

## The OCA Years

My four years at the *Ontario College of Art*, and my young adult journey through Toronto for what would be the better part of nearly thirty years, were times of genuine growth and experience. Gone was the closet environment of a small south western Ontario town and gone was the intimidation of so many of the town's people who had made me feel like an immigrant and not as a welcome addition to the Canadian community. Toronto was the end of ever feeling like a second-class citizen again. Be assured, I did not condemn the entire town of Wallaceburg. I had friends who were good friends and I knew people in town who were truly wonderful people such as the Brand, the Woodrow, and Spiering families. It was more a feeling, an overall prevailing mindset of inferiority and intimidation, that disappeared after I started to attend Art College. A new mindset was birthed in Toronto, a mindset of knowing deep inside I never belonged in Wallaceburg. I have always loved the big city and to this day, despite its screaming pace of life, I will visit Toronto and walk again and again those same streets that were my home during the mid-sixties, especially the streets immediately surrounding the Art College mere blocks from Yonge and Queen. As I revise this entry in my memoir, it's now almost 60 years later, thirty of which on a small west coast island (pop.4000, a far cry from the big city). I still love walking down the streets of Vancouver and Victoria. There's something "good in the air" of a decent and big Canadian city. Except that I don't want to live there anymore. But competition for things "good in the air" is bigger, much bigger along the sandy shores of the Pacific Rim, the promontory of Ucluelet where the ocean crashes high on black volcanic rocky shores, or the tranquil trails of a rainforest in the heart of Vancouver Island. An artist's greatest inspiration at Berry Point just around the corner from my island home with a 200 degree view of the Salish Sea and the Coastal Mountains. But I digress.

During the four intense art college years, I spent long days in the classroom-studio creating project after project in a range of work that spanned from sculpture, painting, and drawing, to photography, two and three dimensional design, and packaging design. My first year at OCA, identified in the school calendar as "Foundation Year," was a broad mix of artistic experiments spread over four quarters and designed to allow every student an overview of visual arts. At some time during that year the college's faculty hoped I would gain a better understanding of what direction in art I really wanted to take. The choices were broad because second, third, and fourth year programs were available in Drawing and Painting, Advertising, Industrial Design, Interior Decorating, and Sculpture. Peter chose Industrial Design and I chose Advertising. It was also a fortuitous time to be at an Art College such as OCA. The early and mid-sixties were years that preceded the infamous academic rebellions that plagued universities and to a lesser degree *my* art college. However, and despite those rebellious times, I enjoyed college years because the college's governors and faculty remained committed to an arts curriculum of highest caliber. I chose Advertising because it promised to be the best choice if I wanted to ensure some form of employment after graduation. Nor was Advertising a curriculum resigned totally to the pursuit of marketing and selling products and services. The Advertising curriculum at OCA in the sixties included such classics of fine art as drawing and painting. My three years of study at OCA, following Foundation Year, also included the other classics of academic and studio courses, studio courses such as anatomy, life drawing, costume drawing, painting, perspective, design, illustration, layout, lettering, photography, techniques, typography, and a healthy portion of art lectures and projects facilitated at the Royal Ontario Museum. To

this day I consider my four years at OCA, just before the rebellions hit, to be the most valuable of art studies a person could possibly get anywhere in Canada.

Throughout those years I was the recipient of a number of awards to complement the standards of my work at the college. These awards included the brewing giant's "O'Keefe Brewing Company Scholarship" in 1966, the "Rolph Clark Stone Limited Scholarship" in 1967, and the "Ontario College of Art Medal for Proficiency" in 1968 (highest grades in the college that year). During my graduation year in 1968, I was also awarded "*Admakers '68*," a special recognition by The Advertising & Sales Club of Toronto. When at last my formal art education was completed in May 1968, I received the coveted appointment to *Associate of the Ontario College of Art* (AOCA) for successfully completing, with honours, four years of study. The appointment was confirmed by a handsome diploma that bears my name. Years later, when I enrolled for a BFA Degree, Bachelor of Fine Arts at Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, BC, my AOCA Diploma was upgraded to equivalency Degree status.

It is now thirty-five years (well, actually 56 years by today's date) after graduation ceremonies, but I remain proud to carry the initials AOCA, *Associate of the Ontario College of Art*, behind my name.

Another significant milestone during the OCA years was the 1968 college yearbook. According to a long-standing college tradition, the yearbook had always been adedigned by fourth year honour students. Therefore, in keeping with this tradition, a group of ten fourth-year honour students were asked in September of 1967, at the beginning of the 67/68 academic year, to submit designs for the 1968 college yearbook. I was one of ten students asked to submit such a design.

To design the yearbook of an art college was no small task. Not only was it a challenge but the reward was prestige and recognition. The team who would eventually complete all the work to produce such a yearbook was pretty well guaranteed their fourth year grades. In fact, the design and production of OCA's yearbook was a fulltime, hands-on project that lasted nearly seven months, with printed copies arriving just before year-end in April. There would be little time to do anything else while working on the yearbook. The yearbook tradition had an additional honour for one specific student. The student whose design was chosen was given the honour of serving as art director for the entire project from design concept to production. His production team included all the other honour students who had submitted designs.

