



MODERN-DAY LETTERPRESS

BEYOND GUTENBERG

Article based on interviews with EM Letterpress, Cleanwash Letterpress, and Studio On Fire

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ELIAS ROUSTOM

EM LETTERPRESS ELIAS ROUSTOM

TALK ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND:

I grew up in Damascus, Syria. My family moved to the south coast of Massachusetts when I was fourteen. Though my mother left her work to raise a family of six, both my parents were professionally trained in medicine. My artistic abilities were always valued and encouraged, but I don't think my family expected me to become an artist. As it turned out, I'm one of six artists. From language and music to lighting and cooking, my siblings and I all now work in creative fields.

TALK ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY AS AN ARTIST:

I went to college for architecture, but it didn't take long in the field to figure out that I was more interested in the layout and composition of the plans and title sheets than I was in the documentation of windows and door jambs. And I felt too detached from the design work because I wasn't building anything—someone else got to have the real fun. I needed to be in touch with the final product of my efforts, and nothing offers that like art. I recalled having enjoyed a printmaking course in college, so I began to look for graduate schools and came upon the Printmaking and Book Arts program at The University of the Arts (UArts) in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My intention was to get a Master of Fine Arts degree so I could teach. I didn't expect to fall in love with letterpress printing and become a commercial printer.

WHEN DID YOUR INTEREST IN LETTERPRESS PRINTING BEGIN?

I wish I could say I knew what letterpress printing was before I went to grad school. I'd never even heard of it. But I remember the tour I took of the printing

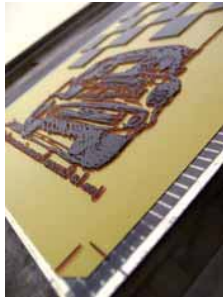


studio at UArts before I applied. The smell of that print shop is still in my mind. Something about it seemed right, and when I took my first course in printing, I had the strange feeling that I'd always known how to print. It came naturally. Everything made perfect sense.

WHAT ABOUT LETTERPRESS PRINTING WERE YOU DRAWN TO?

Letterpress printing is slow and fussy work. If you're detail-oriented like me, and you like to use your hands, even the smallest project can involve every aspect of your creativity, discipline, stamina, and problem solving skills. It's a process that gives the artist complete control, so when the job is done, he or she knows that every bit of the finished print is due to his or her skill and labor. How satisfying that is!

The presses are works of mechanical genius, and there's a near endless variety of them. They're beautiful to look at and marvelous to see in action. The history of ideas and of industrialization can be told with printing presses alone. A day doesn't go by that



I don't look at presses as expressions of civilization.

TALK ABOUT THE PRESS YOU USE IN THE STUDIO:

Our press room has one one-hundred-year-old iron press, one forty-year-old hand operated cylinder proof press, and four automated platen presses. The last four presses do the majority of our work—they are Heidelberg automatic platen presses that are affectionately known around the world as Windmill presses. They are truly wonderful machines, built to last (like nobody builds



anything anymore), and they answer almost all of our customers' needs; their only limitation is sheet size (ten by fifteen inches, or thirteen by eighteen inches, depending on the model).

WAS IT DIFFICULT FINDING YOUR FIRST PRESS?

The Heidelberg Windmill was probably the most common press in the U.S. for quite some time. When the industry grew away from letterpress, there were a lot of Windmills sitting idle in the backs of shops or rusting on loading docks or being sold overseas to countries that hadn't made the advances the U.S. printing trade had made. So starting in the eighties, presses of

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all sorts were being given away or sold for a fraction of their worth. Even in the late nineties, I was just about tripping over presses. Everyone and anyone who knew I was starting a letterpress printing operation had a lead to give me. So it was not difficult to find a press (or four) to start my business with.

DO YOU HAVE SPECIFIC PAPER OR INKS THAT YOU PREFER?

All of our inks are vegetable oil based (either linseed or soy), and are the same inks used in sheet-fed offset presses. Our favorite papers are mould-made printmaking sheets like Rives BFK or Hahnemuhle Copperplate. These sheets are typically thick

and soft with a subtle texture. They take ink and impression beautifully. But we're also fond of some of the better commercial sheets like Strathmore, Mohawk, and Cranes.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR YOU TO COMPLETE AN AVERAGE PROJECT?

Typical turn-around for orders with us is two to three weeks. Sometimes we turn jobs around in a day, and some projects take us months.

HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE YOUR STYLE?

I like to think that I'm a practical craftsman. Every problem has its own solution, and every customer has his or her own needs. I try very hard to treat each job and each person I work with on their terms. Being a printmaker is knowing that your work is in service of the work itself.

