

# ENTERTAINMENT



PHOTOS BY PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Peters works with a printer's proof (left) of the stamps he designed for Canada Post (above), based on original paintings by Alain Massicotte.

## Vision QUEST

Graphic artist Rob Peters believes great design goes beyond aesthetic appeal

**A**FTER nearly 30 years practising the world's most prevalent applied art form, graphic designer Rob Peters doesn't need to fish for compliments.

His Exchange District company, Circle Design Inc., has just celebrated the launch of its fifth project for Canada Post, a set of four 50-cent commemorative stamps on the subject of fly-fishing.

"There's a strong argument to be made that these images are central artifacts in our culture," says Peters, whose company specializes in corporate branding and designing business-to-business communications tools such as annual reports and brochures.

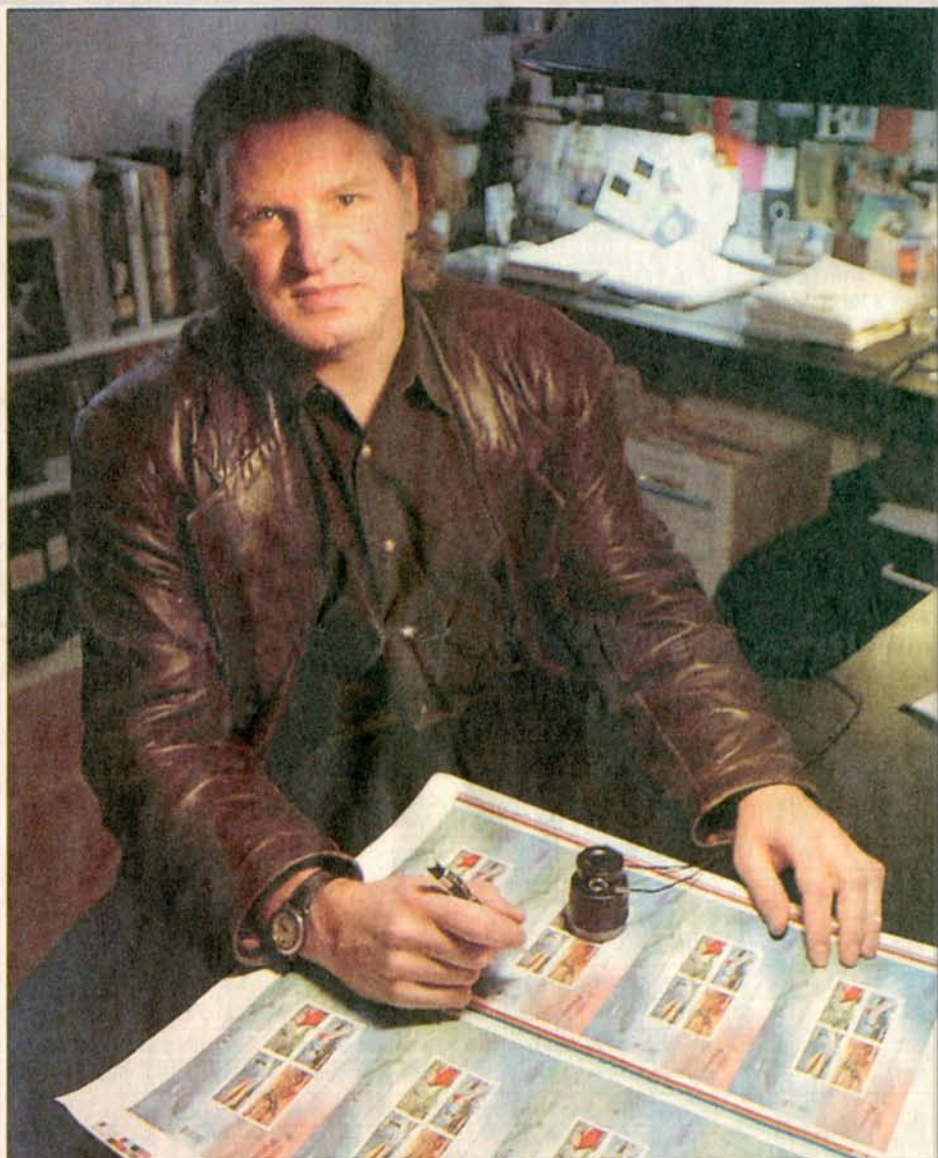
"They become part of our visual vocabulary and they help to shape our values." Any conversation with Peters, a highly articulate and physically commanding man, soon comes round to philosophical topics.

His professional life appears to be an attempt to practise what he preaches ethically.

His company's name is meant to illus-



Morley Walker



trate his belief in a non-hierarchical workplace.

When posing for a picture, he quietly insists on including his two twentysomething designers, Susan McWatt FitzGerald and Celina Blandford, his collaborators on the fly-fishing designs.

He claims his company will turn away clients if their business practices "cause harm to the earth."

Circle once refused a job with Philip Morris to do the tobacco multinational's signage in airport duty-free shops.

