

ARMIN HOFMANN

by Paul Rand

(From the catalog)

He is a rare bird, a daredevil driver, a mountain climber, a teacher par excellence, and a guru. Yet it is difficult, really, to pin him down.

Many years ago I visited the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel, where Armin Hofmann was teaching, hoping to discover some of his secrets. Even after witnessing much activity in his classes, there was little I could grasp as far as the art of teaching design goes. He would look at a student's work, mumble something, and in a split second the student would disappear, only to return almost as quickly with the solution. Why do average students in Hofmann's classes do above-average work while in most other classes average students do average work?

Hofmann doesn't lecture. He doesn't theorize, nor does he double talk, an activity quite common in design schools. His assignments are highly structured, subject matter is succinctly described, formats are specific, materials and colors are carefully delineated. Undoubtedly, restraints are decisive in problem-solving, but is this the whole secret? I think not.

Design is an all-encompassing discipline, embracing the spiritual as well as the practical problems of life. The list of subjects a good design teacher is aware of ranges from the fundamentals of drawing and painting to the study of mathematics, psychology, and philosophy and to a more than passing acquaintance with the history of art and design. Hofmann's posters for museums and for the Basel State Theatre and his architecturally-related projects are evidence of his social consciousness and his preference for the kind of work that permits artistic freedom. Nevertheless, he is keenly aware that good design means satisfying practical needs. Armin Hofmann stresses the higher goals of art and education not to put down the world of business but to give it real meaning.

In 1903, seventeen years before Hofmann was born, George Bernard Shaw quipped, "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches." Certainly, today Shaw would have to agree that Armin Hofmann has few peers not only as a teacher but as a doer.