WHAT IS THE MOST CHALLENGING ASPECT OF WORK?

Meeting demand when wedding invitation season is on! It can get very crazy.

WHERE DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF LETTERPRESS HEADING?

I wish I could be more upbeat about the future of letterpress. All the presses in service today were last manufactured about forty years ago, and no one is ever going to put another letterpress into production. What will happen when these machines are no longer serviceable? It's hard to imagine it because I'm sure that if I oil my presses and keep them clean, they'll last forever. But nothing lasts forever. It's a unique process as it is being practiced today, and it's here to stay for as long as the machines hold up. Get it while you can! Catch a piece of one of the most

pivotal inventions in the history of human progress while you still can.

WHAT INSPIRES YOUR DESIGNS?

Since we work with designers, we hardly ever get to design anything except personal work, but knowing how to design helps us translate our customers' ideas from computer layout to a sheet of paper.

WHY DO YOU PREFER THIS FORM OF PRINTING?

Letterpress has many practical and necessary applications even in the age of iPhones. A beautifully printed card or book is delightful in every age, and I'm happy to be in the position to provide people with a service that satisfies their need for a beautiful and real product.

TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF OUTSIDE OF THE STUDIO:

I'm married, and my wife and I have two daughters. I have a large extended family who mean the world to me, and too many friends on Facebook. I teach the Art of the Book at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. I enjoy sharing my experience as an artist and craftsman with the young people I'm privileged to work with there. I feel like I'm securing a future for my craft by passing it on. I also love photography. I still shoot film, and process and print my work the old-fashioned way, and I even show and sell some of my prints. When I get the chance, I fly fish (with my own hand-tied flies), and I can hardly wait for my little girls to be big enough to go trout fishing with me.

CLEANWASH LETTERPRESS COLLEEN WALSH

WHAT EXACTLY IS LETTERPRESS PRINTING, AND HOW DOES IT WORK?

Letterpress printing was developed centuries ago as a means of creation for the masses. Very simply put, raised metal or wood type is inked and then pressed into a substrate. Originally, pressmen used only a “kiss” impression—never leaving behind a hint of the impact that occurred between paper and type. There was and is a reason for this: hitting the type too hard would wear it down and destroy it. Now with the ease and accessibility of digital printing, the need for such equipment has vanished. Some continue to use the tools and machinery in the way that they were intended, while others have adapted by using these presses in a new way, trading the “kiss” for a deep impression.

TALK ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY AS AN ARTIST:

My family is full of makers: carpenters, writers, builders, sewers, artists, chefs, and musicians. I learned the value of using my hands, and discovered that I was similarly capable. I think that it's those likenesses and differences that make a family; boys, are we a family!

I went to the Savannah College of Art and Design in the heartbreakingly beautiful city of Savannah, Georgia. My college career started off in photography. When I realized it wasn't what I wanted to do, I dabbled in graphic design, sculpture, and printmaking until I ended up in fibers. It was in that program that I learned weaving, dyeing, screen-printing, etc., and where I fell in love with surface design. A lot of people go their entire lives without finding that thing—I



found it, and it treated me well. Then as I grew and changed, I found it again in letterpress.

FIRST LETTERPRESS EXPERIENCE:

My first letterpress experience actually came from a search on Craigslist. I found a young couple starting up a printing business; they had seen a greeting card that was letterpress printed and fell in love. They rented a space in an old fabric mill in the Port Richmond neighborhood in Philadelphia and began filling it with any equipment they could get their hands on. Letterpress is definitely one of those things that is best learned by doing. Get your hands (and elbows, face, and clothes) absolutely filthy, and run into every problem; make every mistake (a couple of times). It's the only way to learn.

FIRST DAY ON THE JOB:

My first day, I was introduced to cabinets of type and an eight-by-twelve Chandler and Price old style. The press was one hundred years old. I was awestruck and terrified as I watched it move. They told me to pick a font and set something—anything. Completely on the spot, I walked over to the bookcase and grabbed the



Cabinet of Natural Curiosities off of the shelf. The first page I opened showed the nine-banded armadillo. It was perfect. I set it in forty-eight-point Goudy Handtooled, inked up the press with green ink, and away I went. It is framed and sitting on a shelf in my office.

