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Graduate Book Arts Education: The University of Alabama Program

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GRADUATE BOOK ARTS EDUCATION

Two Approaches

Printing, bookbinding, typography, letterform study, calligraphy, papermaking, illustration, history of the book: these have for centuries been considered as disciplines, crafts, industrial processes, and yes, hobbies. Have they now, taken together under the rubric of "book arts," come of age as one field of intellectual and creative endeavor, indeed, as a profession? It would seem so if one looks at a recently developing phenomenon: the emergence of graduate degree programs in the book arts.

Of course, the teaching of handpress printing, typography, and the making of books is nothing new at American colleges. Carl Purington Rollins established a "Bibliographical Press" at Yale University in 1924. Carroll Coleman established a Typographic Laboratory at the University of Iowa as early as 1945. Other pioneers in the field were Rosalind Keep (Mills College, 1930s to 1950s), Victor Hammer (Wells College, Aurora, New York, 1941-1947), and Ray Nash (Dartmouth College, 1937-1970). Harry Duncan, one of the most respected figures in collegiate printing, continues to teach at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He co-founded the literarily renowned Cummington Press in 1941 at the Cummington School of the Arts, and was in charge of the program at Iowa from 1956 to 1972.

Besides Nebraska, there are active courses in printing and book arts continuing at Iowa under Kim Merker, at the University of Wisconsin under Walter Hamady, the University of California at Santa Cruz (George Kane), and Northridge (Norman Taniis), University of Kentucky, California College of Arts and Crafts (Betsy Davids), Colorado College (Jim Trissel), Ohio State University (Robert Tauber), and Scripps College (Christine Bertelson), among others. But these courses have always existed under the aegis of other undergraduate departments (Creative Writing, English, Journalism, Art, Design) or as one of the graduate courses required for the Library Science degree. Now at two leading American schools, the University of Alabama and Mills College, "the book arts" has become a field of graduate study unto itself, leading to a master's degree. In the following pages, these two programs are examined.

The possible implications of this development are intriguing to contemplate. Is this seemingly favorable development for the book world, the acceptance of printing and related arts as a serious field of higher learning, actually the harbinger of a kind of death for the commercially produced fine book as we have known it? Perhaps the M.A. or M.F.A. in Book Arts signals that the study of traditional bookmaking will eventually become "purely academic," without application in the real world of "media specialists" and computer graphics. Harry Duncan, in introducing his course on The Hand Crafted Book, always tries to warn his students that "they'll be learning things of no practical use whatever." (Introduction, Collegiate Book Arts Presses, compiled by David Farrell. San Francisco: Fine Print, 1982). Duncan urges the teaching of such subjects as though they are indeed "unequivocally liberal." However, lest we take his disclaimer too literally, Duncan also sees a new challenge in bringing alive the typographic tradition and applying it to divergent texts and new audiences.

These new "masters" of the book arts may be those best prepared to take up this challenge. The making of fine books on a large scale in the United States will doubtless continue to lose industrial feasibility and commercial viability, but the aesthetic urge in bookmaking will have an out. As the higher reaches of trade publishing are held in the thrall of profitable "fast-food" books, merchandised and sold at chain outlets of unvarying character from city to city, there seems to be an increasing trend at the lower reaches for small independent publishers to proliferate and fragment the market. Thus some graduates may choose to establish their own printing shops, issuing highly individual books to select audiences. But obviously not all can or should devote themselves to making books; the market cannot yet support many. What will the others do with their mastery of these anachronistic book crafts? They will become Humanist bookpersons, bearing with them the sensitivities and strengths that come from absorbing the principles of the past and applying them to the future, whether their futures lie in computer type design, mass communications, edition bookbinding, or the conservation and interpretation of rare book collections.

S.K.

The University of Alabama Program

by GORDON B. NEAVILL

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA a two-year program leading to a Master of Fine Arts is being created at the Institute for the Book Arts in the Graduate School of Library Service. Under the direction of Richard-Gabriel Rummonds, the program is designed to provide the knowledge and experience needed for students planning careers in fine printing and bookbinding. Training is provided through academic and studio courses as well as apprenticeships. The printing curriculum is fully in place, and the first class of printing students will graduate this summer. Plans are underway to implement the bookbinding curriculum in the fall of 1984.

