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LIVES LIVED

# Estonian-born graphic designer Tiit Telmet helped shape Canadian visual culture

**KAILI ETS, HELI CUERRIER AND KAJA TELMET**

CONTRIBUTED TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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**Tiit Telmet**

Father. Graphic designer. Estonian. Mentor.

Born April 19, 1942, in Tallinn, Estonia; died Jan. 15, 2025, in Toronto, of mesothelioma; aged 82.

Tiit Telmet enjoyed maple syrup in black coffee, thrifting at Value Village on Senior Tuesdays, dancing and making others smile. He invited others to take their guard down, too, by introducing himself as Tit with two i's.

**Tiit Telmet**

COURTESY OF FAMILY

Tiit's family fled from Estonia to Germany in 1944 and he spent six years living in a displaced persons camp. This is where he honed his thrifty ways as he described collecting discarded cigarette butts from soldiers so his father could reroll them for sale.

His father was skilled in working with wood and leather. Tiit loved watching him

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He arrived for his first day of school wearing lederhosen and speaking no English. He was sent home with a note pinned to his shirt stating, “Please dress your child appropriately.”

Tiit worked hard to overcome many adversities, and was able to study graphic design at Western Michigan University, where he earned his degree in 1966. He drove across the United States in his cherished 66 Corvette to find himself and ended up working as an airplane draftsman for a while.

In 1969 he crossed paths with Kaja Heinla during an Estonian cultural festival in Chicago. They fell in love, drawn together in part because their Estonian heritage was important to them both. Tiit and Kaja lived in different cities and eventually chose to move to Canada because they knew about Toronto’s large Estonian community. They married in the summer of 1972 wearing traditional folk costumes and enacting old Estonian marriage customs. They settled in Toronto and quickly became active in the local Estonian community.

The couple welcomed two daughters, Kaili and Heli. Both parents made sure the Estonian language was spoken at home and Estonian extracurricular cultural activities were prioritized. Tiit was a big supporter of his children’s interests and created programs for his daughters’ gymnastics recitals and spring concerts. He kept their childhood artwork on display for years, as well as framed photos of his growing family on every shelf and available surface in the house.

Tiit’s graphic design career took off in the 1970s and he became a partner in Gottschalk + Ash International before opening Telmet Design Associates in 1985. He helped shape Canadian visual culture through corporate branding, signage and communication design, along with 90 Canada Post stamp designs. His favourite stamp was the tribute for jazz legend Oscar Peterson, which was selected by Peterson himself. His work was recognized with numerous honours, including a DesCan Fellowship, an International Council of Design excellence award, and induction into the prestigious Alliance Graphique Internationale – a distinction held by only a handful of Canadian designers.

Tiit’s humble nature made him approachable. He had a knack for connecting with younger generations and offering thoughtful advice. He loved taking pictures and

cataloguing memories from family reunions and cultural gatherings.

He was a true creature of habit, always eating the same thing for breakfast and preferring the same kitchen chair, bowl, mug and spoon. If a guest was unknowingly using his preferred item, he would insist they give it up and offer an alternative. Tiit was meticulous, often to excess. The family home was always orderly with nothing left on counters and everything tucked away. If anyone left a water glass out while going to the bathroom, it would be cleared away and washed in the blink of an eye.

Tiit faced his battle with mesothelioma with the same resilience that defined his life. He was accepting and resolute in his decision to spend the last few weeks of life at home in bed with his cherished cat, Saku, warming his feet. A procession of family and friends stopped in to send him off. He died in the arms of his family.

Kaili Ets is Tiit's elder daughter, Heli Cuerrier is Tiit's younger daughter and Kaja Telmet is his wife.

To submit a *Lives Lived*: [lives@globeandmail.com](mailto:lives@globeandmail.com)

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