

The Failure of Fine Printing

Why the beautiful book isn't so beautiful, and the ugly book isn't so ugly

Michael Russem

In the fall of 2004, after ten years of working as a typographer, letterpress printer, and fine press publisher, I published *Sleep*, the book for which those previous years had prepared me. The story was by Haruki Murakami, my favorite writer. John Gibson, whose paintings I adore, contributed etchings. Because I felt particularly strong about the content, extra pains were taken to plan an especially luxurious edition which would evoke and honor that content. Finally, I thought, *this story will be presented in a format that is truly appropriate*. The papers were

handmade at Twinrocker. The Dante types were set by Michael & Winifred Bixler. The color etchings were printed by Peter Pettenigill at Wingate Studio. The leather binding was carried out by Claudia Cohen. These are the very best craftspeople, and I could not imagine assembling a better team to work on the edition. After eight months of planning and production, I had a book of which I could finally be proud. I shipped out copies to collectors and anxiously awaited comments and checks. The seven titles previously printed under my Kat Ran imprint had not garnered nearly as much

waited there in the book to be discovered by the reader. The old me had been able to understand only the tiniest fragment of it, but the gaze of this new me could penetrate to the core with perfect understanding. I knew exactly what the great Tolstoy wanted to say, what he wanted the reader to get from his book; I could see how his message had organically crystallized as a novel, and what in that novel had surpassed the author himself.

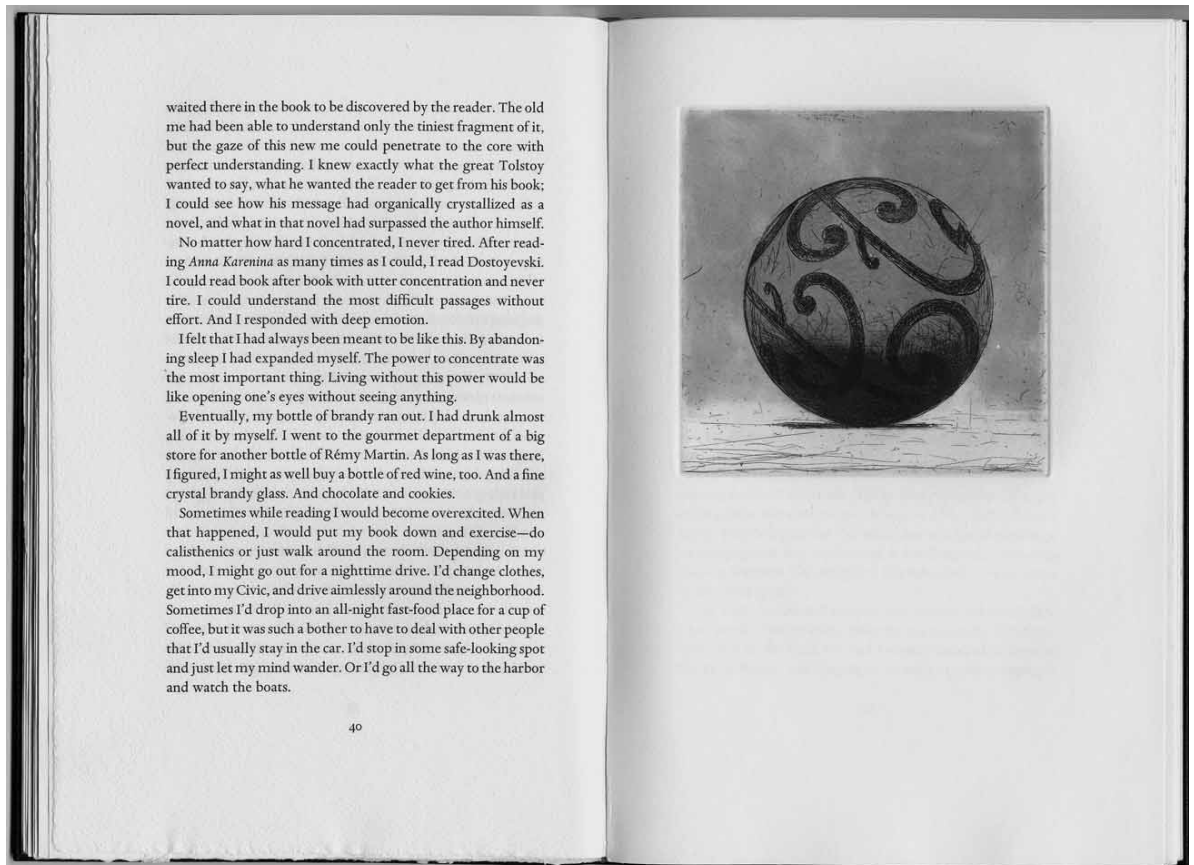
No matter how hard I concentrated, I never tired. After reading *Anna Karenina* as many times as I could, I read Dostoyevski. I could read book after book with utter concentration and never tire. I could understand the most difficult passages without effort. And I responded with deep emotion.

