

## Pressing print

**Modern-day Gutenbergs are raising lettering's profile, reviving the tactile craft of letterpress.**

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JOHN COSTELLO / Inquirer Staff Photographer

Ryan Howell, at his 100-year-old press at Mad Maude in Kensington, sees letterpress as a rebellion against electronic printing.

Bathed in late-day light pouring through the windows of a former textile mill in Kensington, Ryan Howell spreads thick, gooey ink onto a round metal plate.

He slips a piece of thick paper into the maw of one of the 3-foot machines that girlfriend and artistic partner Leslie Graham calls "the monsters." He flips a switch and pulls a lever. The monster groans, then spits out a highly detailed print of the Frankford Armory.

Howell, 24, and Graham, 25, have discovered an old method of printing called letterpress. The name comes from the act of pressing letters - or in this case, a metal photo engraving of an ink drawing - onto paper.

At a time when so much communication is electronic, a growing number of print artists, and buyers of printed materials, are saying no to the computerized and yes to this more tactile form.

"I want to create stuff in low volume that people will want to keep for 100 years," said Howell, who started Mad Maude Press in September with Graham. "I like that it's manual. I like that

there aren't any rules. And I like that every time you do a new job, you have to figure something out."

The increased popularity of letterpress echoes the arts and crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when many rebelled against mass-produced goods in favor of the handmade.

One of Howell and Graham's recent jobs was printing bookmarks for the Book Trader in Old City and Herridge Books in Wellfleet on Cape Cod. When Howell first approached Peter Hiler, who owns both stores, with an offer to beat the price he was paying for bookmarks, Hiler agreed for the cost savings.

But then Howell mentioned letterpress, and Hiler was sold.

"It's like with Stickley making his chairs," Hiler said. "He takes such care to do it, and anybody who takes such care now is a hero to me. He's bucking the system."

The bookmarks show a man under a tree, looking out over water and clouds. The clouds pop out from the background. Run a hand over the lettering, and the indentations are obvious even with eyes closed.

"You can feel the three-dimensional quality of it," Hiler said.

Letterpress is actually much more tactile now than it's ever been. When letterpress was in wide use commercially, printers took care to get the ink on the paper without allowing the metal plate to leave a mark.

"You wanted to 'kiss' the paper, not 'sock' it," said Mary Phelan, director of the printmaking/book arts program at the University of the Arts.

Now both artists and aficionados are often after the "socked" look. This is partly the artistic and aesthetic preference among those who have newly discovered this kind of printing, Phelan said, and partly a desire to make sure anyone who sees the printed object will know without a doubt that they are looking at letterpress.

Phelan sees evidence of the letterpress resurgence in the printmaking/book arts programs' enrollment. In the last three years or so, the graduate program jumped from 14 to 20 students and the undergrad from 23 to 32, she said.

Letterpress has a glorious past. It's how Gutenberg made his Bibles in the 14th century. Before then, every copy of a book had to be written by hand.

Letterpress helped spread not only the words of the Gospels, but also the words of many social and political movements, said Mike Denker, a hobbyist printer who is president of the Chesapeake chapter of the American Printing History Association. Benjamin Franklin's Pennsylvania Gazette was printed with letterpress.

Technological advances speeded up letterpress in the 1800s, and newspapers and magazines could circulate widely. They continued to be printed with letterpress until the 1970s, when offset lithography became the printing norm.

Offset is done with computers. No one needs to set plates letter by letter. It's faster. It's cheaper. And it temporarily shoved letterpress printing to the wayside.

"It's all driven by economics," Denker said.

Phelan, of the University of the Arts, said letterpress never completely went away. Even though most books and other publications are done with offset printing, letterpress has been used in fine printing and some literary publishing.

The University of the Arts has offered undergraduate classes since the 1960s. The Vandercook presses it uses are mostly from the World War II era; until three or four years ago, a press could be had for a few hundred dollars, Phelan said.

One price of the resurgence: "They're now up to \$3,000 to \$4,000."

University of the Arts student Regan Gradet, 34, is a second-year master of fine arts student in the printmaking/book arts program.

She worked 12 years as a graphic designer in San Francisco and New York before becoming a student again.

"I missed working with my hands," she said.

Gradet was recently binding her first book, *The Cynic: Part 116*. It's a deconstruction of Shakespeare's Sonnet 116. Each page has the whole sonnet printed, with all but a few words covered up. The words change from page to page, and the result is a simple story of one person's journey from pessimist to romantic optimist.

Gradet chose to do much of the printing with letterpress.

"Letterpress feels more real," she said. "I feel like the resurgence of letterpress and other things that are crafts, like knitting and quilting, are a reaction to the growth of digital media. I think it is a backlash."

The backlash has hit the incredible economic engine known as the wedding industry.

Brides have a lot of market power, and more and more brides want their wedding invitations, thank-you cards and the like to be letterpress printed instead of engraved, said Megan Kuntze, senior marketing manager at Crane & Co.

The stationery company has been around for 200 years. It introduced letterpress in 2004, in response to customer demand, Kuntze said. There's been double-digit growth in sales every year since, she said.

"The wedding category is tops for us as far as usage," she said. "Baby is second. But we've also introduced letterpress as box stationery, initial notes."

The additional labor involved with letterpress means it is not cheap. Those initial sets are the most affordable letterpress item Crane offers, 10 cards and 10 envelopes for \$15. Personalized stationery starts at about \$200 for 50 cards and envelopes. Wedding invitations are more like \$500, Kuntze said.

Not all letterpress is done with handset letters and hand-carved plates. In a blend of old and new, computers are used to create elaborate designs, incorporate modern typefaces, and allow the printing of letters that are not confined to straight rows.

Graham and Howell are using that technique, but they still use old-fashioned, hand-set lead type. They have found old plates at flea markets. And Graham also painstakingly carves images into linoleum.

Both Howell, who studied writing and advertising at Rowan University, and Graham, who studied graphic design at Philadelphia University, have been interested in printing for years. Graham considered going into printing right after college, but a professor discouraged her.

Last summer, Graham and Howell saw letterpresses at the Smithsonian. Then her sister sent her a letterpress birthday card, and she and Howell were both taken with it. "He said, 'We could do that,' and we went online and looked for a press," Graham said. "The next thing you know, we're renting a truck and going to North Jersey."

They found that first press at [Briarpress.com](http://Briarpress.com), a nationwide online letterpress community, Howell said. Its previous owner: a retired printer in Wall, N.J. They paid about \$400. Howell said the presses he uses are not as expensive as the Vandercooks, at least not yet.

The duo started with greeting cards of their own for Valentine's Day. She carved images, he crafted words. One with a blender out front says "We mix well together." Another with naked feet says "You knock my socks off." They sold for \$3.50.

Now, greeting-card designs lie in drawers, unprinted, while the Mad Maude creators work on wedding invitations and stationery. Weddings start at \$500 for 200 invitations, envelopes and reply cards, Howell said. Custom designs and premium papers cost extra.

Both have day jobs, but head to their former textile mill each evening and on weekends. They put in 40 ink-stained hours a week, have acquired interns and created a Web site ([www.madmaude.com](http://www.madmaude.com)), and hope, one day, to live entirely off the love of letterpress.

"It's definitely what I want to do in the long run," Howell said.