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# The Letterer



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*Dedicated to the craft of letterpress printing, a man melds traditional methods together with the digital world. His passion for metal type and appreciation for the intrinsic value of print is as relevant today as it was when he started printing 50 years ago*

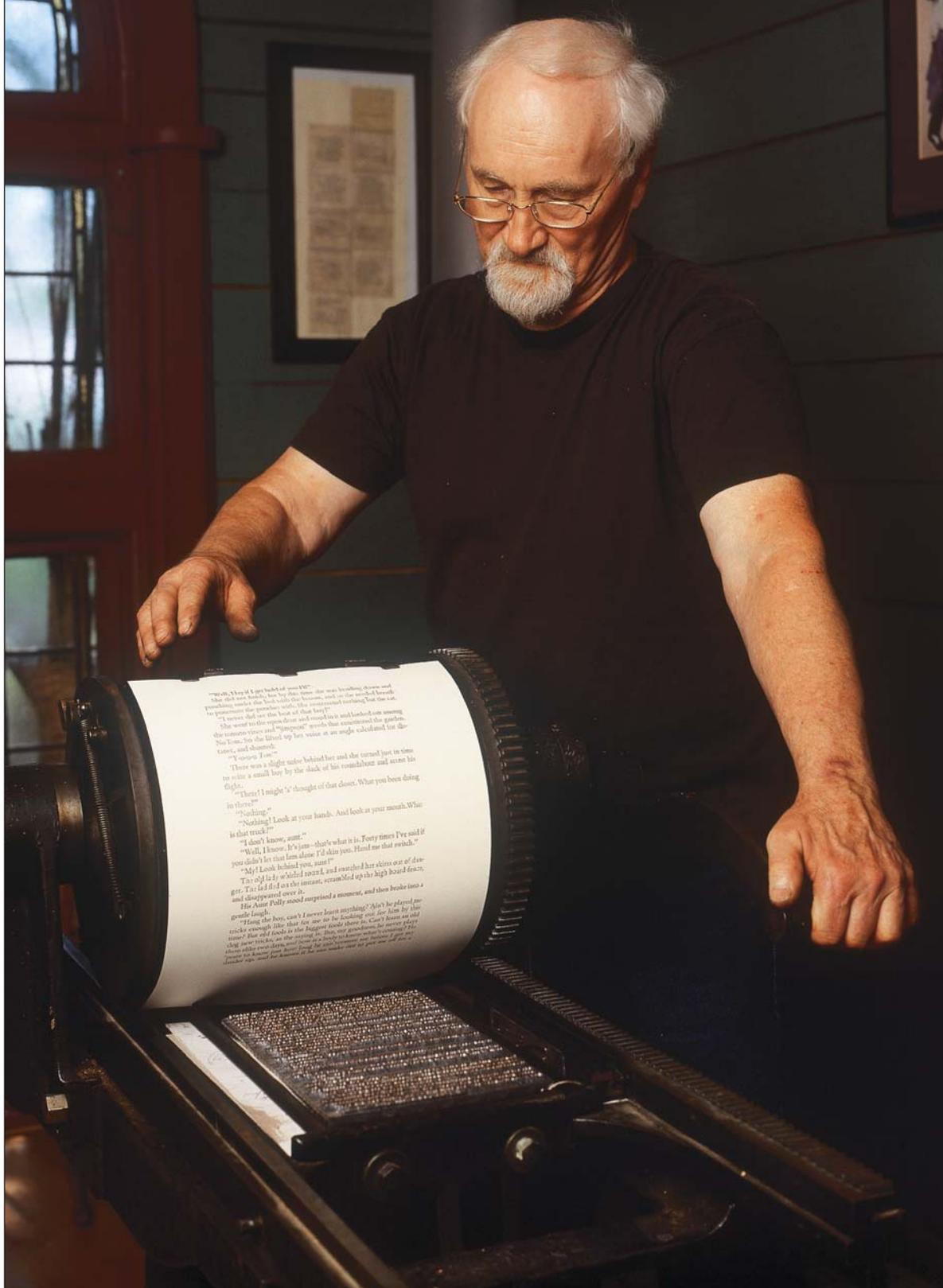


PHOTO: Marina Doolis

# THE LETTERER

**By Jodi Avery**

With a fresh hot metal burn on his hand, Jim Rimmer accepted a gift from a friend – two boxes of old moveable type. The friend was quitting her job in the printing industry, but she knew Rimmer would find a use for the old lead type.

