between 1912 and 1920.¹¹ However, this contradicted the 1916 regulation that stipulated that the school’s task was to further educate pupils only *after* they had completed an apprenticeship.¹² This contradiction soon led to an unwelcome competition between apprenticeships in the Fachklassen and practical apprenticeships. As a result, difficulties arose with the trade associations, which did not want to recognize the Fachklasse as a form of apprenticeship; there were thus arguments in 1916 with the Verein Schweizerischer Lithographiebesitzer (VSLB) (Association of Swiss Lithography Owners) and the Schweizerischer Lithographenbund (SLB) (Swiss Lithography Association). Apprentices who had completed their apprenticeships in the Fachklasse were subsequently no longer allowed to be employed by the companies affiliated to the VSLB; those who were already

thus employed were immediately dismissed.¹³ In spite of this decision, the Arts and Crafts Department of the Gewerbeschule Zürich continued to train graphic design apprentices in the Fachklasse.¹⁴ Graduates of the Fachklasse Grafik were called *freie* (freelance) graphic designers after their training.¹⁵ Given these circumstances and the lack of external recognition, the school tried to revise the profile of its Fachklasse. It established a *Sonderstellung* (special status) in industrial vocational training, which was also not welcomed by the aforementioned associations.

The main goal of the four-year apprenticeship training in a private company (master craftsman apprenticeship) is above all the “Besitz der zur Ausübung des Berufes nötigen Fähigkeiten und Kenntnisse” (possession of skills and knowledge necessary for the practice of the profession).¹⁶ The five-year training in the Fachklassen (including the foundation course and entrance exam), on the other hand, also focuses on independence in creative work, the quality of execution, and the development of new fields of activity.¹⁷ The student in the Fachklasse is to be fostered in such a way that he is able to solve the versatile tasks of practice, and should do so technically and artistically as flawlessly as possible.¹⁸ Furthermore, the “Stärkung der Urteilskraft und die Pflege des guten Geschmacks” (strengthening of judgment and the cultivation of good taste) was of utmost importance.¹⁹ For Altherr,

independence from economic constraints was a major concern. He wanted quality work to emerge in the Fachklassen, “to stimulate thinking and feeling in the best possible way.”²⁰ This could not be learned in a restless business, he claimed.²¹ Entry into the Fachklassen was not open to everyone—there was a tough selection process. Even today (2020), there is a qualifying exam in the foundation course and a subsequent exam in the Fachklasse that students have to pass.

In 1939, there was a change of directors at the school, due to age restrictions. The new director, Johannes Itten, strove to emphasize “künstlerisch-schöpferischen Entwurfsfähigkeit” (artistic-creative design ability).²² According to Itten, the curriculum of the Fachklasse should be worked out systematically and according to pedagogical methodologies, following basic, scientific/artistic principles, which was not possible in vocational apprenticeships.²³ He propagated the concept of the “allergrösste Individualisierung des Lehrenden und des Lernenden” (greatest individualization of the teacher and the pupil). This would be a pedagogical prerequisite for promising work in creative teaching.²⁴ This insistence on teaching and artistic freedom aroused distrust. Did this mean artistic overconfidence instead of “usability”—visual self-realization instead of graphic design for commercial use?

The debate on “Sonderstellung” and certification

Skepticism about the orientation of the Fachklasse also became noticeable in the debate about the certification of this training path that started in August 1940. For the development of graphic design education in Switzerland, this debate was of momentous significance (with one specific meeting having a crucial impact), and its consequences remain valid today. The description of a meeting between Johannes Itten, the then director of the Gewerbeschule Zürich, and representatives of the federal and cantonal authorities, illustrates how education was negotiated based on legal, political, and professional motives.²⁵

Itten’s predecessors had established the Fachklasse Grafik as a parallel vocational training pathway since the 1920s, yet there was no recognized certification for it. Director Itten hoped to strengthen the “Sonderstellung,” or “special status” of the Fachklasse as a form of training, but also wanted to anchor its certification in law.²⁶ At a decisive meeting in August 1940, all the authorities involved were present: the Bundesamt für Industrie, Gewerbe und Arbeit (BIGA) (Federal Office for Industry, Trade and Labor), represented by Arnold Schwander; and the Amt für Industrie, Gewerbe und Arbeit des Kantons Zürich (KIGA) (Office for Industry, Trade and Labor of the Canton of Zurich), represented by Georg Gilg and Dr. Ernst Zaugg. Sitting

on the other side were Berchtold von Grünigen as the representative of the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker (VSG) (Swiss Graphic Design Association), the Swiss Werkbund (SWB), and head of the apprentice classes of the Arts and Crafts Department of the Gewerbeschule Zürich, plus Johannes Itten as director of the Gewerbeschule Zürich.²⁷

