CAXTONIAN

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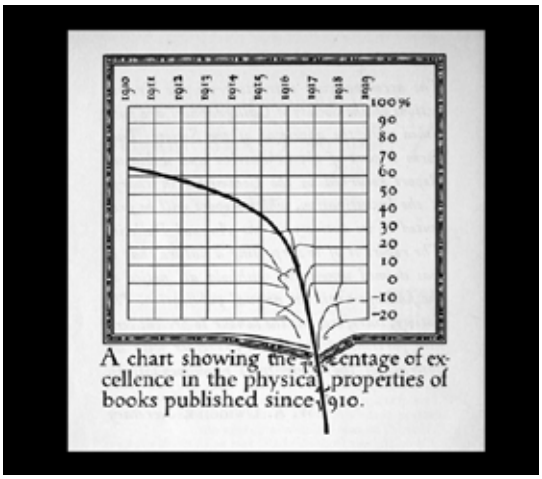
Twentieth Century Book Design

(Minus the name-dropping)

Michael Russem

In 1919, William A. Dwiggins published *Extracts from An Investigation into the Physical Properties of Books as they are at present published*. It was fairly critical of publishers and unions for putting profits and jobs ahead of the craft of bookmaking. It was also critical of the public for being distracted by automobiles, the motion-picture drama, professional athletics, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. The publishers, the printers, and the public were deemed to be collectively responsible for the decline of printing and standards of book production. And the decline of those standards was represented by the chart at right.



A chart showing the percentage of excellence in the physical properties of books published since 1910.

I'm not entirely sure how accurate this chart is. Dwiggins doesn't give any sources. And it only covers the years 1910 through 1919. I suspect it would have been the contention of many early 20th century designers that things would only get worse – not because things actually got worse, but because grouches always think things are getting worse and that the Golden Age has already passed. And being a grouch is far more intellectually provocative than being a cheerleader.

Now, the thing about this chart and the general consensus of certain book designers and practitioners of printing is that it encourages the notion that as book *manufacturing* moved away from the *handcrafts*, book design must have suffered. When applied to 20th century book design, this assumption that *the machine is bad* and *the hand is good* overlooks two things.

First: Over the 20th century, the number of books published went up, up, and up. In 1910, *Publisher's Weekly* announced that an unprecedented number of books had been published in America: 13,000 – of which 11,000 were new titles. In 1996, 63,000 books were published.

That area in red (in the left illustration below) is what's covered by Dwiggins's chart. That downward trend is World War I. The next dip is the Depression, and the next, World War II. Still, it's clear to see that book publishing had a pretty good run. According to Dwiggins' chart, however, that's a tremendous number of poorly made books.

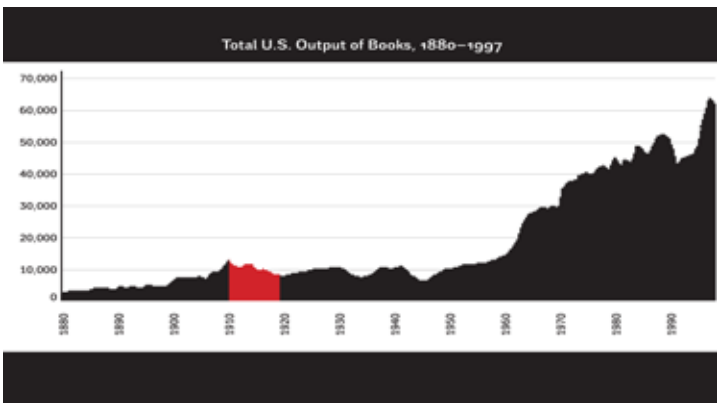
Over that same period the illiteracy rate in the U.S. decreased dramatically. Now, what counts for illiteracy is a tricky thing, and quite frankly I had a miserable time deciphering all of the charts and graphs. Over the course of one hundred years of surveys, the definition of illiteracy changed from time to time. But this much is true: A greater percentage of Americans had the ability to read at the end of the 20th century than at the beginning. And all those people were reading books that Dwiggins's chart would suggest were poorly made.