A love of traditional type was not the only reason he was excited to receive the gift. Upon inspection of the fonts, Rimmer realized that he had actually been the craftsmen who cut one of the type sets in the box. He had made the moveable type when he was 19 years old. He is now approaching 70.

Rimmer practices one of the oldest forms of printing: letterpress. Like Latin to a linguist, letterpress is often thought of as a dead art to printers. But there are those few who use it, love it and promote its role in print. A role that touches printers, designers and a society that continues to consume millions of tons of print every year.

“There will always be a need for printed paper. It is a part of so

many aspects of life. People say they love to hold something in their hands when they read it. When it is printed using letterpress it just gives them something more to feel when they are holding onto the paper,” says Rimmer.

In his shop at the back of his home in New Westminster, a suburb of Vancouver, Rimmer designs, cuts and casts his own hot metal type under the name Pie Tree Press and Type Foundry. Producing hand-crafted books with his own illustrations and fonts, as well as other various projects, Rimmer has always appreciated the intrinsic value of print and the highly crafted work that goes into producing it – using both traditional and modern methods.

Now retired, Rimmer led a full career as a designer, illustrator and letterer. He first discovered letterpress when he was in high school and slowly became familiar with the trade in the late 1940s. After graduation, he entered an apprenticeship to learn the craft of printing. He

*Using the traditional methods of casting hot metal type, Rimmer indulges his passion for letterpress.*

worked in letterpress for more than a decade, until 1963 when he began taking night school courses in graphic design.

"The trade was beginning to evaporate. So I left letterpress as a trade but continued to practice it as a craft," says Rimmer. "When I was in my apprenticeship I realized how much of an art form printing was. So I just moved from the production of the art, to the designing of the art. But I've always had a collection of machines in my home."

Rimmer retired four years ago. Just before his retirement he was a line-type operator for a newspaper called the *North Shore Citizen*. "I didn't quit just because I was 65. It was just good timing. I was living as an illustrator and letterer and that kind of work just completely disappeared. The computer changed the industry so much that if you weren't strong on the computer you had nothing to offer."

Computers and technology were the nails in the coffin of many letterpress printers. With the handcrafted nature of the trade, it was hard for some to keep up, and even harder for others to accept. "It's a changed world. The lettering dried up a few years before I retired. It used to keep me really busy. There was Rolling Stone-type lettering and a lot of Rococo lettering. But that just went away and I didn't know what was going on," says Rimmer.

At first he blamed technology for the lost utility of his talents. Illustrations were moving from assigned artists to stock CDs, and letterers had been completely replaced by software and modern presses.

"I soon saw that people were tweaking typography on the computer and getting by just fine. Students started learning it this way from the start and some didn't even know what hot type was. It was about this time that assigned illustrations started to dry, too. Computers were everywhere and seemed to be able to do all my jobs."

Technology, however, could not replace letterpress in Rimmer's life. To him it's a calming hobby more than a moneymaking venture. Despite the hot metal burns and the frustrations of mechanical errors, Rimmer, like many who have come across letterpress, loves the craft of hand printing and the fine-art results it produces. "I guess you could compare it to someone who's played a guitar all their life. At what point do you quit? You just continue to enjoy playing the guitar."