At its core, the dispute revolved around the question of whether the diploma exams held at the Arts and Crafts Department of the Gewerbeschule Zürich could legally be equated with the apprenticeship exams held by the canton. Itten overconfidently assumed that the Gewerbeschule could determine its own certification and, like his predecessors, he cited the school’s relevance and special status in the vocational education system as his justification.

To Itten’s surprise, none of those present questioned the special status of the Fachklassen. The crux of the discussion seemed to be certification. Itten criticized the fact that the diplomas of the Fachklassen were not recognized by the federal government and the canton. Georg Gilg, the representative of the KIGA, rejected the Sonderstellung certification. But he suggested that instead of a separate diploma, the Fachklasse students should receive the regular Swiss Federal Certificate as a qualification. This proposal seemed pragmatic and feasible, but it was clearly not what Itten had hoped for. Gilg, however, seemed to have general doubts about

arts and crafts education. As a representative of the Canton of Zurich, he demanded that the existing cantonal teaching program be adhered to. Itten tried to convince those present that the Fachklassen knew best how to define and carry out their final exams themselves. Berchtold von Grünigen, as representative of the VSG and the SWB, shared Itten's opinion, and when the authorities demanded that the graduation processes at the Fachklassen should be overseen by external experts, he complained about such demands that would clearly curtail the independence of the Fachklassen.

As one outcome of this debate, Itten had to come to terms with certification by means of the Swiss Federal Certificate for the Fachklassen, and with having examiners drawn from the ranks of the professional associations.

The compromise

The negotiations with the federal government and the canton resulted in an order from the Volkswirtschaftsdirektion des Kantons Zürich (Department of Economic Affairs of the Canton of Zurich) that acknowledged the Sonderstellung of the Fachklassen and agreed on a separate, final exam. The latter was now legally equivalent to the final cantonal apprenticeship exams.²⁸ It was important for this "special status" that the curricula and examination plans should meet the minimum

cantonal requirements of the individual professions and be approved by the KIGA and the BIGA.²⁹ In addition, the training relationship had to be regulated by an apprenticeship contract. As a result, the Gewerbeschule Zürich developed a corresponding regulation for the Fachklasse Grafik. This regulation was regarded as mandatory until the 1980s, although it already caused discomfort to the VSG and the SWB. The associations were of the opinion that any regulation of training should be rejected. According to them, a graphic designer is an independent artist whose impulses must emerge from the free, spiritual development of his personality.³⁰ And from today's perspective, this opinion is even more stridently upheld: the teacher, who is himself an artist, can only give his best if he feels free. The two associations made an unequivocal plea for freedom in teaching.³¹

This phobia of regulations on the part of some associations and designers was also a result of the zeitgeist. In October 1945, the SWB emphasized explicitly that its attitude was backed by a "Angst vor Gleichschaltung" (fear of enforced conformity).³² There were perceptible influences, they claimed, that were inhibiting creative development. Furthermore, the advantage of having been spared from war, unlike the neighboring countries, was in danger of being lost.³³ The demands of the sponsors (the BIGA and the KIGA), however, were understandable from today's point of view.

As late as November 1945, Director Itten tried to regain territory he believed he had lost. He emphasized the link with the SWB and demanded that the experts supervising examinations should be elected by the examination commission on the basis of proposals from the school supervisory commission and the SWB. He insisted that the experts themselves should be members of the SWB and, if possible, of the professional association (VSG) in charge.³⁴

Clearly, this raised certain questions: Would the idealistic support of the arts and crafts schools by the SWB and VSG—the emphasis on artistic and didactic freedom as well as a resistance to any regulations—sooner or later lead to methodical arbitrariness, to an interchangeability of learning contents, subjects, and tasks? Was there not a real danger at this point that the *Fachklasse Grafik* would drift into the realm of free arts and alienate itself from practice? Was there not the danger of a certain cronyism if school directors, department heads, faculty members, and external jurors were members of the same professional associations? On the other hand, were the “commercial” trade associations at that time really the “devils”?

