The History of Letterpress

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The History of Letterpress

This exhibition essay explored the letterpress and how its process has been used and adapted over time. The letterpress was invented thousands of years ago and is still used in design to this day. The exhibition will start off dark as this represents how letterpress started industrial, there will not be many lights at all and dark walls. As we move through time, I would like it to become cleaner and brighter as this is how letterpress is used modern day as it is for recreational purposes. It will be in Germany as this is the main place letterpress started. As someone who now uses the Alexadra press often and enjoys using it for fun, I think that is important how machines like this were used for real life work.

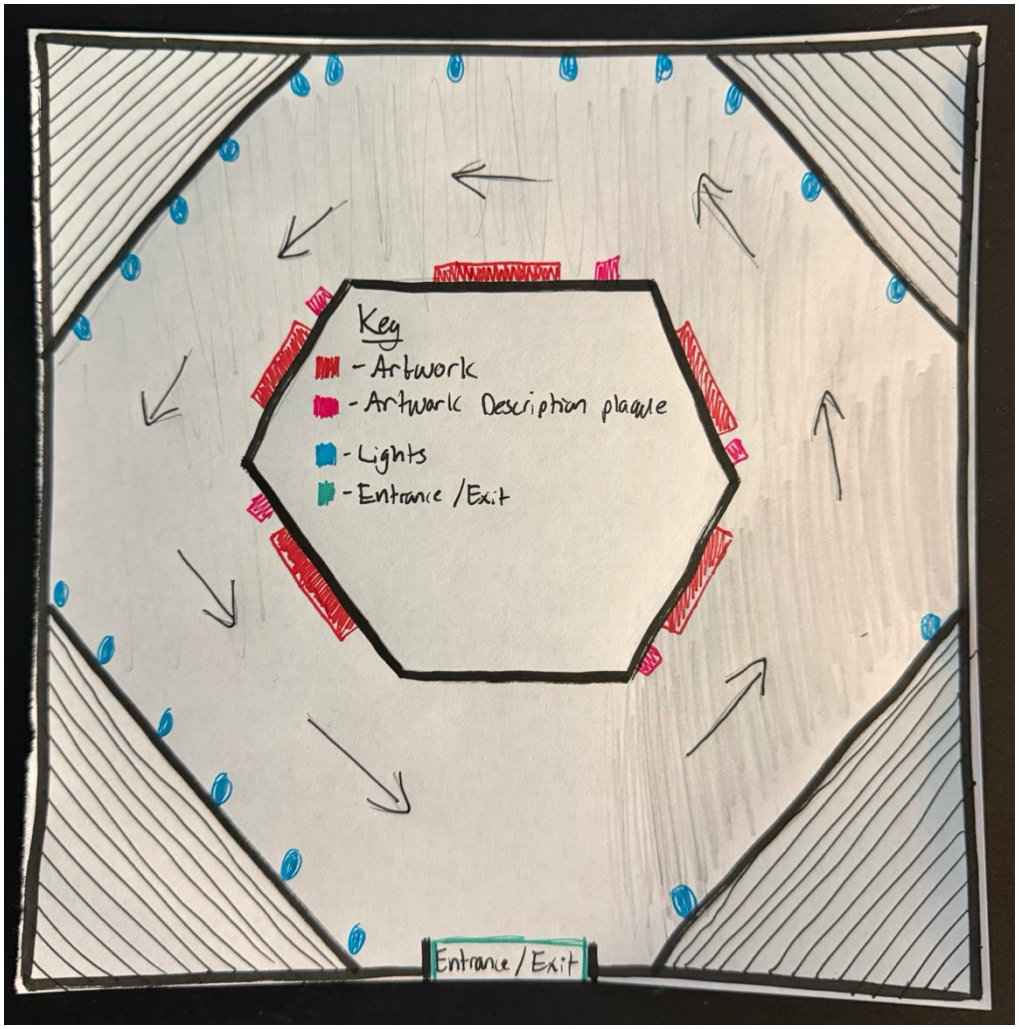


Figure 1: Taylor, *The History of a Letterpress Exhibition Map*, 2026



Figure 2; (Met Museum, *The Printed Image in China,* 2017)