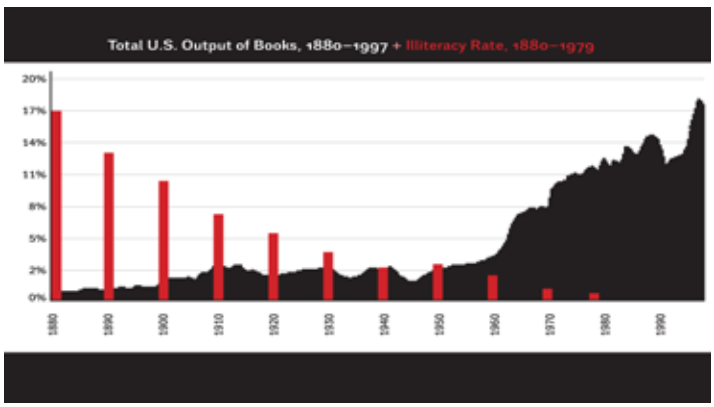
How could so many books be published, sold, and read, facilitating an increase in literacy, if production standards were so miserable, so feeble, so unconducive to reading?

Well, books simply weren't that bad. The standards and expectations of the readers simply adapted and changed. The old-time crafters would, I think, suggest that our stan-

See ***BOOK DESIGN****, page 2*

Michael Russem is a book designer, proprietor of the Kat Ran Press, and a former president of the Society of Printers, a bibliophilic group in Boston. This was originally delivered as a talk on March 14, 2014, at the 2014 History of Art Series at the Center for Book Arts, New York City.





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BOOK DESIGN, from page 1

dards were *lowered*. I know I would have suggested that back when I was a letterpress bigot. Now I would argue that over the course of the 20th century our standards were *simplified*. Aided by advances in printing technology, publishers and designers worked to eliminate what was not necessary, and in doing so they made books more available and more useful.

By the end of the century there were fewer distractions *in* books and more people *reading* them. That sounds like a symptom of Good Design. When talking about book design, however, people often limit that discussion to *typography* and the *architecture of the page*. I think a better way to think about book design is not to stop with the arrangement of ink on paper, but to consider how well a book *works*: *How well does it do its job? How well does it facilitate the act of reading and the communication of ideas?* And that is not determined by typography alone. The paper and binding are just as essential. The grain of the paper should be running in the right direction and not be too textured, precious, or heavy. The binding should be light and unobtrusive.

But what was considered a well-designed book in the 1990s was very different from what was considered good at the turn of the last century. In the early 20th century the good books were printed on heavy, textured paper with deckles. Bindings were heavy and bulky, decorated, and precious. By the end of the century a well-designed book was light and portable and without excessive decoration. And it makes sense that books made 100 years apart would be so different because the tools and materials changed so drastically over that time.

The design of any book or object or tool is the product of two things: the available tools of manufacture and the expectations of the user – in our case, the expectations of the *reader*. The abilities of the tools move faster than the tastes of the reader. Designers and engineers often know what a user wants and needs before the user does. And that's a *primary function* of the book designer: *to anticipate the needs of a reader*.

Consider the evolution from the stone tablet to the scroll, or the codex to the Kindle. They all have the same basic purpose, but they fulfill that purpose in different ways in order to best meet the expectations of the readers of their time period.

Early in the 20th century, designers and readers expected a book to look like it had been made by hand because they were following an era in which *everything* was made by hand – or at least more actual hands were involved. So we had a lot of books manufactured to allude to their handpress ancestry. Early on, books had more character as a result of the tools being less consistent.

There was also more showing off in book design because there were so many people involved who needed to justify their place in the process of production. By the end of the 20th century there were fewer hands involved in the manufacturing of books and fewer opportunities for multiple visions to be imposed. Machines were doing more of the work – and there were fewer machines in fewer plants.

Book designers become full-service operators and they hand over a file for a completely conceived book to a printer – who more often than not does the binding as well. A book is now put together under only two roofs.

In the early 20th century each task in a book's production was often carried out by a different plant – and every plant had highly specialized machines and operators. Even the printing of illustrated books was often carried out by more than one printer – one for the text, one for the plates. By the end of the century, with the work being carried out by fewer hands and presses more versatile, books are smoother, regular, and more consistent. They are more likely to represent the vision of one person – and when done well, that vision is more likely to be aligned with that of the book's author. There are fewer mixed messages, fewer distractions. Books made at the end of the 20th century are simply easier to read because they are *made for reading* – not for showing off.

