

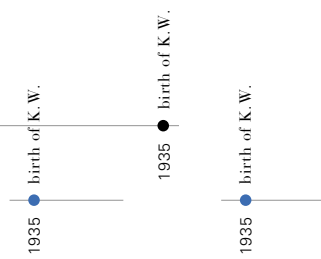
“Devoid of content; free from writing or marks.”

White space begs to be filled, to be written on, to be scribbled upon, to be charted. From the time he was a toddler and could hold a pencil, Kenneth Lynn White experimented with ways to fill white space. The humorous cartoons of his teens gave way to seemingly simple graphic designs that were complexly layered with references, images, and meanings rooted in the experiences of his early years.



Olivette and Kenny White with their young son Ken, 1935.

Ken was born on 19 November 1935 in Kansas City, Missouri, the first of four children of Kenneth Miller and Alice Olivette White. Ken’s parents were talented musicians. His father Kenny was an accomplished tenor saxophone and clarinet player. His mother Olivette was a vocalist who sang with her older sister Arline and cousin Victoria in the Owens Sisters Trio. Kenny and Olivette met while on tour and were married on 11 November 1934 in Denver. After Ken’s birth the following year, the couple continued to perform at various hotels and clubs in the Midwest before settling down in Kansas City to be near Ken’s paternal grandparents, Mabel and Lawrence White whom Ken affectionately called Mom and Pop.



As a youngster, Ken spent a lot of time with Mom and Pop while his parents performed at local parties and wedding receptions. Ken admired his grandfather, a retired accountant who played the tuba, and credited Pop with teaching him to read and encouraging him to draw. When Ken showed a preference for drawing with his left hand, his grandfather wisely never tried to make his grandson right-handed, a practice that was common in the 1930s when some educators believed being left-handed hindered learning.

Although Ken never showed any aptitude for playing an instrument, his parents and grandparents praised his obvious artistic talent. They allowed the little boy with the big imagination to draw to his heart's content. Growing up in a household where music was constantly being played, Ken absorbed the sounds that were in his parent's lives and developed musical tastes that were eclectic. He was proud that his father had a dance band, played at the local radio stations KMBC and KCMO until recordings replaced live music, and occasionally appeared with the Kansas City Pops Orchestra. As an adult, listening to music was one of the ways that Ken relaxed after a hectic day at work. He collected hundreds of 78 records featuring classical, jazz, bluegrass, and popular music, playing his favorites on his high fidelity stereo equipment that he continuously tended and updated.



Kenny White plays clarinet at KMBC Radio station, 1940s.

His mother's love of motion pictures became another of Ken's lifelong interests. When he was only a toddler, Olivette would take her young son on the streetcar to downtown theaters to attend matinees of the latest Hollywood hits. Olivette was a true movie fan, following the well-publicized lives of Hollywood's glamorous stars on the radio and in magazines. Ken learned the names of movie stars and remembered in vivid detail the intricate stories and special effects of the movies he saw. As an adult, Ken's favorite films tended to be those with complex narratives and double entendre conversations, such as the chronicle of human foibles in *Mr. Hulot's Holiday* featuring Jacques Tati; the melodramatic twists and turns of *Casablanca* with Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart; the British humor in *The Lavender Hill Mob* in which Alec Guinness robs the Bank of England; the romantic comedy of *It Happened One Night* with Claudette Colbert and Clark Gable; Orson Wells' seminal film *Citizen Kane*, and Billy Wilder's version of the Agatha Christie courtroom thriller *Witness for the Prosecution*. Later,



Ken stands behind brother Val with twin sisters, Melissa and Michele, 1951.

during long plane flights on business trips, Ken read all of Agatha Christie's mysteries as well as those by Dorothy Sayers, George Simenon, and A. Conan Doyle. (1)

By the time Ken started high school in 1949, the White household had grown to include three adults, five children, and a shaggy brown and white dog named Lady. Ken's brother Val was born in 1942 and his twin sisters Melissa and Michele were born in 1949. Olivette's sister Arline and her son Rob, also born in 1942, were living with the family. Rob remembered how Ken would entertain Val and him with spur-of-the-moment drawings of soldiers in precarious situations in the tradition of the popular World War II cartoonist Bill Mauldin. In the days before television, the family gathered around the kitchen table after dinner to play board games like Scrabble, Monopoly, and marbles. Everyone in the White family had a sense of humor, and there was constant banter to see who could come up with the best riddle or humorous pun. Ken's wry sense of humor and well-stocked knowledge of trivia were nourished in this atmosphere.

