Portrait of the Grant Maker as an Artist

Rip Rapson, head of the Kresge Foundation, draws to distill complex ideas and start conversations.

**BY DREW LINDSAY**

Rip Rapson arrived at the job interview carrying a four-foot-long piece of foam board. It was 1999, and Rapson was a candidate for his first position in philanthropy, as president of the McKnight Foundation in Minneapolis, a city where he had been deputy mayor. McKnight wanted its new leader to help reimagine how it invested in children, families, and economic development. Rapson had put his ideas to paper — specifically, a three-panel, colored-pencil drawing attached to the foam board.

As Rapson remembers it, he was dissuaded from bringing his visual aid into the interview. “What in the world is that?” asked Cynthia Boynton, daughter of McKnight founder Virginia Binger. But McKnight’s board later discussed the sketch at length. And Rapson was hired.

Two decades later, hundreds of Rapson drawings adorn the philanthropic landscape. Some of his earliest work, in the 1990s before he joined McKnight, helped the Annie E. Casey Foundation conceive a new strategy. At the Detroit-based Kresge Foundation, where he’s been president since 2006, his oeuvre includes more than 50 drawings detailing philanthropy’s work in the city, the 2013 bankruptcy, and the recovery.

Over the years, his sketches have found their way into a White House cabinet meeting, the Detroit bankruptcy trial, and university discussions of philanthropy and society. Kresge staff hang them on their office walls.

When Jennifer Kulczycki interviewed to join Kresge’s communications office, Rapson pulled out a piece of paper and made a diagram of relationships at the foundation. “I still have it,” Kulczycki says. “This was before I knew that the drawings weren’t something special, that they were a daily exercise.”

**Beatrix Potter’s Influence**

It’s perhaps a surprise that Rapson, a lawyer versed in the arcane of policy and grant making, has an artistic bent. But his father, Ralph Rapson, was an internationally renowned architect who often worked out of the basement of the family home in Minneapolis. He believed that “architecture could literally change lives by bringing us together across races and incomes,” said then-Minneapolis mayor R.T. Rybak when the elder Rapson died in 1998.

Rip Rapson’s mother was a volunteer in the children’s literature archives at the University of Minnesota, where her son spent hours poring over manuscripts and early editions. How did Beatrix Potter illustrate *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*? Rapson continues on Page 24.
The project’s co-leader and a nationally recognized leader, Rapson worried Smith thought he was idly doodling. But the Casey veteran had the drawing skills to start the meeting focused on them. Over the next couple of years, Casey leaders invited Rapson to visit and translate their thinking into visuals.

**‘Conversation Propellant’**

Rapson describes drawing as much more than simply a means to organize his thoughts. Distilling complex ideas and conversations onto a page “forces you to see the relationships among things and to make your own judgment about whether they add up to a coherent whole,” he says. When shared with others, the drawings can become “conversation propellant,” he says. “If you’re sitting in a room with 10 people trying to track and make sense of a conversation, sketching can be a clarifying act” that allows participants to quickly grasp key concepts and react.

Not everyone finds value in Rapson’s drawings. If ideas are later presented to a broader audience, he will compose a colored-pencil sketch. “There are very few foundation presidents or anybody who would do that,” he says. “I just can’t do it.”

**Humans at the Center**

Typically, Rapson sketches in pen during meetings. If ideas are later presented to a broader audience, he will compose a colored-pencil sketch. Through his father worked only in black and white, the son opts for color as an organizing principle—yellows for one type of activity, greens for another, and so on.

Rapson’s art has signature elements. Bags with dollar signs represent grants or other money transfers. Bold arrows indicate a progression or narrative flow. Ornate pillars illustrate core principles or players in a plan. Cranes stand in for capital construction.

In many drawings, key institutions are depicted as colorful buildings. A recent drawing of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., complete with its stack basket contours.

People regularly populate the drawings. Rapson’s father, who emphasized the role of culture in advancing racial equity featured prominently. Elaborate pillars illustrate core principles or players.

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**ART AND POLICY**

Rip Rapson, whose father was an architect, has been CEO of the Kresge Foundation since 2006. His signature art has been reported on in the Chronicle of Philanthropy. The Chronicle of Philanthropy is an independent, not-for-profit, scholarly organization that helps nonprofits and philanthropists achieve their common goals. It is the leading source for knowledge, analysis, and debate on philanthropy and the nonprofit sector.

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**DETROIT LANDSCAPES**

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**The Chronicle of Philanthropy**

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