

When Wood Trumped Metal: An Interview with Bill Moran

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Wood type is back—and it's too heavy to go anywhere, anyway. While there are collections throughout the United States, the most formidable is housed at the Hamilton Wood Type and Printing Museum, in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, at the site of what was once the largest manufacturer of wood type in the country. Dedicated to the preservation, study, production and printing of wood type, the Hamilton is sure make an impression on any typography enthusiast. And for the wood type lover, a trip to the museum is a must—the perfect excursion for a spring or summer's day. To get an insider's perspective, we spoke to Bill Moran, owner and founder of Blinc Publishing, in St. Paul, Minnesota. Moran is a third-generation letterpress printer and a printing historian who teaches typography at the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin–Stout. Through the UMN he leads a three-week European type history tour that showcases the birth of printing and rare books in Spain, Germany and Italy. His work has been published and exhibited nationally, and he is a co-author of *Hamilton Wood Type: A History in Headlines*.

Heller: Let's start with basics. What is wood type? And why was it used rather than metal?

Moran: The first known wood type catalog to appear in the U.S. was published by Darius Wells, in 1828. Wood type has been used in various ways for hundreds of years, but the serious production began in the States with the expansion of the American frontier. Printers found that as larger type was required for newspaper headlines and advertising, lead type was simply too heavy to manufacture in larger sizes. So, using a router or a pantograph, type makers would cut the type from a master template based on the styles that were in vogue at the time.

Heller: Tell me about the Hamilton Wood Type Museum. How much type does it have, and how was it acquired?

Moran: The Hamilton Manufacturing Company was founded in 1880 in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, and the museum was established in 1999. They have 30,000 square feet of space and a 4,500 sq. ft. printing studio, making it one of the largest working printing museums in the world. Since opening they've hosted hundreds of printers, historians and designers who are drawn to the million and a half pieces of wood type in the collection. The type ranges from a quarter of an inch to 5 feet tall. Hamilton has had many donations and purchased large collections over the years, so sometimes it comes one drawer at a time and sometimes one print shop at a time.

Heller: Who brought the museum to life?

Moran: If you're going to talk about Hamilton, you have to talk about the community that founded it. With sheer determination local volunteers and the museum's technical director Greg Corrigan have preserved and nurtured one of the most important collections of printing history in the U.S. These are generous people who host countless visitors every year. (And if you visit, be sure to get an ice cream sundae across the street—it was invented there.)

Heller: Cool (no pun intended). When we think about wood type, often it conjures heavy slab serifs and ornamental decorative material. Is there a standard the museum maintains in terms of what is collected, or is the sky the limit?

Moran: Hamilton is open to wood type donations of any kind. If they purchase collections, it's because of the quality or quantity. A key development in the past few years has been the acquisition of hand-cut, wood and linoleum advertising plates. In 2005 the museum purchased a 1,500-plate collection from a defunct printer, and the array of sizes and subject matter rivals that of Hatch Show Print, in Nashville. In fact, [Hatch Show Print manager] Jim Sherraden has visited a few times to advise and help appraise the collection. The typography and illustration captured in these blocks are an amazing showcase of the commercial art of the 1930s to 1940s. The skill of the designers, wood cutters and printers who made and used these blocks is every bit as sophisticated as what we're doing today in terms of trapping, overprinting and the incorporation of lettering.

Heller: Wood type was reintroduced to designers by, among other scholar/designers, the late Rob Roy Kelly. Have there been any other breakthroughs since his work in the history of the form?

Moran: I wouldn't say there have been breakthroughs, but wood type has definitely attracted the attention of serious typographers, including a cool project by Matthew Carter, who designed a Latin-style face as a two-color font to be cut at Hamilton. Matthew's technical demands for the face forced us to look past the traditional pattern making and routing, and we've incorporated a computer-driven router to achieve the optical effects Matthew was looking for. Other than that, Rob Roy Kelly's *American Wood Type* continues to inspire us with the talent and ingenuity shown by the early wood-type makers like Darius Wells and George Nesbitt. They made breakthroughs in styles that are still the benchmarks that we look to today.

Heller: At Hamilton you work with students to create specimens, but what other ongoing projects have you initiated?

Moran: The project I'm most excited about right now is a first-time printing of an 1893 plaque that Hamilton made for the Columbia Exposition in Chicago. It features 48 different wood fonts, measures 51" x 22" and boasts the smallest wood type ever made. The plaque is the only known copy that exists, and we needed to print it without getting ink on it. After experimenting with various offsetting techniques we settled on shrinkable window film as a barrier and printed through it. It gives a bit of a ghostly effect but the posters are really handsome and we are able to preserve and share this treasure of typography.