Movable Type was first created in China by Bi Sheng back in the 11th century. Sheng was a 'pioneering figure in the history of printing' (Myers, 2022). He created ceramic type pieces for press which then allowed for more flexible and efficient printing processes as the individual letters could be moved and used more than once. This was during China's Northern Song Dynasty which was from 960 to 1126. This was one of the biggest social and economic changes in China as it 'shaped the intellectual and political climate of China down to the twentieth century.' (Dept. Asian Art, 2001)

Movable Type was then introduced over the world to places as far as Asia and Europe. It was shown to the world ‘At the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, hundreds of dancers moved in and out of square boxes topped with Chinese characters, forming and dissolving words in perfect rhythm.’ (Ying, 2026) This shows that hundreds of thousands of people would have seen this and it would have made an impact.



Figure 3; (Andrews, *The Gutenberg Bible,* 2015)

Johannes Glutenberg created durable lead based movable type and press around 1450 in Europe. Gutenberg creates Gutenberg’s printing press which ‘was considered a history changing invention, making books widely accessible and ushering in an “information revolution”’ (Lehmann Haupt, 2018). The Gutenberg bible was first printed in 1454, and it is estimated to print ‘from 70 to 270 copies, with the majority printed on paper and up to 45 on vellum.’ After hundreds of years there are ’48 surviving copies, only 23 of them are complete’ (Accardo, n.d.) One of these copies can be found on display in the Harry Elkins Memorial Room. Elkins sadly died during the sinking of the titanic and ‘two years later at the 1915 commencement, the

library and in it the memorial rooms opened' (Halberstam, 1953) There were 3,500 of Elkins' books in the English Oak panelled room and for the Gutenberg bible to be one of them on display shows that it is special. With a book like the bible that so many people would call sacred, I think that it is even more special knowing it has been individually pressed. This goes for any piece of art that has been pressed, as it is such an intimate way of working and every outcome might be slightly different it makes it unique. This bible was a massive milestone in letterpress and movable type in Europe. The style within this bible is very much older as expected but also ties in with modernist art. 'Modernism in visual art involved a break from traditional values and styles' (National Galleries of Scotland, n.d.) Just from looking at the Gutenberg bible you firstly see that it is very neat with justified text in two columns which is good as it keeps the perfect character line length. There are also hand drawn illustrations

> 'People like Johannes Glutenberg were developing this style of printed text, but they were doing it when the wider culture and landscape was really all about hand-drawn decorations, hand drawn letters and hand drawn little critters' (The Huntington, 2025)

This shows that these bibles were even more intimate and rare as each one might have had different hand-drawn illustrations and why they are 'estimated value of $30 million' (Nadel, 2017)



THE PENNY PAPER.

No. 113. LAST CINCINNATI, MONDAY EVENING, MAY 16, 1881. EDITION One Cent

NEW YORK'S MULES.

They Both Kick Over the Traces.

Conkling and Platt Resign as United States Senators.

And Pray What Will the Poor Country Do Now?

The Biggest Sensation for Many a Day in the Sleepy Old Capitol.

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 16.—A bomb-shell burst in the Senate soon after it was called to order this morning in the shape of the resignation of Senators Roscoe Conkling and Thomas C. Platt, of New York. The communications were in the usual form and addressed to Vice-President Arthur, and announced that the resignations had been forwarded to the Governor of the State of New York, and requested having announcement of the fact be formally made to the Senate.

This announcement was received by the Senators present with genuine surprise, but the Senate immediately proceeded to the transaction of routine business, and at 12:25 o'clock went into Executive session.

WASHINGTON, May 16.—The galleries were well filled, and the Senate was nearly full, when the resignations of Conkling and Platt were announced. Immediately after the reading of the journal, the Vice-President said: "I have the honor of laying the following communications before the Senate. The Clerk will read." The Clerk then read as follows:

WASHINGTON, D. C., May 16, 1881.

SIR.—Will you please announce to the Senate that my resignation as Senator of the United States from the State of New York has been forwarded to the Governor of that State.

