

Making impressions

Anything but obsolete, letterpress printing appeals to DIY zinesters and brides-to-be alike

BY ANNE MARIE DISTEFANO

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Pick up one of Clare Carpenter's business cards, and you'll probably be running your fingers across the fine texture of the words printed on the thick paper before you realize what you're doing.

"Tiger Food Press," the card reads, "Fine Books & Letterpress."

The cards, like the wares they promote, are the product of letterpress printing, a labor-intensive process that at one time bordered on the obsolete, but is experiencing a revival both nationally and in Portland.

Members of Portland's letterpress community — Textura Letterpress Printing, Satsuma Press, Red Bat Press, Twin Ravens Press, Stumptown Printers and others — converged on Liberty Hall, a union hall in North Portland, in early August, to unload unwanted equipment and display their works of art.

They brought handmade books and greeting cards, as well as thousands of alphabets' worth of tiny metal blocks, each capped with a single raised letter.

Carpenter has snagged a bit of table space at this garage sale, where she's selling her numbered, handmade posters. From a distance, they look like antique advertisements for bare-knuckle boxing matches or banjo jamborees, but they read like short stories, inspired by the St. Johns neighborhood where Carpenter lives. Her prints combine original artwork with handset letters, printed on a vintage press.

The garage sale's organizer is Sarah McCarry, who makes prints under the name Sarah Contrary, and who also is the manager for the book arts studio at the Oregon College of Art and Craft.

"I had a lot of stuff to get rid of so I thought it would be fun," says the 29-year-old McCarry, who has been a letterpress printer for six years.

"As far as commercial printing, people don't use letterpress anymore," she explains, "but people do in higher-end printing. I think people really like the tactile quality of it, so people who want to do really fancy wedding invitations or really nice birth announcements or business cards will go to letterpress printing now."

Artists scavenge type, presses

Before computers there was linotype, and before that, newspapers, books and pamphlets were all made with handset type.

The machines that are popular with artists and artisans today began their lives as proof presses — they were used to churn out in-house copies to be proofread before the plates were sent to off to larger industrial presses. Hobby printers also purchased small presses for home use. They still do, although the equipment hasn't been manufactured since the 1970s.

The nonprofit Independent Publishing Resource Center and the Oregon College of Art and Craft have both nurtured the scene by offering classes and making equipment available to beginners.

Barbara Tetenbaum, who runs the book arts program at the college, has been printing letterpress since 1979. She was an art major at the University of Wisconsin when she fell into the sphere of letterpress guru Walter Hamady — "One of the best in the world," she says.



L.E. BASKOW / TRIBUNE PHOTO

Above: There are trays upon trays of letters making up alphabets of various fonts in the Oregon College of Art and Craft book arts studio. The resurgence of letterpress printing seen nationally has been particularly prominent in Portland.

In the 1960s, Tetenbaum says, letterpress shops closed down all over the country as big companies moved into offset printing. Production of type and new machines ground to a halt. A lot of the old equipment went into the landfill.

However, according to Tetenbaum: “There were a lot of visionary people who were buying the stuff because they loved it. ... It ended up in the hands of artists, who are sort of the ultimate scavengers.”

Starting in the 1970s, university art departments began acquiring the equipment for fine press work. The 1980s saw an increased interest in book arts, and more recently, there’s been a huge upswing in interest from the design world.

Fueled in part by Martha Stewart’s trend-making power, letterpress printing is now the height of style for wedding invitations and birth announcements.

“There’s a kind of a DIY thing that’s been going on,” Tetenbaum says. “I think a lot of the gutter-punk, DIY people love the idea of not being dependent on digital technology and they love older technologies.” Letterpress has some of the same appeal as a bicycle, she explains.

“You can be really independent,” she says. “Some of these machines have no electrical parts at all. ... When the apocalypse comes, they can still be printing leaflets.”

Zines and music were the jumping-off point for Brian Bagdonas into professional print shops. Eventually he became one of the three owners of Stumptown Printers.

The local shop specializes in music packaging, creating period-appropriate posters and CD covers for old-timey bands including the Foghorn Stringband, of which Bagdonas is a member.

The shop works “green,” using vegetable inks and recycled paper, and they have a line of posters that promotes bicycling.

Long Portland tradition

Bagdonas says he thinks new fans of letterpress printing may not fully appreciate the history of the craft. One hundred years ago, he says, Portland was a printing center for the West Coast.

“It was huge back then,” he says. “It’s always been a really big printing town.”

At Stumptown Printers, he says, “We’re real interested in the craft aspect and the history and tradition of the industry.”

“All those old broadsides, the political broadsides, the wanted posters, those were all printed letterpress,” Carpenter, of Tiger Food Press, says. “There is sort of a mystique about it for that reason. ... A lot of people came to printing because of that.”

“That’s the spirit of a lot of the artists here today,” she adds. “I feel that a little bit, letterpress allows me to have complete control over the entire process and also create multiples that can be disseminated.”

Philip Cheaney and Rustin Wright of the IPRC have brought a small, portable press to the garage sale for demonstrations. It’s a tabletop Kelsey platen press, often called a clamshell press because of its shape and the way it moves.

This type of press was made for hobby printers from the 1920s to the 1970s.

“This is a very 20th century, very modern machine,” Wright says.

Ink is applied to a disk at the top. Below, a plate of type is set into one side and paper into the other. Push the handle down and a roller runs over the the type and then continues upward, re-inking itself as the two sides press together, pushing the metal letters into the paper.

“People love letterpress,” Carpenter says. “There’s so much slick production, and things happen so quickly with e-mail and all of that, people really do want something in their lives that’s tactile. ... They love to look at something and feel that it’s handmade.”