TELL US ABOUT THE PROCESS OF LETTERPRESS PRINTING:

Once I have my design (or the client's design) finalized, I have to make color separations to prepare the files for print. I send the files to an offset shop to have them made into negatives, which



I then use to expose the plates in my platemaker. There are five major steps in the platemaking process: pre-exposure, main exposure, washout, drying, and post-exposure. This generally takes twenty to thirty minutes per plate. After the plate is finished, I apply an adhesive sheet to the back and cut it down to size. It is then attached to an aluminum base that is locked up in a chase, which is then ready for the press.

If the job calls for more than one color, the lightest is always printed first in order to speed the cleaning process and to decrease the likelihood of ink contamination. The press is inked up with the appropriate amount of ink for the job. Next, tympan paper is put on the press, and the appropriate amount of packing is

For any CREATIVE person, I think that it is INCREDIBLY IMPORTANT to immerse yourself in your art. Believe in it. SLEEP WITH IT. Paper the walls with it. I'm getting CLOSE to papering the walls."

added to control the impression. The guides are then set up, and then I am ready to print!

If there is a second color (or third or fourth), the press is cleaned of all ink, the chase comes out of the press, and the plate is changed. The setup process repeats itself.

After the printing is finished, the pieces are either die cut or cut down to size on a paper cutter. I always die cut business cards and tend to die cut thicker stocks as well to avoid any possible issues. After the cutting, each piece is counted, examined for consistency, and then wrapped up!

DO YOU HAVE SPECIFIC PAPER OR INKS THAT YOU PREFER?

As far as paper goes, Crane Lettera is pretty standard around here.

It is made from one hundred percent cotton, from fibers discarded by the garment industry that would otherwise end up in a landfill.

I managed to find a large lot of ink from an offset printer closing shop. For smaller jobs that don't require a large amount of ink, I mix just what I need from a set of Pantone mixing colors. There is much debate about the friendliness of inks, and there is a lot of misinformation out there about which is the “greenest.” I feel confident using ink that would have been thrown away.

TALK ABOUT THE PRESS YOU USE IN THE STUDIO:

I have a 1971 Heidelberg Windmill that is my absolute pride and joy. It is most useful for high quantities and tricky ink coverage. I also have a twelve-by-eighteen Chandler and Price that was built in my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio, in 1907—it was my first press, and being born in the same place, we have a special relationship. Its size makes it great for larger pieces, and it is great for small runs.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE THE MOST ABOUT THE LETTERPRESS?

Letterpress has a tangible presence. When I get my hands on a piece that someone else printed, I could literally stare at it for hours. Being a letterpress printer means constant problem solving. I love being challenged to figure things out on my own! All the while, I'm creating beautiful things.

WHAT INSPIRES YOUR DESIGNS?

I am inspired by words and National Geographic. I love animals, wallpaper, fabric, and anything old. I am drawn to objects and places with a history. Going

to school in Savannah definitely brought that out in me—all of the history and detail in the architecture, the trees, and the cobblestone streets. The things those stones have seen!

Other printers/designers are absolutely an inspiration. Recently I joined Pinterest—a virtual pinboard of anything and everything online that inspires you, and allows you to see the pinboards of other artists/designers. For any creative person, I think that it is incredibly important to immerse yourself in your art. Believe in it. Sleep with it. Paper the walls with it. I'm getting close to papering the walls.

WHERE DO YOU SEE THE FUTURE OF LETTERPRESS HEADING?

A while back, I handed a friend my three-by-one printed business card. They asked how much it had cost to produce and asked why I chose letterpress. They didn't understand why I would spend more money on a business card. My response was, “If I have to explain it to you, you wouldn't understand.” It wasn't meant to be snobby; it was just the truth. Some people are drawn to letterpress, and some just aren't. Those that are will keep it alive.

TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF OUTSIDE OF THE STUDIO:

I am a reader, a doodler, and an avid thrifter. Always covered in ink. Blessed with amazing family and friends, a very sweet dog who is allergic to everything, and a boyfriend who puts up with me. Overall, a very lucky woman. They do say that each person makes their own luck; I believe that putting good and beautiful things out into the world is a way to make it. I can pay my bills, and I'm doing what I love. Life is good.

STUDIO ON FIRE BEN LEVITZ

TALK ABOUT YOUR JOURNEY AS AN ARTIST:

I received my B.F.A. in Communication Design from the College of Visual Arts. I spent nearly a decade in the creative industry working with design leaders at Kilter, Larsen, and Thorburn design agencies.

I opened the studio in 1999 with a vision of uniquely combining design and production skills in modern letterpress work. In 2006, I left the agency world to run the studio full time.

