

KIRK NEWMAN

(January 5, 1926 - November 4, 2017)

More than any other individual in Kalamazoo, Kirk Newman's association with the KIA as a creative artist, a teacher and as a mentor can never be forgotten. This man believed in the value of art for everyone and aimed to increase public awareness and appreciation for the arts. KIA Executive Director Belinda Tate says: "Kirk was a visionary arts leader." He will always be remembered as an artist of the people.

Born in Dallas, he came to Kalamazoo in 1949 as an instructor for the Extension Division of the University of Michigan's School of Architecture and Design. Newman never opened an art book until college and was intrigued by both Van Gogh and Picasso. While he originally studied economics, physics, religion and psychology, it was art that opened a whole new world for him. He became aware by what art could do for a person and how it could have a profound effect if it was shared to a larger audience (public art with a purpose). Newman also taught part time at Kalamazoo College and then full time at the KIA. It was his workshops that really brought the KIA and Kzoo to the attention of other artists and students across the country. He was Associate Director for Education from 1966-78. The KIA art school bears his name. "Art is a medium through which you make connections you can't put into words."-K.N.

I have loved Kirk Newman's "People" sculpture, located outside at the KIA, since taking my first art class there in the mid

1970's. Fascinated by the paper bag on the man's head and having no previous education as to what Newman was portraying until recently, I always smiled and thought it was ridiculously entertaining while passing by. I'm so glad I can stop wondering and guessing and can share my new found knowledge with others.

"People" was commissioned by Dorothy UpJohn Dalton (daughter of the founder of the UpJohn Company in Kzoo). It was dedicated to the KIA in 1974 to celebrate their 50 year anniversary. Made of bronze, it took one and a half years to complete. Upon its unveiling, "People" was controversial. The Kalamazoo Gazette described it as comical, ample, ridiculous, gangly, absurd, lumpy, buxom, political, enigmatic, relaxed and appealing. It can also be described as a more original form of haberdashery.

The traditional role of sculpture is to evoke the eternal and unchangingness of the figure, rendering it timeless. Newman was interested in both the timeless aspect and the ephemeral nature of man's existence. "An artist must examine his world intuitively, intellectually and create art as an expression of his knowledge of that world."-K.N. Working in an era when sculpture was minimalistic, he chose the human form using history's most permanent and heavy metal material, bronze. He emphasized movement and motion, playing with space and form. His work is realistic art in the best of American traditions...sarcastic, compassionate, shocking and a bitter reflection of our times. He believes people are the same everywhere and we can all relate to the people in his work.

As quoted by Newman: “ Art is supposed to be a leader, a spokesman for contemporary times.” His “People” was intended to be noticed. It is expressionistic, playful, witty and sarcastic. With a bit of artificial elegance, Newman is caricaturing aspects of the human condition. He satires the moods of ordinary people by revealing their inner desires, social game playing and freedom from inhibitions. We are all camouflaged with ingrained insecurities, it’s the masks we wear while in public. This work of art illustrates the city dweller’s shallow sociability and their escapism from self-imprisoned cages.

No sculpture he has done has been more important or dear to him than “People”. It was a new kind of art in the 1970’s and it boosted his career. His social commentary has provoked and pleased audiences throughout the years, as it speaks for itself. Despite ongoing rumors, none of the characters in “People” are based on any Kalamazoo locals. Phew - we are all in the clear!

Newman passed away peacefully in his home at the age of 91 with an easel of his newest drawings close by. As one of Kalamazoo’s most beloved creators of public work, he continues to enrich all of us who live, work or visit downtown Kzoo.

-Researched and written by KIA 2019 Docent graduate, Bridget Fox