Student Work

Sandra Bischler

In an internal report to the Department of Education of the Canton of Basel-Stadt in 1946, [Fig. 32] Berchtold von Grünigen, director of the Arts and Crafts Department of the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule (AGS) Basel for the past two years, informed his supervisory authority about a seemingly marginal change to the curriculum of the Fachklasse für Graphik (Graphic Design Class):

“[…] the subject ‘Graphics’ was divided into two different subject fields and thus we achieved a more pronounced consideration of experimental, strict graphic design in addition to commercial graphic design […]”

([...] das Fach ‘Graphik’ [wurde] in zwei verschiedene Fachgebiete getrennt und damit eine ausgesprochenere Berücksichtigung der experimentellen strengen Graphik neben der Gebrauchsgraphik erreicht.)

Von Grünigen’s brief notification hardly stood out in the five pages of this typewritten report, and was approved without further ado by the authorities. Furthermore, incorporating opposing design philosophies was not a novelty on the curriculum of the Basel Fachklasse für Graphik. However, von Grünigen’s notification paved the way for the official sanctioning of an essential degree of educational diversity in the graphic design program that would leave a visible mark on the Fachklasse’s future outcomes. [Figs. 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38]

The school now offered two separate main courses for graphic design, which were officially named “Graphik A” and “Graphik B” shortly afterwards. Two new teachers with deliberately different approaches were hired on an equal footing as the main teachers for the Fachklasse: Donald Brun for the “commercial,” Numa Rick for the “experimental, strict” approach. Rick was followed two years later by Armin Hofmann. This educational model remained in place over the following decades, and differed from that of other Swiss schools such as the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich, which hired one teacher for the main subject of graphic design.

The profile of the two courses was further defined in the following years in official publications by the school. According to the directorate, the course Graphik A would trigger “the student’s liberation from conventional design approaches” through its focus on formal reduction and the Gesetzmässigkeiten (regularities) of graphic design. Even though the final student work from Graphik A consisted of the common “commercial” tasks of the graphic designer (such as making posters or advertisements), their starting point was not illustrative depiction, but an exploration of basic formal means. As can be seen in many student works, the color palette was reduced to black and white, and forms were abstracted, playing with graphic translations instead of depicting products in a naturalistic manner. [Figs. 34, 36, 37]

According to the AGS, the educational approach in Graphik B was based on the assumption that a product should be presented in the most appealing way possible, according to psychological aspects of advertising practice. Products were thus represented figuratively or humorously, using a wide range of colors and playful pictorial illustrations in combination with lettering. The materiality of a product or the variety of a brand’s assortment was emphasized using illustrative or painterly means. [Figs. 33, 35, 38]

Both courses were mandatory over the entire four-year duration of the graphic design program, and they were able to build on a large number of fundamental drawing courses, mostly provided by local artists such as Walter Bodmer, Julia Eble, Theo Eble, and Max Sulzbachner. The high proportion of drawing courses in the Fachklasse is reflected in the student records from that period. [Fig. 39]

Students would eventually combine the skills and principles learned from all these courses. Therefore, similar principles of composition and drawing become visible across the students’ work and link the seemingly contrary graphic design approaches once more. [Figs. 37, 38]
The underlying terminology also shifted. Whereas von Grünigen had justified his reinforcement of the “strict” direction in his report of 1946 by emphasizing its “experimental” potential, the situation changed some fifteen years later. “Strict, more sober graphic design” (strengere, nüchternere Graphik) was now presented by its supporters as a widely established approach compared to outdated, artistic, painterly, and humorous graphic design. A change in favor of radical reduction was also noticeable at AGS Basel, such as in student works or the creation of new courses. Another semantic change was evoked by the popularity of “strict” graphic design and typography from the late 1960s onwards, which itself had to face the accusation of being commercial, or not experimental enough. If we leave these terminological shifts to one side for a moment (they were often strategically motivated), it is still remarkable that von Grünigen in 1946 deliberately generated such friction within the school’s Fachklasse für Graphik. This also reflected the diversity of the mid-century Swiss graphic design scene, which was far from homogeneous.

C. Aenderungen im Personalbestand.

1. Personaländerungen.

2. Entlassungen

a) Eintritte.

1. Herrn Mr. Schlossermeister, übernimmt 6 Std. aus dem Pensum Ruggel als Vikar mit festem Pensum. über seine Personellen wird gesondert berichtet.

2. Zillinger Werk, Buchschreiber, übernimmt 3 Std. aus dem Pensum Vogt mit Semesterantrag. über seine Personellen wurde bereits berichtet.


b) Rücktritte.


II. Alterntäglichkeiten im Schuljahr 1946/47 (Sommerhalbjahr)

1. Dr. Fried. Lehrer für Wirtschaftslehre, um 2 Std.

2. Veikert K. Leiter der Schlosserfachschule, um 3 Std.

III. Pensionierungen auf anfängen Sommerhalbjahr.


3 Vorbereitungskurse für die Meisterprüfung: Geschäftswesen, Buchhaltung und Rechtswesen.

Fig. 32  Letter to the Erziehungsdepartement Basel-Stadt, concerning timetables and programmatic changes for the summer semester 1946, Berchtold von Grünigen (school director), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, Mar. 19, 1946 (copy).

[Fachklasse für Graphik: after the resignation of Mr Rolf Rappaz, specialist lecturer for graphic design, the subject “Graphik” was divided into two different subject fields, and thus we achieved a more pronounced consideration of experimental, strict graphic design in addition to commercial graphic design.]
Fig. 33 Poster design “Schaffhauser Wolle,” student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, Teresa Christ, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1953.
Fig. 34  Design for a Swiss stamp “Pro Juventute,” student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, Rudi Meyer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1958–1963.
Fig. 35  Poster design “Bally,” student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, Teresa Christ, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1951–1955.
Fig. 36  Poster design “PTT—telephoniere ins Ausland” for Swiss Post, student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, Kurt Hauert (attributed), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1953–1957.
Fig. 37 Poster design “Anti-ck” snail repellent, student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, Georg Staehelin, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1958–1963.
Fig. 38    Poster “Textil AG,” student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, Suzanne Senn, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1951–1955.
Fig. 39  Student record from the Fachklasse für Graphik, showing the variety of courses and the grades for performance, but also “behavior” and “diligence,” Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1951–1953.