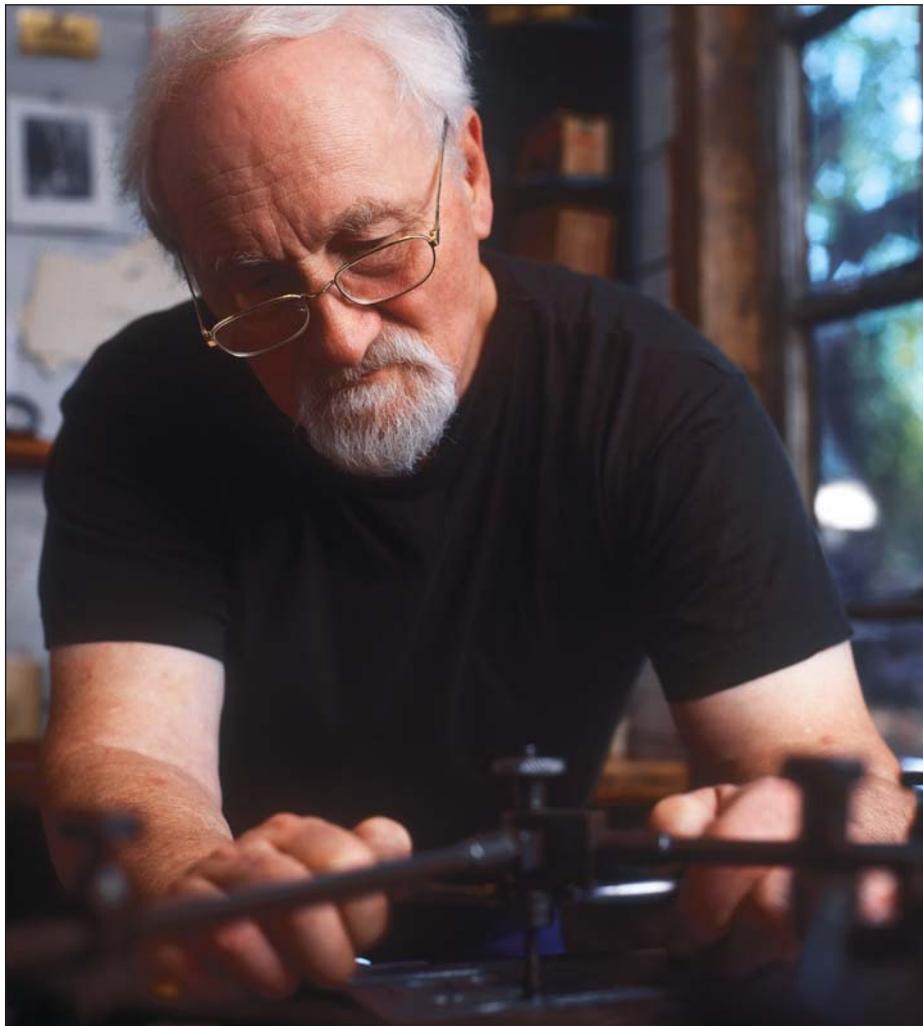
Despite Rimmer's initial hostility towards advancing technology and it overshadowing his career, he realized that fighting it was not the answer. He was thankful to have led a full career, which afforded him the ability to retire and concentrate on the collection of letterpresses in his home. "At first I was angry at digital everything. I thought it was ruining design and print, which actually it did for some. It has erased careers and if they haven't moved with it they have suffered. Letterers are on the scrap heap. They are displaced. But if you move with it, there is a way to keep the art involved and incorporate computers. In that way it has made improvements to the industry. There is some really fine printing coming out of high-tech presses these days."

Rimmer decided to be proactive and become more computer literate in his retirement, even if it was late in the game. He now designs type on a computer and feels he's "become a real whiz at it." With a digital library of 80

font variations, he hopes to sell some of his text designs. Realizing that "progression can't be stopped, no matter how much you don't want it to go ahead," Rimmer has incorporated the progress into his craft.

In the four short years since his retirement from graphic arts, Rimmer has seen the trends in the industry begin to move again. This time instead of away from letterpress and the traditional forms of type, he has seen a resurgence in interest from designers and modern printing companies.

"Ten years ago no designer would have asked for letterpress. Not at all. But now photopolymer plates make it possible to link up designs on the computer with let-



Cutting hot metal type is a long process, one that Rimmer finds calming. He will be speaking on his creation of Hannibal Oldstyle type at the ATypl conference.

terpresses. They have rediscovered it," says Rimmer.