I felt that I had always been meant to be like this. By abandoning sleep I had expanded myself. The power to concentrate was the most important thing. Living without this power would be like opening one's eyes without seeing anything.

Eventually, my bottle of brandy ran out. I had drunk almost all of it by myself. I went to the gourmet department of a big store for another bottle of Rémy Martin. As long as I was there, I figured, I might as well buy a bottle of red wine, too. And a fine crystal brandy glass. And chocolate and cookies.

Sometimes while reading I would become overexcited. When that happened, I would put my book down and exercise—do calisthenics or just walk around the room. Depending on my mood, I might go out for a nighttime drive. I'd change clothes, get into my Civic, and drive aimlessly around the neighborhood. Sometimes I'd drop into an all-night fast-food place for a cup of coffee, but it was such a bother to have to deal with other people that I'd usually stay in the car. I'd stop in some safe-looking spot and just let my mind wander. Or I'd go all the way to the harbor and watch the boats.

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A spread from Haruki Murakami's *Sleep* with an etching by John Goodman. 2004.

gushing as *Sleep* eventually did, and it seemed as though the book was a real step forward. While comments on the etchings, typography, printing, and binding were copious, however, not one person had commented on the text. I wrote to an especially voracious Kat Ran collector to ask his opinion of the story. His reply: *I don't buy your books to read*.

When I started my apprenticeship in fine printing, I quickly gathered that nobody read the books over which we labored. The work, I thought, was noble

and worthwhile regardless. On the rare occasion that this topic was broached by a collector, curator, colleague, or indignant cousin, I would comment that it did not matter if the books went unread. Because every element in a production is chosen to evoke and honor the content, a reader can not help but glean some essence of that content by simply handling the books and turning the pages. On the whole, however, I made every effort to forget that we printers have this absurd and silent arrangement with our readers—until being told outright
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CAXTONIAN

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that my books were not bought to be read.

What was it about my books that evoked this response? Millions of books were sold every year, and although the fact that people no longer read is constantly lamented, I knew that some portion of those millions must be read. What was I doing wrong? I had always thought that by choosing the perfect types, papers, and bindings, I was making books that—unlike those millions of poorly manufactured trade books—were truly meant to be read. I thought I was creating a visual and tactile reading experience. How could that not result in a superior, reader-friendly book? As I believed I was following Beatrice Warde's Crystal Goblet doctrine that told us printing should be invisible, why weren't my books being read?

To most fine printers, Ms Warde's idea that *printing should be invisible* is akin to *thou shalt not kill*. It's just a given, and is a practice religiously applied to the typography of limited editions. We all try to use modest, yet handsome types in a manner that is calm, quiet, and respectful of the text. But we are guilty of taking Ms Warde's idea too literally; we apply her principle *exclusively* to typography. When planning and designing the rest of the book, we opt for delicious handmade papers with feathery deckles, the glowing impression that comes from letterpress, and sumptuous bindings in leather and imported cloth. These choices create books that are anything but invisible.

A benefit of these choices, however, is that the work of most fine presses transcends the mere *book* to become *art*. While these may be works of art, they cease to be useful, functioning books, which, as Ms Warde wrote, are meant to *convey specific and coherent ideas*. "[I]t is mischievous to call any printed piece a work of art, . . . because that would imply that its first purpose was to exist as an expression of beauty for its own sake and for the delectation of the senses." Because there is such emphasis on specific materials and methods, it is difficult to suggest otherwise that the deluxe edition is not guilty of trying to be a thing of beauty to entice the senses. Because we are so accustomed to mass market productions, the physical elements and processes traditionally chosen for fine press books—handmade paper, letterpress, and hand bindings—are foreign to the average reader and thus call too much attention to themselves, over stimulating the senses and spirit. It is impossible to handle them without relishing

Despite considerable effort during the past thirty years to evolve a style of book design in the spirit of contemporary aesthetics and technology, the prevailing criterion of judgment is still the hand-printed-and-bound books of pre-Industrial Revolution eras . . . books which reflect the culture of their periods.

It seems incongruous that today, in a world of mechanical and material resources undreamt of in those days—a world finding expression in Stravinsky, Picasso, the UN Secretariat building and the products of our best industrial and advertising designers—we should yet strive to design books with conventions perfected centuries ago.