In 1953, Ken became the first member of his family to attend college when he entered the University of Kansas (KU) at Lawrence, Kansas. He was quickly swept up in the rituals of campus life with fraternity rush and Big Seven football games but unprepared for the financial and academic challenges. During his three years at KU, Ken struggled to secure enough funds to stay in college. A member of Sigma Nu fraternity, he waited tables at the fraternity house for room/board and earned spending money as a bill



Whose foxhole is it?
Cartoon by Ken, 1950s.



High School graduation photo, 1953.

[1] From Ken's list of movies, 1985

collector for a Lawrence dry cleaner and gas station. Since most of his family's resources were needed at home, Ken relied on summer jobs to help pay for his tuition and art supplies. One summer he worked as a soda jerk at a country club swimming pool. Another time Ken joined the Teamsters Union so he could be part of a crew that steam-cleaned Fruehauf trucks, a sweltering task in Kansas City's oppressive summer heat and humidity. At union wages, this was the best paying of his summer jobs.

As a commercial art major in the School of Art at KU, Ken expected to receive professional training in the fields of advertising art, publication design, and photo mechanical processes. But the University of Kansas curriculum, like most universities in the 1950s, emphasized fine art and art history classes. Having to take required classes in life drawing, ornament, jewelry, and sculpture frustrated Ken because he felt these courses were not preparing him for a viable career. Ken also let the frequent demands from university groups distract him from his class work. He designed and "worked his fingers to the bone" (2) on floats for the Sigma Nu fraternity; constructed scenery for Rock Chalk Reviews, Studio Theatre, and University Players, and created cartoons for the Sour Owl, the campus humor magazine.

Ken's grades suffered and he was twice placed on probation. In 1956, during Spring Semester finals, Ken



Ken in Marine fatigues.

was hospitalized with histoplasmosis, a fungus that attacks the respiratory system and is transmitted through the air from pigeon droppings. Unable to complete coursework in Design VI, Commercial Art III, Sculpture II, Still Life I, Modern Art, and Advertising Copy, Ken failed to meet probation requirements and flunked out of college.

Even though Ken knew that he had not devoted sufficient time to his studies, he was devastated by the consequences. Realizing that he would be drafted into the Army since he was no longer eligible for college deferment, Ken enlisted in a two-year program offered by the United States Marine Corps. Ken selected the Marine Corps because he wanted to prove to himself and his family that he could succeed in the most rigorous branch of the service. On a hot, muggy July morning, Ken boarded a Continental Super Convair 340 flight bound for San Diego and the Marine Corps Recruit Depot there.

1935 ● birth of K.W.

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Marine Corps brochure.



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The trip involved many firsts for Ken: his first airplane ride, his first trip to California, his first extended time away from family and friends.

Ken's indoctrination into the Marine Corps during 12 weeks of boot camp was more rigorous than anything he had ever experienced. In addition to physical conditioning and drilling, recruits received instruction in basic weapons, marksmanship, and combat training. Ken quickly realized how privileged his middle-class upbringing had been. Some of the 75 members in his platoon could not read, and a few had such bad tooth decay and gum disease that they had to have all their teeth extracted and be fitted for dentures while still in their teens. After boot camp, Ken was assigned to administrative duties at Camp Pendleton because he was the only recruit in his platoon who could type and thus process orders for Marines going overseas.

During his tour of duty, Ken wrote frequently about his Marine experience. His 7 January 1957 letter began: "I went over to the hobby shop to see if they had any ink, and the sergeant asked me if I was the one who drew the poster on safety that was hanging on the wall. I said, 'Why, er, yes.' He then went on to ask me if I would like to do that sort of thing all the time while in the Corps. Naturally, I told him certainly. Then he said that this Captain saw the poster and inquired about it. Also one of the officers I work for said it was a waste for me to be pounding away on a

[2] Letter dated 5 May 1955

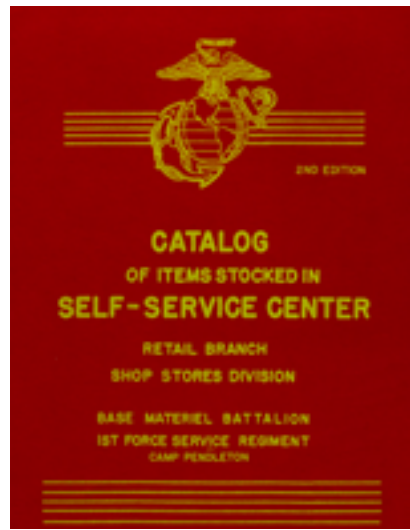
typewriter all day when I could be doing the Corps more good drawing.”

