

The Hand In Print

Recent reading ("A Short History of the Printed Word" by Bringhurst & Chappell) has me thinking that what attracts me to letterpress and holds me is that it is in the direct lineage of putting one's thought/feeling into expression by hand.

There are obvious intentional, manual things we do in the shop; the typesetting one at a time, positioning the forme in the press, pulling proofs etc...all hand-eye-mind-work. And because our machines themselves are hand-made, each slightly different, and subject to crankiness and weirdness, according to how they have been treated (by hands); and because the type itself is made by casting methods requiring a person to be vigilant in mixing the metal and monitoring the machine as it plays like a roller-piano...and because we and others have used the sorts over and over— dropping some, over-impressing others— they each have been made and used by hands. Not to mention the paper— though machine processed, it's all selected & handled by the time we put it through the press, and even the ink: its treatment in the shop, degree of aging...and how we apply it to the press and how long it has been on there by the time a particular print is pulled...is all conditional handiwork. Which means that every single page we do is an 'original'.

But when reading the history of typography, I'm thinking of the other manual lineage - of the letters themselves. When Gutenberg and the next several generations of printers lived, they were making type with inspiration from calligraphy. The way books and scrolls had been made before them., by hand-writing with great care and art. Type makers wanted theirs to look like letters in an illuminated bible, or those by an Italian writing master. When you look at the books of the Renaissance, you see all the direct influence of *writing*... the way thick and thin parts of letters reflect the way calligraphers held their pens...or engravers used their burins, or stone-carvers used their chisels. In type history, there are periods of change when designers began to make type that ignored the past of penmanship and looked to the industrial possibilities of the foundry methods. They made letters that had thicks & thins that couldn't really be done with a pen...and began to fall in love with geometry as the basis of letterforms.

Now we have type designs that come out of the infinite shape-making of digital devices, and even when script shapes are made, they are simulations, surface phenomena. We can marvel at them and prefer them to the abstract ones, but... The way a hand and eye interact with a computer are not the same as what I'm describing. Not *scribing*. Not expressive except in the abstract zone where I'm typing this right now.

What I loved about Poliphilus right away was its syncopation and oddness of thick & thins. It was pleasing to discover that it had been made by a facsimile method, photographing and duplicating the letters as found in the 1499 edition from Aldus' print shop. So the hand-made anomalies of the type (which were really carved in those days) are left intact. Of course, it's a facsimile, not a directly fresh expression. Sometimes I feel that kind of physical attachment to some of the goofiest types I have, like Abbott or Opaque; stuff done in the 1890s when type designers were letting their imaginations go a little nuts. But then they had to actually draw and cut the matrices for these novel letters, so you do have a sense of craft and expressive eye. It's just that what they were imagining was not really poetry.

I've never been a purist about crafts, not as a carpenter nor in printing. I'll try a lot of

methods & tools, modern or archaic...but I do have a loyalty to my connection to handwriting.

In a way, the notion of alchemy hovers around printing, the making of something golden out of something leaden...but for me it's more like a circle or mobius strip; going from my mind to my hand... to ink through pen or typewriter; to lead; to the press; to ink on a page again...& back to the mind.