



# A Printer's Journey

By Isaac H. Wood

“Printing is more than an industry – it is an art – a calling – a service.”  
*-Bertel O. Henning*

The months leading up to November of 2017 were challenging and frustrating for myself as an artist. Having graduated college six months prior, I moved home with big plans of fixing a Tunis Model Two Improved Printing Press, finding a creative job, and moving out within the first year of my return. After the completion of my Senior Project (A forty-four silk screen edition of tarot decks named “Dear Universe”) and moving back to Norwood, I found myself floating in job limbo and suffering from some severe creative blocks. I was applying to jobs and residencies, writing letters of interest to press shops, and interviewing for position after position to no avail. It is the cycle of the job market we’ve all come to know and despise.

My job hunts came up with few results, residencies told me to apply again next year, and my letters of interest were received well, but independent shops either couldn’t afford to take on an apprentice or their shop was full. It led to some serious doubts in my abilities and questions of what was I doing. One of my letters of interest resulted in an email back from printer Andrew Steeves of Gasuprau Press in Nova Scotia, Canada. While informing me he couldn’t take me on in his shop, he was more than willing to discuss all things print related and how he got started.

This moment changed how I would continue to have my conversations in print, books, and art. Instead of asking can I work for you? I decided to ask how they started their own journeys. Where had they started? What had changed? What direction did they see the art of printing going in the modern era?

I was particularly moved by a piece Steeves had authored, entitled “The Arcane Adventures of a Tramp Printer Abroad, Being a True Account of a Canadian Typographer’s Visit to Sundry American Letterpress Print Shops.” This piece was written when friend and fellow printer Glenn Glouska passed away and left Steeves a large collection of type, as well as a Vandercook Universal 1 cylinder press and his Model 31 Linotype. Coming into this collection was a big change for Steeves at the time and found himself needing a little more knowledge in the workings of the Linotype machine. He signed up for Larry Raid’s Linotype University: “a seven day workshop on the operation, maintenance and rehabilitation of one of the most complex, astonishing and seductive pieces of machinery ever devised for the printing trade.”<sup>1</sup> With plans of attending Linotype University, Steeves decided to visit several printers around Canada and the United States both before and in the weeks following this workshop.

Reading this account left me inspired to see these shops for myself, to meet new printers, artists, book binders, and learn what the print trade was evolving into.

I was warned not to go. It was suggested that I do the print work before making the connections, and make the decision of whether or not this was a path I really wanted to commit my life to. Looking back, these words do ring true, to an extent. I should have been more active in creating, learning, and trying to make my own work as a printer.

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<sup>1</sup> Steeves, Andrew. “The Arcane Adventures of a Tramp Printer Abroad, Being a True Account of a Canadian Typographer’s Visit to Sundry American Letterpress Print Shops.” 2013.

However, being twenty-three, fresh out of college, far too idealistic, and wildly unsure of the world, I had no idea what was out there. I had no idea who was printing, binding, teaching, or selling. I didn't know how people were making a living with ink and paper.

I set off on my own adventure. I packed my Buick for a two-week journey. I planned my journey a few months in advance, contacting a number of printers, binders, artists, and educators. Some focused in the realms of print and bookwork as a fine art and some focused on the commercial side of printing. I visited a few college shops as well, keeping in mind the opportunities returning to school may present, but also seeing what other young artists and printers were doing in the field and what they thought about their future in print and art. I remained mostly in Northern New England as my time frame (and funds) dictated that I be home for Thanksgiving.

I set up each of my interviews with a group of control questions so that I could more easily see strings of common thought or theme between the printers, binders, educators, and artists. The questions are as follow:

- How have you seen print change?
- Traditional vs. Digital: How have you integrated digital practices into you shops? Do you feel the need to?
- What do you wish you knew starting out?
- What were your biggest challenges starting out?
- What is your advice to those just starting to enter the field?

While their answers varied, themes of personal perseverance, strong work ethic, passion, and creation were common threads in our conversations. By the end of my journey the original advice of make more work was very prominent in our discussions and I knew it was time to return to my practices.

The following pages are my thoughts and feelings as I wrote them on my journey. The creative souls I met along the way inspired me to keep faith in my path as a creative myself. "A Printer's Journey," as I've entitled this writing, has opened my eyes to where I still need to grow as an artist and printer, and has offered insight as to what a future as a printer could look like.

During this adventure and in these interviews I found myself thinking about returning to school. A year later I recognize a lot of those thoughts were because I missed being in creative, engaging, and educational environments. While I am still considering returning for a MFA, it does not mean that it is the only path. I was presented with work-study program options, internships, workshops, and a plethora of other ways to expand my skills and education in the print field. There are no set paths to becoming a printer/letterpress individual, but that is the beauty of it! The hardest challenge is sticking to it.

“A Printer’s Journey” presents no earth shattering findings or magic cure all for creative blocks. I still don’t have many answers as to where my path is going. I leave for Nashville, Tennessee this November of 2018 to intern with Hatch Show Print as I continue to learn and grow my printing practice almost a year after I first took my road trip.

This document is to share with printers, binders, and artists of all experiences. To share a small portion of who is working in the field and how they started and continue to grow in their practices.

## Acknowledgements

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I'd also like to thank Andrew Steeves for inspiring the trip and Bill Muller of Big Wheel Press for having the chance to meet later in 2018.

I would also like to acknowledge my family for the continued support, my editor and dearest friend Carly Dow, and my friends who support my endeavors.

And, to my car Wilhelmina, thank you for not breaking down in the middle of nowhere.

## November 8, 2017 Wolfe Editions

6:45AM came earlier than I would have liked, but all the same I got up and on the road to my first shop Wolfe Editions. Founded by David Wolfe, his shop is located in the Bakery Studios<sup>1</sup> in Portland, Maine. I met Wolfe at the door and was led into his shop on the first floor where I met Charlie Hewitt and Isak Applin<sup>2</sup>.

Although a stranger in the shop, I was warmly welcomed by the three, and set about my questions to Wolfe and the room.