Now, this is certainly not to suggest that showing off ceased to exist in late 20th century book design. And I also don't mean to suggest that all late 20th century books were well made. They weren't. Just as they aren't now. There is always rubbish design – just as there always *has been* rubbish design and there always *will be* rubbish design. But the rubbish of the late 20th century was made with the *tools* of the late 20th century for the *readers* of the late 20th century. The readers were familiar with the materials and comfortable with these books. And by *these books*, I mean the paperback. The paperback is the

book of our time. Well, not *our* time. The book of *our* time is the ebook on a Kindle or iPhone. But way back 15 years ago, the paperback was king.

Now, in the scheme of things, a paperback is not a great book form. It's not pretty. It does not conform to the ideals of the Book Beautiful. It's the Book Useful – a glorified pad of paper. But that's all it *needs* to be. Think back to 1999 and recall how people read their paperbacks *everywhere*.

Subways, parks, restaurants, in bed, in the bathroom. There were more people reading books everywhere because the paperback was a simple tool designed to do a simple task. They weren't precious things that needed to be cradled or kept in special rooms. We were so relaxed with books that we tossed them in bags and pockets and brought them everywhere we went. We were comfortable with these books. And we are comfortable with things that are well designed. Typographically, they may not have been anything special, but they did their job: They facilitated the act of reading and the communication of ideas. That's good design.

Because books of the early 20th century were produced in smaller quantities for fewer people, they were more often precious things. When newer methods of manufacturing allowed for books to be produced in greater quantities at better prices, their design had to change for two reasons: the Economics of Business and the Audience for Books. The former seems obvious: One can't dilly-dally with decoration when there are units to move. And when one is moving units to *anyone*, the design has to appeal to *everyone*. Not everyone likes flowers and stuff on pages, but everyone likes letters on them. So over time, designers eliminated the *stuff* and stuck to what was essential to the task at hand. Paper was smoother for faster printing. Pages were trimmed to eliminate irregularity. The book becomes more uniform and less distracting. Typographically and physically it is a simpler, more efficient tool than its forebears. It's better for reading and better for the reader.

So that covers books for reading. Books for looking at are another story. Art books change even more radically over the 20th century. Early on museum and gallery publications were rarely illustrated. They were often checklists of works on display. All text. Not many pictures. And when there were pictures they were printed as crude letterpress halftones. Or there were illustrations of the artworks being discussed – by which I mean drawings or engravings meant to *illustrate*, not *reproduce* the artwork.

When works of art were reproduced by halftone, they were limited to the odd page of slick coated paper here or there or segregated in a section of plates in the back. The printers, presses, and papers were not conducive to printing type and illustrations at the same time. One read page after page or an entire book about art before coming upon any *actual* art. Often one could not simultaneously read and see the work being referred to. It was akin to going to a museum and seeing art in one gallery and the labels in another down the hall. The limits of the technology were a terrific distraction.