I have the honor to be, with great respect, your obedient servant,

ROSCOE CONKLING.

At once there was a hum of surprise all about the Chamber. The Democrats looked anxiously at each other and smiled. The Republicans tried to be calm, but more than one showed intense anxiety as to what would follow.

The Vice-President then handed another communication to the Clerk, who read as follows:

WHY SHE CRIED.

More About Stephanie's Lover

A Young Man Suicides, But Not on Account of Love for Her.

VIENNA, May 16.—The speculations about the cause of Princess Stephanie's sudden tearful outburst during the marriage ceremony Monday, was fanned afresh last evening, by a dispatch from Paris, announcing that a young American artist there had attempted suicide by opening the arteries of his arms. It was at once whispered around the palace that the young artist was none other than the Princess' unfortunate lover, the sight of whose face at the wedding threw her into hysterics. This, however, is not true. The young man's name is George Rowland, and from what has been ascertained about him, and hopeless love but pecuniary difficulties are at the bottom of his desperate deed. The American who courted the Princess is said to be no sich as her Royal father himself.

Wall Street.

NEW YORK, May 16.—Stocks opened active and bear yest as compared with closing prices of Saturday. Advance ranged from ½ to 1 per cent., and was most marked in Wabash Common, Northwestern, St. Paul, Union Pacific, Pacific Mail, and the Northern Pacific stocks. All time of writing market is irregular. Lake Shore has reached 1½ per cent., and some other stocks are following suit.

The following are 11 a. m. prices: W. U. Tel., 130½; C., C., C. & I., 97½; C. C. & I., C., 97½; R. I. & P., Con., 118½; N. J. Cen., 102½; Ill. Cen., 131½; Ohio Cen., 35½; Mich. Cen., 113½; North. Pac., 44½; do. preferred, 72½; Union Pac., 124½; Cen. Pac., 91; Kansas & Tex., 37½; Allen and Terre Haute pref., 147½; Canada Southern, 73½; Chesapeake and Ohio, 27; Del. & Hud. Can., 104½; Del., Lack. & Western, 129½; Erie, 36½; do. preferred, 62; Hav. & St. Jos., 70; do. preferred, 113; Iron Mountain, 74½; Kan. & Tex., 40½; Lake Shore, 101½; Louisville and Nashville, 106½; Rockwell, 19½; do. preferred, 142½; Ontario and Western, 27½; Pac. Mail, 54½; Quicksilver, 16½; do. preferred, 67; Reading, 50; Rock Island, 142½; St. Paul and Omaha, 60½; do. preferred, 105½; St. Paul, preferred, [illegible]

IMMENSE.

The Unions' Picnic Yesterday.

Grand Order, a Socialistic Time, and a Big Parade.

THE DAY.

There could not have been a better day provided for the great picnic if the managers had had the ordering of it themselves. The heavy rains of Saturday cooled the atmosphere and laid the dust without making any mud. The sun rose bright and clear in the morning, and while warm and pleasant, the air was yet cool enough to make boating pleasant.

At an early hour excursions began to arrive from Louisville, Indianapolis, Dayton and Springfield. From the two latter points 20 car loads came down on the C., H. & D. and C., C. C. & I. Railroads.

THE PROCESSION.

The parade was a success in every particular. It was long enough to test the patience of the thousands who crowded the streets watching it, and certainly was satisfactory to the members of the Trades' Unions. The Cigar-makers, the Typographical Union, the Iron-molders and the Journeymen Tailors were the most noticeable. The employees of Kuhn, Feiss & Co., H. Lowenthal & Co., H. Tietig & Bro., and Bass Bros., all made a handsome display in their new and neither hats and canes.

AT THE GROUNDS.

Long before the hour of noon, people began to flock toward Lagond Park and the Lookout House, and after dinner a continuous stream of humanity poured into all the streets leading to those places, while every street-car line that reached the foot of the incline, had no extra cars, which were packed to overcrowdedness all day and night long.

