

Donald W. Graham adds his “magic” and artistry to Disney’s Magic Kingdom

BY EKENA B. PARKINSON

SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

Within the empire known as Disney, it took a Graham to help put the “magic” in the Magic Kingdom. Donald W. Graham, born in Ft. William, Ontario (now Thunder Bay) moved as a child to Southern California, home of Disneyland and Disney Studios, and was eventually instrumental in advancing the art of animation with Walt Disney.

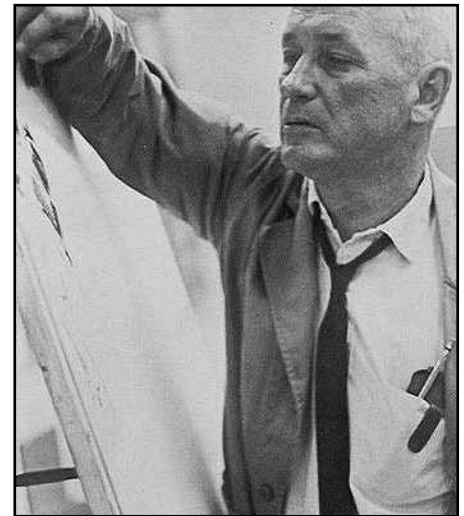
Donald was a grandchild of Captain John C. Graham of St. Catharines, Ontario, who was born in Lochgilphead, Argyll, Scotland, and sailed to Canada in 1833 as an infant with his family. Donald was born on a lumber camp where he was given a First Nation name, “Wawapacanuchi” (little brown mouse) by the Algonquins who shared the surrounding land. It is a coincidence that this special name would be linked to Donald’s future career associated with a world

famous mouse—Mickey!

When his family moved to Southern California in the early 1900s, he grew up to be student body president of Pasadena High School and a member of the Stanford University NCAA gold medal champion water polo team.

Donald’s mother, Ruby, was an accomplished landscape and porcelain painter and had her own gallery. One day while home from Stanford, where he was studying engineering, he accompanied his mother to an art class. Here is “where the aroma of paint and turpentine so intrigued him that he decided to become an artist,” according to his biography on the back cover of his recently republished book “Composing Pictures”.

Soon after, Donald enrolled in Chouinard Art Institute (now California Institute of the Arts) and was an exceptional student while working humbly as a janitor of the school for his tuition. In 1924, in his second year at Chouinard, he also began to teach, first a perspective class, then on to other subjects like painting



CALARTS PROGRESS NEWS 1965

and figure drawing. He later became the chairman of the fine arts department.

Among his students were the employees of a young film producer, Walt Disney, who sent his artists to Donald’s night classes. Eventually, Disney hired him as a drawing instructor to improve the overall artistic style of Disney animation.

In a 1965 “CalArts Progress” newsletter, Donald stated, “Up until 1932, most of the men working at the studios were commercially trained artists, and many didn’t draw well. Walt recognized this and was willing to spend a lot of money to train them.”