Within six months Ken was reassigned to the Training Aids Library at Camp Pendleton and promoted to corporal:

“The lieutenant gave me the highest proficiency and conduct marks possible...He said he hated to see me go, but thought it would be a very good deal for me. Does the old heart good when an officer talks to you like that.”

(3) Ken explained his new position as Illustrator in the Training Aids Library at Camp Pendleton: “This means that I will get all the practical training that I have wanted for so long. I will be working under a very good artist who in the past has drawn covers for The Saturday Evening Post. He said he would be very glad to help me; this will give me something that everyone said I didn’t have, experience. I will be doing every basic thing to broaden my knowledge: lettering, silk-screen, cutaway views of motors and other mechanical drawings, etc. Most important, he said he has wanted someone very badly who could draw cartoons about the Marine Corps that didn’t slam them too much, and he thinks I should be able to fill the bill.”(4)

In a mid-July letter, Ken noted that he had been in the Corps for one year: “Never before have I been so busy. I am on guard duty right now, and there is a good chance I will have to go on mess duty. I was out in the field two days in a row last week with my rifle etc., running squad tactics and so forth. I have to get up at 0530 and go to bed at 1030. Actually I don’t mind all the



Silk screen brochure commemorating battalion flag.

extracurricular activity because the experience I have been getting so far has been most satisfactory. I’ll be an artist yet. Oh, I almost forgot, I am a member of the honor guard, which means whenever a general or some other wheel comes aboard the base, I am one of the select few who dresses up with white hat, gloves and brass and marches out to greet him.” (5)

Initially, Ken prepared charts and graphs at the Training Aids Library. However, on 25 September 1957, Ken wrote that he had completed five safety illustrations about loading material and riding in a convoy of jeeps: “I was able to do cartooning and use different types of lettering.” Later assignments included the design of posters, brochures, and technical diagrams of equipment, including the Browning Automatic Rifle. Ken outlined a silk screen technique that he had learned in a February 1958 letter: “I think I could tell you something about the work I have been doing lately. It’s been silkscreen work mostly. Yesterday I finished a cover for a basketball



[3] Letter dated 2 July 1957
[4] Letter dated 1 July 1957
[5] Letter dated 17 July 1957

banquet and ran a hundred copies off on the screen. Today I am completing a brochure for a big ceremony they are having commemorating a battalion flag. We do a photographic type silk-screen work here. In order to achieve a silk-screen, first we get a positive from an ozalid machine and then put the positive over the film, expose to sunlight for a few seconds and then develop it and stick it on the silk.” (6)

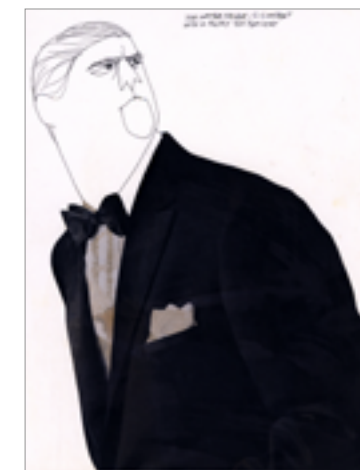
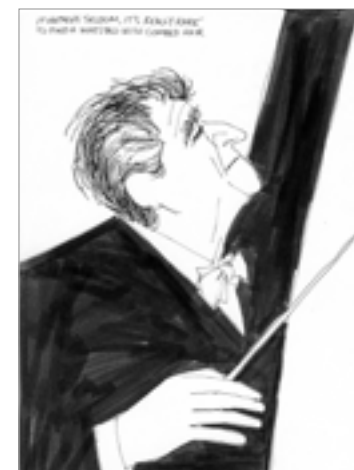
During his second year in the Marine Corps, Ken made plans to finish college and enrolled in night classes at Carlsbad Junior College. In a 3 February 1958 letter, Ken described his spring schedule: “Oil Painting class (18-week course) starts tonight, Poli Sci (9-week course) tomorrow night, duty Wednesday, Poli Sci Thursday, and studying and playing basketball this weekend. Being occupied is the most important thing for me to do for the next 163 days (in the Corps).” Receiving all A’s in the classes was a morale booster.