Wolfe quickly answered the question of how print has changed; “there are no more big print shops anymore.” Wolfe’s comment confirmed many conversations about print that I had in college and how the industry is moving to smaller print shops. I have continued to explore the printing movement and these independent print shops through interviews

and witnessing the changes they can make within both an artist community and a town community. While these shops are out there and thriving my interviews seem to end with the same sentiment that they are not looking to hire.

Wolfe explained that he began printing over 30 years ago in a print shop in Portland, where his focus was in book publications, letterheads, and business cards. As he was spreading ink along the metallic surface of the etching in front of him, he went on to talk about how he used to take on print jobs to make end’s meet. He emphasized the need to take on work such as wedding invitations, business cards, and other social engagement work to pay the bills and be able to fuel creative work later on. Phrasing it as the need to “just do the job work.”



David Wolfe At Work

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<sup>1</sup> The Bakery Studios is a converted studio building located in downtown Portland home to over sixteen other artists and business.

<sup>2</sup> Charlie Hewitt is a Portland artist working on collaboration with Wolfe and Isak Applin a visiting artist and printer assisting on the project.

<sup>3</sup> Polymer Plates (as defined by Boxcarpress.com) is a “photosensitive material in sheet form that is exposed to UV lights through a negative film and hardens to the polymer. The plate is washed out with water. The exposed areas are left to form the relief and the unexposed is washed away. The plate is dried and exposed to UV one more time to complete the process.” By the end of this process you have an image or text that is reversed and can be mounted on metal plates and printed right reading.

When I asked about the challenges he faced when he first started printing he confessed to the constant worry of money (a stress I am already quite familiar with). It seems to be that if you want to be in the print world, whether as a fine art book printer, a commercial printer, or just a general printmaker, you have to be willing to deal and with the worry that comes with it. Wolfe continued to talk about how a number of business-minded people told him to close up, to try something different. But he kept on with printing, working in various shops, some of which he owned, others that were run by colleagues, and said that with Wolfe Editions he has reached a point in life where he can create and take on the work he's interested in. It seemed to be that he was advising me to do what I wanted to do, rather than letting myself get bogged down by the worries. His larger piece of advice to me and to the printers just starting out was to avoid jumping into to debt starting a print business. Wolfe told me of a colleague who took out loans to start his shop and made a promise to his wife that if in ten years the business did not pan out, he'd wrap it up and call it done. Ten years later he found himself selling his equipment. This definitely put my start in perspective and how a slow start and collecting my pieces of equipment over time might be best.

My visit coincided with a collaboration of Wolfe and Hewitt working together to print 25 etchings by Hewitt to pair with the poetry of Artist Marsden Hartley. Wolfe has seemed to find himself doing both what he enjoys as well as some of the work he started out doing with printed publications.

Wolfe passed inked etchings to Applin to press as we moved into our next subject; how does print fit into the digital age? Charlie Hewitt made a comment that with the rise of the digital age, "no one really seems to value the craft [of letterpress work] anymore," and those who do seem to be a small population. Our conversation turned to print in academia, and then to the place of polymer plates<sup>3</sup> in print shops.

Polymer plates have integrated well into most shops, I used these plates in my college print shop. However, there are a couple printers who live and die by lead type. So it left me wondering what other printer's views of using polymers in print. Wolfe shared his shop philosophy on the matter, "whatever fits the project."

Both Wolfe and Applin told me of projects where the digital and traditional means of type worked quite well together but also warned me of what could happen when design and polymers were misused or misunderstood. Applin suggested, "When it [design and polymer plates] become traditionless, that is when we're in trouble." The artists of the room described it through the use of lead type. When lead type is ready to be printed; the form is placed into the bed of a press and inked. The results of the print will be an even ink and crisp looking print. If you tried to replicate this type through polymer plates and do not take into account the type's design, there is a chance the polymer will be thicker and cause over inking of the plate and the integrity of the piece to be degraded some. But with careful consideration polymer plates can be used incredibly well within a shop setting.

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This idea struck me and I found myself agreeing with it. When we ignore the beginnings of a process like printing we lose what it once meant. But it also brings into question how much of the original process is still known, especially in terms of younger generations looking to enter the field? The statement also sparked questions of how would I maintain tradition in my own work: Do I understand enough about the start of design, typography, and print? How do I become the one to share traditions when I am just starting out myself? But this conversation of traditional printing, digital printing, and experimental printing also brings up the opposing argument of how many of these traditions are relevant to print today? Is this the time to redefine what print means and what it could be?

Our conversation came to a close and I took a quick tour around Wolfe Editions. I was in awe of the presses that were packed into his shop, creating a winding labyrinth surrounded by type, inks, prints, and various other pieces of machinery (including seeing my first Heidelberg Windmill Press, so cool). There was almost too much to see; my brain did not know what to process first. Having the opportunity to speak with and watch Wolfe, Applin, and Hewitt at work was incredible. It had me thinking about my start; where would I fall in the print world? Having Wolfe Editions as my first shop definitely opened my eyes a bit more and had me excited to see what other printers were doing.



Press in Wolfe Editions



Reminders

**November 9, 2017**

*Pt. I "A Day in the Life at Laura Marr Printing"*

Walking into Laura Marr Printing (located in Westbrook, Maine) I was greeted by the smell of ink and paper. Looking around the light green show room, I saw a small printing press in a glass case with wood type 'L' 'M' 'P' displayed next to it. Their walls lined with shelving units filled with paper and catalogues.



**Beth Payson (Left) and George Libby (Right)**

Beth Payson, President and Founder of Laura Marr Printing, came from the shop out behind the show room to welcome me, followed by her comrade in print George Libby. Both Payson and Libby have worked in printing for years, starting out when they taught typesetting and production printing while they were students in high school. Their focus of work is in wholesale stationary, social engagement announcements that range from holiday cards, Bat Mitzvah invite, and wedding invitations, to printing on napkins for graduation parties.

When asked how printing has changed over the last 15 years, Libby quickly responded that the client base had dwindled with the shift to digital print. With the convenience of printing from home, people are designing and producing their own letterheads, business cards, and envelopes, which means the demand for large printing companies has declined (a familiar sentiment from my conversation with Wolfe yesterday). "When I started there were twenty presses [in Portland]. Now I don't know if there are more than five," Libby said.

