

Professor Robert Sajnovsky - Opportunities Taken

Professor Emeritus – Art

Personal and academic background:

The youngest of four children, Robert Michael Sajnovsky, was born on October 7, 1941, two months before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. During the first decade of the 1900s his parents had immigrated from Czechoslovakia as children with their parents to Youngstown, in North-Eastern Ohio. They were hard-working and belonged to a sprawling extended family that included numerous aunts, uncles, cousins, as well as a Slovak ethnic community which revolved around events largely dictated by the Catholic Church's calendar. He was nurtured and loved; and even though the family of his youth might be considered near the poverty level today, he never felt need nor hunger. He studied hard and did well at St. John's Slovak Catholic Elementary school and showed an aptitude for drawing from about the 2nd grade on. This ability marked him as "the artist" to his schoolmates and he was often called upon by teachers to make a special mural drawing to celebrate Thanksgiving or Christmas or President's Day for the school. At 8 years old, he also became interested in music, and convinced his parents to purchase a trumpet and lessons. He played trumpet in his school's orchestra and continued to practice and play the in the Marching and Concert Bands during his High School years at Ursuline Catholic High. Youngstown, Ohio held a yearly High School "Swing Band" competition and his school, with Robert playing lead trumpet, took first place during the two years they entered. He applied to several colleges, intending to study art, and was elated to be accepted at the University of Notre Dame, a school which continued his education at Catholic institutions. He also continued to play the trumpet at Notre Dame with the Marching Band.

Robert's education in art and life at Notre Dame was, for him, an enchanted period when he could selfishly devote all his time to study, and practice and making new acquaintances and learning about the world. He graduated in May 1963 with a fellowship to Connecticut Wesleyan University in a Master of Arts in Teaching program to become a high school Art teacher. That November, as Robert was attending a printmaking class at Wesleyan, it was announced that President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. After experiencing a public school for the first time and attempting as a student-teacher to teach art to unruly teens, he decided that a career in Secondary Education was not for him and transferred to a Master of Fine Arts program at the Ohio State University in Columbus, Ohio. Teaching the young adult undergraduates as part of his TA duties was more satisfying and Robert received his Master of Fine Arts Degree in June 1967. The MFA is considered a terminal degree in studio arts and qualified him to teach at the college level.

UOG employment:

In the 1960s The Ohio State University was an institution from which new faculty for the then-emerging University of Guam were heavily recruited. A job announcement for a position in the art department at UOG caught Robert's eye, but one of his fellow MFA graduates applied one month earlier and landed the position. His name was Terry Taggart. Robert took a position at Concord College in Athens, West Virginia, and Terry Taggart came to Guam. They kept in touch.

Robert met and married his first wife, Susan, while at Concord College, and their child, James, was born in November 1968. By early 1969, it was evident that Terry Taggart would not renew his two-year contract at UOG, and he wrote to Robert about the wonderful experience and great opportunities he discovered on Guam: Guam is a tropical island paradise, the University paid for first class transportation of immediate family and household goods to Guam, the people are so warm and welcoming, Japan and Hong Kong are a mere 3 hours away, and after the contract was up, if you did not want to continue, family and household goods would be shipped back to your place of recruitment. First Class! What was not to like? So, in mid-August of 1969, a few weeks after two humans named Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin walked on the moon for the very first time, Robert, his new wife, Susan, and their infant son, James came to Guam where he was an Assistant Professor of Art. Dr. Antonio Yamashita was the president of UOG at that time.

