



Rob Giampietro

DESIGNER/WRITER

Rob Giampietro is a designer and writer, and serves as Creative Lead at Google Design NY. After graduating from Yale University, he worked as a designer at Winterhouse and Pentagram before running his own studio, Giampietro+Smith. He was Principal at Project Projects from 2010 to 2015. He has worked as a thesis advisor for the Rhode Island School of Design MFA Graphic Design program for nearly a decade, and was the recipient of the esteemed Katherine Edwards Gordon Rome Prize for Design in 2014.

Tell me about your path to what you're doing now. I'm originally from Minneapolis, Minnesota, and my awareness of design came out of growing up near the Walker Art Center and interning at Target headquarters during high school and college.

Target was important because it introduced me to working in a studio-like environment. I was surrounded by “grown-ups” who didn't appear to work boring office jobs: they left to go for walks for inspiration or spent the day sketching, and that was fun to be around. Target also had a wonderful design library filled with annuals from the Type Directors Club and Art Directors Club, which would have been totally inaccessible to me otherwise. I spent my days poring over whatever design resources I could get my hands on.

Target and the Walker Art Center were both strong forces of great design in the Twin Cities. It was through their libraries that I discovered a design publication called Emigre. It was incredibly influential in the '90s and was somewhere between a fan zine and lively academic journal that focused on discourse and debate about graphic design. The Walker Art Center, Target, and Emigre all added to and helped dimensionalize who I was at the time and what I wanted from my career in design.

I initially got the idea to attend Yale University from Emigre. A lot of the schools they wrote about at the time were overseas, but they described Yale as a great choice in the US. I decided to study in their design program and landed an interview with Michael Rock, who owns the design firm, 2x4, in New York City.



“As a young designer, the professional work I did was wonderful and interesting, but it often became repetitive. Teaching gave me time outside of my daily practice to reflect and try to articulate why being a designer was important and why my students should care about the problems they tried to solve.”



Did you immediately decide to study design in college? Not initially. Once I got to Yale, I cherry-picked a few design classes but stayed dedicated to a literature and writing track. Then I realized that in order to do great design, I needed to fully commit and study art completely. During my last two years at Yale, I studied drawing with a great painter, Robert Reed, who recently passed away. He was an amazing man. I also studied with an important mentor, Paul Elliman, as well as Michael Rock. It was a great time to bring my different interests together and learn how to make design in my own way.

Before graduation from Yale, I thought about studios I could learn from. While attending the 50th anniversary party of Yale’s graduate graphic design program, I met the designers Bill Drenttel and Jessica Helfand of Design Observer. We corresponded after I graduated, and they invited me to work in their studio, Winterhouse.

What a cool opportunity! What was working at Winterhouse as your first job out of college like? I worked at Winterhouse for a year, and I had the opportunity to work on all kinds of amazing projects. I helped research and design Jessica’s book, Reinventing the Wheel; we designed a bunch of books for the Grolier Club, a book-collecting club in New York City that Bill belonged to; and we collaborated with the Washington Square News, New York University’s student newspaper. At one point, I did initial design work for the New England Journal of Medicine, and I worked alongside Bill Drenttel and Michael Bierut, who collaborated on the project.