Donald eventually

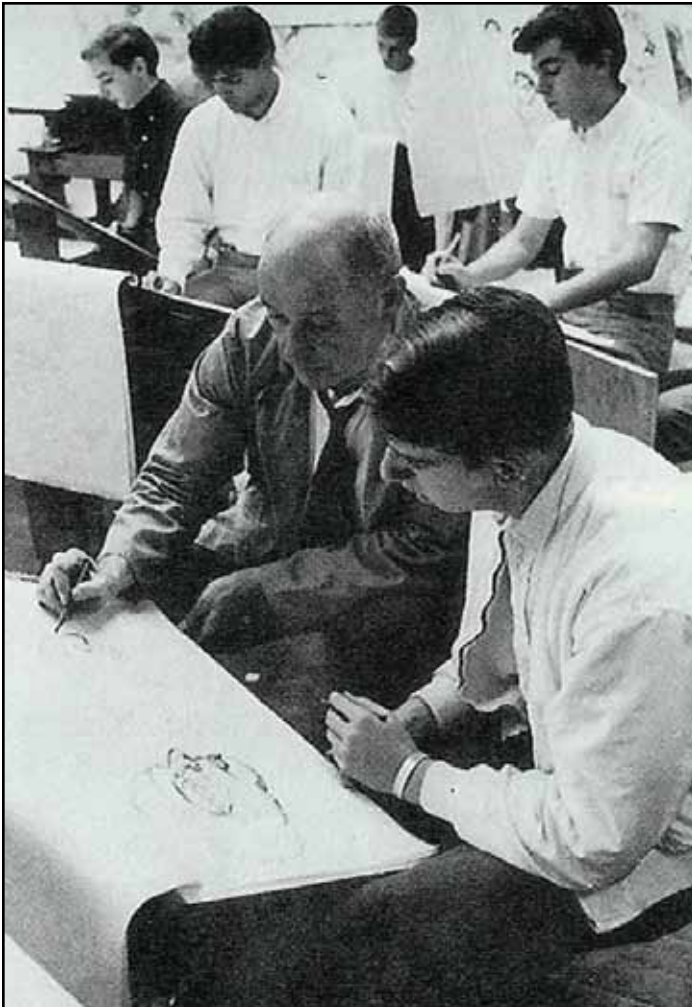
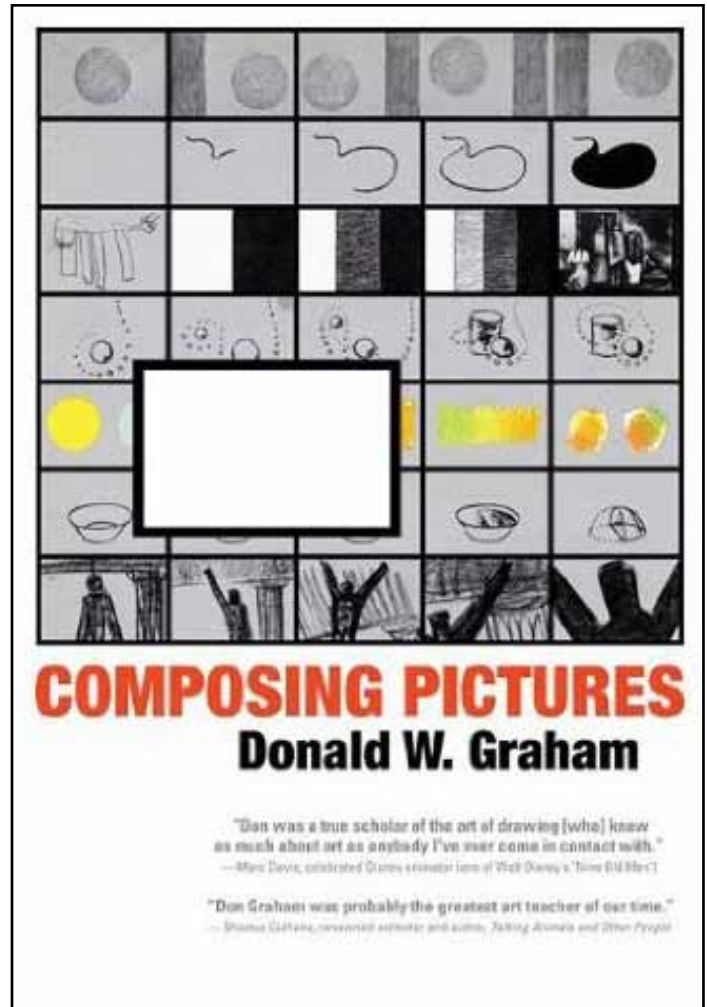


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SILMAN-JAMES PRESS

Donald W. Graham taught professional artists, including Disney animators.

Book cover (republished by Silman-James Press; ISBN 978-1-935247-00-5)

became the director of the Disney Studio Art School and taught there for nine years. While there, he was instrumental in developing the Disney style of animation, focusing the animators' attention on "action analysis" and ways to convert two-dimensional graphics into

the illusion of moving three-dimensional action. He did research on the significance of animation as a graphic form, which became the material for studio reference materials and the forerunner of his recognized classic textbook, "Composing Pictures."