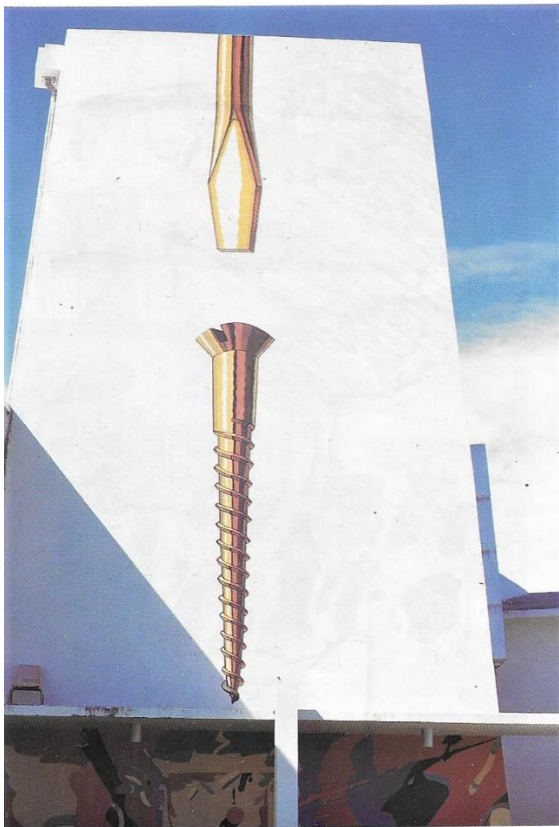
In the fall of 1969, the other faculty members of Art at UOG were Pauline Harvey, whose husband had developed the art program at UOG, and David Robinson, who also served as the acting Art Department Chairman. The growing student population and faculty responsibilities other than teaching required more. A sculptor/ceramic artist had just resigned, leaving the program without a 3-D person. But by the fall semester of 1971, two positions had been added: Joseph Kagle, a teaching/administrator who would Chair the Department, and David Hall, a sculptor/ceramicist, also recruited from The Ohio State University. Many colleagues have come and gone from UOG's art program. Robert's tenure outlasted most. He retired at the rank of Professor in January 2002 having served for over 33 years, teaching, and developing studio and lecture courses in Art and other disciplines, and serving on numerous University wide, College and Departmental committees, as well as being elected to chair the Art Department, the Division of Fine Arts and the Division of Communication and Fine Arts at various times. He was honored with the title of Professor Emeritus of Art upon his retirement in January 2002.

UOG in the early 1970's:

Upon assuming his position at UOG, Robert was surprised to learn that, in addition to teaching duties, he was also assigned ¼ load as Director of the then-named, Insular Arts Council (now the Guam Council on Arts and Humanities Agency - CAHA). The IAC, established on Guam in 1967 as a function of the University's Art Department, was a federally funded program to aid in establishing arts programs in the States and Territories, and at that time received about \$50,000.00 in federal funding which was to be matched with local funds to provide for arts projects to encourage, educate and assist local participation in the arts. The Director's job was to review potential projects, arrange for them to be presented to a council of nine members chosen from the community and university, and, if chosen to proceed, to see that UOG released the funding received

from Uncle Sam to the proper project manager and that the “matching funds” were also accounted for in actual dollars or “in-kind” services.

The IAC’s Federal dollars provided opportunities for visual arts projects that were not viable before. Projects such as mural paintings in public buildings like the old Guam Memorial Hospital. Robert designed a course in mural painting and he, and a group of UOG students decorated several walls of the Children’s ward with lively, colorful murals to delight the young patients and staff alike. The federal money bought the painting supplies and the design and labor provided “in-kind” donations. It was the beginning of many other community mural projects that Robert would design and oversee, the most notorious one being the “Great Golden Screw” which decorated the tower wall of the Fine Arts Building at UOG from 1974 to 1976. Even though not many noticed that the screw depicted was a “left-handed” screw, having to be driven the opposite way of a “normal” screw, UOG’s administration found a sinister meaning in the design and had it painted over after less than two years of display. Another was a mural requested in 1976, by then Speaker of the Guam Legislature, Joseph A. Ada: A design for the street-facing wall of the Guam Legislature Building to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the United States. This project was designed and executed in a few days shy of two months. (see illustrations below)



STUDENT EXECUTED MURAL U.O.G. ART BLDG.
1974

The Great Golden Screw, Art Bldg. tower,



Bicentennial Mural, Guam Legislature Bldg. Hagatna, 1976

By the early 1970's, it became apparent that the IAC needed to have a full-time director; and Robert, with the blessing of its board, petitioned the UOG Administration to establish it as an independent department with its own Director. Louise Hotaling became the first, non-art faculty Director in 1973; and In 1975, Governor Ricardo Bordallo removed it from UOG altogether; and through Executive Order 75-23, he established CAHA as an agency under the Governor's Executive Office where it remains to this day.