In addition to an honorable discharge, Ken’s commanding officer 1st Lt. K. Kirkpatrick wrote the following letter

of commendation: “In performance of his duties, Corporal White proved that he possesses initiative, energy and excellent creative thinking, highly desirable in a job of this nature. His services were of great value to the Training Aids Library and have contributed immeasurably to production standards of this section. Corporal White is a man of high moral character and is entirely trustworthy. He is exceptionally cooperative and works harmoniously with all personnel with whom he has contact.” (7)

Immediately following his 16 July 1958 discharge, Ken caught a plane back to Kansas City with new confidence in his abilities, his muscles taut and his body twenty pounds heavier (at 175 lbs.), and with boxes of Book of the Month Club selections he’d ordered and read while in the service. Soon after his return, Ken made plans to be married and to attend spring semester classes at the Kansas City Art Institute and School of Design (KCAI).

Given a second chance to attend college, Ken flourished in the academic atmosphere at KCAI, a small private college with 70 years experience in the field of art education. KCAI had an enrollment of 500 students and a staff of 45 faculty members. The college was located on 13 wooded acres in a



Caricatures in Rhyme.

[6] Technique pioneered by Rob Kelly, Camp Pendleton, 1950s
[7] Letter dated 10 July 1958

residential area near the famed Country Club Plaza and across the street from the William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Museum. Dean Richard H. Brunell took an interest in Ken and gave him credit for classes taken at Carlsbad Junior College. This meant that Ken would have enough credits to graduate in three semesters.

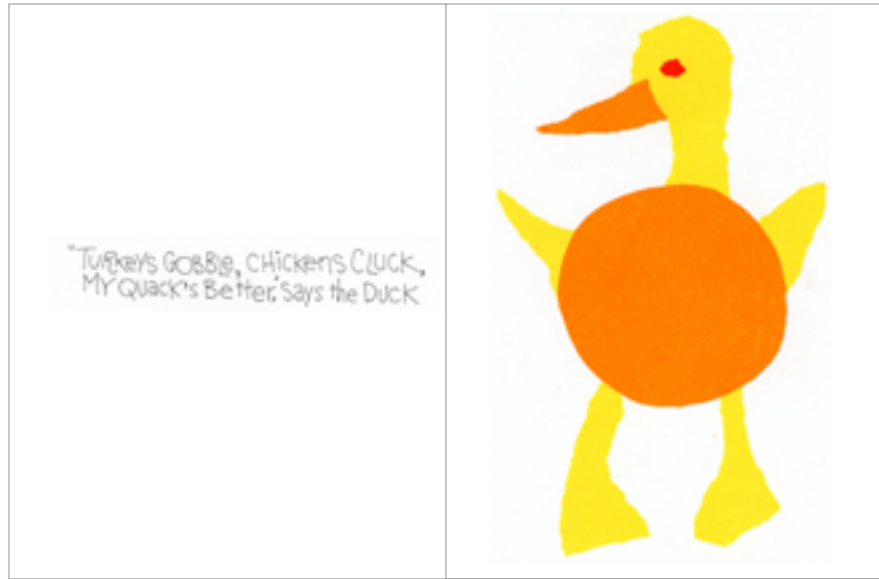
As an upper-class commercial design major, Ken attended studio classes five days a week, working on practical assignments and learning to deal with technical problems of equipment and materials. After his experience in the Training Aids Library, Ken appreciated the relevant assignments, small classes, and guidance of dedicated professors. A few pieces from KCAI classes that still exist include an album cover for a recording of *La Mer* by the Kansas City Philharmonic Orchestra and the *Circle Book of Rhymes* done with torn tissue paper. The oversized 15" x 20" *Young Composers* book featured illustrations and rhymes about the lives