Because of its craft orientation, the book arts program is somewhat more structured than most M.F.A. programs. Beginning in fall 1984, students will major in either printing or bookbinding and minor in the other field. There are three required courses per semester and one elective. All students begin with History of Printing and Introduction to the Book Arts—a studio course that covers basic techniques of typography, printing illustration, papermaking, marbling, and binding. Second-semester required courses are Typography and Printing, in which students design and print a project of their own choosing, generally an illustrated booklet, and Hand Bookbinding. Although they may not be writers or artists themselves, as printers many of the students will eventually have to work closely with writers and artists. Therefore required courses in the second year are taken outside the Institute in order to prepare them for this role: a course in the English department's creative writing program helps develop editorial skills; a course in the art department provides experience in various printmaking techniques, and students are graded on the basis of technical skill rather than artistic talent.

Electives currently offered include Descriptive Bibliography, Modern Book Publishing, Book Design and Production, and Archives and Special Collections. An internship at the University of Alabama Press is available to students with a special interest in publishing. Second-year students may also work individually with book arts faculty on studio or academic projects of their own choosing. Electives that the Institute hopes to offer beginning in the 1984/85 academic year include Calligraphy and Lettering, Illustration Techniques, Decorative Papers, and Paper Conservation and Book Restoration.

The faculty primarily responsible for the book arts program are: Richard-Gabriel Rummonds, who supervises the printing apprenticeships and teaches the History of Printing, and Book Design and Production; Glenn House, who teaches Introduction to the Book Arts, Typography and Printing, and various other electives; Gordon B. Neavill, a publishing historian on the faculty of the library school, teaches Descriptive

Bibliography and Modern Book Publishing. A bookbinder is being sought to become associated with the Institute beginning in fall 1984.

The Origins of Book Arts at Alabama

There are no shortcuts to craftsmanship. The skills of a craft must first be grasped intellectually and then practiced repeatedly until eye and hand and brain gain confidence and coordination; the aesthetic traditions of the craft must be absorbed thoroughly if one is to avoid blundering into incongruity or tastelessness. In the book arts there is no shortage of aspiring craftspersons with the requisite determination, talent, and discipline; the problem has been the lack of places to get the necessary professional training. It is testimony to the seriousness and dedication of the new generation of fine printers, bookbinders, and other book workers that so many of them, lacking opportunities for formal training, have largely taught themselves. Traditional apprenticeships are scarce, and even when available are often impracticable for older students. Workshops are invaluable but cannot provide in-depth training. Formal training based on a long-term association with a master craftsman is the best route to proficiency in the book arts, and graduate degree programs are coming into existence in response to this need.

Under the direction of Richard-Gabriel Rummonds, the M.F.A. program at the University of Alabama is designed to provide the knowledge and experience needed for serious practice of the book arts through academic and studio courses as well as apprenticeships.

The establishment of the Institute for the Book Arts at the University of Alabama is the result of more than a decade of activity. James D. Ramer, the dean of the Graduate School of Library Service, is a printing historian with a special interest in fine printing. When he came to Alabama in 1971, the academic vice-president of the university was Raymond McLain. It was McLain who, twenty-three years before, as president of Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky, had invited Victor Hammer to Lexington to be printer-in-residence. With these two men active, it is not surprising that book arts courses came to occupy a prominent place in the Alabama library school's developing curriculum. By 1973, the school's new quarters included a large and well-equipped typographic laboratory where McLain himself taught the first printing courses. Among his students was Glenn House, a commercial artist and designer, who was then staff artist with the university's publications department. House took over the printing course when McLain retired, and in 1975 he became a regular member of the library school faculty, teaching printing full time.