I was truly honoured to be selected to submit a design, but the creation of an entire yearbook weighed heavy on my conscience. Many of my fellow students, who were selected, rose to meet the challenge with exceptional zeal. Soon their ideas began to fill sketchbooks in enormous quantity. And they were great ideas. I, however, drew a blank. Perhaps it was the sheer intimidation of an entire yearbook or my need to be somehow unconventional, or just plain "different" that kept me from producing a single idea for the book. My ideas remained frozen. As ideas of the other nine flourished like flowers in a spring meadow, my stream was dry. Some of the design concepts were very handsome.

But this was 1967, and the *Ontario College of Art* was steeped in the throes of a flourishing post-modern era where abstraction, abstract expressionism, and minimalism were beating the romantics, the realists, and the impressionists to the post. It was also a time of tremendous social upheaval. The sixties were in full bloom and people were captivated by new experiences of vibrant colours and a freedom of creativity never seen before. Life became a virtual arts explosion that rivalled the less fortunate explosion of drugs and sex, which clouded the exuberance of so much creativity.

My mind was flooded with questions of relevancy and impact of a proposed yearbook. How could any art college ever stand tall and unique in such a flood of artistic expression and social change of the 60's? Pragmatically, how could the design of our yearbook ever stand out as my personal portfolio of work amidst the hundreds of OCAS and other art school graduates who would soon roam the streets of Toronto, hoping to find a sympathetic art director and a job? Whether my idea would be selected or not, the design and production of the yearbook would in fact be a most prized example of student work in any portfolio.

The deadline for design submissions approached fast. One student was nearly finished with an elaborate mockup of the entire book. I felt overwhelmed, yet inside my heart I knew the answer lay somewhere else. Despite art's voluptuous developments during the sixties, OCA still had many traditions and conventions. As was the case in every college and university, the yearbook was one such tradition. Blue gowns and caps for graduation ceremonies were other traditions. All of them, however, appeared to be out-of-date. Perhaps I could not change the convention of gowns and caps, but I could aim to change the convention of a yearbook, if my design was selected. But how? The deadline for submissions was only days away. All the other students were putting finishing touches on their design presentations. I had yet to put any ideas on paper.

At last, with hours to spare, I arrived at a breakthrough.

I had an inspiration.

The night before all design presentations were due, I worked all night into the early hours of morning. Finally I knew what I had to do. My answer was inspired by one of the most popular designs of the day - the poster. The poster had become a hallmark of art and advertising popularity in the sixties. Wherever a wall offered a few spare feet of space, posters sprang up everywhere. Music groups were some of the most prolific consumers of posters. Everybody wanted a poster. Everyone wanted bright, colourful, *design-y* posters. A concept began to grow in my head.

With a stockpile of coloured felt markers and a huge layout pad, as well as a pot of coffee and some loud music, I began to design a series of posters, each representing a department of the college. My presentation recommended a poster for each of the college's many department with a proposal that each department would design its own poster, as directed by my fellow students who would part of the team. It was a brilliantly cooperative idea I thought. My presentation included the tradition that I remain in charge as overall art director to ensure my design concept was followed exactly. As night fell, I began drawing poster after poster in a flurry of quick felt pen layouts. One of my favourite studio classes was advertising design, where I was taught the techniques of felt pen rendering for newspaper and magazine layouts. I felt right at home as page after page of my layout pad filled with bright colours and bold designs. My design for each poster was not a detailed representation of the actual department. They were simply a concept to "sell" the idea of my yearbook or year-*poster* to a jury of OCA faculty and Toronto designers.

My yearbook was not a book.

My yearbook was a collection of posters.

To "bind" the whole collection of posters together in a "book," I created an impressive mat-black mailing tube with a bright label that wrapped like a red-and-white barber pole around the tube. At one end of the label was a photograph of a trumpet to herald this unique design concept. When I slowly turned the mailing tube around, the label ended with a photograph of a reclining nude who lay on her stomach and looked at the trumpet. One photo that summarized everyone's stereotypical image of an art college - the female nude, and the other a trumpet to

herald a new age for OCA - the year of the year-*poster*. Now all I needed to do was sell the jury. I don't remember how late it was, or how early in the morning, but at last, exhausted from all that flurry of creativity, I rolled nine large poster ideas into a black mailing tube and carefully glued the long label around it.