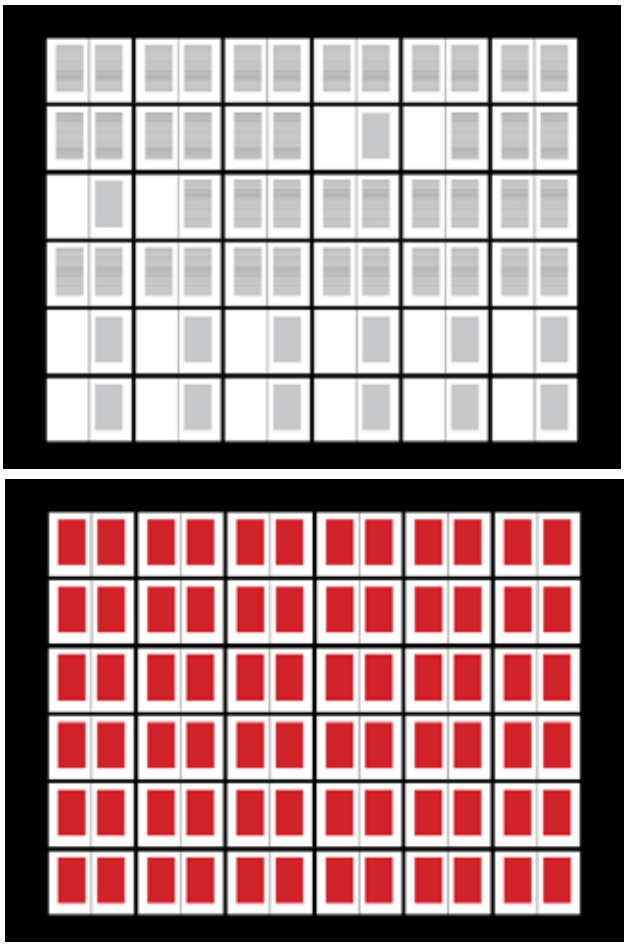
The alternative was to *illustrate* the artwork with engravings or line drawings that could be printed along with the type. Certainly this was more conducive to reading and understanding what was being discussed, but the illustration could be no more than a cheap imitation of the original. This was a technique often used for books about architecture, historical art, and ancient artifacts, whose makers were not around to contend with.

With the introduction of offset printing, artworks could be reproduced with greater fidelity, but as texts were still printed by letterpress these reproductions were still consigned to black and white art ghettos or to token pages scattered throughout.

With the abandonment of letterpress as the primary method of putting ink onto paper it became easier to integrate text and images, all printed on the same paper, making for a unified experience. Black and white was still the primary method of printing, so now color was sent to the odd page or the back of the book.

Finally, multicolor presses become the norm, and text and color reproductions are printed as one. The reader gets an accurate representation not only of the art but of what the author or curator has in mind, as careful designers are able to arrange images and texts so that an artwork is never too far from where it is referenced. Or, with the ability to affordably have page after page of full-page reproductions the art book becomes more like the experience of being in a gallery and is potentially closer to the intentions of the artist or curator.

The progression in printing processes to the point where full color on every page is a reasonable option has made real "art books" possible purchases for almost everyone.



So the text-driven book becomes more streamlined, allowing readers to develop pictures in the theaters of their own minds and read comfortably anywhere. By the end of the 20th century books have fewer distractions imposed by the designers. Art books, however, become more complicated, but better approximate the experience of attending a museum, gallery, or studio. Fewer distractions are imposed by the technology.

Either way, advances in printing technology facilitated better design and better books. There were missteps along the way, of course, but on average things got better for everyone involved. Well, not for printers, I suppose. Things don't look too good for them. But for readers and designers, the technology of the 20th century brought us away from ornamental silliness with better design for better reading.

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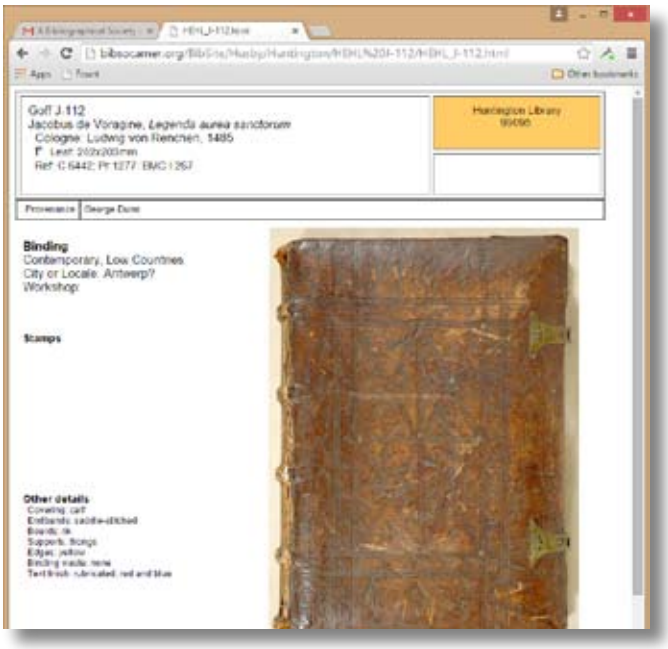
Fun Stuff Out There on the Web

Especially tailored for the bookish

BibSite

bibsocamer.org/bibsite-home

The Bibliographical Society of America maintains an archive called BibSite, that shares the fruit of bibliographic efforts which might interest other people but that have not reached the level of scholarship that demands physical publication. I've pictured a page from their "Bookbindings on Incunables in American Library Collections," which allows you to travel (in your desk chair) to important libraries and see what ancient bindings they hold, organized by country of creation. But that is just a sample. There is a union list of book auction catalogs from the 19th century, an article discussing the evolution of the borzoi device used in Knopf Publishing's promotion and packaging, and a printing history of Chairman Mao's "Quotations," just to skim the surface.