Richard-Gabriel Rummonds's association with the school began a year and a half later. Rummonds had been living and working in Verona since 1970, and the hand-printed books issuing from his Plain Wrapper Press had gained considerable renown for combining the work of outstanding contemporary authors and artists in impeccably printed editions in several languages. He was interested in teaching occasionally in the United States, and at the urging of Carolyn Hammer wrote to the University of Alabama. He spent several spring semesters in Tuscaloosa as a visiting lecturer over the years 1977 to 1981, and taught Descriptive Bibliography, History of Printing, and Printing and Publishing on the Handpress. He also drafted a proposal for a full-fledged book arts program. In 1982, when he closed the Plain Wrapper Press and returned to Alabama as visiting lecturer, it was with the hope that his association with the school could be made permanent. His appointment as director of the Institute for the Book Arts became official on 1 January, 1983.

Initially it was assumed that as the Institute was part of the library school, book arts students would receive the master's degree in librarianship, but it quickly became apparent that the appropriate degree for the program was the M.F.A. Formal authorization for the M.F.A. in book arts is expected from the university's board of trustees early in 1984, in time for it to be awarded to the program's first graduates. Because close personal contact between student and teacher is required, the M.F.A. program will remain small. A maximum of four new students is admitted each fall.

The Alabama Book Arts Student

Applicants' undergraduate degrees may be in any field. Students presently in the program come from a variety of academic backgrounds, ranging from a B.F.A. in painting from the Rhode Island School of Design to a B.A. in geography from the University of Chicago. As one student commented, "The nicest surprise I've had is the range and strength of the students' backgrounds; we all have something unique to contribute. My fellow students, in fact, are like another set of teachers to me, a benefit that's especially valuable in the 'team' system used to produce books here."

The Alabama Model

The emphasis is on craft skills rather than artistic expression. Fritz Eberhardt, in connection with teaching bookbinding, has commented: "It is quite difficult for student and teacher alike to give creativity a temporary back seat and go through the sobering exercises of counting and folding paper, measuring, and cutting exact squares. But clean sewing, squaring, and backing are the underpinnings of an artfully made book. For both technical and aesthetic reasons, no architecture could rest on its ornate façade. This goes for bookbinding too." In the Institute's printing program, apart from small projects, students spend three semesters mastering the technical skills of printing before they initiate and execute a major book of their own design.

Apprenticeships are the heart of the M.F.A. program. The Institute is actively engaged in printing and publishing origi-

nal literary works by major writers, often with specially commissioned illustrations. Two collegiate presses, Parallel Editions and Gorgas Oak Press, schedule four limited editions a year and also undertake occasional commissions. During their first three semesters, students spend a minimum of ten hours a week at the collegiate press as apprentices; those receiving financial aid devote an additional ten hours a week to collegiate press activities. The books are designed by Rummonds and printed, usually in an edition of 115 copies, on the handpress or Vandercook proof press by students working under his close supervision, and up to Rummonds's exacting standards. This, he feels, "is the only way students are assured of acquiring a high level of truly professional skill. When I began to examine the work of other well-known printers, I realized there was a startling lack of technical skill. . . . Of greater concern to me were the badly printed and ill-conceived books of young printers who assumed they knew how to print because they had studied bookmaking in an academic environment. I became convinced that the only logical way to learn printing was to work alongside a demanding master craftsman."

Under the Parallel Editions imprint are published works by internationally recognized authors. Titles for 1983/84 are *Return & Other Poems*, by the Greek poet Yannis Ritsos, a bilingual edition with translations by Edmund Keeley, illustrated with woodcuts by Sidney Chafetz; *The Origin of Sadness*, a short story by Wright Morris, illustrated by Susan Hendrie; and *Just Shades*, a book of poems by James Tate, illustrated by John Alcorn. These titles reflect in part the close working relationship between the book arts program and the University of Alabama's excellent M.F.A. program in creative writing, which has an endowed chair occupied each semester by a distinguished visiting writer who is required to supply an original manuscript for book arts students to print. Morris and Tate have been 1983/84 visiting writers; the 1984/85 chairholders are Gerald Stern and Margaret Atwood.

