

But Is It Real Printing?

While digital printing technology has expanded the horizons for artists and specialty publishers, some people question whether digitally printed books belong in the traditionally craft-oriented book arts. Should they? By Rollin Milroy.

I was in a bookshop in Montreal a few months ago and got talking to another customer. It turned out he was an Alcuin Society member. I confessed to being the editor of *Amphora*. He told me of some Alcuin publications he had recently purchased and asked about the new biography of Dorothy Burnett the Society issued earlier this year. In describing it, I mentioned it had been printed digitally. “Oh,” was his reply, and I knew exactly what he meant: not interested.

The art reproduced on the back cover of this issue of *Amphora* was printed by hand, each letter engraved from a block of wood by Scott Polzen. Some people would say this is printing in the truest sense—“real printing”—because the letterforms were inked and squashed into a piece of paper. But the actual cover was reproduced by a digital colour printer. Those same people who talk about “real printing” would say this is not real printing: it’s something different, maybe something less, and definitely something that does not belong in “real” books.

This immediate dismissal of digital printing is particularly common among collectors interested in traditional book crafts, so-called fine press books, letterpress printing, and so on. Digital is dismissed as “not real printing.” (Collectors of artists’ books, where digital printing technology has created an explosion of activity, are much less likely to be so pedantic.) I knew without asking what that “Oh” meant, because it’s a reaction I myself have to digital printing, at least for text (we’ve all seen laser or ink-jet pages that start to smudge or flake). As for images, too often they are reproductions, not true prints created purely in a digital matrix (see Glossary). But when confronted with a project like the Szyk

Haggadah, can a bias against digital printing in the world of fine, limited edition books be defended?

“I must admit to liking letterpress and etching presses, but in the context of offset printing, what is ‘real’?” asks Rick De Coyte of Sili-con Fine Art Prints Ltd. in Philadelphia, where the Szyk Haggadah is being printed on an Epson 9800 ink-jet printer. “For me the proof is in the page. I don’t quite know how to answer the question of whether digital is real printing, except to say we make great prints on beautiful papers. We also consider ourselves craftsmen and are called master printers by our ‘traditional’ printing peers in Philadelphia.”

One reason for a bias against digital printing in fine bookmaking may be too strong a sense of familiarity: laser and ink-jet prints are part of our everyday life. We use and dispose of the sheets they produce by the handful. Anyone can run sheets out of

a printer; there’s no particular skill—no craft—involved (unlike traditional printing technologies).

“It’s true that anyone can buy an Epson printer and run it,” says De Coyte, “but there is a little more to it than that, or we’d be out of business. Most files that we receive have to be tweaked before we print them, to get good results. We’ve also made custom profiles for all the papers we use. The profile is basically a table that converts the colours in the file to make them print with the best possible results on the target printer. We make them by printing a target, which is a page with hundreds of patches of colour, and then measuring each patch with a spectrophotometer and comparing the measured colour with the true. A single page of the Szyk Haggadah can have 30 million specified colours, and each colour



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has a theoretical 16.7 million variations.”

While De Coyte and the Szyk Haggadah could be said to represent one end of the digital publishing spectrum, the other, more prevalent end consists of people using home computers and printers to make books. This was how Jason Dewinetz’s Greenboathouse Books started. Over the past eight years he has established a reputation for publishing interesting Canadian writing in well-designed limited edition chapbooks. Despite the critical success of the books, Dewinetz claims never to have been satisfied with digital production, and currently is in the early stages of transitioning Greenboathouse to letterpress production.

“Every newly completed book left me disappointed and frustrated with the limitations of digital production, despite the superficial freedom granted by a massive library of type

and the ability to manipulate it any conceivable way. Three hundred point type set in some obscure face? Easy. Colour reproduction? No problem. But soul? Spirit? Substance? These qualities, I found, were ever absent,” Dewinetz says.

This desire for soul and spirit is what drew him to letterpress, or more specifically, the process of letterpress. Dewinetz believes that the best way to challenge himself as a designer, and respect the texts he publishes, is through the labour-intensive, hands-on experience of working with metal type. “At the end of the day I must admit that making books well is more a matter of appeasing my desire to explore my own abilities and limitations,” he says.