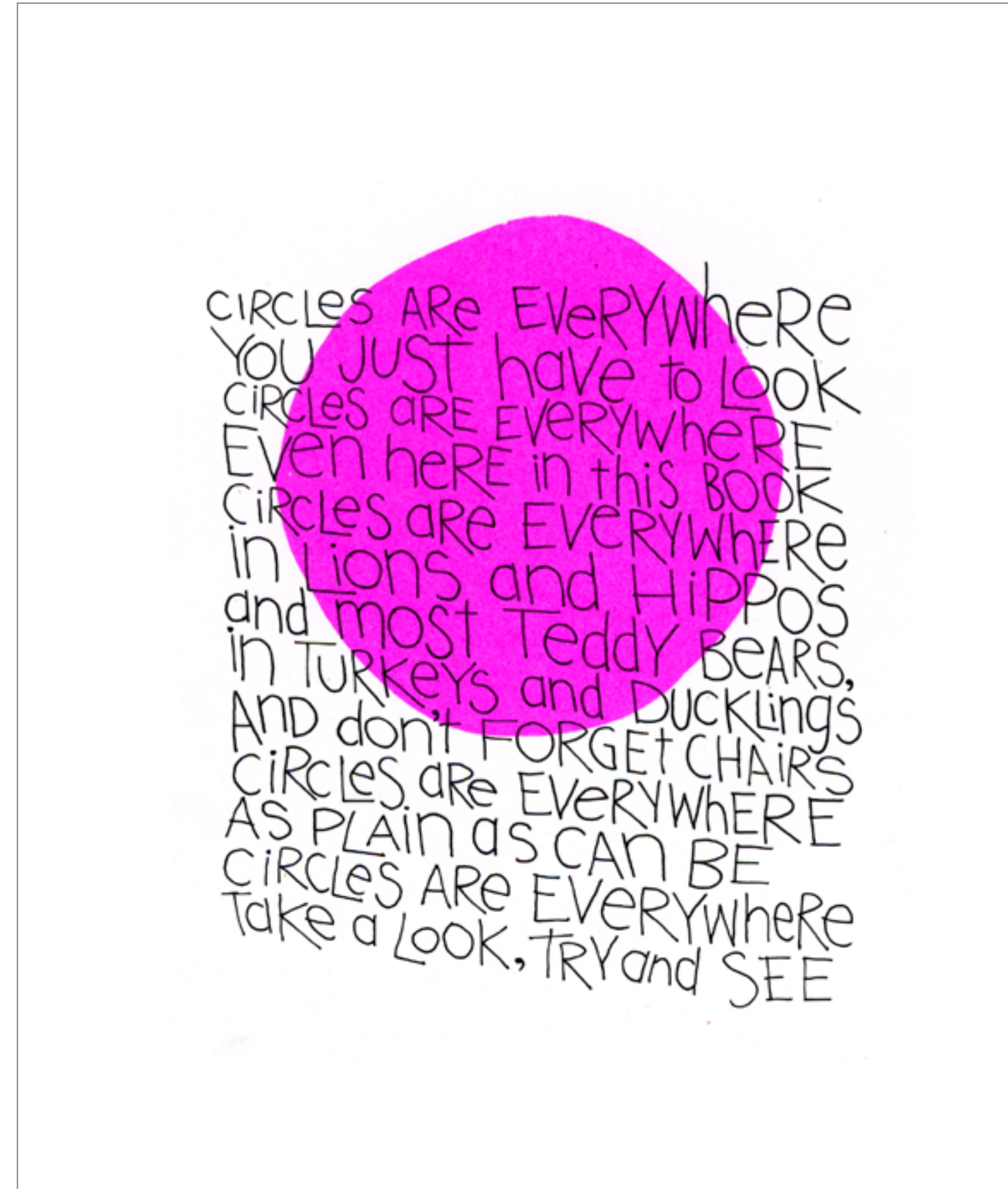
Ken's characters come to life in catchy phrases.



The Young Composers cover, 1960.



Circle Book of Rhymes spread, 1960.



Circle Book of Rhymes cover.

of Johann Sebastian Bach, Franz Joseph Hayden, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky, Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, and Franz Schubert. The book's illustrations were line drawings painted in bright primary colors, and the text of poems by Ken was hand lettered.

Seven years after starting college at the University of Kansas, Ken received his Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree on 26 May 1960. The evening commencement exercises were held on the lawn at the KCAI campus with 46 students receiving degrees and 300 people in attendance. Commencement speaker Dr. David Ruhe of the University of Kansas Medical Center urged graduates to accept the "very special task of bringing the exotic worlds of science somehow into the common camp. Youth must study and act on the great social issues of our time. Every young person should make commitments to things greater than himself." [8]

