

In praise of **LETTERPRESS** and **LIVRES** **D'ARTISTE**

No doubt fueled by the actual fumes, my excitement flares up at the sight of the metal presses, old tools, stacks of fine papers – some partly printed, some lined up for production; weathered wood type drawers, long flat trays of type waiting to be handset, various jobs already printed, others ready for assembly, bindery or shipping: wedding announcements, greeting cards, stationery, business cards, broadsides, posters, booklets and limited edition books of poetry and art. A visual world unfolds, anachronistic yet modern, far apart from the daily digital reality of contemporary life: solid, smelly, sensual, tangible.

What exactly is letterpress printing?

Does anyone still practice it? Does anybody in Ojai?

And how has it evolved from craft to art, from the constraints of a technique to the freedom of creativity?

Letterpress printing is a technique of relief printing using a printing press.

A worker composes and locks movable type into the bed of a press, inks it, and presses paper against it to transfer the ink from the type, which creates an impression on the paper. (Wikipedia)

Before the invention of movable type by Gutenberg around 1450, communication was limited to handwriting. Books of Hours and illuminated manuscripts were the privilege of the clergy and the ruling classes. A private library was rich if it contained fifty volumes. By 1500, letterpress printing allowed books to be published and information disseminated to a wider public, and that changed everything. The advent of lithography and photography in the 19th Century were two huge steps forward in democratizing mass printing; then offset printing



By Anca Colbert

I don't know about you, but I love the smell of fresh ink on paper. All it takes for me is to walk into a working printing studio.

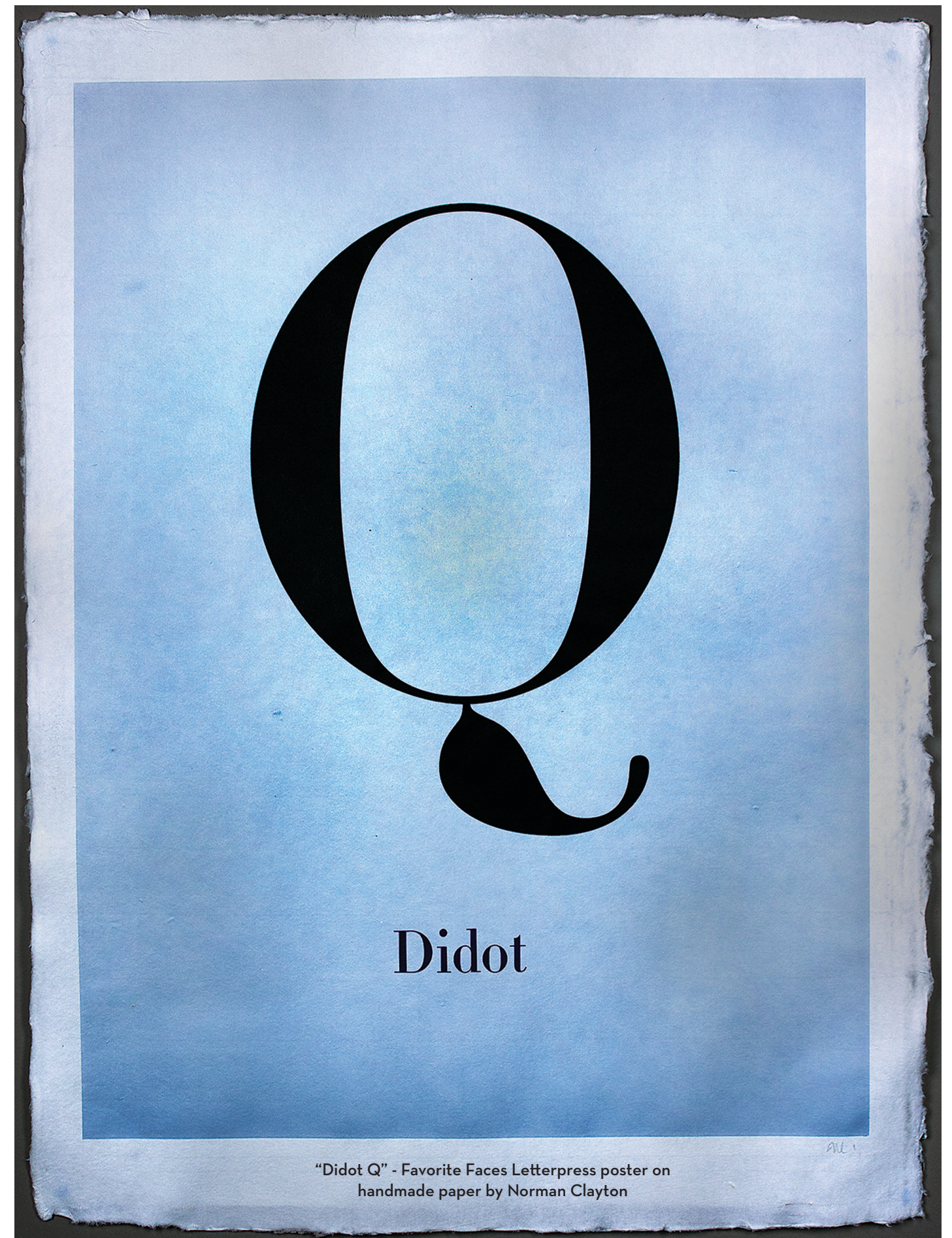
in the early 20th Century revolutionized the speed and cost of communication, and the need for letterpress printing began to change from a means of mass production to a printing method valued for its more artistic qualities.

