

Association of European Printing Museums Conference, Birmingham University, 2025 presentation text

The Caseroom at 60: Sustaining Print Heritage at The Glasgow School of Art

We will be speaking today about traditional print in an art school setting but specifically about questions of heritage prompted by this year's celebration of 60 years of The Caseroom at The Glasgow School of Art as a dedicated space for the pursuit of Letterpress print.

The exhibition brought together works by current and former students as well as staff and a wide range of professional collaborators across multiple disciplines.

The Caseroom is The Glasgow School of Art's collection of Letterpress Printing equipment. It's an inky place housing around 350 case of metal type, more than 150 fonts of woodtype, presses a risograph as well as binding and finishing equipment. It is a communal space organised around print production, experimentation and book binding but also a teaching space and venue for specialist workshops in associated lettering arts and talks, presentations and lectures and the occasional gig.

IMAGE: Columbian Press

The Columbian Press is a remnant of activities before the Caseroom was established in 1964. It stayed in service and is still used today. Once the Caseroom was set up, the range and scope of equipment expanded (and continues to expand).

IMAGE: Post-1964 FAG Press¹

Our collection of equipment mirrors development of design education in typography and print production at GSA since 1964—sitting in turn within UK institutional frameworks for art education.

When GSA was established as one of the Government Schools of Design in 1845 it supported design for manufacturing production and trained artisans in ornamental craft. Before the 1970s, and CNAA degree upheavals, all teaching at GSA was presented under a vocational aegis. However, unlike Central School (CSM) or the London College of Communication (LCP/UAL) there was no formal technical training of compositors or printers.

Before 1977, the two-year General Course (followed by all students) veered wildly between craft, technical and 'fine art' skills before Fine Art became a recognised specialism. Vocational training in design meant constant adjustment to perceived commercial and aesthetic demands. To be blunt; taste and fashion are the whips driving art schools and students. Training for design in print production and book arts ever since the Arts & Crafts and Private Press movements reveals a constantly fluctuating border between 'trade' and 'fine art' oriented values. In 1964, when the Caseroom was set up, the students in 'commercial art' suddenly found themselves

¹ FAG (Fournitures pour les Arts Graphiques: tr. Supplies for the Graphic Arts) presses were built in Lausanne, Switzerland between 1937 and the 1990s. In the 1960s, FAG was also an importer of Vandercooks into Great Britain and continental Europe. Information about FAG presses is maintained by Dafi Kühne at <http://proofpress.ch>.

translated into 'graphic designers'. That borderline of status in print mediums at GSA during the past 60 years is one of our research interests. As evidence, we see this manifested in our material archive of equipment and printed artefacts; also in the testimonies of individuals.

One of the key insights of our research was the significance of wood engraving within GSA in the mid-20th century and in particular to the founding of The Caserom. Douglas Percy Bliss, director of the school from 1946 to 64 studied under Paul Nash at the Royal College of Art, London and alongside his friends Edward Bawden and Eric Ravillious became a preeminent engraver of the inter-war period. Wood engraving was one of the first techniques to fall to photo-repro processes and as such was 'freed' from commercial necessities into the hands of an artistic elite and left, interestingly somewhere between fine and commercial art practices. Under Bliss' directorship staff such as GW Lennox Paterson thrived in the Arts and Crafts inflected environment of the Commercial Art department. It isn't hard to see why Senior staff such as Bliss and Paterson would support investment into a well-resourced model printshop. As wood-engraving and letterpress are complementary processes, the founding of a collection of types well suited to mannered private press publishing of the period was a logical step. But this elite, though not per-se elitist, vision is set within the context of the city. Glasgow was a major centre of industry and print production with large publishers such as Collins and Blackies, national and local newspapers as well as numerous commercial printing companies. As ever, the equipment necessary to realise this ambition and the skilled technicians whose expertise would be relevant to students, going into the commercial design industry were drawn from the cities' manufacturing base. It is still possible to discern these two cultures at play in the collection where private press and blue collar industrial fantasies rub up against each other and the reality is, of course, a nuanced amalgam of the two. There is evidence of wood engraving activity right up until the late nineties but even by the time that I was a student just a couple of years later this important craft had receded from view.

We engage with former staff to map out when why and how equipment was acquired and how it was used in everyday workshop teaching. Generational knowledge overlaps in a useful way, with long-term sustained engagement of individuals cycling through roles: as students; technicians; practitioners; and educators, supporting the Caserom as a living museum. The archive is manifested in material form and evolving design practice.

