**Ink, Paper & Pressure**

**Restoration of a 1925 Vandercook Press & Renewed Printmaking Research**

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**Letterpress Printing**

- The advent of the printing press, widely attributed to 15th century German Johannes Gutenberg, revolutionized the distribution of both written media and art. For the first time in history, an inexpensive and easily repeatable process (printing) made it possible for the commoner to access literature and art.

- In the following centuries, letterpress printing became the standard method of information (text) dissemination. From the 15th century through the 19th century, this monopoly would continue, but by the 1960's many presses and fonts of type were abandoned, often sold as scrap metal, considered to be outdated and obsolete, and were replaced by the 'new kid in town' called Offset Lithography.

**The Vandercook Press**

- The press we restored is a Double Truss Proofing Press made in 1925 by Vandercook and Sons of Chicago, Illinois.

- The ‘double truss’ refers to the paired rails which assist in the stabilization and tracking of the printing cylinder as it is rolled down the press bed. The designation of ‘proofing press’ comes from the machine’s use as a beta testing ground for designs; the uncomplicated, hand-powered design of such a press provided the ability to quickly proofread and make any necessary adjustments of layout so that critical errors would not make their way into a final publication.

**Restoration of the Press**

- Our project began with attendance at an educational conference at Hamilton Wood Type & Printing Museum’s Wayzgoose in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, November 7-10, 2014. The Wayzgoose featured keynote speakers on all things typography plus multiple hands-on letterpress workshops where we learned the basics of letterpress printing.

- Our cast iron, antique Vandercook press required extensive restoration before we could attempt any printing. The press was disassembled so that decades of grime and rust could be removed. The pressbed and trusses were scrubbed clean with steel wool and camphor wax; wire brushes were used to clean the lower rail gear teeth. Jessie assisted Gallery Director Tom Wagner in the construction of a mobile cart to house the newly restored press and its numerous essential accoutrements.

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**Creating a Broadside Print**

- The ultimate goal is to have a solid arrangement of type locked into the chase so that it cannot wiggle nor shift whilst being printed. The secured design, chase and all, is then moved to the pressbed for proofing.

- Once printed, the sheet (proof) is checked for any errors (grammar, spelling etc.). If discrepancies of ink coverage are discovered, the process of makeready ensues. To ensure even inking, all height discrepancies within the form is corrected with packing material (thin papers laid beneath forms, the purpose of which is to adjust printing height). All forms must be type high meaning exactly .914 inches in height in order to print correctly.

- Traditionally, ink kissed off onto the paper gently; nowadays, new-to-letterpress aficionados seem to prefer heavier, embossed (indented) or to bite is the contemporary aesthetic question.

**Conclusions**

- The restoration of this press inspired and challenged us to research and conduct work across multiple disciplines. Before physical restoration of the machine could begin, we needed to become familiar with historical and mechanical letterpress issues. Afterwards, in-depth research into traditional typesetting rules and techniques, followed by hours of trial & error processing ensued. In an age of chronic consumer discard, it has been exceptionally satisfying to take an abandoned machine and coax it back into beautiful working order.

- Along the way, our project piqued the interest of fellow students & faculty and raised awareness of printmaking. We also curated an exhibition of letterpress broadsides and type specimens; this exhibit was held February 20 - March 13, 2014 in UWEC Foster Gallery. The artifacts were from the Hamilton Wood Type & Printing Museum’s collection.

- As well, Museum Director Jim Moran was invited to conduct a letterpress printing demonstration in Foster Gallery on the refurbished press, and present a lecture on the subject of Hamilton Museum’s history and the art of letterpress printing.

- From a working printmaker’s perspective, restoration of this press and the ensuing accession of letterpress knowledge facilitated a stronger symbiosis between the art we produce and the tools we use to create it. With the refurbishment of this Vandercook press, and donations of various letterpress items, the stage has been set for future UWEC art students to explore the ever-evolving potential of printer’s ink and the written word.

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