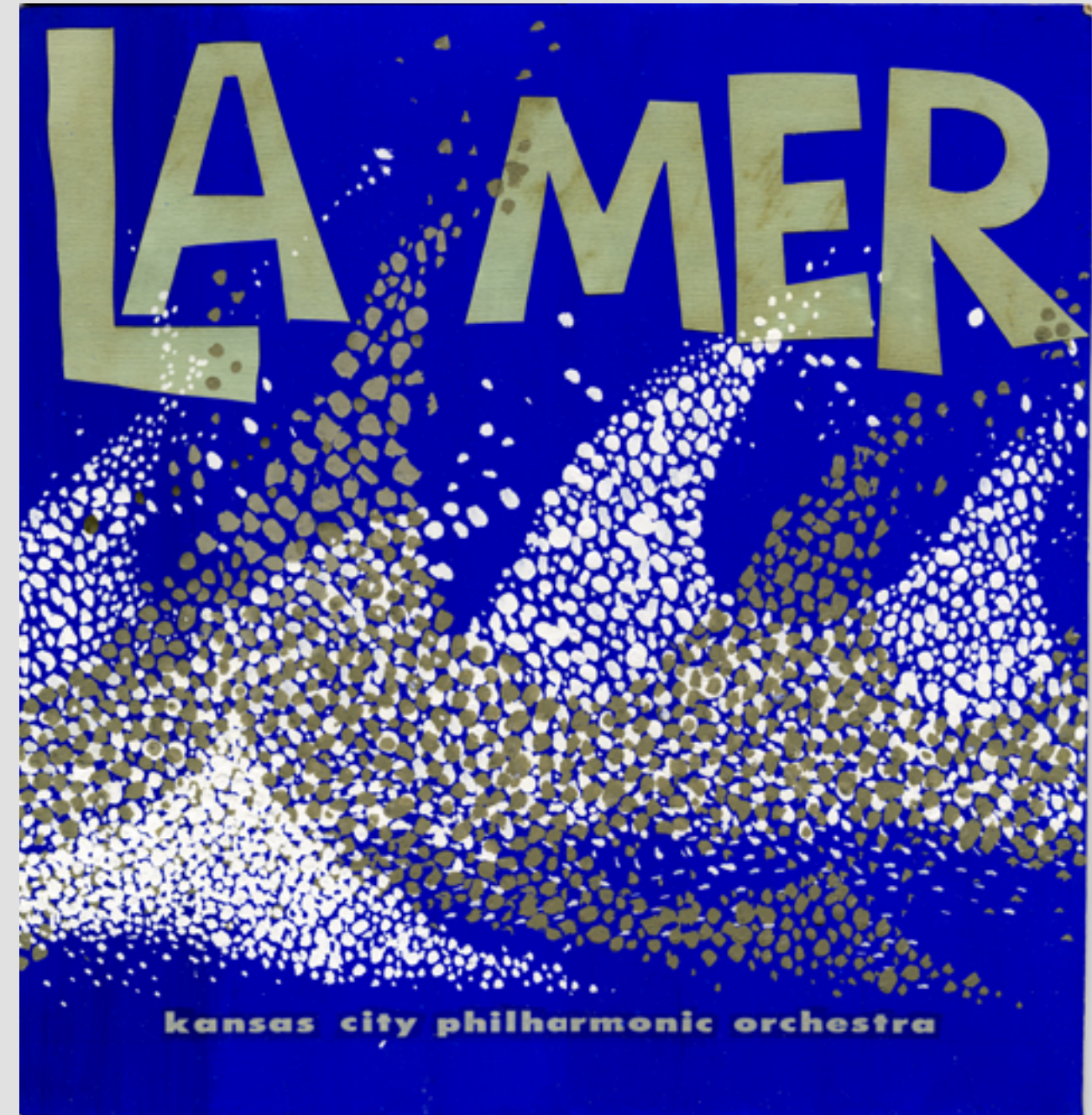
Before graduation, Ken had accepted an offer from Meredith Publishing Company (now Meredith Corporation) to be a commercial artist in the Advertising and Promotion Department at a starting salary of \$5,000 per year, a seemingly enormous amount of money for an entry level position. Ken was glad to finally be part of corporate America at a time when most men spent their entire careers working for the same company. After his father's premature death in 1959, Ken wasn't interested in freelance work or joining a small advertising firm. He believed that his father's death at age 48 was related to the stress of being self-employed.

For the first 23 years of his life, Ken filled the white spaces of his youth with experiences that taught him how to deal with adversity and take advantage of opportunities when they appeared. Now he was ready to experiment with the possibilities of a career in commercial art.

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La Mer album cover, 1960.

[8] *Kansas City Times* article, 27 May 1960