Teaching Materials

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The Fachklasse für Graphik (Graphic Design Class) at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule (AGS) Basel was founded in 1915, when the Belgian Julius de Praetere radically restructured the school by replacing its former curriculum (based mainly on drawing courses) with practical courses held in newly formed workshops with teachers who were themselves involved in professional practice. After this restructuring, the full-time Fachklasse für Graphik was led by the painter and graphic designer Paul Kammüller. Over the following fifteen years, a certain routine set in—at least this is what is indicated in a letter written in 1931 by the AGS director Hermann Kienzle. Kienzle had noted with displeasure a certain backwardness in the teaching of the Fachklasse, especially towards "the newer direction that we absolutely have to consider following, because it has taken on the leadership role in graphic design and typography were more than a mere fad of the time." His letter thus supported employing "fresh forces"—new teachers who would introduce the ideas of European avant-garde movements into the AGS curriculum.

Amongst these new teachers was the graphic designer August Theophil, called Theo Ballmer, who started teaching at the Fachklasse für Graphik in October 1930 after returning from an educational visit to the Bauhaus under Hannes Meyer’s directorship. Notably, Ballmer did not begin his graphic design course with a focus on hand-drawn, figurative motifs, as was the case with his fellow graphic design teachers. The few documents, templates, and student works that have survived from his courses in the 1930s indicate that Ballmer, as mentioned in Kienzle’s letter, pursued a methodical teaching concept with successive assignments. These documents were precisely notated for the school in Ballmer’s typical minuscule handwriting.

The course began with the construction of type from basic geometric forms such as circles and squares, for which Ballmer had a great affinity in his own practice. [Fig. 121] These lettering exercises were extended to so-called Flächenbehandlungen (plane treatments): rectangular fields where students would examine basic principles of composition, surface contrasts, the effect of type on linear or point-shaped patterns, and different possibilities for its rotation [Fig. 122]—principles that were also reflected in applied tasks. Eventually, gray and color tones based on the color standardization system by Wilhelm Ostwald were added. [Figs. 123, 124]

These exercises developed into more figurative, applied tasks such as posters, advertisements, and logos, [Figs. 125, 126, 127] and were finally combined with photography. [Fig. 129]

The integration of photography in the curriculum of graphic designers was a novelty in Switzerland in the early 1930s. Ballmer, being part of the “New Photography” movement in Switzerland, taught very technical, structured photo exercises with a focus on perfect execution. He would set the focus on object photography [Fig. 128] or the photographic exploration of surface qualities. [Fig. 129]

Certain motifs in his photography templates also reflected Ballmer’s political and design commitment to the communist party of Switzerland. This mixing of politics and teaching was not to everyone’s taste at the school. Ballmer was also fascinated by systems of standardization such as the “DIN-Norm,” as well as by ideas of construction, typification, and systematization of printed matter, which greatly
De Praetere had also reformed the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich a few years earlier along the lines of the Swiss Werkbund. See Kienzle 1930: 267–270. See also “Timetables,” in the present volume.

2 Kienzle 1931: 1.

3 The “new” directions, propagating practicality, objectivity, and a rejection of ornament, for example, were enthusiastically received at Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel and its Gewerbemuseum. See Direktion des Gewerbemuseums Basel 1928: 3. See also the exhibitions *Neues Bauen* (1928); *Die Neue Werbegraphik* (1930); *Die Neue Fotografie in der Schweiz* (1933), all at Gewerbemuseum Basel.

4 Kienzle 1940: 3.


6 See Direktion des Gewerbemuseums Basel 1928: 3.

7 New teachers at the Fachklasse für Graphik during the 1930s included Fritz Bühler, Julia and Theo Eble, Ernst Mumenthaler, Georg Schmidt, and Jan Tschichold.

8 Ballmer was definitely registered at the Bauhaus in the 1930 summer semester. In his early years in Basel, he taught at the Fachklasse für Graphik, later also in the photo apprentices’ class. See Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel 1931: n.p.; Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel 1934: n.p.

9 For example, Paul Kammüller insisted on a curriculum beginning with a two-year focus on the fundamentals of drawing. See Kammüller 1931: 3.