Another exciting initiative is bringing in volunteer groups to clean, sort and classify type from the collection. Over the museum's 10-year history we've had a lot of type that's been donated or purchased that we simply haven't had time to inventory. And with the help of friends, and current and former students, we've embarked on a large-scale effort to dig into boxes that have been unopened for 30 or 40 years. The exciting thing about this initiative is that not only do we have a clearer idea of the extent of the collection, but we're also labeling and storing the type in a way that will be easier for folks to access the type, who want to print with it later.

Heller: How do you feel about the digitization of wood type? I mean, as with the letterpress purists, is there a line in the sand between the real thing and the approximated thing?

Moran: Well, I think there's a broad spectrum of practitioners who are reviving wood typefaces. On one end you've got Jonathan Hoefler and Tobias Frere-Jones, who've elevated the classic families of wood type to a suite of fonts that not only acknowledge where they come from but also bring a level of discipline and beauty to a craft that wasn't possible when type makers were working in wood. On the other end of the spectrum you've got websites that encourage visitors to download copies of specimen sheets and do it yourself. The struggle between "authentic-looking" and authentic is an old one, and the presence of the internet has only served to broaden that gap.

I'm glad you mentioned the letterpress purists! As a third-generation letterpress printer and a printing historian I'd like to consider myself a purist. But I do have a problem with designers/printers who bad-mouth polymer plates as being the demise of letterpress. These are individuals who have large collections of type at their disposal and/or have a selective view of printing history. Plate-making to compensate for a lack of type goes back to the Renaissance, and much of the best letterpress produced in the 20th century was made with wood or magnesium plates. I've been printing since the early 1970s and have used all of these media, and at the end of the day—with budgets, deadlines and clients looming—you use the tools at your disposal and do the best work you can.

Heller: One sees bits and pieces of wood type at flea markets all over the place, but how do you acquire full alphabets?

Moran: Mostly with sheer luck. The collections that come available via the web are scooped up quickly by folks with money to spend. Watching listservs and websites like the Briar Press gives you an idea of what's out there, but it also illustrates how great the demand has become. I guess the best strategy is to make your interest known and enlist other letterpress enthusiasts in your search. Small-town newspapers seem to be a common source for printing equipment, and many of these newspapers needed wood type for headlines. So that might be a good starting place.

Heller: Who in the past produced the most impressive lots of wood type?

Moran: The work of Darius Wells, and the David Knox Company deserve mention, but for sheer beauty my vote goes to William Page, of Norwich, Connecticut. Between 1856 and 1891 his company made some of the most ambitious and visually stunning wood type designs we've ever seen in the U.S. His company was bought out by Hamilton in 1891, and Hamilton phased these designs out as the demand for them was limited and they required more skill to make than Hamilton could afford to invest.

Heller: Is there anyone actually making wood type today?

Moran: Hamilton has the capability to make wood type, but we only do so on a limited basis. We have working pantographs and a large supply wood, but the number of people who have the skill to do it is quite small. Many of them are retirees and there's a critical need to get younger people trained to use the equipment. But even with the training, much of our work is done on a volunteer basis, so having the time and money to make type is really limited.

Heller: Nearly all of the museum personnel are volunteers, and yet the upkeep and funding for such a collection must be a burden. How do you do it?

Moran: Once you set foot inside the museum it's hard not to be inspired by the legacy of Hamilton and the community that hosts it. That inspiration has brought dozens of local and national volunteers back, year in and year out, to help out in small and large ways. The work of board member Jim Van Lanen and pantograph operator Norb Brylski and a host of others serve as a great motivation to pitch in and do what needs doing. Recently we've had the hard work and creativity of filmmaker Justine Nagan, who works for Kartemquin Films (*Hoop Dreams*). She made an outstanding documentary called *Typeface* that chronicles the museum's history and challenges. When you see this film it's easy to want to get involved.

Heller: What else is in store for the Hamilton?

Moran: Lots of exciting stuff. We're having our first major poster exhibition and open house this Memorial Day to celebrate our 10th anniversary. Jim Sherraden, of Hatch Show Print, is leading a workshop in May, with all proceeds going to benefit the museum. And we're having our first Wayzgoose this fall. It's a printer's celebration where we'll feature demonstrations, workshops and posters for sale. To help with funding we've established membership levels that allow individuals to donate online. We're also working on a corporate sponsorship program and are building up an inventory of posters for sale.

On the personnel front, our long-time technical director Greg Corrigan is stepping down this spring. We'll really miss Greg's expertise—his years of hard work have helped make the museum what it is today.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of the Designer as Author MFA and co-founder of the MFA in Design Criticism at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press). He is co-author of *New Vintage Type* (Thames & Hudson), *Becoming a Digital Designer* (John Wiley & Co.) and *Teaching Motion Design* (Allworth Press). His book *Iron Fists: Branding the Totalitarian State* (Phaidon Press) will be published this spring.