The paste-down from *Books for Our Time*, edited by Marshall Lee. Oxford University Press, 1951.

in the deliciousness of the materials—though all the while feeling panic over the possibility of damaging these precious items. It is difficult to imagine curling up in bed with a full leather or a delicate paper binding as one would do so readily with a paperback. Because the editions are so luxurious and often unwieldy, it is impractical and terrifying to read these book. People are often afraid to even *touch* them.

I suggested earlier that by selecting the materials and production methods most appropriate to the content, the viewer can not help but glean some essence of the content. But the *essence* of content is not the same as content. Reading the CliffsNotes for *The Iliad* is hardly the same as reading *The Iliad*. (Although at least the act of reading is involved.) If the reader is expected to gain a sense of the text by the physical materials alone, it is as if we are watering down CliffsNotes. What author or poet would want this for his work? How, too, can a book typographer (often concerned primarily with the minutiae of letters and spacing, but nevertheless a Servant of The Written Word) take comfort in a job well done, when the meanings and intent of those words aren't being communicated to the reader? Are we really supposed to infer the gist of a book without reading it?—like an audience watching a movie

with the sound turned off? It is unlikely that a director would advocate the viewing of his film in that manner, and I suspect few writers and poets would knowingly advocate a similar presentation for their work.

The overwhelming emphasis on materials and process inherent to fine printing is a tremendous obstacle to the act of reading and the ritual of sitting down to take in a story or poem. Fine press books have ceased to have anything to do with this ritual. In planning these editions, the fine press publisher asks (as Ms Warde noted) *How should it look?* not *What must it do?* As a result, the deluxe limited editions are not about *content*—they are about *materials* and *process*. They are exclusively about *form*, and as such, they are prime examples of *function following form*: the cardinal sin of design.

If these undeniably beautiful fine press editions, for which every detail is carefully considered and laboriously crafted, is inherently an example of bad design, then what book format can claim to be a successful example of good design? The paperback. The hastily designed, poorly printed, glorified pad of cheap paper is a far more successful piece of design than the fine press book. Although not necessarily handsome, the paperback book can be considered the more beautiful, more successful form because it selflessly gives itself over to the content. Rarely do we concern ourselves with the welfare of our paperbacks. This is because we are too busy *reading* them. The books are doing their job. Isn't this the most basic test of successful design, that the object in question is used almost without thought? Is this an attribute the fine press book can claim?

It is no doubt ironic that a book made with the finest materials can be less successful than a book made with the cheapest. Although the materials may be of the highest quality, they are often not the best materials for the job at hand. Fine press editions are made for the reader of the Renaissance, while the paperback is made for the reader of *today*. Standards of design and production are fluid, changing with lifestyles and technology. In an age of machine production and digital excellence, the fine press book does not reflect the

culture of our time, and though it may be beautiful and stir men's souls in indirect ways, it is a failure as a vessel for the specific ideas of writers and poets.

Consider the evolution of handwriting. Few can look upon a casual letter by, say, a 19th century clerk and not recognize that there is an inherent beauty to the script. Far fewer, however, would easily recognize just what that script actually said. The beauty may be timeless, but the usefulness of that particular hand has long since expired because our needs and standards are constantly in transition. This is the same problem with the fine press book. We are no longer accustomed to deckled edges and letterpress impression, just as we are no longer accustomed to reading or writing with quill pens. Until the engineers develop a comfortable, efficient, and affordable

digital book "machine," and publishers decide to restructure the industry and embrace the technology, the paperback book will continue to be the book form of our time. Its days are surely numbered, but it is the most accessible and beautiful form that is available to the reader because it is something we all recognize and intuitively know how to use. We may all recognize the deluxe limited edition as a book form, but because times change, its materials are so foreign that we do not know how to interact with it.

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Michael Russem is a book designer and proprietor of the Kat Ran Press, a fine press in Florence, Massachusetts, with an additional office in Athens, Georgia. Sleep, despite being "not for reading," is sold out.



Athanasius Kircher, *Turris Babel* (Amsterdam, 1679). Courtesy of the Newberry Library.

Remodeling the Tower of Babel: The Translator's Role in a Shrinking World

The 2007 Caxton Club/Newberry Library Symposium on the Book, March 31, 2007

The day-long symposium is open to the general public, but seating is limited and advance registration is required. Use the form on the Club web site.

SESSION I: MANUSCRIPT TO PRINT. 9:00 A.M., THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY

PATRICIA CLARE INGHAM, *Indiana University*: "Romancing the Public"

Professor Ingham, an expert on William Caxton and other early English writers and printers, will explore how broad dissemination of popular texts brought new demands on the translator's art in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

THOMAS HAHN, *University of Rochester*: "Linguistic, National, and Global Communities."