"Most young people, and anyone under 40 is young to me, have not seen a lot of letterpress. Then people got looking at old books and saw the beautiful unique work that can be printed. And it's like any trend. Fifteen years ago people discovered wood cuts and people started doing them again. Some people were using programs to do them and others were doing them in Illustrator so they look like linocuts. The trend gets bigger. And letterpress is back in, even though it's mostly done in digital."

Applying the technology of photopolymer plates to traditional letterpress printing has proved to be a successful commercial venture for some printers. Rohner Press in Chicago is one such example. The plates are engraved from digital files, making letterpress more accessible for designers who rely heavily on computers – bringing letterpress into a modern commercial print realm.

Bruno Rohner started his commercial letterpress shop seven years ago and says his business has been doubling every year since. "We do coasters, posters and everything in between. Anything a designer can come up with that needs a letterpress look in their design.

Annual report covers are something that has become really popular, as those are a staple in the design community. They are always looking for new ways to get their work noticed," says Rohner.

Thick stocks, debossed type and a tactile feel are just some of the reasons Rohner is called upon for letterpress printing. "Letterpress has such a rich dimensional quality in today's use. Whereas, in its traditional form, letterpress should have no impression at all on the paper, making it look like today's offset. But it had evolved into the type of work we do," says Rohner. "The heavier and the harder you can hit it into the paper the better. It's like debossing and printing at the same time."

Rohner feels he has "gone backwards in some sense" by starting his own letterpress shop. But he has successfully combined the craft of traditional letterpress with the technological advancements in the industry, finding new ways to satisfy the need for print.

"Although our production is full of old presses, our frontend is completely digital. We receive most of our files electronically, then output them to plates in-house. And most of our presses are auto-fed. This modernized setup allows us to produce large jobs for clients." One such large job was 400,000 posters printed for Harley Davidson. The posters all contained line-art illustrations – an application that lends itself to letterpress printing.

Rohner started in the printing industry by working in his father's commercial sheetfed business, which specialized in art prints and reproductions. He appreciates the craft in an industry filled with technology. "You need to be a true craftsman to operate these presses. There are constant manipulations and tweakings that need to be made."

Rimmer agrees and feels all press operators, even those running the most high-tech automated presses, are craftsmen as well. But he doesn't like to use the photopolymer plates employed by the highly commercial Rohner Press. "The joy for me is handling the hot metal," he says. Rimmer, however, does print some commercial work when it comes his way.

He has worked mostly with Metropolitan Fine Printers, having known owner George Kallas for many years. Rimmer was involved with a self-promotion job Met printed. They reproduced the first page of Genesis in the Gutenberg Bible and commissioned Rimmer to print all the type using B42 – a front revived by two American printers from the original text.

Met was pleased with the outcome of the Gutenberg page. "We do a lot of specialty work and printing is such a craft both in how we do it today and letterpress. They really go hand-in-hand," says Nikos Kallas, operations manager at Met. "A lot of the designers know printing is a craft so they utilize it and do a lot of higher-end work. They like to look to different things to see how they can bring back the old with the new. There are so many different ways to apply letterpress to modern, commercial print." Last month, Rimmer quoted on three up-coming letterpress jobs for Met.

Designers rediscovering letterpress and its uses in modern design is a recent phenomena that both Kallas and Rimmer have witnessed. "We have a bunch of old cabinets with letterpressed work in them. One day we had designers in who were working on the Nike Presto campaign and they saw the cabinets and started to go

through and look at what was inside,” says Kallas. “They were inspired and decided to use letterpress in their design and used it to print the limited edition number on each box set. Before seeing the examples, they had no idea what letterpress could do and they worked it into their design on the fly.” The high-quality work produced by Met with the Nike Presto campaign won the printers the They Said It Couldn’t Be Done award at last year’s Benny competition (see *PrintAction*, August 2002). “My opinion is that designers just don’t know it’s there. It’s all a matter of educating them on the traditional processes.”

Rimmer feels designers may know that letterpress is out there, but the problem is many are not aware of how it can benefit some of their designs. Once they are introduced to its value as a printing process, they are more likely to use it. “I’ve spoken to a lot of art directors who are interested in using it. They can see that it makes another area for them to draw upon in their designs. They aren’t going to use it every time with every job. But a few times a year it will come up in their designs when it works.”

