The New York Times
ART; Retro Printers, Grounding the LaserJet
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Published: December 10, 2006

MY love affair with letterpress aptly began with a man named Art.

I was walking home one day last spring when I saw an older gentleman on a corner selling old metal type and pre-World War II copper illustrations. Art, who never gave his last name, had recently bought them from a printing shop that was going out of business. After sifting through the images for an hour, I left with a box of treasures and a promise from Art to find more of the letters for my name.

Over the summer, whenever he acquired something promising he would call and say: ''Meet me on the corner. I got you some H's.'' Together we sorted through the trays, gleeful whenever a jewel emerged from the ink-stained rubble. Later, with a growing trove of images and letters, I set about finding a printer who could bring the images to life. I did not figure that the printer would be me.

I am not alone in my newfound interest. Letterpress, which became obsolete in the 1980s with the rise of desktop publishing, is experiencing a resurgence as artists and consumers rediscover the allure of hand-set type. It is still a specialty craft. But at the San Francisco Center for the Book, nearly 30 percent of the 300 workshops offered this year are letterpress classes, many of them added in the last few years.

Claudia Laub, a well-known Hollywood printer, said she had doubled the number of private studio classes she offers since she began them five years ago. And the six weekly letterpress classes at the Armory Center for the Arts in Pasadena, Calif., are among its most popular.

It is a surprising turn at a time when computers make it so easy -- and fast -- to design individualized note cards and stationery. But art experts say this new interest in the specialized craft is a reaction to the slick design and flat graphics common in computer publishing.

And it is more feasible now for hobbyists with access to a press: many shuttered print shops are selling old presses and rare type, while expanding paper chain stores like Paper Source offer a wider variety of affordable papers in different colors and textures.

''Letterpress is like the new engraving,'' said Kitty Maryatt, director of the Scripps College Press and an assistant professor of art. ''It looks different. It feels old. It's tactile. People love that. It is the romance of the impression of the letter pressed into paper that people feel good about.''

Steve Woodall, the artistic director at the San Francisco Center for the Book, sees a rising interest in design. ''Creative people who stare at a computer all day want to use their hands,'' he said. ''There is also the do-it-yourself thing. People like to make things.''

Elizabeth Witt is one of those people. She began taking letterpress classes at the Armory in Pasadena with an eye toward hand printing the invitations for her wedding next June. ''It's the first impression anyone will have of my wedding,'' she said. ''I'm very into antiques, and I like old things.''

She recently joined two Internet chat groups for letterpress enthusiasts. And when she told a college friend about her new hobby, she learned that he and his wife had recently bought a press, so together they will make her invitations.

Ms. Witt also decided to make personalized stationery for her six bridesmaids. ‘‘It’s nice to have your own stationery,’’ she said. ‘‘Not many people do. It’s better than an e-mail.’’

For centuries after Johann Gutenberg first printed a Bible, around 1455, individually hand-set metal type was the industry standard. It fell out of favor, though, with the advent of the linotype machine in the late 1800s, which made it possible for printers to cast whole lines from molten lead. (This is commonly referred to as hot type.)

After World War II offset printing gained favor with commercial printers, hastening the demise of hand-set type. Then desktop publishing, which also revived interest in different typefaces, allowed anyone with a computer to become a publisher.

Ms. Laub said that her students are often hobbyists or entrepreneurs who want to start their own greeting card lines. Her home studio is a jumble of boxes stuffed with paper and drawers filled with metal, copper and wood letters and images, including an unused wooden alphabet bought from the daughter of a printer.

The hands-on experience she provides is not cheap: Ms. Laub charges $600 for three four-hour sessions. That is more than twice what the Armory costs, $285 for 10 two-and-a-half-hour classes. At the San Francisco Center, a one-day intensive beginner class is $125.

‘‘We have people come from all over: New York, Philadelphia, even Alaska,’’ said Mr. Woodall at the 10-year-old center, which allows students to rent its presses after they have taken classes. Five couples, he added, have bought their own presses and started their own companies.

The most commonly used machines are those that were popular more than 50 years ago: the Chandler & Price platen press and the Vandercook proof press. Bought from a printing shop going out of business, or from on-line sources, they can cost $3,000 or more.

The Chandler & Price platen press, manufactured from the late 1880s to the mid-1950s, is the workhorse of the letterpress studio. Type is locked into a frame called a chase. The chase is then placed in a bed, ready for printing. Wide rollers pass over a large inked disc and apply a thin layer of ink to the type. Paper is then placed on a flat surface, called a platen, and pressed against the bed like a clamshell.

The appeal of the machine, which runs on electricity, is its speed. Even a novice can print up to 100 sheets in 10 minutes. An experienced printer can do twice that, reinking frequently depending on the size of the image or text. Still, while the process looks deceptively gentle, the press employs enough pressure to crush errant fingers.

The Vandercook press is less fearsome, though equally powerful. It was designed nearly 100 years ago by Robert O. Vandercook, but later versions are favored today. Rollers (with paper attached) are moved along a track over the inked type, which is in a flat bed. The rollers are operated by a crank. The machine prints more slowly than the platen press but is favored for oversize posters and limited-edition books.

Once the machine has been mastered, the fun part begins: laying type. Each word is painstakingly constructed with individual letters, which are generally stored in thin drawers in tall wood cabinets. While there are thousands of typefaces, Ms. Laub said Garamond, an old-style typeface, is a favorite among her clients. (I preferred Huxley Vertical, for its Art Deco flair.)

Not every paper is a good candidate for letterpress. Most experts agree that paper with a soft texture, made mostly from cotton or linen, is the most desirable. For top-end clients Ms. Laub buys specialty paper from companies in the Czech Republic or Italy, as well as from some in the United States. For hobbyists she recommends mass-market Italian paper, which accepts ink readily and can be found at art stores.

I was partial to Fabriano's Medioevalis paper and Arturo Fine Stationery, which have an attractive untrimmed edge and are thicker than regular paper, allowing for a noticeable impression.

Whether to leave a deep impression, however, is subject to debate. Purists say no. ''But people today want to see that,'' Ms. Laub conceded.

The issue didn't bother my friend Kathryn Hilton, who was thrilled with the personalized cards I had made for her. She especially liked the ''H,'' reminiscent of the Arts and Crafts style.

Art had found that letter for me. He would have been pleased.