The Gorgas Oak Press imprint is reserved for works of southern regional interest. Most of these titles are distributed by the Institute itself, giving students experience in marketing limited editions. *Neighborhood*, an early fragment from Barry Hannah's novel *Ray*, appeared in 1982 and was sold out shortly after publication. Currently in production is *Nothing Rich, but Some Things Rare*, an anthology of poems from the *Black Warrior Review*, illustrated by Jeffrey Haste.

After three semesters of course work and apprenticeship, the M.F.A. program culminates with a master's project initiated and carried through by the student. For printing students, this involves printing and publishing a limited edition book. The student selects and edits a manuscript, designs the book, commissions illustrations, prints and binds the edition, and plans how it will be marketed. Most students will find it necessary to begin planning their master's project well before the final semester. One student thus far has reached this stage of the program, and he is illustrating and printing a book of poetry written by a recent graduate of the creative writing program, and submitted by her as a master's thesis. The students feel that the program is small and intimate enough to accommodate, and encourage, each student's particular interests. "We all take the fundamental courses, then move naturally into 'individual study' arrangements that we've

tailored ourselves, usually with an eye toward future ambitions. Some begin producing work to establish and distinguish their own imprint, others initiate special research projects, some start building professional design/publishing portfolios, and others use their experience here to create comprehensive plans for directing a similar collegiate book arts program elsewhere. The variety of apparent possibility is exhilarating."

The Institute also offers other programs in book arts education for students with a basic knowledge of printing or binding who want a shorter program, or who lack the undergraduate degree required for admission to the M.F.A. program. These students who attend the Institute for one or two semesters receive a Book Arts Certificate. Admission is by portfolio or interview, and students pursue a course of study tailored to their individual needs. Students in the library school may also receive a Master's of Library Service degree with a specialization in book arts by taking basic courses in librarianship together with academic and studio courses at the Institute. It is also possible for M.L.S. students from other schools to take book arts courses at the University of Alabama for transfer credit. M.L.S. students are not ordinarily admitted to the book arts apprenticeship.

The Book Arts Environment

The Institute sponsors conferences and intensive summer workshops taught by visiting specialists. Enrollment is open to anyone interested in the book arts, and is usually limited to twelve for each workshop. A preliminary workshop in the summer of 1982 was divided into five one-week sessions and featured Jack Stauffacher on typography, Steve Miller on printing, Don Guyot on marbling, Julia Loving on papermaking, and Fritz and Trudi Eberhardt on binding. Last summer, Claire Van Vliet taught a two-week workshop on Printing Illustrated Books, and the Eberhardts returned for a four-week workshop on Intermediate Bookbinding. The 1984 workshop, scheduled for June 4-29, will be devoted to Japanese Bookmaking Techniques. The instructors will be Timothy Barrett (papermaking), Tom Killion (printing on Japanese paper), and Peter Geraty (oriental and non-adhesive bindings). Registrants come from all over the country and range from neophytes to established professionals. For the Institute's own students, the workshops provide a supplement to the regular curriculum and healthy exposure to different approaches and points of view.

The fifth floor of the main library is currently being renovated to provide additional space for book arts activities. Studio courses in printing will continue to be offered in the typographic laboratory, which houses three Vandercook proof presses, one Washington-style handpress, two Chandler & Price job presses, as well as an extensive selection of type. The collegiate presses, which presently occupy temporary quarters, will have a spacious room of their own. Two Washington-style handpresses, one Vandercook proof press, and additional cases of type will be arranged here so that independent projects can be carried on at all three presses without students getting in each other's way. The Institute's binding equipment, including a very good board shear, standing

presses, and guillotine, will be consolidated in a modest bindery. The third room under construction is a book arts reference library, which will contain basic reference works in the book arts, examples of contemporary and historical fine printing, and reference collections of binding styles, decorated papers, handmade and machine-made papers, type specimen books, etc. It is hoped that the reference library will become a major collection, serving not only students in the Institute but the entire book arts community. Still lacking at present are adequate quarters for papermaking.