Arriving at the grounds the immense multitude found all the usual devices for purely amusements in full blast. Every body seemed in good humor and bent on having as much fun as could be extracted from a day of such rare attractiveness. Four large dancing platforms were crowded with dancers, while the merry go-round, the shooting galleries, bowling alleys, peanut stands, ice cream and refreshment stands all did a thriving business. As for beer, it flowed in streams down the thirsty throats of the thirty thousand or more people present. Considering the vast quantity drank, there was very little drunkenness apparent and no disorder to speak of. The police detail had but little to do, as the various committees were untiring and vigilant in watching and promptly suppressing any thing approaching disorder.

HOW IT WILL PAY OUT.

CHESTER PARK.

Entries for the Running Races.

Liberal Purse-ment, and Promise of Fine Sport.

The spring running meeting over the Chester Park Course will begin on the 24th inst., and continue five days. There are some fine runners among the entries. The following is the programme for the season of five days:

FIRST DAY—SATURDAY, MAY 21.

First Race.—Trial Purse $200 of which second to have $50. For all ages. Dash of one mile.

Second Race.—Sixth Derby Stake. For three-year olds. $50 entrance, h. f.; $200 added by the Association, of which second to have $100. Dash of one mile and a half.

Third Race.—Club Purse $300, of which second to have $50. For all ages. Mile heats.

SECOND DAY—MONDAY, MAY 23.

First Race.—Club Purse $200, of which second to have $50. For all ages. Dash of one mile and a quarter.

Second Race.—Club Purse $300, of which second to have $150. For all ages. Two-mile heats.

Third Race.—Cincinnati Ladies' Stake. For two-year-olds. $25 entrance, h. f.; $250 added by the Association, of which second to have $50. Dash of three-quarters of a mile.

THIRD DAY—TUESDAY, MAY 24.

First Race.—Club Purse $200, of which second to have $50. For all ages. Dash of one mile.

Second Race.—Sweet Home Stake. For three-year olds. $50 entrance, h. f.; $300 added by the Sweet Home, of which second to have $100. Mile heats.

Third Race.—Club Purse $250, of which second to have $50. For all ages. Dash of two miles.

FOURTH DAY—THURSDAY, JUNE 2.

First Race.—Club purse $200, of which second to have $50. For all ages. Mile heats, three best in five.

Second Race.—Cincinnati cup. For all ages. $50 entrance, p. p.; $500 added by the Association. Dash of two miles and a half.

Third Race.—Consolation purse for beaten horses, purse of $250, of which second to have $50. Mile heats.

A NOBLE CHARITY.

THE PENNY PAPER.

Now Shape, New Press, New Room.

The "All-the-News-for-a-Cent" Paper Ready for Business.

Four months and more ago THE PENNY PAPER was started in Cincinnati. Nearly everybody predicted its early demise. The paper became popular and was seen to be lively, newsy and, complete, but still people had little faith in its permanency. Cincinnati is so gloriously strewn with the carcasses of newspaper ventures that the new-comer must fight his way through to notice into the heart of public confidence.

Well, THE PENNY PAPER still lives, and has long years of life and usefulness before it.

To-day it appears in new form and enlarged according to original calculation. To-day, also, the new press, the use of which enforces obstacles have long delayed, is running, throwing out papers at the rate of 12,000 per hour.

The entire establishment is now located at 4, 6, and 8 Home st., (between Elm and Plum and Fourth and Fifth), in commodious and convenient quarters, especially fitted up for it.

THE PENNY PAPER since at being reliable, fair, and independent. It has all the current news of the day worth a reader's time, and this news it presents in an attractive and readable form. In the city news THE PENNY PAPER leads all other afternoon papers, and in the future, with new capacity and convenience, expects to be at the head of all papers in all news interesting the masses of the people.

THE PENNY PAPER is published by an incorporated Company that also publishes daily newspapers in four other American cities. Those papers are The Detroit Evening News, The Cleveland Penny Press, The Buffalo Evening Telegraph and The St. Louis Chronicle. The Detroit and St. Louis papers are two-cent, the others one-cent. The five papers of this alliance have an aggregate daily circulation of eighty thousand copies, but two cents paper establishments in the United States circulate more papers every day than THE PENNY PAPER and its colleagues.

