



# P R O F T H E C A N A G R A P P R O F

On May 27th of this year, a small but potentially important piece of history was recorded when about thirty people attended a classroom at Toronto's George Brown College to write the inaugural set of examinations offered by the Association of Registered Graphic Designers of Ontario.

ARGDO ([www.argdon.org](http://www.argdon.org)) is a body which was formed in April, 1996 through an Act of Legislature passed by the government of Ontario (see *Of MacHeads and Designosaurs*, GRAPHIC EXCHANGE July, 1996). Through this Act the title Registered Graphic Designer (RGD) was officially recognized in law, with ARGDO appointed as the sole exclusive administrator for this designation.

The concept behind "RGD" was straightforward. Members of the graphic design community (primarily those involved with the Society of Graphic Designers of Canada [GDC]) felt a growing sense of frustration with the lack of professional standards within their discipline. Many were alarmed at the influx of neophytes to the industry, brought about in large part by the rising tide of desktop technologies.

This group of designers sought to establish an official set of rules and requirements which would govern competency and business conduct for those in the field of graphic design. By doing so, they hoped that they could distance themselves from the swarms of untrained "Mac heads" which had sprung up, armed only with a personal computer and a knowledge of desktop page layout and drawing applications. Not only were these graphics neophytes severely compromising the aesthetic level of graphic design with ragged, unsophisticated work, worse yet they were eroding the pay scale of experienced designers by offering their services to clients for a fraction of what long-established professionals were accustomed to charging.

# I L L I N G

# D I A N

# H I C S

# E S S I O N A L

BY DAN BRILL

Finally, after four years of discussion, debate, consultation and introspection, the members of ARGDO's examination board settled on the format and content of its screening and testing procedures. In the interim ARGDO had "grandfathered" as many established designers into the organization as they could, using a simple qualification procedure based on a minimum of five years' experience in the business. Entry into ARGDO through this method ended last year.

Now anyone wishing to attain RGD status must pass through a three-tier process. First, they must accumulate a total minimum of seven years of combined formal training and professional experience, which must include graduation from a recognized three- or four-year graphic design course. Second, they must apply to ARGDO's examination board (which consists of graphic design professors and professionals) for permission to write the ARGDO examinations (and pay a fee of \$150). These tests consist of a combination of multiple choice and essay questions which cover four basic areas: design history and principles, technology, business practices and professional conduct. The board must approve an applicant's application in order for them to write the examinations. Finally, upon passing the exams, they must present a portfolio of work to ARGDO which is reviewed by a three-member panel. With an applicant's acceptance at this third stage, full RGD accreditation is granted (at an annual membership fee of \$300).

There are presently only fifteen schools in Ontario which offer ARGDO-approved graphic design courses: Algonquin, Cambrian, La Cité Collegiale, Conestoga, Durham, Fanshawe, George Brown, Georgian, Ontario College of Art & Design, St. Clair, St. Lawrence, Sault, Seneca, Sheridan and York.

In addition to full RGD status, ARGDO also has provisional memberships for design graduates who have not yet been in the

field the requisite period of time (to make up the total seven-year requirement). Provisional memberships cost \$75 per year.

There is also a special membership available for graphic design students at \$25 per year. As of this September, all students in full-time graphic design programs at George Brown, Sheridan, York and York Sheridan will automatically receive student memberships as part of their enrollment.

ARGDO also offers others in the design industry the opportunity to become associate members of the organization for an annual fee of \$200.

Graphic designers who have been working in the field for seven years or longer but who do not have formal training may apply to the board for permission to write the ARGDO examinations. Their applications are reviewed on a case by case basis.

Currently ARGDO has just over a thousand members, 800 of whom are Registered Graphic Designers. The rest are students, associate members and provisional members.

From May's round of entries, ARGDO accepted about fifteen new members into the fold. The next set of examinations will be held in Toronto on November 18th (deadline for application is October 6, 2000—contact ARGDO for further details).

Ontario is presently the only province with an RGD program. However the government of Manitoba has now also provided funding to explore the possibility of enacting the Registered Graphic Designer designation.