Universal Short Title Catalog and its ilk

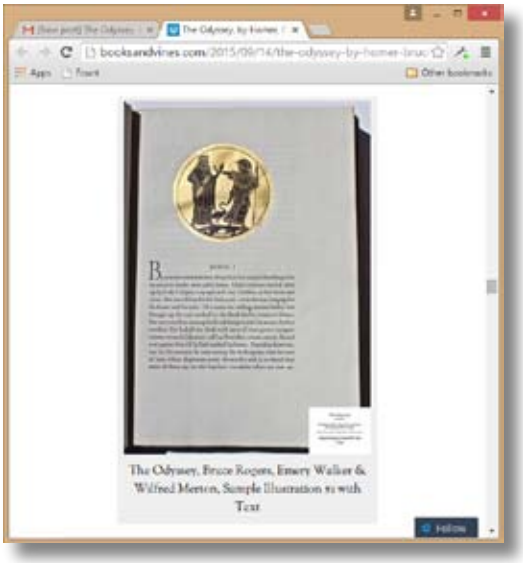
ustc.ac.uk, www.worldcat.org, etc

Applying electronic methods has allowed librarians and bibliographers to approach completeness asymptotically. They know they'll never find every copy of a book, or even every edition. But because these things are now kept in databases, new information can be instantly added. When the "universe" is finite, as it is with the Short Title Catalog (since no more books are being published before 1800), *nearly* everything can be found.

Digital Collections of the Library of Congress

www.loc.gov/library/libarch-digital.html

That's an inside of the Bemidji *Daily Pioneer* from 1915. Imagine a time when lead pencils merited display ads, and stationers provided "Free Pencil Sharpening Stations." Want to see the 300 glass plate negatives the Wright Brothers gave the LOC? WPA posters? Civil War photographs? Picking tobacco in 1940? It's all here.



Books and Vines, The Whole Book Experience

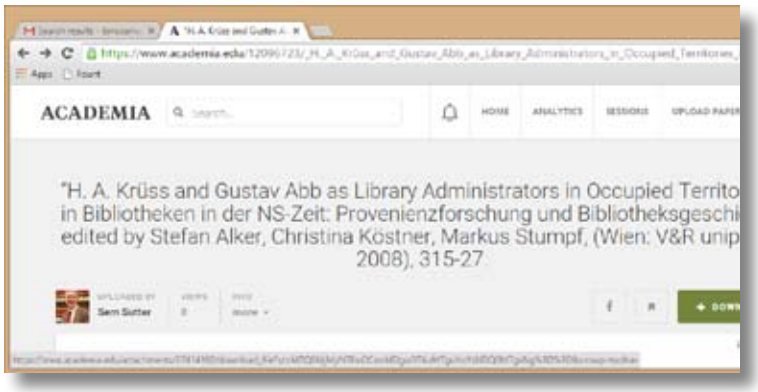
booksandvines.com,
www.thewholebookexperience.com

If the book arts float your boat, these two blogs should be interesting. Both provide detailed reviews of limited-edition books, both current and historic. (Books and Vines is notable for its beautiful and detailed photographs of the books.) The amazing thing about the authors of both sites (B&V's Chris Adamson and WBE's J. Davis) is that they actually *read* their beautiful books.

Fine Books and Collections

www.finebooksmagazine.com

I confess I took a dim view of the magazine when it first appeared, but the folks who run it have kept plugging and by now there is a lot of information available on their website. Generally their facts are right, even if you don't agree with every opinion.