Payson spoke about how the need for social engagement printing was still alive and well, and we talked about the National Stationary Show that takes place in New York City. When speaking on the subject of how print has changed, Payson went on to say that my generation viewed printing as a fine art, while Libby chimed in that the millennials will bring more change in terms of their client base, especially when it comes to what they will be able to afford for letterpress services. With these changes in the print world Laura Marr Printing has adapted; Payson and Libby have embraced the rise of digital printing and have successfully incorporated it into their shop.

Our conversation shifted to finding their start in the printing industry, and included a discussion of the challenges I might face. Finance was a major focus, followed by learning and maintaining your customer base. "If you have/know your niche and have a passion for it, go for it," Payson encouraged. "If you expect to make money from this and don't know your customer base, it'll be a challenge." The pair stressed that print is

not an easy business to dive into, and when asked what advice they have for beginners in my position, Libby joked, "Go into plumbing." I've been met with this joke in several variations of advice; that print is a 'dead' or 'dying' form of art.

Payson pulled out a sign that used to hang up in their stall when they would attend the National Stationary Show. It presented a long list of questions that are asked regularly in the shop and by clients. My personal favorite was "Can you make that yellow a little happier?"

As our conversation came to a close, I was given the opportunity to tour the shop. It is a clean shop with three Heidelberg Windmill Presses, a platen press from the 1920's suited with a motor for automated work, and a thermographic printer. They showed me a range of their work, from die cuts to hot foil printing, and I found myself overwhelmed once again by the immense amount that I was learning in such a short time. My visit with Payson and Libby quite different from my time spent at Wolfe Editions, in very positive ways. Their dedication to their craft and clientele is clear in the work they produce. Payson remarked: "you have to be a little crazy to be in printing," and I had to laugh. It was not the first time I'd heard this comment. I recalled a professor from my freshmen year at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts telling me that artists tended to be more eccentric in their appearance and behavior, and he felt that I didn't fall into that category at the time. You have to be a little crazy to do what you're passionate about.

The Laura Marr Printing shop also had an automated cutting machine that was pure magic. Watching it work made me really wish I had it during my thesis project six months ago, when I had spent hours individually cutting each card for the tarot decks I crafted. I started to wonder if I would enter the business side of printing or if my area of focus leaned more towards the world of fine art and academia? It is something I will continue to think about as I tour Maine College of Art (MECA) later today.



**Platen Press from 1920  
suited for Die Cut Envelopes**



**Heidelberg Windmill Presses Prepped for a Hot Foil Job**

**November 9, 2017**

**Pt. II MECA and a Sneak Peak of Pickwick Independent Press**

What a whirlwind of three hours! I feel like I just ran a marathon of art. From Laura Marr Printing this morning, to lunch with Lexi Valentin this afternoon (a good friend from college that happened to be living in Maine), to a tour of MECA, and an unexpected view of Pickwick Independent Press.

I was late starting my tour, but my guide Shannon who was in the MFA program at MECA took me through every level of the building. Each floor dedicated to a different media, but the opportunity to take an interdisciplinary approach to your education at MECA is highly encouraged, and with that in mind I was like a kid in a candy shop. To be surrounded by so many different art forms would be amazing. Their print program had a variety of presses for letterpress, lithography, digital printing, etching, etc. I came to learn they have a CNC router that they used to create wood type that was missing from their own collection, and I started to think what it would be like to have access to such a powerful tool as a printer. Fantasies of making my own wood type, creating intricate wood blocks, and even having the opportunity to do some welding work in their foundry ran rampant in my mind. Returning to school would put me on a very different path from what I had been thinking.



Just Two of Many Presses at Maine College of Art



Maine College of Art

I sat down with Admissions Counselor and artist Adrienne Kitko to go over the nitty gritty of tuition cost and what the application would look like, but also to talk about what this program would offer me in my journey as a printer. The most common stereotype of art at the graduate level has always been that of a dog eat dog world. Hearing tales of relentless competition from other artists and reading about artist communities had made the prospect seem quite intimidating. Kitko made several great points on going back to school, reminding me that “you go to grad school to meet your colleagues.” This was a thought that had never really crossed my

mind before. Viewing graduate school as a way to meet other artists and trade thoughts and secrets changed my perspective on returning to school entirely.

While at MECA I also met artist and MECA Staff member Hope Rovelto, who happened to be a member of Pickwick Independent Press. Pickwick Independent Press is located in downtown Portland, Maine, with Director Pilar Nadal at the head. Rovelto kindly gave me a sneak preview of the shared studio space equipped for various forms of print such as intaglio, relief, letterpress, silkscreen, and offset lithography. The brief visit inside Pickwick guaranteed a future return visit to Portland. Rovelto took me to her own studio space just above Pickwick where she runs a small silk-screening business and was preparing to teach a silkscreen class later that evening. I stayed at Rovelto's studio for a few more minutes, discussing her background in ceramics, the equipment she uses for silk-screening, her views of printing, and how she ended up in Portland.



Wood Type Collection at  
Pickwick Independent Press

I left Rovelto's studio in search of dinner and ended up at Sichuan Kitchen not far from my hotel. I reflected over my day at dinner, thinking about the different paths I faced between becoming a commercial printer, a fine art printer, a teacher, or any combination of all these paths. There are so many different ways I could take my passion for print. These options have left me to dwell on my current situation and what it would mean moving forward as an artist. *If my study is art, how much am I doing to remain in that field? Should I be applying to more artists in residencies? Should I be looking for gallery representation? Should I be looking to go back to school?* The idea of grad school has me excited for all that I could learn and the artists I could meet and work with. I have been leaning towards grad school, mostly because of my deep love of learning, but would I want to return so soon after graduating? Would it be predictable for me to run back to academia?



Vandercook  
Overlooking  
Downtown Portland  
Maine

**November 10, 2017**  
**Museum Day**

Day three I find myself with little to do (and possibly over budget for my time here). I wander the streets of Portland and stop to visit the Maine Historical Society, looking at their exhibit on *Trade Banners and the Crafts that Built Maine*.