Professor Hahn's thesis is that in Europe the New World was "created" through the medium of print, as Europeans' understanding of the Americas came primarily through what they read.

SESSION II: PROBLEMATICS. 11:00 A.M., THE NEWBERRY LIBRARY

GÖRAN MALMQVIST, *Swedish Academy*: "The Translator's Responsibility: A Divided Loyalty?"

The members of the Swedish Academy are charged with selecting one author each year to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature. Sinologist Göran Malmqvist will discuss the translator's twofold responsibility: to the author of the original work and to readers in the new language.

DOUGLAS HOFSTADTER, *Indiana University*: "Who Is the Real Author of a Translated Book?"

Can Dante really be understood in English, a language that didn't even exist when he was alive? Crazy! This observation will be the starting point for Professor Hofstadter's consideration of some paradoxes of translation. He is the polymath author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Gödel, Escher, Bach* (1979).

SESSION III: TODAY AND TOMORROW. ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE AUDITORIUM, PANEL DISCUSSION, 2:30 P.M.

The symposium will reconvene for a panel discussion by the four morning speakers, under the leadership of Professor Diana Robin, a distinguished translator of Renaissance texts and Scholar-in-Residence at the Newberry Library.

Remembering John McKinven

David Meyer

If you were a member of the Caxton Club in 1991 and attended the Holiday Revels that year, you were entertained by a tall, white-haired man in a tie and sports coat wearing a cloth bag around his waist. He was portraying Lescamoteur, an 18th-century street magician, who carried his props in a bag. He explained, in French, that he would perform the oldest trick in magic, the Cups & Balls. Three cups, three balls: they vanished; jumped “invisibly” by ones, twos and threes from one cup to another; reappeared and, in the final lifting of the cups, they had all changed into large lemons.

The magician was John Alexander McKinven, a member of the Caxton Club since 1981, who died this past December at the age of 86. He had lived in Lake Forest since the 1960s but in 2003 moved to Fairport Harbor, Ohio, to the family home of his wife, Doris. John, Doris and their three children moved several times during his career in advertising—from Cleveland to Pittsburgh to Greenwich, Connecticut, to Chicago. However, many of his friends knew him only by his interest in magic.

In 1962 a magic magazine reproduced a print by John in imitation of an 18th-century woodblock engraving of a magician performing the Cups & Balls trick. This brought about my first contact with John. I wrote to him, asking if I might purchase one of his prints. He replied:

“I’m happy to send you one of the few prints I bothered to make off the linoleum block of the ‘Juggler.’ It may interest you to know that this [print] was made, not with a press, but by simply inking up the block, setting it on a piece of paper and then standing on it.... Since then I put a couple of screw eyes in the block and hung it up as a wall decoration so for the moment you have a relatively rare thing. You are welcome to it.”

This letter in many ways encapsulates what I learned about John McKinven over the next 44 years. His kindness, generosity, ingenuity, and creative energy were all expressed in his love of magic. He researched and wrote about its history and,



McKinven in 1959.

unknowingly, received a compliment from the most famous illusion designer and magic historian of our time, who once said to me that in his own research he often found that “McKinven had been there ahead of me.”

I felt fortunate to publish two of John’s books. *Stage Flying: 431 B.C. To Modern Times*, which surveys the history of simulated human flight from religious plays to church celebrations to a host of modern theatrical forms, appeared in 1995 and was reprinted in an expanded edition in 2000. The scholarly journal *Theatre Survey* called it “fascinating reading.” John’s writing was always as engaging and evocative as it was factual. “Whatever writing skills I might have,” John once said, “were shaped by years of writing ad copy... short and economical.” His second book, *The Hanlon Brothers: Their Amazing Acrobatics, Pantomimes & Stage Spectacles*, was published in 1998 after nearly 30 years of research.

Both books contain technical illustrations that John had drawn himself. “From childhood on,” he said, “I always gravitated toward making things, so much so that many people assumed I was an engineer. Actually, my college major was English and all my workshop skills were self-taught.”

His passion for learning a subject led to a fortunate outcome for him during World

War II. “When I was 9 or 10,” he wrote in a letter to me, “my mother and I set about to learn the stars. I had a book from the New Castle [Pa.] library, the same place where I learned [magic from the books of] Joseph Leeming. During summer evenings we traced out the summer constellations. Then, not satisfied, we took blankets out in the backyard and slept there. Along about 3 or 4 in the morning, when we awakened, we could see Orion, Sirius, and the winter constellations rising in the east.

“We kept at our studies for several years. I always said that no matter where I went I always had some familiar friends [in the stars]. Years later, when I was in Air Corps Navigation school, this knowledge stood me in good stead and I’m sure that when I graduated, it was a good part of the reason why I was assigned as an instructor and was never shipped overseas.”