Strangely enough, however, the original printing technique has experienced a Renaissance as a fine craft in the last 25 years, just as the digital revolution started sweeping the world.

In the United States, that recent revival appears to have particularly gained ground and new adepts around New York and along the Pacific Coast, mostly in the San Francisco area. This October The International Printing Museum in Carson held their sixth annual Los Angeles Printers Fair for a growing audience of professional printers and amateurs.

Meanwhile, in bucolic Ojai... letterpress printing is thriving as a handful of printers has moved to the area in recent years. Three years ago they formed Coast Letterpress Guild, which counts eleven members from Santa Barbara to Los Angeles. I had a chance to meet with three of them who live and work in Ojai: Elizabeth Allen (Sugarcube Press), Michael Addison (Rough Magic Press) and Norman Clayton (Classic Letterpress). Their respective experiences and areas of interest differ greatly.

Elizabeth Allen is the printer and co-owner of Sugarcube Press, a successful small letterpress production company based in Meiners Oaks. Originally from Maine, she started as a papermaker in Seattle then fell into letterpress printmaking "accidentally" in 1996. Her partner Kelsie Park-Sherbo Zimmerman was born and raised in Ojai and "handles designs and computers, along with a small staff of three other gals."



"Didot Q" - Favorite Faces Letterpress poster on handmade paper by Norman Clayton



Sugarcube Press, located in Meiners Oaks, is owned by Elizabeth Allen and partner Kelsie Park-Sherbo Zimmerman. Their extensive line of stationery can be found in 400 boutique stores.

Elizabeth attributes the revival of fine letterpress stationery to “the return to aesthetics of handmade quality and nuances in each item versus factory-made.” It also helped the whole field that around 1995 Martha Stewart started popularizing her influential interest in handmade wedding invitations. The Sugarcube Press stationery line is characterized by sassy, whimsy, catty

one-liners. “We are a closed-studio wholesaler with 400 boutique stores that buy from us as well as chains Papersource, Urban Outfitters, Paperchase England and now Indigo of Canada.” Their extensive line of cards can be found in Ojai at Fig, Modern Folk Living, Farmer & The Cook and Summer’s Dawn.

Michael Addison and his wife Susan moved from Northern California to Ojai in 2010. When Michael, a theater director well known for his productions of Shakespeare’s plays, had retired, they built their house with a studio space devoted to Michael’s increasing dedication to letterpress printing.

How did Michael develop such a passion for letterpress printing arts?

It was an accidental discovery. While walking in the Cotswolds, in 2004, he stumbled upon an exhibition of William Morris (founder of the Arts and Crafts Movement) who had designed his own font and published his own books. As a teacher and director, Michael had a primary interest in the life of words; he figured, “I can still work with words and design ideas with printing to create beauty – without having to put together theater productions.” It was a satori moment.

So he took a few classes, bought equipment (press and type) and launched himself into printing as a great hobby. He had always been interested in design and the visual arts, but then a whole world

of fonts opened up to him: “the singular differentiation is that letterpress printing is a three-dimensional art – you can see and feel the indentation in the paper.” Michael adds with a smile: “What you seek is ‘the kiss’ of the type.” Subtlety and elegance are key elements.