Interestingly, the same access and ease of use that helped Dewinetz start publishing is what makes it possible for his friend and col-

GLOSSARY

Backing up: printing text on both sides of a sheet, so that the lines on each side match up horizontally and vertically. Also known as perfecting.

Digital (adj): data—text, images, sound—broken into electric pulses representing a binary code (0 or 1), which can subsequently be manipulated or reproduced in identical form endlessly.

Fine art print: the result of a true print-making medium (e.g., intaglio, stone lithography or relief) in which there is no original per se, but rather a matrix (e.g., etched plate or block, grease crayon drawing on stone) that is inked and transferred to paper or similar surface. A digital print in which the original image (i.e., matrix) was created on a computer, and exists only as a digital file, would be a true print; a print that is simply a scan (or photocopy) of an original artwork would be a reproduction.

Giclée: a word coined to differentiate IRIS fine art prints from IRIS proof prints, and as a more interesting term than *digital print*. In the same way serigraph differentiates an art print from a silkscreen print. Now the term simply means ink-jet print. It is used mostly by artists who print on canvas.

Ink-jet print: image or text printed using between four and eight inks (depend-

ing on the quality of the printer), which combine to make a broad spectrum of colours. The inks are sprayed onto the printing surface.

IRIS print: a print made by an IRIS Graphics printer.

Laser printing: a xerographic process (i.e., like photocopying) wherein the image is broken into very small dots. An electrostatic charge and heat cause toner (ink) to be transferred to a printing surface.

Letterpress: a relief printing process, wherein metal type (or some other relief matrix) is inked and pushed into a sheet of paper. This contact of raised surface with the paper pushes the inked image into the paper; for this reason letterpress has been described as *in* the paper, while offset (or digital) sits *on* the surface of the paper.

Offset: a photomechanical process, the most common commercial printing method for the past 50 years. Type or image is transferred to a flat printing surface, which is inked and rolled across paper.

Pigment print: a print made on an Epson printer.

Reproduction: a copy of an original artwork, whether by photomechanical (i.e., offset) or digital (i.e., photocopy) means. These are not true prints and should be referred to as reproductions.

Laser vs. Ink-jet

*A beginner's guide from Jerad Walters
of Centipede Press*

The great thing about laser is that it prints text far better than an ink-jet printer does. If you take the time to fine-tune your images for a colour laser printer, you can also get very decent quality colour prints out of it. You can also print on a wide variety of papers and sizes. Colour laser prints are extremely archival. If you are using a good-quality offset paper, the toner will not be transferred to other sheets, either. Moreover, laser is extremely cheap to run. The disadvantage with laser is that you have to keep strict watch over the life of your drum kit, the transfer kit and the toner cartridges. The consistency can vary somewhat, sometimes a lot, when these elements are running below 20 percent capacity.

The primary advantage of ink-jet over laser, and even over offset, is that you can get extremely consistent colour prints. There are a wide variety of papers available as well, so if you have a custom colour job that requires high-quality colour at a

low run, you are likely to find a paper that you can use. Ink-jet has some serious deficiencies. If you don't allow adequate drying time, the images will offset onto the backs of other images. The archival quality of ink-jets, despite all the tests that the so-called independent organizations run on the prints, is still totally up in the air. This is less a concern for book publishers, as for 96 percent of the book's life, the book is going to be closed and not exposed to air, pollutants and sunlight. My most serious complaint against ink-jet is that the prints are ridiculously fragile. One stray fingernail will destroy an otherwise perfect print. Hopefully, the ink-jet printer manufacturers will figure out that eight or nine inks and three or four different shades of grey and black are finally enough, and work on creating a varnish that can be applied as the print is made.

Centipede Press and Millipede Press books can be seen at www.millipedeypress.com. Walters also publishes a regular newsletter with book reviews, available at the site.

league Caryl Peters to continue her work with Frog Hollow Press. Peters began publishing around the same time as Dewinetz, and shares his interest in contemporary Canadian poetry. Frog Hollow books were printed letterpress until about a year ago, when the physical demands became too much and Peters reluctantly decided to switch to digital printing. The reaction among her subscribers to this decision illustrates the issue at hand.

"I lost all but one—UBC retained their standing order to take one of everything I produce, bless their hearts. I only heard from two of the other subscribers, who wrote to tell me that their choice was for letterpressed books and nothing else," Peters says.