10 Ballmer started using similar, geometrically constructed lettering during the late 1920s. See, for example, his poster for *Internationale Bürofachausstellung Basel*, 1928, Plakatsammlung der Schule für Gestaltung Basel, No. 11932.

11 See “Reproductions,” in the present volume.

12 See Ostwald 1917.


15 Walter Peterhans, who had a similarly precise and technical approach, was the photography teacher when Ballmer attended photo courses at the Bauhaus in 1930. See also Ballmer’s notes on photo theory, Ballmer 1930: n.p.

16 The school’s commission president Fritz Mangold feared that Ballmer’s political views might also be communicated in class. See note in Fig. 119.

17 In a semester report, Ballmer described the goal of his teaching: “standardization of all printed matter, letterheads, additional sheets, invoices, envelopes, postcards, business cards, memoranda, magazines. design of all these printed matter with an emphasis on unity.” See Ballmer 1931/1932: n.p.

18 Ballmer’s own systematized designs were shown in the exhibition *Planvolles Werben*, co-curated by Jan Tschichold, in 1934; see Gewerbemuseum Basel 1934: 27. On ideas of standardization, see, for example, Meyer 1926: 223. On typification, see also Kienzle 1939: 62.

19 See “Reproductions,” in the present volume
Fig. 118  Letter to Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel’s commission president Fritz Mangold about the Fachklasse für Graphik, Hermann Kienzle, Basel, Mar. 24, 1931.

[For once it seems to me indispensable, especially in the field of applied graphic design that has seen so many major shifts in recent years, to let fresh forces have their say if possible, who are not alienated by these new developments. Mr Kammüller would surely run the course in a very diligent way, but he is too far removed from the newer direction that we absolutely have to consider following, because it has taken on the leadership role in graphic design. The second reason is that I find it right to assign the course to that teacher who runs the course in commercial art [...], Mr Theo Ballmer. His ability in the field of lettering is at least as great as that of Mr Kammüller, but the way he organizes his teaching is methodologically far more in the manner of the new direction.]

Handwritten note by Fritz Mangold:

[Agreed, though I fear that Mr B will be active in secret in line with his political beliefs.]
Fig. 120  Semester report “werbegrafik” (commercial graphics) about exercises with type and color, Theo Ballmer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, summer semester 1935.
Fig. 121  “Konstruktionsschema” (construction scheme), type exercise for the Fachklasse für Graphik, Theo Ballmer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1930s.
konstruktionschema

flächenbehandlung blatt 5

schrift flächig, positiv und negativ, kornbination dieser beiden möglichkeiten.
Fig. 122  “Flächenbehandlung” (plane treatment), exercise for the Fachklasse für Graphik, Theo Ballmer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1930s.
Fig. 123  “Flächenbehandlung Blatt II,” color and type exercise for the Fachklasse für Graphik, Theo Ballmer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1930s.
Fig. 124  “Flächenbehandlung Blatt 12,” color and type exercise for the Fachklasse für Graphik, Theo Ballmer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1930s.
Fig. 125 Advertisement for H. Stamm apple cider, student work from the Fachklasse für Graphik, anonymous (student), Theo Ballmer (attributed teacher), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1930s.
Fig. 126  Logo design, student work from the second year of the Fachklasse für Graphik, Beatrice Hefti(-Afflerbach) (student), Theo Ballmer and Ernst Keiser (teachers), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1937–1941.
Fig. 127 Free works from the Fachklasse für Graphik, anonymous (student), Theo Ballmer and Ernst Keiser (teachers), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, before 1939.
Freie Arbeit.
Gegenstand und Schrift mit zwei gefüllten Grau. Verwendung geometrischer Grundelemente.
Fig. 128  “Optik Aufgabe 4,” photo exercise for the Fachklasse für Graphik, Theo Ballmer, Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, 1930s.
Fig. 129  Free works from the Fachklasse für Graphik, anonymous (students), Theo Ballmer (teacher), Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, before 1939.

[To close and summarize the above study program, and in view of the standardization of printed matter, a text and object will be developed as a systematic advertisement.]