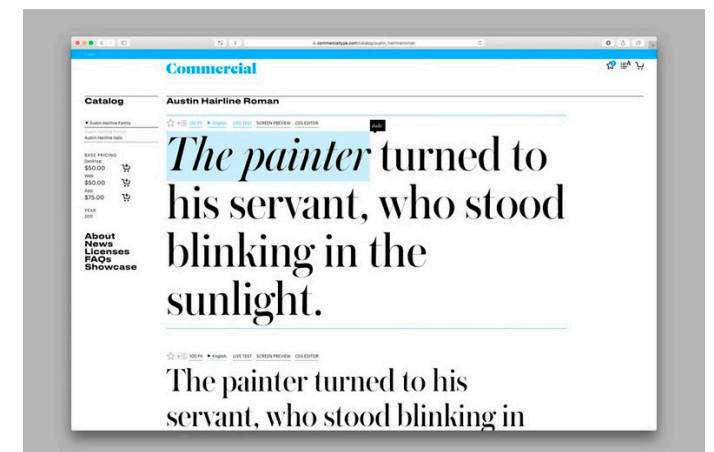
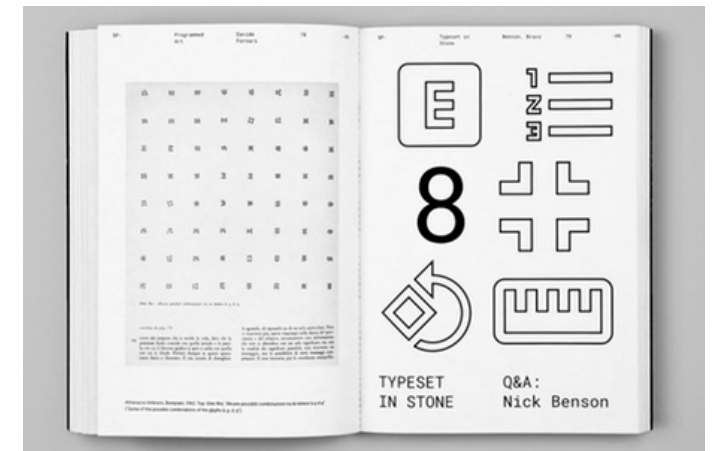
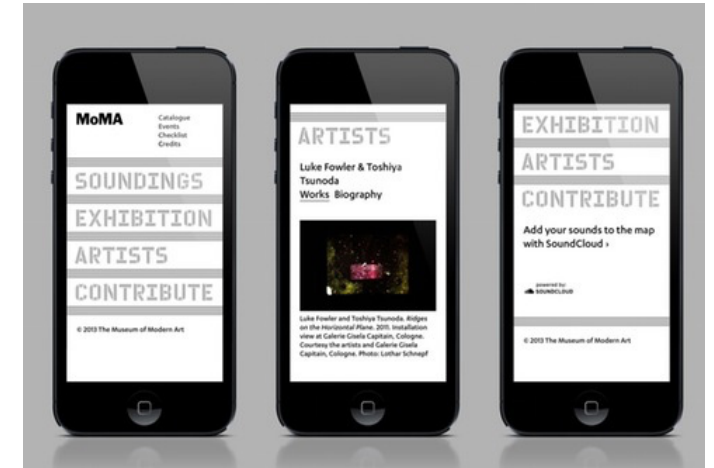
A year later, I moved to New York City. The New England Journal of Medicine needed additional work done on the journal, so I joined Michael Bierut’s team at Pentagram and worked on several projects there. Around that time, I was given an opportunity to teach at Parsons School of Design through one of Michael Bierut’s partners at Pentagram, J. Abbott Miller. Charles Nix, who ran the program at the time, invited me to teach the “Introduction to Typography” class. Teaching was an amazing introduction to New York City’s design community, but it often became repetitive.



What did you do after you left Project Projects? In September of 2014, I became a Rome Prize Fellow and went to the American Academy in Rome for eight months. The Rome Prize has been given since 1906, and it’s an incredible opportunity for artists and scholars to live together for anywhere from six months to two years in an incredible villa on the Gianicolo, a high hill overlooking the city. Fellows are given “the gift of time” and are encouraged to collaborate with one another, with other Romans and Italians, and with fellows from the other foreign academies, like Germany and Spain. Everyone proposes a project and begins working on it, although you aren’t expected to complete it while you’re there.

My project was about getting out of my studio and into the city as much as possible in an attempt to understand how Rome fit together historically and geographically by walking through it with different people. It was a wonderful time, and I wrote about all of it while I was there. In February, at the end of my eight months at the Academy, I gave a series of lectures about the writing I did. I also did a collaborative performance with the composer, Paula Matthusen, that was based on field recordings she made at some of the sites I described in my writing. Since then, I’ve been thinking about how to further develop those essays and how to present it all more formally in the future.

And now you serve as Creative Lead at Google Design NY. Tell me about that. While I was still in Rome, Google approached me to join them in leading Google Design’s team in New York. Google Design is Google’s initiative to support designers, both internally and externally, with tools, resources, and guidelines, along with conferences, articles, videos, case studies, and more. That might sound like an unexpected next step, but while I was in Rome I thought so much about how technology mediates our experiences, and I had been looking for ways to broaden my interactive design practice. I knew Google was a place where I could learn a lot about design from a wholly different perspective. I’ve been here for the last six months, and it’s been tremendously exciting. I’m very proud of my work with my students.



“significant recognition takes a long time to earn and is worth the wait. It’s important to have realistic expectations and not let yourself become prematurely frustrated.”