That was, however, the reaction only of her subscribers. Peters adjusted her pricing to reflect her lower production costs, and thanks to reviews in a number of journals she has picked up new customers.

"To tell you the truth, I don't think many of our customers realized that a change in production had occurred, although we have stated it on our Web site. We've maintained the same production values despite the change in

equipment. I don't think the letterpress meant much to anyone other than our subscribers. The library service companies that are our biggest customers never questioned the fact."

If Peters' experience is typical, it seems the issue of digital's validity matters only to people who consider the means of production an important component of the text and reading experience: people like Dewinetz who value the challenge of, and physical connection between, labour-intensive work like letterpress printing and the texts that come from it. A printing press is a tool, which by definition takes skill and experience to use well. A digital printer, however, is a device, which by definition anyone should be able to use (and the better a device's design, the easier its use). That could be the core of any claims against digital printing. But like any printing technology, digital also requires skill and expertise. Just as anyone with access to metal type and a press (or even the back of a spoon) can print letterpress, the difference between that and something printed by John Baskerville lies in the hundreds—thousands—of hours of practice and experience.

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Working entirely with digital printing, Jerad Walters has built up an impressive backlist and reputation for his Colorado-based Centipede Press. All of his books are printed on acid-free papers, custom bound, and issued in limited editions, typically not more than 300 copies. (A companion imprint, Millipede Press, focuses on trade publishing.) Many projects incorporate colour artwork. This, and the ability to have complete creative control over a project, are two of the main advantages Walters attributes to digital printing.

“I think the level of expertise required for digital printing is high,” says Walters. “The pre-press knowledge is the same required for offset. You are just adjusting your prints to a different output medium. Printing, whether digital, offset or letterpress, requires a certain skill set. Backing up the type, selecting the right paper, making sure the colour output is acceptable, checking the colour of the type, ensuring consistency—all these facets of printing are there, regardless of the method.”

But I never doubted that good digital printing required skill, especially in the pre-press stage. I’ve done enough hack scanning and printing at home to know that the truest possible colour reproduction takes tremendous skill and a practised eye. My more fundamental bias was against the use of digital printing, no matter how skilfully applied, to a limited edition—a book that would want to sit beside books from any of the contemporary publishers who specialize in limited editions produced first and foremost with a strong grounding in traditional book crafts. So I asked booksellers and librarians who specialize in contemporary limited editions whether the term “fine press” could be applied to a book printed digitally. And then I watched them duck for cover. Only Anne and David Bromer, of Boston’s Bromer Booksellers, and their shop manager Philip Salmon took my question on.

“After some lengthy discussion, we came

to the conclusion that ‘fine press’ as a term cannot be applied to digitally printed books. Implicit in the term is the use of a printing press, regardless of the presence of the qualitative modifier, and so anything that is done without the use of a press would not qualify. This goes quite a bit beyond semantics: inherent in a press book is the tactile sense that ink was mechanically imposed upon paper. There are smells, dimensionality, etc. that accompany the object and lend to its appeal. We simply do not see how this can be replicated in a digital environment. In saying this, though, we do not wish to give the impression that nothing ‘fine’ can be accomplished using the digital process, but it would have to sport a different moniker.”

The Bromers and Salmon provided the clarity I was unable to reach on my own. I do not have a bias against digital printing; I have a passion for letterpress, and not because of the process alone, but because of all the tangible aspects inherent to that process—the “dimensionality”—which make themselves evident in the book.

I think a well-printed page of letterpress type, printed on dampened handmade paper, is about as pure and beautiful as text printing can be. But this is not practical or appropriate for most books today,

especially ones used as part of our daily lives (perhaps we can simply say, “for books that are used”). I own many books printed offset on coated stock, which are beautiful in their own way. Not better or worse, just different. A digital book should not be compared to one produced with some other (traditional) printing technology. Digital printing is not so different in appearance than offset lithography, and no one accuses offset of not being real printing. The digital book must be judged on its own merits, for what it is.

Rollin Milroy is the editor of Amphora. Under the imprint Heavenly Monkey he publishes books printed from hand-set type on dampened handmade paper with a Washington handpress.