Further events that strengthened the Caserom include the 1973 exhibition and publication *The Page Right Printed*; ² also in hiring x2 trade-trained technicians shortly after (Fraser Ross and Jack Fordy). Although seemingly against the tide of 'progress'; it asserted the Caserom as a workshop for future innovative typographic experimentation with the 'freedom to evaluate what is worth perpetuating in print', ³ most immediately in the publications from the Foulis Archive Press and FACET Press.

Our interviews with staff and the provenance of artefacts illuminate our local hinterland of industrial print and publishing: metal and wood types and litho stones from Blackie & Son, Ltd., wood display types from the SCWS printing works, and the

² with introduction by Gordon Huntly and design by Kit Grant. Put this in image caption.

³ Following this initiative, the Foulis Archive Press produced many remarkable editions of new work by staff, students and graduates in the next decades such as Don McPherson's *McGonagall rides again* (1973); most available within GSA Special Collections.

Buteman newspaper (Rothesay, Isle of Bute), the book printers Bell & Baines, linking variously to industrial and business environments in the West of Scotland. The death throes of commercial letterpress and adoption of new print technologies were prolonged and not uniform; we benefitted from this slow collapse and we can capture some of this prehistory. As a working print shop we gained equipment, people, and contacts with specialist suppliers and the expertise and knowledge of technical staff.

From our store of interviews I've mentioned two individuals: Jack Fordy (printer) and Fraser Ross (compositor), trade-trained letterpress craftsmen employed as technicians.⁴ Although Fraser continued his trade role as compositor while staff and students acted as 'graphic designers', he also taught new enthusiasts the printing skills that had formerly been so jealously hidden in the days of demarcation; generations of students gained deeper typographic understanding through handling type. Both technicians shared their specialist knowledge of process and materials while exploring new equipment and methods such as photo- and computer setting and print, I think we can compare this with Cyril Cannon's findings amongst London compositors during the drastic changes in print production there in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Intertitle: Sustained Practice, Cross-disciplinary opportunities, a disaster and the future.

Future connections, emerging generations. Sustained development of practice as individual and facility. Post fire change in acquisition, manufacturing, tangible and intangible heritage Diversity and inclusion bridging Gaelic Gap created by historical suppression of language, re-materialisation going further back in time with hand casting.

One of the particularities of our living museum being based in a higher education institution is the sustained engagement of both staff and students with their chosen material processes over weeks semesters or years. Many former students have gone on to careers in which the imprints of that sustained engagement with letterpress are distinctly visible. Here, as we are also discussing the history of staffing in the Caseroom is the work of Caseroom technician Ruth Kirkby from her graduating portfolio of 2017. This piece draws on the work of professor Tim Ingold and his book *Lines* which focuses on the artificiality of national borders. Our current designer in residence Euan Moreland is pursuing practice based enquiries into the relationships between provincial publishers such as Lund Humphries in his hometown of Bradford, radical free presses and British design history.

Another benefit of being in the art school is the proximity and relationships between specialist equipment and expertise in multiple areas. Colleagues in the metal and wood workshops and silversmithing and jewellery department especially are regular collaborators and advisors. Artistic collaborations take the work outside of the institution and into public spaces where disciplines like sculpture and animation can engage a broad audience with our shared typographic heritage.

You may have noticed throughout this talk, glimpses of the remains of the school of art's famous Charles Rennie Mackintosh building, visible through the Caseroom windows. The second fire of 2018 was particularly devastating. It caused intense heat

⁴ from 1974 and 1975 respectively. Fraser's long service was from 1975-2006.

in the room itself, cracking those windows and warping and dishing around 60% of our larger wood types. The fire provoked reflection on what is valuable. A forced audit of what we had, what we'd lost and what we might wish to conserve, consolidate, remanufacture and pursue. The most expedient option in bridging the emergent fissures in our equipment was to buy like for like. We were able to purchase close to 100 cases of wood type many of which were formerly the property of Bournemouth College of Art, from letter cutter and printer Nicholas Sloan. But the fire also prompted more complex operations in conservation and re-manufacture, moving us into serious type production. Here working with Icelandic type designer Gudmunder Ulfarsson of OrType Foundry on a three weight digital revival of our characteristic 'Caseroom Groteque' a relative of Miller and Richard's Groteque no. 4. Optimized for cnc cutting to replace 13 sizes of the original from 8 to 36line which were left unusable after the sudden humidity drop of fire two.

This spirit of shaping the collection for future generations through specialist equipment production projects has prompted us into the prototype stages of equipping the collection with Scottish Gaelic types. In turn instigating a broader research project concerned with identifying and bridging material deficits in Gaelic print heritage.

And deeper into forging new networks of production with greater opportunities for object led teaching and directed by our location and circumstances.

And wood engraving is back on the presses too!

Many Thanks.