When I once asked him about his devotion to the history of magic, he quipped, “I’m more comfortable in the presence of people long dead. I guess because they don’t talk back.” (Unlike the nightclub audiences he performed for during his college years.)

In the last two decades John concentrated on reproducing exquisite and intricate old-time wood-turned boxes and vases for performing magic feats. His efforts to rebuild collectors’ apparatus involved not only woodworking, but also metal working and electronics.

It all began when he was about eight years old while reading Joe Dunninger’s articles on magic in the old *Science and Invention* magazine. A year later his father took him to see Howard Thurston’s full-evening magic show which, he wrote, “set the fever raging.” It never left him. Seventy years later when we were talking about Thurston, one of his favorite magicians, John said, “I wish I’d taken out the big show and done one world tour.”

He would have been great.

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In Memoriam

Simone Blake, wife of Hayward Blake ('60), died on January 9.

CAXTONIAN FOOTNOTES

Wynken de Worde

Ask **Shawn Donnelley** ('95) to demonstrate her new moves, her new happy feet steps that she learned from the penguins last December. That dazed look on her face may be her confusion of looking for Santa's Workshop among the glaciers and never finding it. Shawn's compass may have been extra sensitive to the current movement in the earth's magnetic field which is in the process of reversing the magnetic poles. But it is still the North Pole for Santa—and Superman's Fortress of Solitude.

Meanwhile the squinting eyes on **Dorothy** ('00) and **Junie Sinson** ('00) may have been caused by snow blindness and the Northern Lights in Sweden, where they went to meet again with the insiders of the Nobel Prize for Literature Committee.

Whereas **Jerry Meyer** ('04) and **Ron Klein** ('01) squint at the Northern Lights in the parking lot when they return to the university in DeKalb.

Wynken wonders if **Donald Rumsfeld** again called bookselling friend **Harry Stern** ('66), to help fill out his Christmas shopping list. While Secretary of Defense, The Donald had acquired special books as gifts for retiring generals (Shinseki??).

Harry, inquiring minds want to know: did Sec. Rumsfeld still have "W" on his gift list at the end of December? If you know, email the answer to Wynken at wynkendeworde@comcast.net

Brad Jonas ('89), of Powell's Books of Chicago, and **Tom Joyce** ('82) of Joyce And Company and The Chicago Rare Book Center, will be doing a book appraisal event for The Chicago Public Library at the

Harold Washington Library on Tuesday evening, February 20th, in the lower level auditorium.

Modern athletes are rarely known for their academic achievements, but there have been some local exceptions. Former Chicago Bear quarterback **Jim Harbaugh** has an abiding interest in the American Civil War. Current Chicago Bear **John Tait**, an offensive tackle of Pro Bowl caliber, got interested in graphic novels (such as *God's Man* by Oak Parker Lynd Ward) through his father-in-law.

Roger Carlson, popular proprietor of Bookman's Alley book shoppe in Evanston, has been undergoing treatment at a nursing home. Notes and cards can be sent to Bookman's Alley, 1712 Sherman St. (Rear), Evanston, IL 60201-3775.

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Call for Submissions: Caxton Club Scholarship Awards 2007-2008

Again this year the Caxton Club will award Scholarships for expenses of up to \$2,500 for academic year 2007-2008. (For 2006-07 two graduate design students were chosen from Columbia College Center for Book & Paper Arts.)

I. Applicants should have demonstrable interest in the history of the book, book arts, literary studies, or library education and must be enrolled in a Chicago area graduate program in one of the following areas:

- * Literary studies with specific relation to print culture
- * History of the book
- * Book arts

Library workers and other professionals seeking additional training in book history or book arts fields are encouraged to apply.

II. Applicants must supply a brief statement of interest (1 page) outlining the title and description of the project or work for which support is sought and must include:

- * relevance of the project to the Caxton Club's mission*

- * material or samples of supporting work
- * reason scholarship is needed
- * proposed budget

Two letters of recommendation must be submitted with completed application from faculty members or direct supervisory staff. These letters should include:

- * description of talent of nominee
- * attestation to character of nominee
- * length of time known by recommender
- * any significant details that enhance personal details

III. Criteria for judging will include:

- * quality of application
- * appropriateness of the proposed project to Caxton Club
- * recognition of limited funding available
- * projects in book arts (collecting, preserving, publishing, binding, etc.)

IV. Deadline for nomination materials is April 15, 2007. The award will be tied to academic year beginning 2007/2008. Notification-of-award letters will be sent by May 1, 2007.