THE PENNY PAPER to-day begins paying the Union scale of wages to its employes, and is in hearty sympathy with the workingmen in their efforts to secure fair pay for good work. This paper will always in the future, as in the past, be found watchful of the rights of the work-

for sending the yard in front of the Postoffice.

RIVER INTELLIGENCE.

STEAMERS LEAVING TO-DAY.

[illegible]

LEAVE AS ADVERTISED.

[illegible]

Minimum Almanac.

MONDAY, May 16.

[illegible]

PORT ITEMS.

Clear and pleasant. Business fair.

The river continued to fall, with 17 feet 2 inches of water in the channel at noon.

The Rob. Perkins arrived this morning with coal, and is gathering up empties for her return.

The Silas P. Coe arrived this morning from Pomeroy, and leaves, this afternoon, for St. Louis, although the statement to the contrary in a morning paper.

The Jos. D. Lewis and the Ellen McCoy are receiving the finishing touches in the repairs made upon them, and will be ready for business in a week or two.

The Andy Boom arrived at 4 o'clock this morning with an excellent trip from Memphis, having refused tonight at a number of places. She brings 1,500 bales of compressed cotton for the Eastern trade, which will be sent East over the C., H. & D. and N. Y., P. and Ohio railroads.

The Wildwood left this morning at 8 o'clock on her daily trip for Maysville. This is the initial trip for the Wildwood daily and it is to be hoped they will pay sufficiently to be continued the year round. She returns this evening at 7 o'clock.

The daily packets depart as usual, including the fast Buckeye State for Pittsburg, the W. P. Thompson for Parkersburg.

The Chancellor and Cora Miller are both ready to receive for their trips tomorrow, the former for Kanawha and the latter for Memphis, followed by the Andy Boom on Friday.

The following boats were at the wharf at noon: Golden City, Gosling Star, W. P. Thompson, Wildwood, Chancellor, Pike, Gen. Lytle, Buckeye State, Cora Miller and Cincinnati.

The Fannie Tri[illegible] row.

NEW ORLEANS, May 16. The New Era Hamilton arrived, yesterday, from Cincinnati.

ST. LOUIS, May 16.—The John L. Stevenson, to-morrow, for Pittsburg. The New Orleans Anchor Line steamer W. H. Halliday down Wednesday, and

Figure 4; (The Penny Paper, *From Penny Paper to Post and Times-Star: Mr. Scripps,* 1881)

Letterpress was then taken to the industrial world when it was realised that this was a quick way to print in large quantities for things like newspapers. Before linotype letterpress was a slow process as ‘letters of type needed to be individually cast in molds and put in order by hand, backwards and in reverse order’ while also thinking about the spacing of the letters and words. Linotypes association is mostly with a man called Ottmar Mergenthaler who was an engineer back in 1876. After much testing Mergenthaler made a machine that had a keyboard and that would be able to type sentences and space out the words correctly. “Once the line was completed, the machine would pour liquid metal into the mold and cast brand new type that was all connected in a line, called a slug. This is allegedly where the name linotype came from as it created lines o type.’ (Colclough, 2022) So this was how linotype and hot

metal came into production where the machine was taken over the world and improved by other people using it. At the time this machine was generational, but it did have a drawback. The linotype machine ‘cast blocks of metal type for individual uses’ which shows it probably wasn’t the costliest way of doing things. Benefits to this machine were that ‘A single operator could take the place of six people setting type by hand.’ (Anon., n.d.) This was a huge operation until the late 1980s and then soon after is when print was replace by phototype setting and computer typesetting.