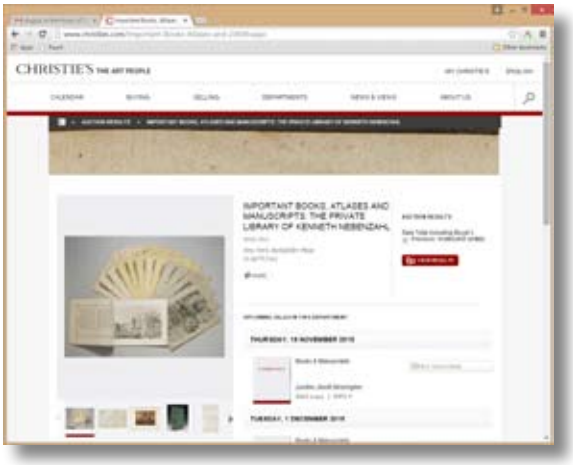
Academia, the Web archive

www.academia.edu

Perhaps you thought academic papers were only available on expensive paid archives that you had to be a college professor to get your school to pay for. It may not all be at Academia.edu, but there sure is a lot. You can check up on what fellow Caxtonians have shared (Susan Hanes, Sem Sutter, and Martin Antonetti are the posting members I happen to have discovered), or even what your college roommate is now up to. Or use it to learn more about topics that interest you: if you "follow" a topic, you'll learn when new articles are posted. – *Robert McCamant*

All those book dealers

We all have the ones we look at. For me, it's Moleiro, Oak Knoll, Vamp & Tramp. One could spend hours on the Christie's site when Nebenzahl's maps were about to be auctioned last year. Not that I ever end up buying much, but it can be fun to dream.



Book- and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

Compiled by Lisa Pevtzow

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

Send your listings to lisa.pevtzow@sbcglobal.net

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-443-3600: **"Tools of the Trade: 19th- and 20th-Century Architectural Trade Catalogs,"** through October 13.

Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, 847-835-8202: **"Ampelography: I heard It Through the Grapevine,"** through November 8.

Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark Street, Chicago, 312-266-2077: **"Railroaders: Jack Delano's Homefront Photography"** (the federal Office of War Information assigned photographer Jack Delano to take pictures of the nation's railways during World War II), through January 31, 2016. **"Chicago Authored"** (works by contemporary Chicago authors and the literary giants of past generations), opening October 17.

Columbia College Center for Book and Paper Arts, 1104 S. Wabash Avenue, Chicago, 312-269-6630: **"Leslie Dill: Faith and the Devil"** (large-scale installation investigates evil and underlying faith in the world through words stenciled on fabric), through December 23.

DePaul Art Museum, 935 W. Fullerton, Chicago, 773-325-7506: **"The Andy Archetype: Works from the Permanent Collection"** (Warhol objects from the permanent collection), through December 20.

Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State Street, Chicago, 312-747-4300: **"Called to the Challenge: The Legacy of Harold Washington,"** (an overview of Washington's life and projects as mayor) Harold Washington Exhibit Hall, ninth floor, ongoing.

Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Ave., Chicago, 312-280-2660: **"The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now"** (links the vibrant legacy of the 1960s African American avant-garde to current art and culture), through November 22.

The Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton Street, Chicago, 312-943-9090: **"Stagestruck City: Chicago's Theater Tradition and the Birth of the Goodman"** (traces evolution of Chicago's theater tradition through posters, programs, scripts, letters, and photographs, Stages), December 31.

Pritzker Military Museum and Library, 104 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-374-9333: **"SEAL The Unspoken Sacrifice"** (features photographs from Stephanie Freid-Perenchio and Jennifer Walton's 2009 book and artifacts on loan from the Navy SEAL Museum), ongoing.

Smart Museum, University of Chicago, 5550 S. Greenwood Avenue, Chicago, 773-702-0200: **"To See in Black and White: German and Central European Photography, 1920s-1950s"** (selection of German and Central European photography by Walter Peterhans, Hannah Höch, František Drtikol, Jaromír Funke, and others), October 1 to January 10.

University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library Special Collections Research Center Exhibition Gallery, 1100 E. 57th Street, Chicago, 773-702-8705: **"Poetic Associations: The Nineteenth-Century English Poetry Collection of Dr. Gerald N. Wachs"** (nearly 900 titles, many of them presented by the author to other writers, friends, or family members, illuminates the life and works of English poets), through December 31.