V. Award Presentation(s) will be made in September 2007 at the first Caxton meeting for the 2007-08 year. Club members will meet the winning student(s) and winners will have a chance to personalize the investment of the Club.

VI. Winners will be expected to present a report of their experiences and activities at a Program near the end of their year.

*The Caxton Club's purpose is the literary study and promotion of the arts pertaining to the production of books. Within the scope of such object may come arranging for lectures and exhibitions, and the occasional publishing of books, offered and designed to illustrate and support the object of the Club.

Send applications to:

The Caxton Club
The Newberry Library
60 W Walton
Chicago, IL 60610
ATTN: Scholarship Committee

Book and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

Compiled by John Blew

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

"Black Jewel of the Midwest: Celebrating 75 years of the George Cleveland Hall Branch Library and the Vivian G. Harsh Research Collection," spotlighting their roles in the cultural flowering of the Chicago Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, and including "Treasures of the Harsh Collection" featuring special displays of rare and unique items, many of which have never before been exhibited (from one of the finest institutional collections anywhere of African-Americana) at the Woodson Regional Library of the Chicago Public Library, 9525 South Halsted Street, Chicago 312-747-6900 (closes December 2007)

"Cézanne to Picasso, Ambrose Vollard, Patron of the Avant Garde" (in addition to traditional works of art, this exhibition contains a number of *livres d'artiste* created by the artists featured in the show, including Bonnard, Degas, Denis, Dufy, Picasso and Rouault) at the Art Institute of Chicago, 111 South Michigan Avenue, Chicago 312-443-3600 (17 February to 12 May 2007)

"Chicago, That Toddlin' Town: The History of Transportation in the City" (books, photographs, and maps drawn from Northwestern's Transportation Library, which houses one of the most extensive transportation collections anywhere in the world, documenting the central role played by all modes of transportation in Chicago's growth and its importance as a great urban center) on the first floor of the Main Library, Northwestern University, 1790 Campus Drive, Evanston 847-491-3636 (closes 22 February 2007)

"Imperial Cartographies: Power, Strategy, and Scientific Discovery" (maps, globes, and remotely sensed imagery from the Newberry Library, the Adler Planetarium, and other collections illuminate the connection between knowledge and conquest) DePaul Art Museum Main Gallery, 2350 N. Kenmore, Chicago 773-325-7506 (closes 18 March 2007)

An exhibition of books, manuscripts, and maps inspired by a summer 2006 seminar at the Library for college and university faculty on "Race and Identity in Revolutionary France and Haiti, 1787 - 1804," at the Newberry Library, 60 West Walton Street, Chicago 312-255-3700 (6 February to 10 March 2007)

"Printing for the Modern Age: Commerce, Craft, and Culture in the R. R. Donnelley Archive" (historical materials from the R. R. Donnelley corporate archive presented as a gift to the University of Chicago in 2005) at the Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library, 1100 E. 57th Street, Chicago 773-702-8705 (closes 12 February 2007)

"One Book, Many Interpretations" (to commemorate the five-year anniversary of *One Book, One Chicago*, an exhibition of artistic

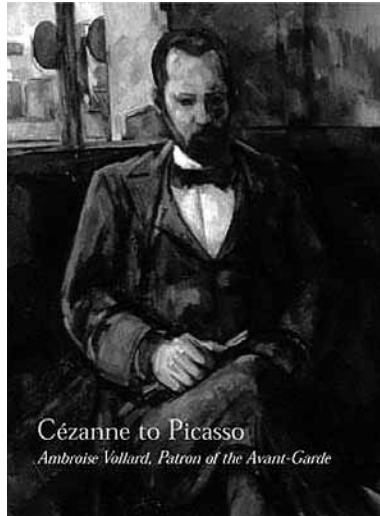
bindings done by fine binders and book artists from around the world that interpret the ten *One Book, One Chicago* selections through the art of binding) in the Special Collections Exhibit Hall, 9th Floor, Harold Washington Library Center of the Chicago Public Library, 400 South State Street, Chicago 312-747-4300 (closes 15 April 2007)

"Following the Twins Through History" (rare books, works on paper, and instruments from antiquity to the current period that depict the constellation Gemini: the Twins; this constellation imbeds the bright stars Castor and Pollux in the images of twin boys); this is a sequel, exhibiting additional materials, to a similarly titled show at the Adler during the summer of 2006; at the Adler Planetarium & Astronomy Museum, 1300 South Lake

Shore Drive (the Museum Campus), Chicago 312-322-0300 (closes 4 March 2007)

"Solon S. Beman Architecture in Illinois" (an exhibition of contemporary and archival photographs and other materials of some of the more than 1000 buildings designed by Beman, many of which, including Pullman, are located in northern Illinois) weekdays at the Pullman State Historic Site, Hotel Florence, 11111 S. Forrestville Avenue, Chicago 773-660-2341 (closes Spring 2007)

Members who have information about current or forthcoming exhibitions that might be of interest to Caxtonians, please call or e-mail John Blew (312-807-4317, e-mail: jblew@bellboyd.com).