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I wandered the Portland Museum of Art for the evening after a day of walking and entered the McLellan House Galleries, a 200 year old National Historic Landmark that houses a few exhibitions. Here I found a project entitled *The Study: Give What You Can. Take What You Need*. The public is asked to write letters to strangers with the themes of beauty, strength, and hope. I really enjoyed the idea of sharing positive messages with strangers. The McLellan House might have been my favorite part of the whole museum; the joining of history and art in one space seems to be one of my favorite themes these days.

I ended my day around eight or so, returning to my room for warmth and to stream new episodes of Steven Universe.

Artists that inspired me today:

George Wesley Bellows "Matinicus" 1916

Benjamin Paul Akers "The Dead Pearl Diver" 1858

Wassily Kandinsky "Strong" 1929

Gustave Courbet "Stormy Weather at Étretat" 1869

Winslow Homer Etchings

Robert Gwathmey "Nude in Rocking Chair" 1930-88



## **November 11, 2017**

### **Gallery Adventures**

Day Four had me itching to get back to my mission of interviewing printers, artists, and bookbinders. I spent most of my morning bound to my hotel room researching other presses before venturing to the Old Port for a couple of hours.

I found the Ocean Gateway quite pleasant. I forgot how much I like being near the water. Just having the chance to sit in the sun was a nice change from the time I'd spent indoors conducting my research. I found a nice bench to sit and listen to the water and wind. I walked into a couple of shops and asked around about printers in the area and was directed to Ruby + Gus Letterpress. I added their name to my list; I would try and see them when I made my way to Keene, New Hampshire.

I visited many galleries today and found a variety of paintings, sculptures, and a singular print that absolutely captivated me; David Driskell's "Accent of Autumn". I came across a number of fantastic works, but was surprised that I only found one print. Now I probably wasn't looking in all the right places, but I started to wonder about how well printers do with gallery representation, if they decide to take that route; and what kind of printers are they? Do they specialize in a certain area like letterpress, silkscreen, etchings, or are they doing more experimental works? As usual, this had me questioning the role of print in modern society and within art communities.

Galleries I found and the Artists that inspired me today:

#### *Greenhut Galleries*

George Lloyd  
David Driskell  
Tom Paiement (his work reminded me of Josh Ostraff a bit)  
Thomas Connolly  
Frederick Lynch

#### *Portland Art Gallery*

Ann Trainor Domingue  
Ingunn Milla Joergensen  
Jodi Edwards  
David Wilson

**November 12, 2017**  
**Last Day in Portland**

Today is my last day in Portland. I woke up and texted my friend Lexi for advice on where to eat for brunch. I made my way to Dutch's on Preble Street and along the way I started listening to *Nancy*, a podcast by Kathy Tu and Tobin Low. They are a pair of fantastic queer podcasters sharing stories, having conversations, and discussing what it means to be a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. I love it. Their stories are relatable, eye opening, and thought provoking.

This week has been good, full of business, art, and even a little relaxation. The message I've received so far is that you have to be a little crazy to be a printer. I saw commercial printer Laura Marr Printing and their space was very nice, their presses are in great condition, and their work is beautiful. Is it a career I want to pursue? Taking on the world of social engagements. But it is like David Wolfe had said to me in my first interview "just do the job work." There will be moments that I will have to take on projects to pay the bills. Unless I get a nine to five job and create art in my free time, but I don't think I really want that either. I am totally willing to learn the commercial work and think it would be a fantastic opportunity, but it's not the reason I fell in love with printing.

Pickwick Independent Press reminds me a lot of the North Adams Makers' Mill, and although I don't know much about the space itself at the moment, it is closer to my ideal. In the end, however, the studios over at Maine College of Art had my heart.

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I stare out on the roofs of brick buildings while listening to *Nancy* and I think about living here. I'm thinking about the art I could make, the people I would meet, and the work I could do. Honestly it would probably be fantastic for my art. Anything at the moment would be great for my art since I'm not making very much. I have been flirting with creativity for the past six months, but I miss being immersed in creative environments and the inspiration that comes from being there. The truth is I am still a student, forever dreaming of being an artist of old, and I can honestly say that I still don't know what I mean by that. I know I can make art on a nine to five job, but would that give me enough time to make? Would it mean my art becomes more of a hobby? I'm definitely not a huge fan of the idea of being a hobby printer. I want to live a creative life. .

Next stop Orono.

**November 14, 2017**  
**University of Maine Machias**

Yesterday was my travel day. I made it to my airbnb in Orono just find and made my way to Machias this morning. When I arrived, Bernie Vinzani, Professor of Book Arts at the University of Maine, warmly welcomed me. To our mutual surprise, we both had the pleasure of sharing the common friend of Kate Barber, an artist and former Director of the North Adams Maker's Mill. He took me on a tour of the studios, which included a small gallery of books, various pages of historic documents, and a C+P press. The tour continued with a look at the print shop, which housed two Vandercook presses, an etching press, and a few of cases of type. It was a very quick walk through, but I had the opportunity to see Vinzani's office. There was something enchanting about the book cases of tools, artist books, and various other personal collections of work scattered about the room.



**Professor Bernie Vinzani**

We paused our tour in one of their two bindery rooms and began our discussion. Talking with Vinzani felt like talking with an old friend. He shared his history, starting with his early years in Indiana, from his time making paper at Twinrocker to the numerous projects he's worked on before arriving in Machias. We meandered conversed on various topics, including printers who have come into the space and the upcoming Rainbow Ball. Vinzani is an impassioned ally to the LGBTQIA+ community and the fierceness with which he spoke was refreshing and inspiring.



**C+P Printing Press Located Across the Hall from the Studios at UMaine Machias**

He spoke on the classes he's taken with other artists and showed me some incredible pieces of art. Works such as a printed and hand bound version of *King Lear* that left me breathless. I could have spent hours just looking at the beauty of this book. The hand made paper provided by Vinzani, handset and printed by Michael Alpert, and woodblock print illustrations and bound by Claire Van Vliet. Alpert and Van Vliet were just two of the many artists, printers, and organizations Vinzani

mentioned. My naivety to some of these rather well known artists opened my eyes to just how much I still had to learn and how vast the print community is.