KGTF, Guam's Public Television station also went on the air for its first broadcast in October 1970, and the then General Manager, Dan Smith, was eager for locally produced programming. The Art Department's faculty at UOG was invited, and eager to delve into this new, "visual" medium, and began to experiment with programming that provided learning experiences for students and faculty alike. During the early 1970s art courses in TV production were developed, the art faculty and students at UOG were producing weekly ½ hour television programs aired on KGTF-TV titled: Come on in the Art's Fine, and Visions of Micronesia. Robert also became a member of KPRG's Board of Directors. Pauline Harvey retired in 1975 and Adriano Pangelinan was hired to fill her position. In 1976, the art faculty was increased by hiring Jane Grobbins, who specialized in "commercial art", i.e. illustration, layout, print production, etc... By the late 1970's UOG's art program had five full time faculty members, and also acquired additional studio space at house 9 in Dean's Circle which served as a photography and printmaking studio.

ISLA Center:

In 1982 Robert proposed the idea of establishing an Art Center affiliated with the University of Guam but separate from it. He was familiar with the alignment of Art Centers with Educational institutions from his experience with similar collaborations in Youngstown Ohio, Notre Dame and Middletown Connecticut. The advantage of the separation was that the Art Center could apply for and receive grants to promote the arts that were unavailable to educational institutions, and more freely explore exhibits and programs which educational institutions might not be inclined to promote. A separate Art Center could also serve as a repository for the collection of artifacts acquired by the IAC during the early days of its existence. The collection was selected and amassed to serve as a teaching collection for UOG students and purchased with funds from IAC grants. The collection includes an etching by Rembrandt, a complete set of Goya's aquatints, "Los Caprichos," some Japanese Ukiyo-e woodblock prints and many artifacts of Micronesian origin. Thus, the Isla Center for the Arts at the University of Guam – ISLA - was born in 1984 with a board consisting of UOG Art faculty, members of the community knowledgeable in the visual arts, and a Director who would serve a part-time position as a UOG faculty member. As the first Chairman of the Board, Robert lobbied long and hard with the UOG Administration to acquire a space for the new Art Center and was finally granted House 15 at Dean's Circle. Architect Mark Ruth was the board member representing the community and also drew up plans to re-model the one-time residence into a gallery space. Marvin Montvel-Cohen was hired as the first Director.

Special Memories of UOG:

A sabbatical year (AY 1985/86) near Kyoto, Japan studying Japanese traditional art and architecture was one of the fondest memories, and provided the material to develop and offer a new course at UOG in Traditional Japanese Art. The year was made more memorable because Robert and crew sailed his 42' sailboat to Nishinomina Marina where he and wife, Cynthia, lived aboard while pursuing their studies of Japanese culture. The voyage to and from Japan took about 14 days each way and provided a unique experience apart from the first-hand study of traditional artifacts. Robert had been living aboard his sailboat, Pokoj ("Peace" in Slovak, the language of his European heritage) since 1977, and when he and Dr. Cynthia (nee Bellinger) Sajnovsky married in January 1981, they took up residence on the yacht. Cynthia became Robert's partner in life and a colleague as well. She was hired as an Assistant Professor of Music in 1979. Robert's love of sailing caused him to join the U. S. Coast Guard Auxiliary in 1977, an organization of volunteers whose mission is to assist the Coast Guard in its non-law enforcement duties such as recreational boater education, search and rescue, and training. Robert became involved with the Auxiliary and continues his service to this day.

He also became qualified as a Red Cross small boat sailing instructor and, having established a relationship with the manager of Sumay Marina located on Naval Base Guam, he developed and instructed a 2 credit-hour Basic Sailing and Seamanship course (PE 171) for the Physical Education department at UOG, using the boats available at Sumay Marina. He taught Saturday morning classroom and afternoon on-water sessions of the course for 10 years from Spring 1984 to Spring 1994.

Final Thoughts:

Robert's legacy is visual, it is seen in the quality of artists, many former students, practicing today on Guam and in UOG's sphere of influence. He would advise students today to never underestimate their ability to learn, and when an opportunity arises to try something new, take it.