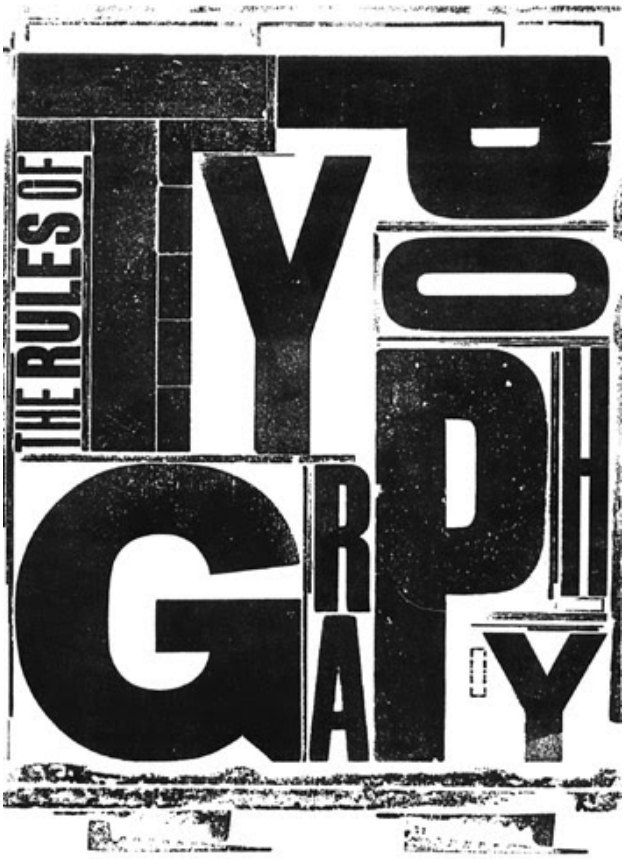


Figure 5; (Kitching, *Rules of Typography*, 2004)

Letterpress has made a return within the 20th century in a different sort of way as letterpress is now used as art and more decorative pieces. Figure 5 shows a piece by Alan Kitching showing where he has made a poster, he doesn't only use one type of press he is known to layer up work using multiple different presses which use movable woodblock. Personally, I feel that there are two ways you can go with letterpress, the clean and neat look and the rustic messy look. It is very easy to create a clean look with the press but as soon as you start layering up different words, it can look messy in a good way. Kitchings work could be described as post-modern as it is quite hard to read sometimes and often lacks in hierarchy, but this is what makes it real. The texture that letterpress gives is also quite post-modern as it

is not crisp and real. This is personally why I love letterpress so much as every outcome is slightly different.



Figure 6; (Taylor, *Manifesto Poster,* 2026)

Finally, for where we are today with letterpress. It is still being used for art and other small purposes but is most defiantly not used for bigger quantities like magazines and newspapers as this would take way too long and would be very expensive. Figure 6 is something that I made using mainly the Alexandra Press and rollers but to make this successful, I had to make the final outcome online. This is most likely the future of letterpress as there aren't many machines left to be able to make art like

Alan Kitchings. To make this I had to scan in all of my individual presses which would then capture all of the detail. When it comes to making art through a letterpress, I think that the great thing about it would be that that piece of art is individual and almost 3 dimensional as it is the original print. When scanning in the prints, the details still there but there isn't as much emotion that comes with it as there could be thousands of prints which are the same.

Letterpress is nowhere near used like it was back in the industrial days and is now only used for art and things like wedding invitations and cards. Personally, having the access to use an Alexandra Press and Adana Press is important in learning how to change the kerning and the tracking of a word. These days having software that does all of that for you takes away from the past and takes you back to the basics of typography.

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Figures

Figure 1; Matthew Taylor (2026) *The History of a Letterpress Exhibition Map*

Figure 2; The Met. (2020) *The Printed Image in China.* Available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2012/printed-image-in-china Accessed on: April 11th

Figure 3; Sky History (2015) *7 Things you may not know about the Gutenberg Bible.* Available at: https://www.history.com/articles/7-things-you-may-not-know-about-the-gutenberg-bible Accessed on: April 11th

Figure 4; Commons Wikimedia. *The Penny Paper, May 16, 1881.* Available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Penny_Paper,_May_16,_1881.png Accessed on: April 11th

Figure 5; Advanced Graphics. (2025) *Alan Kitching: Rules of Typography.* Available at: http://www.advancedgraphics.co.uk/kitching/zooms/rulesoftypographyZ.htm Accessed on: April 11th

Figure 6; Matthew Taylor (2026) *Manifesto Poster*