In 1947, the cold shower came promptly. The representatives of advertising and the industry—the “commercials”—were enraged. The criticism came from the *Zürcher Werbeklub* (Zurich Advertising Club). Paul O. Althaus remarked that

many pupils had no idea that any work ought to be based on reproducibility. It should be noted that no businessman had ever spoken to students to develop a brief from a sales perspective. He concluded that the link between advertising professionals, prospective businessmen, and the teachers of the *Fachklasse Grafik* ought to become more active.³⁵ Nine years later, none other than advertising legend Adolf Wirz spoke up, the then president of the *Bund Schweizerischer Reklameberater* (BSR) (Swiss Association of Advertising Consultants). His concern was that young graphic designers should engage in practice with the correct mindset. Wirz wrote that he would welcome it if pupils were made aware of the real task of the *Gebrauchsgrafiker* (commercial graphic designer).³⁶

Conclusion

In retrospect, Director Itten’s persistent “struggle” for the special status and certification of the *Fachklasse Grafik* was understandable. What he subsequently achieved became the standard throughout Switzerland—to the present day. These negotiations led to a coexistence of *Fachklasse* and practical apprenticeship in graphic design training that is unique in Europe. A graphic designer’s training is based on an “artistic,” conceptual orientation (*Fachklasse*) on the one hand, and an advertising, service-related, craftsmanship-based

orientation (apprenticeship in practice) on the other. The constant rivalry between these two forms of training has long proved to be very productive. Each has had to compete with the other for clients in the marketplace, and the complementarity and overlap involved have contributed to the high quality of Swiss graphic design training.

However, the constant call for freedom of teaching and artistic expression, which has been characterized by a certain idealism, proved to be something of a “boomerang.” The problems it brings were also exemplified by the criticism leveled by representatives of advertising and industry in the postwar years. When too much “art” and too many “concepts” are involved, the labor market tends to get bypassed. In a positive sense, regulation by the authorities also means that teaching concepts and curricula must be developed and disciplines and professional profiles reconsidered. This ensures that teaching can keep pace with the development of technology and with new tasks in practice, while at the same time opening up new fields of activity.

About forty years ago, however, a new, academic training path for graphic designers opened up via the higher education colleges of the schools of design. Its importance further increased some twenty years ago when this training attained university status (at the Universities of Applied Arts). Pure lectures and self-study, although common at universities abroad, do not really

exist anywhere in Switzerland. On the contrary, project teaching and workshop teaching, with basic and advanced subjects, are still the standard in our curricula. This model has proven to be very successful when compared to tertiary training abroad. It is notable here that the curricula in Bachelor studies in visual communication and graphic design are still largely based on the Fachklassen model.

