Rob Giampietro

Designer,Writer

Interview by Tammi Heneveld, Photography by Ryan Essmaker

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. 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. “If I ever find myself not learning, then I figure out how to keep moving forward. That principle has made for a very rich and engaging career.”

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.

“If I ever find myself not learning, then I figure out how to keep moving forward. That principle has made for a very rich and engaging career.” -Giampietro