

LETTERPRESS:

printing from the past

ABBY PICKUS

Photography: Kristina Bauer

When most people think of letterpress printing (often mistakenly called “letterpressing” or “printing”), they think of the Gutenberg press—invented in 1440—or the Chinese presses dating back to 1040.

While many of the printing presses in circulation date back to the 1950s, much of wood type is from the 1800s. The ink used in letterpress printing is oil based, which conditions wood type and actually makes it less fragile the more it is used.

HERE AT MIAMI

Miami University has its own press: Curmudgeon Press. It operates in Hiestand Hall and is helmed by assistant professor Erin Beckloff. Beckloff has been printing for seven years and even runs her own press in addition to Curmudgeon, called Inkie Winkie Press.

Letterpress printing has become increasingly popular at Miami as more students arrive and discover the intricate practice. Senior Emmy Hartmann, an interactive media studies major, is enrolled in ART 450, the base letterpress class taught by Beckloff.

“Letterpress is easily one of my favorite classes I’ve taken,” Hartmann says. “It’s graphic design without sitting in front of my computer for another two hours. Creating something physical instead of digital is a great change of pace and has expanded my views of how typography can be used.”

Many people are unaware that letterpress printing is still alive. Even in this age of Adobe Photoshop, there are still presses all over the country—from Starshaped Press in Chicago to Hatch Show Print in Nashville, which has been in operation for almost 140 years.

JENNIFER FARRELL VISITS

Jennifer Farrell is an expert letterpress printer. She visited Miami University on March 29-30. Farrell

also spent time at Curmudgeon Press, interacting with students and faculty.

She spoke at “Paper Playhouse: An Exhibition of Miniatures” at King Library, shared her “Well-Traveled Ampersand” project at The Ampersand Affair in the Wertz Library and gave a lecture in the Art Building.

Since 1999, Farrell’s studio has been a keystone in the world of letterpress. Her interns have moved on to open their own presses. The former interns, in turn, hire interns, and so the cycle continues.

Senior Tina Zenzola, a graphic design major in Beckloff’s letterpress class, attended all three of Farrell’s events.

“I loved it!” Zenzola says. “As a giant letterpress nerd, it was an amazing week. I’ve always admired Jen and her work, so getting the chance to meet and spend time with her was a dream come true.”

During the lecture at the Art Building, titled “Print Like it’s 1929,” Farrell revealed her humble beginnings working as a letterpress intern at Fireproof Press in Chicago.

When that press closed, Farrell set out on her own to spread “the gospel of letterpress printing.” She shared her ornamental projects and told the story of how she carved out her place in the Chicago artist community.

STUDENT REACTIONS

According to Zenzola, “[Farrell] passed around prints, and they were absolutely stunning. Knowing the time that goes into printing something that small and intricate made the prints even more jaw-dropping.”

In another project, Farrell constructed wood frames, called forms, in the shapes of ampersands using

many different fonts—like Californian (&C) and Cooper Black (B).

She then filled in the forms with different pieces of ornamental type, arranged into representations of the cities where the font originated. The Californian Ampersand, for example, is modeled after the steep hills of San Francisco.

Buildings are arranged along the steep slant of the ampersand, and there is even a trolley car made entirely of squares, circles and lines.

Hartmann was particularly drawn to the Californian print: “It reminded me of San Francisco, which is where I spent last semester,” she says.

Zenzola, on the other hand, prefers the Cooper Black print: “I’m from Chicago,” she says. “So naturally I adore the history and imagery of my hometown being woven into such a beautiful form.”

One of the most common mottos of the letterpress world is “Preservation through Production.”

Beckloff says, “As a craft, I think that letterpress is an important connection between art and design. It’s especially essential with contemporary technology.” ■