Vinzani was the first artist to dismiss financial circumstance as the main issue when starting as a printer. Instead, he found that learning how to get the craft right and finding studio space were the biggest challenges, but also noted that some of the best work is done when you have the least. Great works of art can be created with little equipment and little supplies; especially when paired with strong craft. It made me consider what I had done in the past six months. I could have been practicing binds, and print to some capacity, but I hadn't. I have such a vision of what I 'need' to do consider myself able to produce art, and it simply isn't true. I think I grew so accustomed to the luxuries of the shops I've learned in that I forgot what it's like to have a makeshift studio to create my work.

Vinzani drew my attention to poems written and printed by students in one of his classes. One of their more recent projects had to do with movement, and I found it highly appropriate. I wish I could remember the name of the poet and printer but the poem had to do with travel, movement, and to some capacity discovery. I felt a connection to the poem because of my own movement. About everything I was learning in relation to prints, presses, and books, but it is also how I've been trying to rediscover my own corner of the world. After my time in the Berkshires, I've been wondering and wandering, and not sure what is next. Asking myself, *where do I go now? Where do I set up shop? Where do I settle? How will that environment change my art and me?*

*Could I rediscover my corner of the world here in Maine?*

Our discussion came to a close with his advice to artists just starting out. He gave me two pieces of advice on the subject. One, be as focused and serious about what you want to do and ignore the flack people will give you. Two, "Be a human. Be as loving as you can be... You can't go wrong being human." This final message connected to a larger theme of collaborative work. Good artists create, but great ones share and work together. I felt this message came to me as a reminder to keep networking and talking with different people, to see who was working on what and to share my own work as well.

Our tour continued over to UMaine's papermaking studio and their collections room in another building across campus. There, Vinzani told me about some of the up coming projects and classes he would be teaching in the space come spring.

I left the campus with a great deal to think about, but I feel as if I am getting closer to understanding my relationship with creating. I am also starting to feel like I can't ignore grad school anymore. I made the two-hour trek back to Orno after an early dinner over at Helen's Pies.

**November 15, 2017**  
**University of Maine Orono**



**Professor Susan Groce**

My day started with a meeting with Professor Susan Groce of University of Maine Orono at the Wyeth Family Studio Art Center, which is tucked away towards the back of campus. In awe of the building that I later discovered was only four years old, I learned Groce was a major part of raising the funds to build this beautiful studio. I met with Groce in her office. Behind her towered stacks of flat files containing student work from over the years, along with her own creations.

We started our discussion with the switch to safer means of printing that was worked towards in the 1990's and wound around her time in working with the Edinburgh Printmakers. With Groce's experiences and her work, she developed a responsibility to her students to teach both traditional methods and contemporary methods. She advised me on the importance on having a range of skills and tools that can help you become a well-versed artist; making it easier for you to achieve your goals. Groce also encouraged me to "learn how to manipulate the system," learn how to fundraise for yourself, and learn skills you might not necessarily think you'll need or find useful. Find ways to bend and twist existing rules and systems to fit what you need.

"Print changes all the time." Groce reminded me that even in the past fifteen years print continues to change today. That artists are always developing new grounds of making, new ways of pressing, and stressed the importance of being open to that change.

When asked about the challenges she faced starting out, she explains that, "in the moment, it didn't seem like a challenge." But looking back she could see them better. "I mean, as a woman artist in the 70's, I was going up against the old boys club." She recalled that she felt "you kind-of have to have blinders on at moments to keep going," but as time has progressed, she has seen some of the challenges she faced get better for others.

"Have a good sense of humor," Groce said when asked about advice to the artists just starting out.

Printing doesn't always go as planned, it's one of the first major lessons I learned when I started, and sometimes it is for the best and other times it can be frustrating to no end. In the end, if you end up hyper focusing on a single issue, you lose track of the bigger picture. As in all practices, you should learn to laugh at the mess-ups, study them, and

be open to the challenge rather than shut down. I hear my mom's voice telling her third graders, "Don't be a rock brain."

We wrapped up our conversation talking about various programs UMaine runs, such as the residency Groce started. Inviting three artists a semester to join the studio to create work and in trade the artists must be willing to share their knowledge or give an informal lecture to students. The residency is a brilliant resource to have a working artist working along side growing artists and sparks numerous dialogues about creating and works in art Post College.

I was lucky enough to be visiting on the day artist-in-resident Meg Brown Payson was giving a brief presentation on her work. Primarily a painter, Payson has created stunning works of art, and listening to her process was a great bonus to the day. When on the subject of creating landscapes and dealing with the familiar and unfamiliar, she said, "Abstraction becomes the only language available." As a fan of abstraction in my own work this statement stood out to me, and has given me some things to think about in terms of how I create while considering abstraction, and how to continue to make my own familiarity quite different.

After Payson's presentation, the artists of the class set to work on various projects from etchings to relief cuts to lithos. I got to speak about the sentiment I've run into time and time again over the course of my academic and personal career, the idea that 'print is dead' or in connection a dying art. Jenya Demsky and Joshua Baker, student artists of Groce's class, agreed that print was alive and well in our modern society, and with the help of social media, it was now easier to connect, share, and create together. They also came to the agreement that print seems to be misunderstood in a lot of ways, and that if print was more accessible and readily available, the idea of print being 'dead' might be less common among the general population. Baker mentioned very few outside the artist community seemed to understand the work and value behind a print. This made me think back to Portland with David Wolfe and Charlie Hewitt's comment about people lacking appreciation for the craft and value of print work.

Megan Ogden is receiving her B.F.A. with a concentration in print come this May, and I was lucky enough to see an absolutely stunning woodblock print she has been working on: a stunning landscape with absolutely amazing colors. We shared a love-hate relationship of registration and how even a fraction of an inch could throw the piece entirely. When asked what printmaking meant to her, she replied, "It's a very admirable art form," and continued to spread a deep purple ink onto a etching plate. She went on to talk about how she was trying to further her education in print with an internship out in Ireland or Scotland, or by working with the familiar Zea Mays out in Western Massachusetts.