Moreover, any of his employees can veto a contract if he or she is uncomfortable with the client.

"How else can we work?" Peters asks. "We want to be able to pour all our talents and all our passion into what we do."

Peters, 50, has long taken an evangelical role in graphic design.

"We live in a visual culture," he says. "One study estimated that the average person is confronted with 16,000 images per day."

He has taught at the University of Manitoba, judges contests around the world and writes features for international

design journals. This weekend he is in Seattle, judging a Washington-state design competition.

For nine years he served as the Graphic Designers of Canada representative with the International Council of Graphic Design Associations (Icograda), the professional world body for graphic design and visual communication.

This led him to an Icograda board position and eventually to its presidency from 2001 to 2003. Founded in London in 1963, Icograda boasts 87 member associations in almost 50 countries and promotes what it calls "graphic designers' vital role in society and commerce."

Peters is currently in his second year as Icograda past president. In the past six years, he says, he has visited 35 countries and has spent tens of thousands of dollars of his own to finance this labour of love.

His travel and volunteer responsibilities have resulted in a severe downsizing of Circle's business and number of employees.

"His motives are altruistic," says Winnipeg lawyer Kathy Kalinowsky, his friend of 10 years.

"He sees the importance of design being carried out through the world. One of his pet subjects is the idea of visual pollution."

Peters was born in Steinbach, but his father, a Mennonite theologian from Russia, took his family to Europe when Rob was two.

A middle child, Rob grew up mostly in Basel, Switzerland, near the Alps. The locale was formative in many ways, not the least of which was in giving him a life-long enjoyment of skiing and mountaineering.

At age 19, after a year of Bible college in England and a stint with an African relief mission, he returned to Manitoba with his wife, a Niverville girl he met in England.

This was December 1973. He recalls being struck by two of our enduring winter clichés — the cold and the sun.

His response, however, was not a cliché. He began researching the notion of solar heating, which struck him as obvious as adding one and one.

With the help of architects and other construction experts, he designed and built a 1,700-square-foot passive solar house 50 kilometres east of Winnipeg.

He and his wife moved in in 1981. These days, Peters lives there alone, save for two cats. His marriage of 27 years, which produced no children, broke up four years ago, and it's clear from the tone of his voice that he is still healing.

"He's an incredibly bright person and a jack of all trades," says Kalinowsky, who climbs and runs marathons with Peters and her engineer husband, Garth.

"He intellectualizes everything he does."

Peters clearly possesses a restless mind. He calls himself "a recovering workaholic." From age eight to 35, he was an insomniac. The condition, he believes, was brought on by watching his mother die of cancer over 10 years.

"She was the glue that held our family together," he says. "Something just clicked over in my mind."

**'He's an incredibly bright person and a jack of all trades'**

Continued

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PHOTOS BY PHIL HOSSACK / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS

Blandford (centre), McWatt Fitzgerald on Peters' team.

## Walker

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Canada Post has issued five million of Circle's colourful fly-fishing series, based on original paintings by Montreal illustrator Alain Massicotte, in a pressure-sensitive-format book of eight. Another one million are available on 225,000 gummed souvenir sheets of four.

As well, the federal crown corporation has issued the same four images, which include Circle's specially commissioned flies from expert fly tiers, on prepaid postcards and decks of playing cards.

"It's a dynamite series, and they're selling like crazy," says Jim Phillips, Canada Post's Ottawa-based director of stamp products, which launched them Feb. 5 in Granby, Que., during the Quebec-Maritimes Fly Fishing Forum.

"We sold out all we had there on the very first day."

Circle's first foray into postage-stamp design was in 1998 with a series for the RCMP's 125th anniversary. The company then won contracts to mark the 1999 Pan Am Games and Canada's role in banning landmines for the 2000 Millennium Collection. They also did the 2001 Christmas stamp.

Circle is neither the biggest graphic design firm in Winnipeg, nor the only one to have won contracts from Canada Post. Among the others is Steven Rosenberg's Doowah Design, which counts numerous city arts groups as its clients.

Phillips says that Canada Post has contracted as many as 100 firms and launches about 20 stamp series per year. The new Chinese Year of the Rooster series, launched last week, was designed by a Montreal firm.

"Circle delivers very consistent quality design work," Phillips says. "They really dive into the subject."

Peters' original goal was to be a fine artist, a painter of wilderness landscapes.

But as he told an interviewer with the Internet website Netdiver last year, "I soon discovered that Canadians prefer to spend their money on hotter barbecues and faster snowmobiles — fine art was low on their priority scale."

Pragmatically, he turned to graphic design, which had fascinated him since his childhood. While still at Red River College, he started Circle with a partner, who stayed 2 1/2 years.

Their first contracts were designing rock band posters, of such acts as Blood, Sweat and Tears and the Hollies, for local concert promoters.

"I knew nothing about being an entrepreneur," he recalls. "My father was a man of the cloth. I learned every lesson about business the hard way."

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