Besides teaching at Chouinard and Disney, Donald taught at the New Orleans Art Institute and the Tacoma Art Center. He is reputed to have trained more professional artists from the

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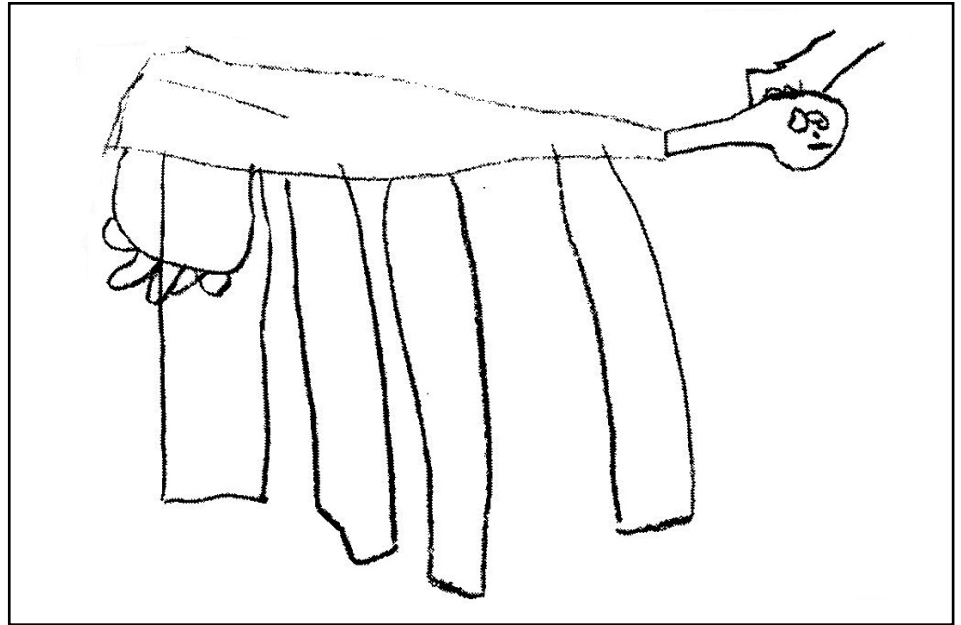
fields of fine arts, advertising, fashion, animation and film than any other art teacher in the country! In addition to Disney, his close colleagues and students included Disney's "9 Old Men," Chuck Jones (Bugs Bunny and the Road Runner) and Ted Geisel (Dr. Seuss).

Donald passed away in 1976 but his legacy lives on through the success of his students, his artwork and his book, "Composing Pictures."

In 1982, he was awarded an Annie Award, animation's highest honor, by the International Animated Film Society (ASIFA).

His book, "Composing Pictures," was recently republished by Silman-James Press and is available at major bookstores or from online booksellers like Amazon.com and BarnesandNoble.com.

The author's son, Clan Graham Society member Donald H. Graham, said, "The book was originally published as a hardbound textbook in 1970 and as a paperback in 1982. It went out of print and for years has been in high demand in second hand bookstores but not otherwise available." The book is recommended reading for



PABLO GRAHAM (DONALD H. GRAHAM)

animators at Pixar, Lucas Studios and elsewhere.

Don's own artwork appears in his father's book. When he was five- or six-years-old, he drew a cow, which now appears on the cover and on page 90 in the "Illumination and Contrast" chapter of the book. Young Don is credited as Pablo Graham.

"Like many Graham families with a Donald there is at least one son named Donald. So there were two Dons in the house. When I was a very young boy, my father decided to give me the nickname 'Pablo' after one of his favorite artists Pablo Picasso. The name stuck because it was handy to use it to differentiate between father and son,"

Don explained about his "nom de plume."

He has no explanation as to how, with an artistically talented grandmother, father, mother and sister, who each had exceptional art talent, that he has only this one children's drawing as his claim to art fame! His sister Jeanne, also a graduate of CalArts, consoles him by saying that since he is a lawyer and his brother, Kenneth, is a hospital administrator, they are simply rechanneling their creativity in other directions.

Learn more about Donald W. Graham and see samples of his artwork at <http://donaldwgraham.com/>.

His ASIFA profile is at <http://www.cartoonhalloffame.org/2005/12/graham-don.html>.

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Read the exclusive story on pages 24-26

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