Columbia College / Leslie Dill
Big Gal Faith, interlocking words and images.

University of Chicago / Poetic Associations
Left: Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). "The Prince's Progress and Other Poems." London: Macmillan and Co., 1866. Right: H. B. W. Garrick. "India, a Descriptive Poem." London: Trübner & Co., 1889.

Smart Museum / To See in Black and White
Walter Peterhans, Dead Hare (Toter Hase), 1929, anonymous gift, 2007.118.1. © Estate of Walter Peterhans.

Caxtonians Collect: Rob Carlson

Interviewed by Robert McCamant

Although Rob (not Bob!) Carlson has always loved books, reading, and works on paper in general, and although he attended library school in Kalamazoo, Michigan, he has never really been a librarian. He knows plenty of them, is partnered with one (Paul Gehl '88), and spent most of his working life working at the American Library Association (ALA), but his field actually is computing and technology.

His first job out of library school was in Laredo, Texas, where he ran the education department library at Laredo State University. His major accomplishment in Laredo was to convert two "media rooms" to computer labs – one IBM, one Apple. This led to his career in technology.

ALA brought him to Chicago in 1986. He started at ALA on his 30th birthday, working in the publishing division (long before Don Chatham!) administering and marketing an e-mail and database system for librarians. This was in the days of dial-up modems, mind you: people sent messages in words, not images, or – unthinkable! – video. He also created ALA's first website, starting in 1995. He does not have fond memories of the project. "Getting a large organization to agree on a single embodiment is akin to trying to herd cats. You do not make friends in the process of getting the job done."

Carlson began his life in Bismarck, North Dakota. "Bismarck may be the capital of North Dakota," he explains, "but when I was growing up it was nowhere near even its present population of 61,000. Oil has entirely transformed the area. When I was growing up it was a small town where just about everybody could know each other." He went to college at the University of North Dakota, located in Grand Forks.

His background in technology has been very helpful to the Caxton Club. He was instrumental in the development and management of the Club's present website, and his efforts in testing and importing data for our Wild Apricot Web membership system made its adoption possible. In addition, he served in the Council's Class of 2009, which meant that he had to live through the agony of our removal from the Mid-day Club and the eventual settling in at Union League, with all the uncertainty in between.

photograph by Robert McCamant

In recent years, Carlson has moved from being an avid reader to being something of a collector. The area of specialty could be called "works on paper," with an implied "art" and a form that can vary from framed drawing to multivolume book. Working with Gehl, the two have developed a constellation of friends in the book-and-paper arts, and acquiring a sampling of work from these friends has proved to be a pleasant avocation.

He took me around the apartment they share and pointed out some of the treasures. Audrey Niffenegger has been a long-term friend, and they have many copies of the novels which have made her world-famous, as well as the hand-made works that she started by creating. She shows her work at Printworks Gallery, and they have collected a few of the other artists the gallery represents, including graphite and silverpoint artist Robert Schultz. They have a pencil drawing by Schultz of Adam, with an apple in one hand and a snake tattooed around his bicep, on their living room wall which pictures him shielding his eyes from the light with other his hand. They have positioned the figure exactly under a floodlight exactly so it seems that it is their floodlight he is shielding himself from!

Midwestern book arts are well represented, with works by Caren Heft (Arcadian Press), Jeff Morin (sailorBOYpress), and Tracy Honn (Silver Buckle Press) from Wisconsin; Caxtonian Craig Jobson; Caxton scholarship winner Daniel Mellis; Ken Botnick (Emdash); Shawn Sheehy (Chicago pop-up artist); and Paulette Myers-Rich (Traffic Street Press).

Carlson and Gehl have become good friends with New York book artist Russell Maret and his wife, the photographer Annie Schlechter. I noticed several of Maret's books in their collection, and I was not surprised to see a complete set of the cookbooks Schlechter has illustrated for the American Academy of Rome.

They are active participants in Maret's ongoing *Hungry Bibliophiles*, another cookbook project. This cookbook contains recipes contributed by book collectors, makers, librarians, and dealers and is letterpress-printed on a special sized paper created by Timothy Barrett at the University of Iowa. Each contributor has received a copy of the book, and is spending a year cooking through it, having been instructed to annotate and illustrate the recipes as much as possible. The books will be temporarily returned to Maret for an exhibit in 2016.