training	education policy	schools	associations	Arts and Crafts	159
1 Today there are four different training paths in Switzerland: the academic path at a university of applied sciences and arts; the path via further education after completing an apprenticeship at the Colleges of Higher Education; the Fachklasse Grafik; and that of an apprenticeship within a company. von Grünigen 1943: 261.		8 See "Timetables," in the volume <i>Visual Arguments</i> .		office), "Entwurf eines Reglements über die Ausbildung des Graphikers in der graphischen Fachklasse der Gewerbeschule I der Stadt Zürich," annex, no. 5. Zurich: June 8, 1938. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AY-VCB-00001.	
2 "[Der Werkbund strebte] die Veredelung der gewerblichen Arbeit im Zusammenwirken von Kunst, Industrie und Handwerk durch Erziehung, Aufklärung und Stellungnahme zu künstlerisch und volkswirtschaftlichen praktischen Fragen" (Zumstein 2013b: 63). The social reform plans on the other hand were dropped. See Krufft 1977: 29.		9 Altherr 1916c: 14.		17 Steiner, Heinrich. Letter of the Ortsgruppe Zürich (Zurich local group) of the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker VSG to the Volkswirtschaftsdirektion des Kantons Zürich. Zurich: September 12, 1945. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AB-UAE-00002.	
3 "Frauenfelder 1938: 62. The Prussian Ministry of Trade and Commerce had issued a decisive "Lehrwerkstatt-Erlass" (Training Workshop Decree) in 1906, which defined training workshops as common components of education. See Maciuika 2006: 120–131.		10 Budliger 1978: 97.		18 Gewerbeschule Zürich. Memorandum on the decision of the Teachers' Conference of the Arts and Crafts Department of the Gewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: April 28, 1938. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:7.1.	
4 The director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich and the Gewerbemuseum Zürich, Jules de Praetere, advocated the school workshop concept. See de Praetere 1908: 19. Later there was a lively exchange among the reform schools. Highly respected designers came to teach in Switzerland in the 1920s (e.g. Fritz Helmuth Ehmcke).		11 In the winter and summer semester of 1928–1929, for instance, there were twice as many school apprentices as assistant and master craftsmen in the Fachklassen. See Altherr 1929: 5.		19 See Keller, Ernst. Letter to the kant. Industrie- und Gewerbeamt (cantonal industry and trade office), "Entwurf eines Reglements über die Ausbildung des Graphikers in der graphischen Fachklasse der Gewerbeschule I der Stadt Zürich," annex, no. 5. Zurich: June 8, 1938. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AY-VCB-00001.	
5 The Swiss Werkbund (SWB) and the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker (VSG).		12 Zentralschulpflege der Stadt Zürich. Verordnung über die Organisation der Gewerbeschule und des Kunstgewerbemuseums Zürich. Zurich: April 27, 1932. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AB-UAE-00002.		20 Kienzle 1929: 22.	
6 Altherr was a co-founder of the SWB in 1913. See Bignens 2008: 13–18.		13 Budliger 1978: 110.		21 Altherr 1924: 7.	
		14 Gewerbeschule Zürich. Minutes of the Supervisory Commission of the Gewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: December 12, 1917. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.		22 Gewerbeschule Zürich. Minutes of the Supervisory Commission of the Gewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: June 27, 1941. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:2.1.3.1.	
		15 These trained apprentices— <i>freie Graphiker</i> —could later only work as either a freelancer or an independent graphic designer, as they had no right to be employed by the contracting companies. It also led to misunderstandings, for the lithography trade and related professions in Switzerland understood the term <i>Graphiker</i> (graphic designer) to mean <i>Zeichner-Lithograph</i> (draftsman-lithographer). See Keller, Ernst. Letter to the kant. Industrie- und Gewerbeamt (cantonal industry and trade office), "Ausbildung des GRAFIKERS in der grafischen Kunstanstalt," annex, no. 1. Zurich: June 8, 1938. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AY-VCB-00001.		23 Ibid.	
		16 Keller, Ernst. Letter to the kant. Industrie- und Gewerbeamt (cantonal industry and trade		24 Itten 1939: 14.	
		17 See "Training," in the volume <i>Multiple Voices</i> .		25 Federal Act on Vocational	

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	Training, June 26, 1930, 876. See "Legal Documents," in the volume <i>Visual Arguments</i> .				
27	Gewerbeschule Zürich. Minutes of the Arts and Crafts Department of the Gewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: August 21, 1940. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:3.1.2.				
28	Gewerbeschule Zürich. Minutes of the Supervisory Commission of the Gewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: April 29, 1944. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:2.1.3.1.				
29	Volkswirtschaftsdirektion des Kantons. Order of the Volkswirtschaftsdirektion des Kantons Zürich "Verfügung: Fachklasse gilt als Lehre." Zurich: 1944. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:7.3.				
30	Steiner, Heinrich. Letter of the Ortsgruppe Zürich (Zurich local group) of the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker VSG to the Volkswirtschaftsdirektion des Kantons Zürich. Zurich: September 12, 1945. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, ABUAE-00002.				
31	Swiss Werkbund. Minutes of the Board of Directors of the Swiss Werkbund SWB. Zurich: September 13, 1945. SWB-Archives.				
32	Swiss Werkbund (signed by Richard Bühler and Egidius Streiff). Letter to KIGA, Zurich, as well as to the Gewerbeinspektorat Basel-Stadt (Trade Inspectorate of the Canton Basel-City). Zurich: October 5, 1945. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AB-UAE-00002. See "Letter of Correspondence," in the volume <i>Visual Arguments</i> .				
33	Ibid.				
34	Gewerbeschule Zürich. Minutes of the Supervisory Section I of	the Gewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: December 4, 1945. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:2.1.3.1.	35	Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich. Minutes of the Supervisory Section I of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: February 18, 1947. Stadtarchiv Zürich, V.H.c.121.:2.1.3.1.	
			36	Wirz, Adolf. President of the Bund Schweizerischer Reklameberater (BSR) (Swiss Association of Advertising Consultants) in a letter to Hans Fischli, director of the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich. Zurich: February 24, 1956. Zürcher Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdK, AY-VCB-00001.	