

A WAR OF A DIFFERENT TYPE

Arion Press may have Moby Dick, Shakespeare and the word of God on their side. But they also occupy 10,000 square feet of prime San Francisco real estate. And there's the rub.

BY PAUL RAZZELL

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FOR OVER 20 YEARS San Francisco's Arion Press has held a prominent place in the typographic firmament. Innovative design, imaginative combinations of texts and artwork, and immaculate letterpress production have made Arion's books centerpieces in many private and public collections around the world. In 1979, for example, Arion astonished many dealers and collectors with their monumental handset, limited edition of Moby Dick, which bore an unprecedented price tag of \$1,000. A copy can now fetch \$4500, and it was recently named one of the hundred most beautiful books of the 20th century by the Grolier Club of New York, a society of fine book historians.

What makes Arion's books unique—apart from their literary qualities and design—is that compositors set each word individually in lead type. The printer then forces inked type into the paper—wonderfully physical process. The result is that words have an embossed feel to them—a tactile effect that can't be achieved by any contemporary printing method. The press produces two or three titles each year. Many of their books are literary texts—they have published Shakespeare, James Joyce and Nabokov, among others—and all reflect the personality of Arion's publisher and designer, Andrew Hoyem.

At age sixty-four, Hoyem is more ambitious than ever. In fact, he is currently overseeing production of the largest project the press has ever undertaken: a large folio limited edition of the Bible in the New Revised Standard Version, the first lectern Bible published in this translation. This edition will contain all the books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament. Given the vast changes to printing technology in the last fifty years, this is almost certainly the last time a folio Bible will be produced by letterpress from lead type. Bound in full leather, in a cloth-covered box with hand-illuminated initials, you can expect to pay \$11,000.

Unfortunately, Bibles, which are often referred to as “the printer's Everest,” are not the only mountain Hoyem must climb. Arion has lost the lease on its 10,000 square-foot space on Bryant Street in the now trendy South of Market area in San Francisco, and their landlords, Fisher-Friedman Associates, say they must move by June 30, 2000 for renovations.

But Hoyem can read between the lines.

“[Fisher-Freidman] claim they've scheduled to clear the entire building for seismic retro-fitting, which was made necessary by the city,” Hoyem says. “However their actual deadline is not at the end of this year. It's actually in 2004. Their real reason for doing this is to remodel the building to maximize income. And there are all kinds of start-up dot-corns around who would be open to paying at least four times as much as we're paying.” There goes the neighborhood.

San Francisco's real estate values have soared in recent years as landlords and developers have revamped once industrial areas to suit the tastes—and budgets—of high-tech firms who prefer the city to Silicon Valley. “Until last year the landlords were never able to rent the upstairs floors of this building for anything other than a sweatshop,” says Hoyem. “Now, light industry has been driven out of San Francisco—almost overnight.”

The move of the Press in the midst of work on the Bible would be more than just an inconvenience. “We’d have to spend half a million dollars out of pocket just to move. And that cost cannot be justified in business terms,” says Hoyem firmly. He sees only one feasible solution and that is to close their typefoundry facility, M&H Type.

The eighty-five year-old firm was purchased by Arion in the 1980s. M&H is the last large manufacturer of lead type in the country and the threat of its closure has many printers around the world worried: a printer without type is like a photographer without film. “It would be dire straits for printers,” says Deke Sonnichen of San Francisco’s Roxburghe Club, a group of fine printers and book collectors. “It is unthinkable to contemplate the dissolution of this entity.”

The lead type medium, the sole method of printing books and newspapers for over four hundred years, was supplanted in the 1960s by the cheaper, cleaner, less bulky offset method, which did not involve lead type. At this time old presses and type were melted down for scrap metal and the digital era was just over the horizon. Today, there is still a flourishing niche market for books printed the old fashioned way. But the artist-printers who make them must be able to buy lead type.

Hoyem has been negotiating with Fisher-Freidman to extend the lease until he has printed the Bible. “But we’re not counting on it. They’re not known for being kindly. Quite the opposite. It’s entirely possible they will say ‘you have to be out at the end of your lease’.”

In which case he must have a back-up plan. Hoyem’s campaign to save his facilities includes seeking heritage status, non-profit status and, of course financial aid to make the move possible. “All the time I’m thinking how this irreplaceable facility can be kept together so that other people can benefit from it, use it, and learn from it.” Already the University of California has expressed interest in joining with Arion, but only to the extent of preserving the publishing side of the business.

Institutional affiliation, however, can be a double-edged sword. Fine printers who work with lead type worry that institutions will turn the casting machines into the unthinkable: museum pieces. Crispin Elsted, a Canadian publisher who works in the lead type tradition warns, “The danger is if M&H Type went to an institution, people would only be able to look at it. Presses will still need to purchase type.”

Everyone agrees that the dissolution of M&H Type would be a terrible historic loss. “It isn’t just that it is a foundry,” says Elsted, “they have a rare collection of equipment.” Indeed, M&H is widely regarded as a necessary resource for the heritage of letterpress printing.

Janice Braun, President of the Colophon Club, a San Francisco-based organization of bibliophiles, collectors and book artists, sees Arion’s eviction as “very indicative of what’s been happening in the

real estate market in San Francisco. It's short-sighted and will turn the area into Anytown U.S.A. You know you're in San Francisco when you see places like Arion Press and M&H Type, and encounter all the special people who work there. What will replace them? Starbucks?"

And what do the landlords have to say? "Our landlords are being confronted at cocktail parties by people who say, 'How can you drive out the Arion Press and M&H Type?'," says Hoyem, "but they stiffen. They're tough." Robert Fisher or Rodney Friedman, Hoyem's landlords weren't available for comment but Fisher-Friedman's Marketing Director Irene Lauren was very clear about their position: "Arion Press were told three to five years ago when they renewed their lease that it was not going to be renewed again and that the building was going to be retrofitted and there's not much more than that to be said."

Still, Hoyem is confident, even optimistic. "Being in business you're confronted with problems all the time. This one just happens to be a little bit bigger." He knows he will need the help of donors, legislators, the Mayor's office as well as public support to find a permanent home for his press and foundry. But his most eloquent appeal is to the sense of beauty in all of us.

"We're doing something that is substantial in a world that is increasingly insubstantial. I think there is definitely a place for this [kind of publishing]. It's not mainstream. But there's no particular reason why, if people find this beautiful and valuable, that some of us should not be able to carry on."

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