Christiana Becker shared her path with me as well. While showing me an eight-part print dealing with self-harm in the Maine region, she shared with me her thoughts of research in the arts and the need to explore. She said that as important as research is to a work of art, it is imperative to still be playing with other pieces. Her personal favorite

is exploring organic based patterns. She viewed creative exploration as a way to break up the sometimes heavy and devastating facts of research.

It was a great day of talking, seeing what my peers are working on, and some of their views on print. I'm starting to think grad school might be the next step.



**Inside the Print Studios of  
UMaine Orno**



**Vandercook at UMaine Orno  
ft. Giant woodblocks**



**Wyeth Family Studio Art Center at UMaine Orno.**



**Meg Brown Payson (in purple) gives lecture and demonstration to the students of UMaine Orno.**



**November 16, 2017**  
**Travel Day**

Poetry thoughts

- The migration of squares
- for what truth was I left with?
- let me forget you in the folds/ the sheets (or paper)?

-Set up time to visit Ruby + Gus Letterpress at the start of the new year.

**November 17, 2017**  
**Travel Day**

Yesterday I got to see an old friend, Chelsey Gundlach, before hitting the road for Keene. Today all I did was email people and sleep. I'm off for Easthampton tomorrow and my brain has been thinking of poetry lately, so the next few pages might be lines, stanzas and who knows what else.

*let me forget you  
in the folds of  
signatures.  
printed in the valleys  
and mountains  
unattached,  
are the prayers I  
whispered at your spine.  
bound in threaded bees' wax  
our truth and lies  
exposed.*

*the migration of squares  
towers above mist  
looming cathedrals  
of an abstract god*

*gather parallel  
and hum  
to one another.*



**Notebook Extract**

**November 18, 2017**  
**Daniel E. Kelm**



Daniel E. Kelm

At the start of this journey my former mentor, Melanie Mowinski, strongly recommended that I email book artist Daniel Kelm and set up a visit. This morning I made my way to his studio in Easthampton Massachusetts, and after accidentally finding my way into the adjoining apartment complex; Kelm came to collect me at the door. I followed him up the stairs floor after floor, and felt we were ascending to a bell tower.

We came to the door and a long studio welcomed me with tables filled with books and in-process works. We sat and dove right

into conversation. He asked about my background and the reasons for taking this trip to visit other artists, printers, and bookbinders, and I relayed my hopes to him. The hopes of finding work in the field, the desire to make new connections, and the paths I'm faced with as a recent college graduate and young artist. Kelm looked at me and asked what he has asked many beginners; "How much time do you want to put into this?" He continued to say that if I was looking for the thirty-five to forty hour job, this wasn't the right avenue to pursue. I thought on it as he continued to advise me that if I wanted to invest myself into it, it was well worth the time.

My gut reaction was to the latter. I want to be creating work, collaborating, and meeting a variety of people and artists. Kelm encouraged me to immerse myself in the craft, diversify my skills and to show up to art shows, make connections, and even begin submitting my own art to be shown..

We delved into his beginnings, starting with comics he used to draw as a kid and then his path into chemistry. Kelm described his time in chemistry and book arts as both having a "strong mind-body connection" in the ways they bend the mind and the physicality. Listening to Kelm speak about the connections between chemistry and book arts was inspiring. His inquisitive nature pushed him to learn as many bindings as possible. He advised me to practice bindings repeatedly and to "set a standard for yourself for the quality of your work," then train your eye to that level.

He shared with me a few of his works and in relation how his past working in chemistry influences his bookwork. We spoke on how early in his career things were financially challenging, but his desire to do proper high quality work gained him reputations that lead to job opportunities. In terms of challenges starting out, he found finding work that added to the skills he wanted to learn was the trickiest part. He mentioned that it was a bit easier back then than it is now. Sharing an anecdote about his first job in Boston with a bindery with a sideline repairing BDSM equipment. Kelm looks back at that bindery

and admits it was somewhat difficult as a binder just starting his career and had little guidance. When the behind the scenes business came to light he realized he was in over his head, and found work with a different bindery. His story reminded me of the Arts Management classes in college. My Professor Diane Scott would constantly advise us the need to have several revenue generating sources if we were going to pursue Art and Arts Management careers. Even binderies need a second income.

“Be persistent, it will all come together,” Kelm said to me. He sat across from me in front of piles of bookwork that reminded me of stalagmites. He encouraged knowing traditional methods of binding but also being open and willing to experiment, and to emphasize this he showed me a book of his own design that was wire bound. There was a movement to this book like none other I have seen, and it was truly fascinating. The longer I looked at Kelm in these stalagmite books at his back the more I saw him as an adventurer in the book world.

He shared more works with me as we discussed how the book art world has changed and how it fits in with the digital age. He mentioned the traditional bookbinders of Europe and how they were bound (excuse the pun) to an old master and came out thinking there was one true way of binding. He found that in America, with no masters to follow, it allowed for a freedom not otherwise known overseas. In terms of traditional book and print work, he was an advocate of finding a way to combine the two.



Inside Kelm's Studio

When asked what his advice to beginners would be, he said to “learn a lot of different things,” stressing the importance of being able to do a great many things, along with making your own work. He encouraged young binders, printers and creators to go out and submit to shows as a way to get your name out there, and he recommended finding an interest to connect your work to.

He shows me one last binding in two variations. The first was a circular book of isosceles pyramids bound together in black paper that moved so gracefully I could only think of it being similar to water. The other was a series of similar pyramids that were magnetized and could either have the same structure as the first, or a variety of different ones. “I love making kinetic art,” Kelm said, playing with the books. We ended our discussion with a tour of his studio that just seemed to go on for ages, a new surprise waiting behind every corner.

Kelm walked me out to the studio and we agreed to remain in touch. As I drove to my old stomping grounds of North Adams, Massachusetts, I thought of Kelm's story and advice. In my notes, I have a quote from Kelm written down: "Find a field you relate to." I think this is in reference to my work as an artist, but it speaks to me at a higher level. We bounced ideas of avenues for diversification from book design to book repair work. It had me thinking about library studies and how are they having their books rebound. Perhaps this is something to explore in the future?