Michael considers “Seven Poems” by Walt Whitman the most important work yet to come out of his studio. The exquisite small book is the result of his collaboration with artist/printmaker Linda Taylor: Michael did the letterpress work; Linda made the wood engravings. We can see side-by-side the letterpress work for a single-page form (bottom left) and the resulting printed title page for the book (bottom right).

Each letter of metal foundry type is set by hand to create the text, with lines separated by lead strips, then locked in place within a metal form before being loaded onto the platen press. Notice that the printing process reverses the image, as is the case with any other relief printing technique with which most art collectors are familiar, such as etchings, woodcuts, wood engravings and linocuts.

Around 1900 in Paris the visionary art dealer Ambroise Vollard discovered and championed Cézanne, Bonnard, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso and other greats. Combining his obsessive passion for words and images, poetry and art, he created *livres d’artiste* and set a high bar for the genre. He was so intent on every aspect of the production to be “original”



Norman Clayton in his Ojai studio, with his Heidelberg Cylinder Press. Photo©2014 Eric Dahan

interested in “most accurately showing the letter forms which the type designer created.” He too speaks emphatically about the traditional goal of good printers who “ideally want to apply the appropriate amount of impression to ‘kiss the paper’ with the type.”

Norman loves the physicality of printing. But what moves him, what motivates him is creating beauty. When asked what beauty means to him, he thoughtfully ponders his answer: “emotional elegance; elegance with emotion.” His work in designing and printing “The Indigo Bunting,” 15 love poems by Robert Bly, with original wood engravings by Keith Cranmer (Nawakum Press, 2010) is an exquisite manifestation of what matters most to Norman Clayton. It was produced at his studio on Rice Road. Norman will be offering classes in January and February of 2015: a great opportunity to learn about the craft and art of printing.

The papers used in fine printing are art papers, often handmade, sometimes with deckled edges. They have a texture that adds an architectural quality to the look and feel of the printed page, thus making them an integral part of the process, and of the pleasure of touching and turning those printed pages.

Granted, savoring the pleasures of letterpress printing is an acquired taste. A fascination with the sheer shape of various letter formations, their connection and interaction, their spatial placement (between them, between lines and on the entire page) is the result of a rather refined interest and patient pursuit.

Consider it a slow, rewarding process by which you develop your taste the same way you develop a love of opera or a taste for fine wine; whatever takes time and practice, and requires an individual’s attentive involvement.

In a world increasingly dominated by noise, speed and the obvious glitz, Ojai is a rare oasis. So is letterpress printing an island for refined communication arts in the middle of the digital ocean, in which we are now submerged by too many words and images. An aesthetic appreciation for “less” develops in this quiet, peaceful space where the pace of life is slower, the power of the message is singularly magnified, and the senses develop the ability to perceive and savor that which is small, palpable and subtle. ☺

that he contacted l’Imprimerie Nationale to have them design new fonts for his limited edition fine publications.

It may be interesting to note that the 20th Century saw a succession of avant-garde artists and groups pursuing the fascinating connection between words and images: the Dadaists, Marinetti and the Italian Futurists; Picasso, Braque and other Cubists; Mayakovsky and the Russian Constructivists; Herbert Bayer and the Bauhaus; Pop artists, Fluxus and Lettrisme; and, closer to home, now-famous Ed Ruscha, who, starting in the ‘60s in Los Angeles, glorified one-syllable words in his paintings.

Fast forward to San Francisco in the 1980s where Arion Press, under the direction of Andrew Hoyem, gave new life to the fine tradition of combining art and letterpress by publishing luxurious

limited edition *livres d’artiste*. Considered the epitome of fine art printing in America, they contain original prints by artists such as Jim Dine, Robert Motherwell, Jasper Johns, Richard Diebenkorn, and Wayne Thiebaud.

The San Francisco area has been the hub of fine letterpress printing in the US.

That’s where **Norman Clayton** learned his craft before moving to Ojai with his family four years ago. He brings with him the finest skills as a master letterpress printer and designer, along with a high regard for the history of his craft.

What is most important to him in defining the quality of letterpress printing? Inking. “The precision with which the type is inked, the evenness and consistency of the inking on the page.” Norman sees his job as a fine printer “is to reproduce type with fidelity.” He’s



On the left is the page form for “Seven Poems by Walt Whitman. On the right is the printed result. The book featured wood engravings by Ojai artist Linda Taylor and printing by Michael Addison’s “Rough Magic Press.”