My passion behind letterpress printing and starting Studio On Fire goes back to studying original masters like William Morris, W.A. Dwiggins, and Frederic Goudy. These fellows truly understood and merged both design and production. A critique of today's design reality is that fewer and fewer designers understand the production method for which they are designing. As designers, we have so many options, we've become generalists. At Studio On Fire, design and letterpress are dating again. We are committed to making letterpress printing one of the most premium and relevant production methods for contemporary design. Understanding our niche letterpress market and offering production advice to the designers that come to us is how we work. Merging design intent with letterpress printing keeps our work exciting.

JUST WHAT IS LETTERPRESS?

Letterpress is a method of relief printing. It is the process of inking a type-high reversed image and then transferring that ink to a substrate, making a print of the positive image. While previous generations relied on movable



wood and metal type, most modern letterpress is achieved with a plastic material called photopolymer. Photopolymer has bridged the gap between the computer and letterpress printing presses. A digital file with correct specifications can be moved to water-wash polymer plates and printed on letterpress in place of handset materials.

WHY DO YOU PREFER THIS FORM OF PRINTING?

In years past, letterpress used to be the primary method of all

printing. Nowadays, designers have so many printing options—digital printing, offset printing, screen-printing. Letterpress is such a small part of today's printing industry. However, we'll give you three good reasons for choosing letterpress:

Tactile Design - Like to feel what you see? That sculptural impression is a primary reason for using letterpress printing. This heavy impression is how letterpress has reinvented itself over the past couple decades. Things



like text, line work, and patterns offer an impression into soft paper material. As a designer, if you get the artwork right and pair it correctly with a material, the resulting impression is unmistakably letterpress. It is an effect unmatched by any other printing method.

Unique Materials - Just try running a toothy 600 gsm cotton stock through a digital printer. Maybe some thick blotter paper for coasters? A thick duplex stock business card stock perhaps? Even thin onion skin stock or napkins? Yes, letterpress will print it all. Lots of special stocks that just won't run through modern offset and digital presses.

It is this notable pause that exemplifies LETTERPRESS PRINTING as a breath of fresh air. As our society increases our digital COMMUNICATIONS and time spent in front of glowing SCREENS, letterpress printing becomes AN EVEN more unique counterpoint."



Letterpress offers material versatility that is unmatched by any modern presses.

Upscale Presentation - The materials we print on for letterpress generally cost more than going to any local quick-print shop. And the time-consuming nature of the letterpress printing process means it is not mass-produced. It has that artisan quality which sets it apart. The cost of each color makes projects printed with letterpress have a certain simplicity. Generally, letterpress projects are only a couple colors. There are no slick gradients or drop shadows. We hear all the time that anything looks better letterpress. We'd say this is because letterpress makes people simplify the design.

HOW LONG DOES IT TAKE FOR YOU TO COMPLETE AN AVERAGE PROJECT?

Most projects can be printed in less than ten business days. (But we can do a same-day rush when someone has lots of cash burning a hole in their pocket and accidentally forgets they are getting married and needs the invites tomorrow. Hey, it happens.)

WAS IT DIFFICULT FINDING YOUR FIRST PRESS?

It was (and still is) relatively easy to find old Chandler and Price platen jobbing presses because they are heavy (1,000 to 1,500 pounds) and difficult to move. Most people who want them don't have a place to put them and use them. Often they are found in basements. I made the mistake of moving my first machine there. I put it in our basement between the car box and the boiler. It took six guys to slide the press down heavy boards into the basement. Then we moved a year later. We had to

have a tow truck back up to our door to help winch it out.

TALK ABOUT THE PRESS YOU USE IN THE STUDIO:

Nowadays, we use mostly Heidelberg Windmills and Cylinder presses in our daily production. We do some hand-fed work on our Vandercook proofing press, and we even keep one of those Chandler and Price platen there.

WHAT SORT OF PROJECTS HAVE YOU PRINTED?

Posters, CD's, wedding invites, business cards, folders, letterhead, napkins, coasters, and did we say wedding invitations?

WHAT DO YOU LOVE THE MOST ABOUT THE LETTERPRESS?

Speaking as both a designer and letterpress printer for the past decade, I'd say letterpress is still gaining momentum as a production method. When people get a letterpress-printed business card handed to them and turn it over in their hand, they feel it, look at it closer, and consider it. It literally buys extra seconds in their hands. It is this notable pause that exemplifies letterpress printing as a breath of fresh air. As our society increases our digital communications and time spent in front of glowing screens, letterpress printing becomes an even more unique counterpoint. It is something we both see and feel. We are tactile beings, and letterpress's tangibility makes us connect. [AL]

www.emletterpress.com

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