Carlson and Gehl love to travel, especially to Italy, where Gehl has ongoing research into early printing. "We've enjoyed almost every place we've been in Italy," Carlson confesses. But they find themselves returning most to Rome, where they have developed a cadre of friends. "When we go, we sometimes have to be judicious about who we tell we're coming, since there is never enough time to see everyone," he says.

Carlson joined the club in 2003, nominated by Norma B. Rubovits and seconded by Lydia Cochrane.

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Bookmarks...

Luncheon: Friday, October 9, Union League Club
Caroline Szylowicz on "Proust and What He Read"

A popular feature in the *New York Times* book review is a column that asks authors about their reading preferences and influences. Unfortunately, it would take a time machine to interview Marcel Proust, whose *In Search of Lost Time* or *Remembrance of Things Past* is considered one of the 20th century's best books.We may not have a time machine, but we do have the next best thing – an engaging and entertaining scholar who has read the many books about the books Proust read, and who can share how we know which books he read, how he read them, and what became of the books themselves. Whether you're a Proust enthusiast or novice, or just enjoy a great literary detective story, this generously illustrated talk is for you. Presenting will be Caxtonian Caroline Szylowicz, Associate Professor, Kolb-Proust Librarian, and Curator of Rare Books at the University of Illinois in Urbana. You'll want to attend the luncheon to learn about her own six degrees of separation in relation to Proust (not to mention Dumas). Here's a hint: she was born near Paris, studied music and literature at the Sorbonne, and received her library training at the Catholic University of Paris.

October luncheon: Union League Club, 65 W. Jackson Boulevard. Luncheon buffet (main dining room on six) opens at 11:30 am; program (in a different room, to be announced) 12:30-1:30. Luncheon is $32. For reservations call 312-255-3710 or e-mail caxtonclub@newberry.org. ***Reservations suggested by noon Wednesday*** *for Friday lunch.*

Dinner: Wednesday, October 21, Union League Club
Anna Sigrídur Arnar, "The Transformation of Print Culture"

On October 21, at the Union League Club, Anna Sigrídur Arnar, Professor of Art History at Minnesota State University – Moorhead, will discuss her book *The Book as Instrument: Stéphane Mallarmé, the Artist's Book, and the Transformation of Print Culture* and her current research on contemporary book arts, which demonstrates how the Symbolists' use of books anticipated our modern interactive media and the evolving social dimensions of book culture. She will explore the link between these ideas and her current contemporary book-art works, which have been displayed in such places as the Venice Biennale.

October Dinner: Union League Club, 65 W. Jackson Boulevard. The evening will follow this order:
Social gathering: 5:00 - 6:00 pm
Club announcements and program: 6:00 - 6:15 pm
Presentation: 6:15 pm
Dinner immediately to follow

Program only: Free, but please reserve so we can prepare appropriate seating. Dinner: $60; ***reservations are required*** *and must be received or canceled no later than noon on October 16. Drinks, $5 - $9.*

Beyond October...

NOVEMBER LUNCHEON
November 13 will be revolutionary! Ellen Clark is library director of the Society of the Cincinnati. She'll talk about the role printing played in the American Revolution and reveal why so many collectible materials from that era are striking in content but not in appearance.

NOVEMBER DINNER
November 18, Mark Dimunation, Chief of the Rare Book and Special Collections Division at the Library of Congress (he manages the largest collection of rare books in North America) will discuss his "Life in the Stacks" – the ten seminal moments of his professional career.

DECEMBER LUNCHEON
Roosevelt Redux! It's the eagerly awaited sequel to Joseph Ornig's talk about Teddy Roosevelt, our most prolific presidential penman. Join us December 13 for an illustrated journey with Roosevelt the explorer to experience his exciting and harrowing river journey through Brazil.

DECEMBER DINNER
Dinner with wine for $48! It's our annual Revels, including fund-raising auction, which will take place at the Newberry Library on Wednesday, December 16. Get your auction items to Dan Crawford at the Newberry!