**Cottage Street Studios of Easthampton: Home to Daniel E. Kelm's studio as well as Big Wheel Press and many other artists.**

**November 19, 2017**

**Michael Smoot of Double Down Press and Bennington College**

I met Michael Smoot at the Bennington College Visual and Performing Arts Center (VAPA), where I got to see the amazing studio spaces dedicated to lithography, etching, and silk-screening as well as an old stable house that had been converted to a letterpress shop. Smoot also discussed his responsibilities there as a Printing Technician to assist in classes, work with students as well as maintain the print shops and equipment.



Michael Smoot

After getting a tour of the college facilities, we made our way to his studio just 10 minutes away in an old mill building. Now if I thought Kelm's studio felt like it was in a bell tower, Smoot's was quite literally in a clock tower. We rode the an old elevator up the five floors to a very large room with boxes and bobbles that were tucked into corners and made our way to a door that sat at the far end. Upon entering, I was greeted by a bare bones studio space with a table, a few chairs, his press, boxes of paper, and materials scattered about space.

We sat across from each other and I began to learn Smoot's story. He started in Maryland as a printer for ten years; in 2007 he finished the Tamarind Institute's Professional Printer Training Program, and received his Masters at East Carolina University in Greenville, North Carolina. Smoot talked about the various jobs he had- the number of times he was a barista seemed to escape him- but shortly after graduating, a teaching position in printmaking opened up at a school in Georgia, where he spent two years working before moving North to become the Bennington College Print Technician.

I asked his views of how traditional printing fits in with the digital age and he responded with a resounding, "I'm all for it. You got to mix it up." He went on to talk about how social media has been the biggest change he has seen since starting in printing, and how it connects and drives the community. It allows printers to be inspired and keep up to date with new methods and trends of the print population. He also mentioned that with growing digital technologies there has been a revival in analog printing. He found that a number of his students were drawn to working with lithography and type setting.

Our conversation moved to his personal views on printing. He said he enjoys creating work, appreciates the ideas, but nothing beat the magic of showing someone how to

pull their first print. Smoot enjoyed the teaching side of print, particularly being able to help people recognize their vision in this medium. "It's like alchemy," Smoot said with a bit of a smile and shared a couple questions he asks himself as a printer: "How do we fix the world?" and "How do you get out of the bubble [of the print community]?"

Smoot is driven to play a role as an educator, to be there for people through their experiences with printing. "How we treat each other matters... and how you work in a print shop is a place to practice that. Even if it is as simple as asking someone to clean up their mess."

Smoot's second question stood out to me the most in the conversation we'd engaged in, and I think it's a question many artists should ask themselves. Being in your community and teaching each other new methods, sharing ideas, and creating dialogue on the differences in practice is very important, but how do we go beyond that? How do we go beyond what I personally would describe as a communal comfort zone? How as printers are we sharing our knowledge at a higher level? I found Smoot's question to be a sounding board for important future discussions that may crop up later on.

When asked what his advice would be for beginners such as myself, Smoot said, "Persevere. That's all it comes down to. Hold on to that and you will find your way." The familiar message seemed to be following me, and I took it as a sign to keep going. We circled back around to some of the odd jobs he had over the course of his life as a printer, and at one point he said to himself, "I'm never going to have a non-art related job." He recalled he took that sentiment to heart, and found himself picking up work in the art field.

As our conversation came to a close, he shared with me some of the work he's created. We discussed the promise of the students he's taught, and the exchanges he's been apart of, and I even had the opportunity to share the few pieces I had brought on the road with me.

Meeting Smoot was a great addition to my adventure, as he brought to my attention questions dealing with printing beyond the community, teaching, and what print can mean in addition to being a form of art.



**Inside VAPA's  
Printing Studio**



**Two Vandercooks living in the  
Bennington College Letterpress  
Studio**



**Worktable in the Letterpress  
Studio**



**Bennington  
College: VAPA  
Building**



**Bennington College's Letterpress Studio**



**November 20, 2017**  
**PRESS at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts**



Melanie Mowinski ft. The 50 Card Project

Nothing beats the magic of your first print shop. It had been a couple months since I last visited my alma mater, Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. There I met up with my mentor and artist inspiration, Melanie Mowinski.

My conversation with Mowinski felt as if I never left her shop, and since our visit was towards the end of this adventure, allowed me to approach our meeting with new thoughts on print. I listened to her experiences with a fresh outlook on the printing practice, which allowed us to bounce ideas around of what would come next for this

adventure, and what steps I could take to grow as a printer.

My time with her passed much faster than I was hoping, but was very valuable nonetheless. She told me about her experiences coming out of her undergrad and how she spent some of the time she took off, describing her time home and the series of jobs that led her to returning school. "We've all paid our dues and had those shit jobs," she said, a truth I've heard from many, but she continued to ask, "How do you take these mundane jobs and make the skills transferable to your work?"

The question reminded me of Kelm and his advice in finding work that would keep me in practice, such as repairing books.

As we continued talking, Mowinski had another statement that made me think; "Be clear on why you want an MFA." What does an MFA mean for my future practice? It would certainly challenge and connect me, but also put me on the path of teaching, which I've seemed to rebel against as a career option. Maybe it's time to seriously think about it? We talked about the ups and downs of an MFA, as well as other programs that I may consider, such as work-study programs at Haystacks, Penland, or internships at studios such as Women's Studio Workshop. Mowinski recalled a piece of advice from an artist, Peter Adams, when she was on her path as an artist in that it is so important to be making work.

Before I knew it, my time with Mowinski was quickly drawing to a close, so I asked my last few questions that have been driving most of the conversations with other printers. When asked if there was anything she wished she knew when she started out, she had

two thoughts; “I wish I listened to my parents about retirement,” a thought I’ve had more than once, and been advised by my own parents about. For her second thought, she offered me a bit of advice: “it’s okay to not be in control and to play a little bit more.”