Through his own letterpress shop, Rimmer has been a part of that education process in the design world. He takes on co-op students from some graphics programs. Recently, he guided a student from the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design in Vancouver through the design and cutting process of the student’s own type face and the letterpress printing of a broadsheet using the hot metal type.

Letterpress-design enthusiasts are often the ones who pass their knowledge onto up-and-coming designers.

Peter Bartl and Jane Merks have been teaching graphic design for decades. A little more than a year ago, the couple quit teaching and opened their own letterpress shop in Balfour, British Columbia called pb+j press. They now print fine-art books, visual poetry and other artistic pieces (including a children’s pop-up book) using the 2,000-square-foot shop they built in their home.

During their careers in graphic design they both abandoned the traditional ways of typography for the more modern, computerized methods – only to one day return to moveable type and letterpress printing. “We left it in favour of computers and technological

into computers so early that we were the people who taught designers how to use the new technology. I know quite a few designers now who are just itching to get back into letterpress. Not because of a commercial entity but you spend 12 hours at a computer everyday and I find you lose touch with reality,” says Merks. “But on the other hand,” Bartl adds, “letterpress is also coming back as a commercial entity as well.”

Unlike Rohner Press, pb+j press uses letterpress printing for creative expression, not commercial gain. Merks refers to this as the fringe area of typography. And this movement has taken on as much momentum in recent years, if not more, than the commercial print side.

“It happened at the turn of the century in the 1900s too. As everything was becoming industrialized people began to clamour more for the handcrafted things. It’s happening again as things become digital and you read so much on computers, people want to hold onto the page. And a tactical beautiful page printed with letterpress lends itself to that. And that applies both to the commercial side and the artistic side that we do,” says Bartl.

Jan Elsted of Barbarian Press – a B.C. letterpress shop that prints and publishes limited edition books – agrees. “Who wants to sit at a computer and read a novel on the screen? I think since there is so much high-tech in society it brings a greater need to some people to have things that are handmade and produced with care on a piece of paper people can hold and feel.”

Although pb+j press is running very low-tech equipment in its print shop to produce handcrafted pages, Merks and Bartl continue to see the value in advancing technology.

At first I was angry at digital everything. I thought it was ruining design and print, which actually it did for some. It has erased careers and if they haven’t moved with it they have suffered

developments in the printing and design industries. But that was unsatisfactory to our creative urges. We did some original exploration on the computer and felt it had run out of creative potential,” say Bartl.

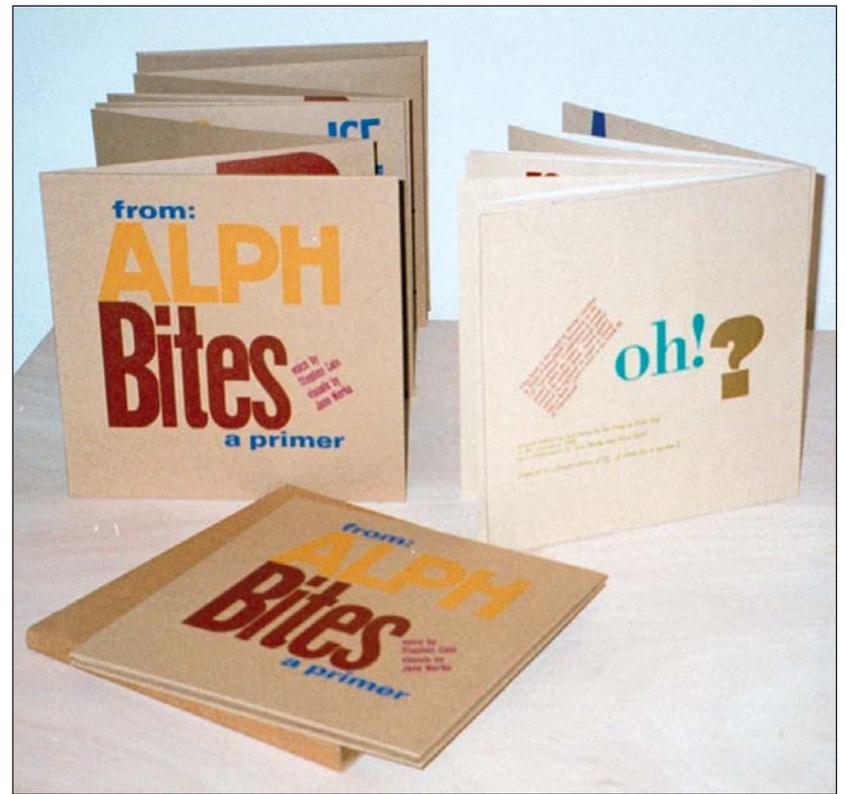
Merks agrees, adding that although they were two of the first professors to teach digital graphic design, they both (though separately, having only married in 1998) taught their young students traditional processes. The methodology being that to learn the basics first could lead to a mastery of both high-tech and low-tech design. “Starting out by teaching students letterpress first is a perfect introduction to typography. It’s so tactile. They can see where leading came from and why spacing is important,” says Merks. Through Merks and Bartl’s classes, students learned why a click of a button in software makes a design more appealing, not just how to click that button.