When the morning of decision came, I and nine other students sat with nervous expectation outside the college's large boardroom, waiting to make our respective presentations. We clutched our prized possessions in a portfolio in our laps. I was last as the order of presentations was determined alphabetically. I think I had my first taste of eternity that morning as hours crawled slowly by. Keith Rushton's design was the favourite to win. His design was an elaborate book with sumptuous art-nouveau designs and lots of contemporary graphics. It was a masterpiece. For a moment I entertained all sorts of doubts about my presentation, but I remembered the zeal with which it was birthed at the last hour. Finally, when my turn came, it was the shortest presentation they had ever seen. Eight jurors sat around the table, expecting a presentation of yet another book with a page by page description of the design's merits. I admit that with some degree of theatrical drama I rolled the tube on the table making sure each juror saw the trumpet photograph slowly wrap around the tube to end at the reclining nude. They didn't know what to expect. I didn't say a word. Then I carefully removed the posters from the tube and spread them on the table. My words remained simple.

I made sure the judges understood I was proposing a design concept that would involve the participation of others and not just feature my design alone. I recommended a collaborative creative work rather than a solo work. The jurors showed no reaction and gave me a genuine but polite thank you. I felt relieved and knew Keith had won. But, at least I would be on his production team. That was guaranteed. The other students were surprised that I lasted such a short time before the judges. The atmosphere outside the room where we waited impatiently was tense. Regardless of Keith's great design, Russel and Stan each had submitted excellent ideas as well. About twenty minutes later, the jury of faculty and designers met with us and with great enthusiasm announced *my* design as the winner.

Everyone was shocked, especially me, first because my design was so unconventional and perhaps too daring, and second because I had spent so little time actually making a mockup of my design. It appeared as if I had snubbed all the others students who had spent so much time doing so much work to create a yearbook. That meant damage control.

Nevertheless, because I was now appointed art director as well and given the task of assembling my team, I made an offering of peace and friendship. I went first to Keith Rushton who was most noticeably shocked and irritated. I assured him my design was in no way superior to his. It was the concept of something bright and new instead of a book that sold the jury. I asked him to join the team. When their surprise, shock, *and* irritation, finally passed, everyone readily agreed to join the team. I had made it clear that *we*, not I, would put OCA on the map as well as put our own portfolios in front of the line. Instead of hundreds of applicants looking for work, there would only be nine. In retrospect, that was how it turned out. All nine were gainfully employed in Toronto's art and design studios.

Our team was given a large room below the auditorium's stage and within days our production and design team met to plan the next seven months. We were exempt from all classes because the project was a fulltime job from concept to final printed copies. Our time together counted as OCA fourth year equivalency. News spread through the college like wildfire.

*"Gerrit Verstraete had won the design competition. The college would have posters for a yearbook? Groovy Man!"*

Immediately, and with permission from the college I sent a news release to the major Toronto daily newspapers and got good press coverage of the unique event. Despite a few mishaps and some minor personality irritations, the 1967/68 yearbook, or *year-posters*, under my direction, became an award winning design and a showcase for the college. The final product was a great success and gave OCA a much needed boost of favourable public opinion because many would also remember 1968 as the year of "the great OCA sit-in." Our unique yearbook brought international recognition to the college and the team that put the project together, including myself as designer and art director of the entire project. A special award was given to the OCA and its revolutionary yearbook when my design was selected to be included in an ambitious international project called, "Graphic Design Canada," a retrospective touring exhibition that traveled throughout Canada and Europe, sponsored by the *Society of Graphic Designers* and the *National Design Council*.

Four individual designs among the *year-posters* were awarded special notice in the "Graphic Design Canada" exhibition. Thankfully, Keith Rushton's design was one of them. He was a happy and vindicated man. Another of the four posters selected was my personal design for OCA's Advertising Department. "Graphic Design Canada" was also published in book form that same year. Needless to say, I basked in the recognition of my work. It was the first time in my life I had been duly recognized for a creative work. It was a long way from another competition I had won in highschool, when I was the only Wallaceburg resident who entered a design for the official crest of the Sydenham Valley Conservation Authority. It was a good design and I won. But because I was the only entry, the SVCA did not give me the winner's prize. Instead they gave me a pair of cheap chrome cufflinks in a dusty box. I didn't even own a shirt with French-cuffs. I can still remember how disappointed and insulted I felt. But this *year-poster-book* was no cheap cufflinks. I was thrilled with the honour that I had won. I was equally excited that I could share the glory with a great team of fellow students who worked so hard to make the whole project a success.

The entire *year-poster* project allowed me to work inside and outside the college for the better part of a school year, giving me hands-on experience working with photographers, typesetters, film and plate makers, and Rolph Clark Stone Limited, the prestigious Toronto printing company who printed our posters and mailing tubes. I came well within budget and took advantage of the opportunity to print a number of extra copies for myself, about two dozen, which I used as my personal portfolio to send to art directors of Toronto's design studios and advertising agencies. There were also enough left over to send to a few New York companies.

It was the best portfolio I could have ever hoped for. I was proud of my work throughout the entire project. Local press was enthusiastic and somehow the Ontario College of Art was no longer branded with the label of a hangout for rebellious youth. Instead, the college's fine art image remained intact as the quality school it had always been, and still able to produce world-class designs.