Mowinski’s thoughts on challenges she faced are ones that as a printer she is still facing today. She revealed that she still works on “Being a good enough printer and wanting to be better than I am.” To finish our chat, I asked her what advice she’d give to printers who were just starting out. “You can’t wait for someone to open that door,” she said. “You have to do it and be assertive about it. Don’t be afraid to fail and don’t take anything personally, especially rejection.”

Leaving Mowinski’s shop I had more to consider about graduate school, as well as about my practice.



**Vandercook Universal III and a New Acquisition of Type**

## November 22, 2017 Horton Tank Graphics

Yesterday I made my way to my last printer in Hadley, Massachusetts. I drove to Horton Tank Graphics to meet with Art Larson on the second floor of a building dedicated to a number of studios.

Larson greeted me, leading me into his shop where my attention was immediately drawn to its walls, which were covered in prints, art, charts, bookcases, and even tarot cards. He gave me a tour of his shop before diving into our conversation. He has some very unique pieces of equipment, cases, and type, that left me wanting duplicates for a shop of my own, including a beautiful Vandercook 325A, that lives down stairs through a labyrinth of doors and halls.



Art Larson

As we began our conversation, he described himself as an anomaly in the field, working primarily in fine pressed books and as a contract printer. Larson, like many other printers I first spoke with, got their start when print was popular. In the late 1970's he started at the Hampshire Typothetae in Northampton where he worked with Harold McGrath and Barry Moser.

As Larson began to set up his own shop in 1987, he told me he came across the exceptional pieces that sit in his shop now. Most of his collection came into his possession when larger printers were starting to let go of their last pieces of equipment as the demand for large scale print projects slowly dwindled and moved towards digital printing. He mentioned that a few pieces might have come from Norwood, which I later learned was the home of Plimpton Press.

These pieces included modified cases, ornament cases, collections of wood type and other various sorts of printing related equipment. Larson noted I might be finding myself in a unique place as well, with printers starting to sell their shops, which might open doors for myself in the future.

Standing at the long table at the center of his shop, he told me some of the changes he's seen in print. Many of the changes seemed to stem from shifts his client base and in the types of jobs he takes on. After taking that into consideration, his focus was the best way to go about a project, weighing his options of type or polymer plates. I also asked Larson how he views traditional means of print fitting into the digital age. While in

favor of working with type, he is open to the uses of digital work saying, “I’m not so stuck on that.”

I asked if there was anything he wishes he knew when he started, and Larson said, “Ignorance was bliss then, if I knew the amount of work I was going to do, I would have been terrified.” He quickly followed up with, “Follow your instinct.” I understood what he meant, and I think before this trip I was ignorant to the level of dedication that would be required, and perhaps in some ways I still am. But even so, the level of work described by these printers, book binders, and artists excites me and only drives me that much more to figure out how to be relatively successful in print and book work.

We touched on challenges he faced, and again he said, “I was just really fortunate. I fell into the stuff.” He found challenge in learning the craft and figuring out how to get by financially, both challenges I have already started to understand, with the rest of my career still looming before me.

We spoke about how we end up on paths for a reason, about the books that came into his life and seemed to predict printers he would work with later down the line. “I’m a crazy reader,” Larson said to me as he showed me a few books, including a version of *The Odyssey* bound by Daniel Kelm. I also learned that one of my favorite books created by Melanie Mowinski was printed in Larson’s shop after a National Park residency in Denali, Alaska.



The Magical Vandercook 325A  
of Horton Tank Graphics

On the last question about advice to the aspiring young printers such as myself, Larson pulled out a set of rules I was very familiar with. “Immaculate Heart College Art Department Rules” reminded me of some of my first print work, when I was working with Mowinski on the 2015 PRESS calendar. New to print work at the time, I worked with Mowinski and Jonas McCaffery to design and print three pages. One of these pages listed Rule 9: “Be happy whenever you can manage it. It’s lighter than you think.” This was a page that sparked a deeper love of print within me, and acted as an introduction to nun and printer Sister Corita Kent that would follow me for the majority of my college career.

Larson’s advice was to follow Rule 7: “The only rule is work. If you work it will lead to something. It’s the people who do all of the work all the time who eventually catch on to things.” The end of my trip seems to be a

call to the fronts of my practice to get back into habit and keep creating. Larson continued with the tour of his shop where I was in awe of the collection of type, the presses, and the work that hangs in his shop. He told me how he came across some of his works, the people he's worked with, and then we made our way down to see his Vandercook 325 A. In the depths of his shop, we talked about my findings from visiting other shops, my plans post trip, and the magic of the machine in front of us. I once again found myself drawn to the art on the walls, the stacks of paper that surrounded us, and I let myself imagine working in a shop such as Horton Tank Graphics. We spoke about the National Stationary Show, hosted in New York, when Larson said it was one of his most sobering experiences. Just witnessing the sheer size of the show, and the number of people who are in the business of paper crafts. This conversation made me think of Beth Payson and George Libby over at Laura Marr Printing and their recommendation to go to the show as well.

I left Horton Tank Graphics and Larson, feeling excited and willing to embrace the unknown of my future in print.

The last two weeks have been an incredible opportunity to travel, connect, and educate myself on the world of print and bookbinding. It has been an absolute privilege meeting David Wolfe, Isak Applin, Charlie Hewitt, Beth Payson, George Libby, Adrienne Kitkio, Hope Rovelto, Bernie Vinzani, Susan Groce, Meg Brown Payson, Joshua Baker, Jenya Damsky, Christiana Becker, Megan Ogden, Daniel Kelm, Michael Smoot, Melanie Mowinski, and Art Larson. The opportunity to see your work, studios, shops, and your advice and kindness will not be forgotten; I hope to carry the same work ethic and dedication to the world of print, books, and art as you all do. Thank you.





## About Isaac Wood

Isaac Wood started his career in mixed media works and photography and quickly moved into printmaking upon entering college. He has since expanded his specialties to letterpress work, linoleum carvings, silk-screening and book arts. His work follows concepts of healing and emotional narratives through a lens of abstraction. He earned his BA in Art in 2017 from the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts.

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 [@fantasticmr.wood](https://www.instagram.com/fantasticmr.wood)

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