Cézanne to Picasso at AIC
COVER OF CATALOG TO THE EXHIBIT

HESTERBERG, from page 7

and replicated in a typewritten document. Copies were given to Gordon Williams, Middleton, and Jim Wells. Middleton's copy passed to Hesterberg in 1976 and that document has provided the basis for this new search for the blocks. More than thirty collections are represented and twenty original blocks will be printed in the letterpress edition. The Caxton Club is exploring the

possibility of issuing a trade edition of the book in 2007.

Hesterberg says he is not a big collector anymore. He has "typography, calligraphy, and printing from private presses."

Hesterberg and I spent quite a bit of time during his interview discussing art. "We should all be so fortunate as to go to art school. Our lives are so much richer for it."

Hesterberg has extensive experience in

advertising and graphic design and is recognized professionally with numerous awards for both film and print. He plans to work a few more years and then teach. He has been a member of the Caxton Club since 1982, except for a few years when he worked in California. Not surprisingly, Middleton was his sponsor. We are glad he is back to share his printing and Bewick passions with us.

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Caxtonians Collect: William Hesterberg

Twenty-seventh in a series of interviews with members

Interviewed by Kathryn R. J. Tutkus

I interviewed Caxtonian Bill Hesterberg in the basement of his Evanston home where the Hesterberg Press is located. The press has been in operation since 1985, producing letterpress-printed ephemera, and one photographic book: *A Portrait of Home* of Norborne, Missouri, his hometown.

Hesterberg was beginning work at the University of Kansas on a masters thesis on Victor Hammer's American Uncial typeface when Hammer died. After some correspondence with Mrs. Hammer, a noted printer in her own right, Hesterberg decided to move to Chicago to find work and to interview R. Hunter Middleton, a distinguished type designer with the Ludlow Typograph Company, a Caxton member, and an authority on Hammer.

[Middleton, winner of the 1968 Type Director's Club Medal and subject of the Caxton Club's 1985 *RHM, Robert Hunter Middleton: The Man and His Letters*, also inspired Hesterberg's planned book "Impressions of Cherryburn" a recollection of days spent with Middleton at his Cherryburn Press in Chicago.]

"On my first visit to Middleton's home I was exposed to three personalities who would have an immediate and lasting effect on my life: Bob Middleton, Victor Hammer, and Thomas Bewick. All three have influenced my typographical and printing sensibilities."

Middleton had been a good friend to Hammer and had been instrumental in bringing Hammer to Lexington, Kentucky, and having his American Uncial cast by the Society of Typographic Arts in Chicago. Hammer was an artist and a master craftsman in many mediums, including type design, punchcutting, and printing on a hand press. He had established the Stamperia del Santuccio Press in Florence, Italy in 1929 and published many works in his uncial types before coming to Wells College in America in 1939. The Hesterberg Press still prints from some of his types, acquired through Middleton.

"At the time of my first visit with Middleton, he was working on his largest Bewick portfolio and took me downstairs



PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN SUNDLÖF

to his Cherryburn Press (named after Bewick's homeplace). It was my first exposure to Bewick and his work, and it was magical. I left Dover Street that day with books to read, not only on Hammer, but Bewick as well."

After the thesis on Hammer was finished, Hesterberg's interest in Bewick grew with the purchase of two small volumes of Bewick's birds (\$180) from the Marshall Field's rare book department, and a modern trade edition of Bewick's *Memoir*. These, along with a few prints from Middleton's blocks, started Hesterberg's Bewick collection. The library of books by, and about, Bewick is well chosen, thanks to suggestions and gifts from Iain Bain. "The only book that I covet is David Croal Thomson's *The Life and Works of Thomas Bewick* published in 1882—a book very hard to find and now even more expensive."

Hesterberg's story of his collection of Bewick blocks, told to me first at a Caxton Club dinner, interested me so much I had to interview him about this collection and share that knowledge with my fellow Caxtonians. Hesterberg says, "Once you hold one of these blocks you realize the real humanism and skill that Bewick's work represents."

A call to Middleton one Saturday resulted in an invitation to come up to

Dover Street to meet Iain Bain from England. That meeting began a long friendship with Bain and several trips to England to film a documentary on Bewick.