“I’m finding, and Peter is as well, that we both were

“When you work with people who aren’t good pressmen, they don’t translate the vision you have for your work properly. A press just doesn’t run on its own. Yes, it’s very technical but the fine tuning of a modern press is also an art,” says Merks.

Bartl and Merks exhibit and speak about their letterpress work two or three times a year. At the ATypI conference in Vancouver at the end of September, the couple will present a seminar called, *Obsolete design becomes art: the revival of letterpress printing in North America*. Their presentation discusses the developing interest in letterpress printing, one they say has been doubling every year for the last 10 or 15 years.

Today Rimmer – who is also speaking at ATypI on Hannibal Oldstyle, one of the typefaces he has cut in his foundry using a Mac for accuracy – is working on a new edition of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. He is about to begin casting the pages using Hannibal Oldstyle. He



Winner of the honourable mention award in the artist book category of the Alcuin Society’s annual design competition in 2001, *Alphbites* by Stephen Cain was printed on a letterpress by Peter Bartl and Jane Merks of pb+j press.

expects the process to take him 14 months to complete. Crafting this book is a slow procedure but one he finds calming and rich in creativity.

“Printing a book using a high-tech press is much cheaper when you think of labour costs. If you consider the time of a true letterpress craftsmen worth anything, then letterpress printing is a very costly venture,” says Bartl.

To Rimmer, the intense labour costs are worth the end results. Combining a highly trained skill with an innate love for creativity not only makes him a great typesetter and pressmen, it also sparks his passion for printed paper. “It’s the look of letterpress that’s so great. The depth of it. I love the feel of the impression on the page. I like it to have bite. Not over done. But a refined texture.”

Rimmer’s true love will always be letterpress. He feels people have become too used to “plain, flat litho” printing. To him, litho is beautiful, clean and crisp. But it’s level and smooth. No bite.

He does admit that a direct comparison between litho and letterpress can leave the eye wandering towards the other side. Rimmer and a colleague once printed a brochure for a San Francisco hotel called the Westin St. Francis. The design called for the cover to have the name Westin lithographed and St. Francis letterpressed, both in black.

“The fonts were a different style of script so the two clashed right away. Our letterpressed type looked sharp and clean if you covered the litho up. But if you looked at the whole piece with the two side by side ours looked really rustic,” says Rimmer. “It was because they were a quarter inch apart and the two processes fought each other. What I am saying is with letterpress, if you look at it all by itself, it looks very refined and crisp in the hands of a good press operator. But put next to litho it looks really rough and crude.”

It must be remembered that the traditional technology was once at the forefront. It was once scoffed at by traditionalists of the time. Its impact was once far reaching and powerful. Advancing technology and traditional methods can work together to build upon the intrinsic value of print. A value that has not changed since the days of the first letterpress. And one that will progress and adapt with the future changes to technology.

“I’ve cut many types in hot metal but I’ve also digitized old brass letters. Technology doesn’t scare me. If it did I would have stayed away from letterpress, which was the latest in technology at one time,” Rimmer says. “It all comes down to the fact that I love print.” ☐