## TO RGD OR NOT TO RGD

But many designers have chosen to forego the RGD title. In fact, a large proportion of RGD designers are those who have simply added the new letters onto existing GDC memberships.

The Society of Graphic Designers of Canada ([www.gdc.net](http://www.gdc.net)),



which was formed in 1976, has established chapters in Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, British Columbia and Atlantic Canada. It represents the interests of its members through its networking opportunities and by lobbying government bodies on matters concerning professional graphic design.

GDC and ARGDO operate essentially in tandem. But whether they represent the graphics community at large is a point of discussion.

There are a great many more individuals engaged in graphic design in Canada than belong to these associations. How many more are there? Well, that's another question which no one is sure of, including GDC/ARGDO (although they plan to conduct a national survey in the fall with one of its objectives being to come up with an estimate). The most recent numbers available from the federal government's Human Resources department

suggests that there may be as many as 30,000 men and women across the nation making a full-time or part-time living in graphic design and illustration.

Meanwhile, there are many designers who feel that these bodies do not offer sufficient benefits to warrant their membership dues. Others who are well-entrenched with an established client base simply feel that they can be successful enough without the support of letters or membership credentials.

The GDC/ARGDO model seems well-suited to satisfying the needs of the traditional corporate market, giving employers of in-house designers a standard by which to evaluate prospective employees (ARGDO has successfully lobbied the government of Ontario and several large corporations to hire only RGD designers). It also aids the corporate client in search of an independent designer or design firm by guaranteeing a certain level of professionalism and design competency.

But is this the path of execution that the next generation of graphics professionals ought to follow?

#### THE PUBLISHER SPEAKS OUT

Up until this point, I've stuck to the facts. I've recited the party line as the GDC and ARGDO have presented it. But now I'm going to deliver my own personal viewpoint on the subject of the present and future of professional graphic designers, from the perspective of a reasonably well-informed industry observer.

Let's begin with a relatively minor point, though one which is sure to get GDC/ARGDO members testy.

The question of working "on spec" is one which raises the hackles of the associations—that is, design work done for clients who want to choose their designer after soliciting finished projects from two or three or perhaps more firms or individuals. You wouldn't expect a doctor or a lawyer, or even a plumber to work with no guaranteed remuneration, so why should a designer?, they expound.

Well, I hate to have to point out the obvious, but surely it's self-evident that doctors and lawyers go through far more rigorous training and apprenticeships than any designer. To equate them with designers seems, at best, pretentious, and at worst, insulting. As for plumbers—hey, if I hire a plumber to fix my taps, do I care how he fixes them, as long as they get fixed? And if they don't get fixed, am I going to pay anyway? Not likely.

This is the real world, folks. People in other professions are called upon all the time to provide services in competition with others in their field, with no promises: real estate agents, advertising agencies, interior designers—the choice is always theirs. They can accept those conditions, or they can take a pass. What makes graphic designers so special?

Here's another sticky point in my book—the issues of "ethics" and "business practices" and "professional conduct". I'm all for integrity in the field, but honestly, do we need to pay membership dues to an organization just so they can hand down their version

#### Useful Websites for Graphic Design Resources

There is a wealth of information and helpful material to be found on the Web. These are just a few of my favorite (non-vendor) jumping-off points for graphic design resources:

Creaticity	<a href="http://www.creaticity.com">www.creaticity.com</a>
CreativePro	<a href="http://www.creativepro.com">www.creativepro.com</a>
Design & Publishing Center	<a href="http://www.graphic-design.com">www.graphic-design.com</a>
Design Forum	<a href="http://www.mediadrone.com/forum">www.mediadrone.com/forum</a>
Design Tools Monthly	<a href="http://www.design-tools.com">www.design-tools.com</a>
DTP.com	<a href="http://www.dtp.com">www.dtp.com</a>
Graphic Design Portal	<a href="http://graphicdesign.searchking.com">graphicdesign.searchking.com</a>
Graphic Design Resource Center	<a href="http://www.deezin.com">www.deezin.com</a>
Graphic Design Resources	<a href="http://www.e-gdr.com.ar">www.e-gdr.com.ar</a>
Graphic Designer's Guide to the Galaxy	<a href="http://www.icenter.net/~huebs/gdlinks">www.icenter.net/~huebs/gdlinks</a>
Graphic Exchange	<a href="http://www.gxo.com">www.gxo.com</a>
Graphics Connection Forum	<a href="http://computingcentral.msn.com/topics/graphics">computingcentral.msn.com/topics/graphics</a>
I/Us	<a href="http://www.i-us.com">www.i-us.com</a>
Idea Exchange	<a href="http://warren-idea-exchange.com">warren-idea-exchange.com</a>
Ideabook	<a href="http://www.ideabook.com">www.ideabook.com</a>
Incredible Art Department	<a href="http://www.artswire.org/kenroar">www.artswire.org/kenroar</a>
International Directory of Design	<a href="http://www.penrose-press.com">www.penrose-press.com</a>
Lynda Weinman	<a href="http://www.lynda.com">www.lynda.com</a>
Mundi Design (Principles of Graphic Design)	<a href="http://www.mundidesign.com/presentation/index2.html">www.mundidesign.com/presentation/index2.html</a>
Robins Design	<a href="http://www.robinsdesign.com">www.robinsdesign.com</a>
Ultimate Electronic Publishing Resource	<a href="http://www.desktoppublishing.com">www.desktoppublishing.com</a>
Web Page Design for Designers	<a href="http://www.wpdtd.com">www.wpdtd.com</a>
XPressobar	<a href="http://www.xpressobar.com">www.xpressobar.com</a>

of Laws for Graphic Designers? As for business practices, I really have to wonder about the wisdom of taking business advice from a group of people who have their feet firmly planted in the education field, a decidedly non-business environment, and even more difficulty knowing that this is an organization that took four years to bring a relatively simple product to market (i.e. RGD qualification procedures), especially when they have a legal monopoly on that product. What other company could stay afloat for that long, expecting its customers to pay up year after year, while it slowly developed its core market offering?

Then there's the matter of digital technologies as a component of design training. Design history and principles are all fine and well, but how can an organization for a discipline that these days is so integrally based on computer skills tiptoe around technology as if it's just a minor part of the process? And how can that same organization insist that its members must have a minimum of three years of formal education at colleges which are in general underfunded, under-equipped and in many cases woefully inadequate (through no fault of their own) at providing up-to-date training in the very technologies which are driving the industry forward—while privately run institutions which are better capitalized and better equipped turn out competent graphic designers from shorter, more focused one- and two-year courses?

It seems awfully presumptuous to me for GDC/ARGDO to be

promoting themselves to students as the beacons of the graphic design community, to the point where they actually collude with educational institutions to collect membership dues buried in tuition fees, without even offering students the option to opt out.

#### FUTURE OF DESIGN STARTS WITH A "D"

GDC and ARGDO represent but a fraction of all graphic designers; their mandate appears to be focused on defending "old school" attitudes, while proselytizing to the uninitiated.

Wake up, folks. Graphic design is a marketable skill, but it sure ain't rocket science. And no school or association on this planet can teach artistic ability, any more than genuine design talent can evaporate simply for lack of schooling.

From where I sit, the most critical element in graphic design from here forward will be a solid understanding of digital technologies—whether it be mastering the requirements of print production or the Internet. Designers who think they can succeed solely on the basis of pretty page layouts and an intimate knowledge of the history of design are in for a rude awakening.

Creativity starts with a good grasp of the power and capabilities of creative software. And it can't hurt to be familiar with color spaces, file formats, preflighting, and troubleshooting a system.

Will the designosaurs hear the mouse clicks in time? Those of us on the bleeding edge recognize that it's the mouse that roars. ■

A Q U E N T

serious designers

web&print

www.aquent.com | 1-877-PARTNER

toronto montréal vancouver

canada