"Bain suggested I print a book on Bewick's interest in memorial stones and the result was *A Frail Memorial, Selected Writings and Engravings of Thomas Bewick*, published in 1977. With Middleton's kind permission to use his Cherryburn Press imprint, and a key to his basement, I produced the book on my own time. The block used as the frontispiece was the first block I acquired from Middleton's few remaining blocks and I printed it on Troya paper in the Middleton manner." Most of Middleton's blocks had been given to the Newberry Library by that time and Hesterberg's work at the press was mainly typesetting for Bob's small book and keepsake projects.

Hesterberg's current Bewick work is an expanded version of a keepsake produced for the Typocrafters in 2002. It documents known collections of Bewick blocks around the world and is possible because 1,350 of Bewick's major blocks were purchased by the Argus Bookshop in Chicago in 1942. The blocks were sold off individually and the sales records were found years later by Greer Allen (*Caxtonian*, September 2005)

See *HESTERBERG*, page 6

Bookmarks...

Luncheon Program

February 9, 2007

George Anastaplo

“Simply Unbelievable”

Gifted teacher/scholar, prodigious writer, political gadfly and philosopher—George Anastaplo returns for the fourth time to the Club to speak about his latest and soon-to-be-published book, *Simply Unbelievable: Conversations With a Holocaust Survivor*. George, a faculty member at Loyola Law School and University of Chicago’s Basic Program of Liberal Arts, encountered Simcha Brudno at a physics symposium at the University of Chicago. Brudno, who was working on a math project at the University of Illinois at Chicago and MIT, had an incredible story to tell. Renowned for his skill and art as a Socratic discussion leader, George, in a series of interviews, elicited Brudno’s story about the persecution of Jews in Lithuania and at Dachau that goes far beyond the facts and usual cruelties we have come to expect hearing about from Holocaust survivors. Come join us for a stimulating discussion of the incredible life of a heroic (but unheralded) Chicagoan, told to us by a Chicago icon.

Dinner Program

February 21, 2007

Geoffrey D. Smith

“The American Puritan Library”

Geoffrey D. Smith earned his undergraduate degree at Tufts University and his doctorate in American Literature and Textual Studies at Indiana University. In 1983 he was appointed the first Curator of the William Charvat Collection of American Fiction at the Ohio State University, and was named Head of the rare books and manuscripts library there in 1992, and a full professor in 1999. He has published widely on American fiction and bibliography, and on Henry James, William Dean Howells and Nathaniel Hawthorne. He is currently working on a second volume in his American Fiction bibliographic series, and on a series of textual editions of William S. Burroughs. He is active in many bibliophilic organizations, and is a founding member of The Aldus Society, the Columbus, Ohio, counterpart to Caxton. He will talk to us about “The American Puritan Library,” and how the ideas found in the books of those early Americans influenced the New England Renaissance two centuries later.

Beyond February...

MARCH LUNCHEON

March 9; speaker to be announced.

MARCH DINNER

On March 21, our own Leslie Hindman will give us the inside story on the auction industry: “the crossroads of commerce and culture,” she calls it. [This is a change: Gary Johnson will now speak in June.]

APRIL LUNCHEON

On April 13th artist, printer, binder, and papermaker Peter Thomas (of Peter and Donna Thomas: Santa Cruz), will speak about artist books. They will bring along some of their own, examples of which are in collections and museums worldwide.

APRIL DINNER

Stuart Sherman, chairman of the English Department at Fordham University, will tell us April 18 about David Garrick, the most famous actor ever on the English stage and how he shaped our ideas of celebrity death and deathlessness ever since.

The 2007 Caxton/Newberry Symposium on the Book...(details, page 3)

The event will be held Saturday, March 31, at the Newberry Library in the morning and the Alliance Française in the afternoon. The topic will be “Remodeling the Tower of Babel: The Translator’s Role in a Shrinking World.” Speakers include Patricia Clare Ingam, of Indiana University;

Thomas Hahn of the University of Rochester; Göran Malmqvist of the Swedish Academy; and Douglas Hofstadter of Indiana University. The morning will be devoted to talks by each speaker; in the afternoon, all will join in a panel discussion moderated by Diana Robin of the Newberry.

All luncheon and dinner meetings, unless otherwise noted, are held in the Mid-Day Club, 56th floor of Chase Tower, Madison and Clark, Chicago. Luncheon: buffet opens at 11:30; program 12:30-1:30. Dinner meetings: spirits at 5 pm, dinner at 6 pm, lecture at 7:30 pm. For reservations call 312-255-3710 or email

caxtonclub@newberry.org. Members and guests: Lunch \$25, Dinner \$45. Discount parking available for evening meetings, with a stamped ticket, at Standard Self-Park, 172 W. Madison. Call Steve Masello at 847-905-2247 if you need a ride or can offer one.