Although a large part of Rummonds's time is now devoted to his activities as director of the Institute for the Book Arts, the closing of the Plain Wrapper Press does not mean the end of his own printing career. Much of his equipment, including his Washington and Albion handpresses, has been moved from Italy to Alabama. During the spring of 1983 he designed and built an exceptionally beautiful 900-square-foot studio overlooking a lake near Tuscaloosa. The final Plain Wrapper Press book, a short story by Italo Calvino with woodcuts by Antonio Frasconi, is now on the press. Subsequent books will appear under his new imprint, Ex Ophidia. He plans to publish three Ex Ophidia books a year, beginning with a selection from the unpublished journals of John Cheever. In addition, he has been commissioned to print an annual limited edition for the Library Fellows of the Whitney Museum.

Rummonds's own printing activities add an important dimension to the book arts program. The acquisition of specific knowledge and skills is only part of learning a craft; equally important is the assimilation of intangibles. Many informal gatherings and discussions take place at Rummonds's studio. In addition, a few advanced printing students have the opportunity of working with him at his studio as paid assistants. Says Rummonds, "The agonizing experience of teaching myself to print on the handpress made me realize that only a first-class masochist could survive such a lonely apprenticeship. I vowed that if I survived I would try to be generous with the knowledge I acquired as I attempted to tame my cast-iron beast, unlike Mardersteig, who took his secrets with him to the grave."

The first students will not complete the M.F.A. program until this summer, so it is too early to predict what kinds of jobs they will get. Graduates will be highly qualified to direct the collegiate presses that are being established in libraries, art departments, and creative writing programs. One student in the program is on leave from a collegiate press to which she will return. Other graduates may find teaching positions in undergraduate book arts programs. Some may use their training to become book designers, others may establish themselves as independent craftspersons.

The University of Alabama's book arts program is dedicated to providing professional education at the highest technical and aesthetic level. The program has been in existence for less than two years and is developing rapidly. The next step, once the binding curriculum is in place, is likely to be the development of a curriculum in papermaking and paper conservation. The University of Alabama has become a national center for book arts education; however, its success cannot yet be assessed. That will be measured by the contributions of its graduates.



ABOVE: Instructor Claire Van Vliet with participants in the summer 1983 workshop "Printing Illustrated Books."

Clockwise: Instructor Glenn House, students Susan Hendrie and David McClure, Claire Van Vliet, and students Bradley Hutchinson, Anita Prewett, and Linda Talleur.

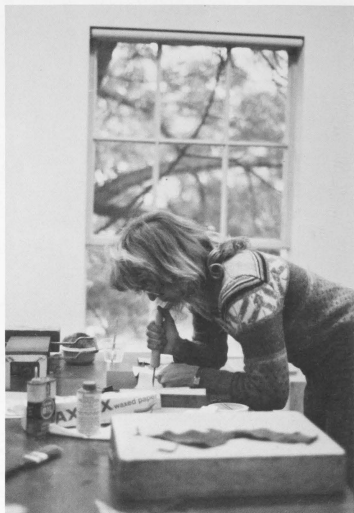
RIGHT: Student Megan Benton at the handpress, Collegiate Press Room.

BELOW, RIGHT: Students Peter Kruty and Susan Hendrie at the Vandercook.

BELOW, LEFT: Students Susan Hendrie and Jeffrey Haste with instructors Glenn House and Richard-Gabriel Rummonds in the Collegiate Press Room.

(Photos: J. P. Forsthoffer.)





Clockwise from above left:
Tracy Davis, teaching assistant in the Graduate Book Arts Program, discusses a book structure with fellow student Kate St. Clair.

Kathy Barr sets type at the Eucalyptus Press facility.
Susan Moon pares leather in the Florence Walter Book Bindery.

Field trip to the typesetting firm of Burch & McElroy & Heisch.
Kathleen Burch is at the typesetting terminal. Looking on are, left to right, students Marie Dern, Kate St. Clair, and Linnea Lundquist.

Tracy Davis conducts a troubleshooting workshop on the Vandercook proof press for students Kirsten Buckendorf and Kathy Barr.

