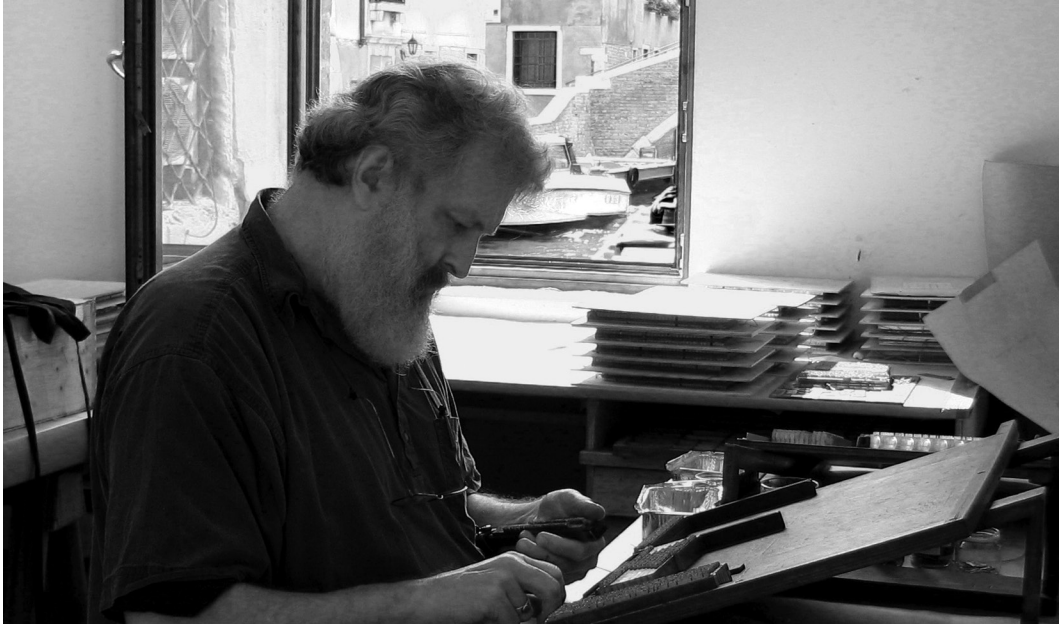


Keeping the Tradition Moving

A lifetime of achievement is as much about what one accomplishes as what one enables others to accomplish, as PETER MITHAM discovers from JAN and CRISPIN ELSTED of Barbarian Press.



Crispin Elsted in Venice. (Peter Koch photo)

ONCE UPON A TIME, according to the late Anne Yandle, it wasn't uncommon for members of the Alcuin Society to take field trips to visit private presses in British Columbia's Lower Mainland. One of those excursions, perhaps in 2000 or 2001, was to Barbarian Press in Mission. Another was to Jim Rimmer's Pie Tree Press, where—if I recall the stories correctly—the Linotype hurled a bolt of molten lead through the assembled type fanciers. That'll learn 'em.

But it was the visit to the Barbarians—Crispin and Jan Elsted—that stood out, and on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the press in 2002, I keenly called for a perspective on the business of operating a private press. British Columbia had, at the time, one of the biggest concentrations of such printers in Canada, and—perhaps anticipating the interest hipster millennials would show in the craft—the cluster seemed worthy of profiling.

My editor at *Business in Vancouver* consigned the story to the small-business page, and even the Elsteds seemed surprised that anyone should see a business angle in their venture. Jan emphasized that no one starts a private press because they want to make money. Most subsidize themselves with real jobs.

“It really has nothing to do with trying to find a niche and being entrepreneurial and all that kind of thing. It has much more to do with people discovering a certain spiritual value in doing work with [their] hands, and involves hands and mind and producing something that is lasting,” she said.

Sometime later, I discovered Crispin's bemused take on our interview in one of the infrequent updates circulated by the press; names weren't given, but the course of the interview was familiar:

I'm afraid I rather alarmed him. When he asked me how we budgeted a book, I told him we had no idea of the budget until we had spent it; and later, when he wondered how we managed to survive financially, I remarked that I was sure we were secure because the business account chequebook still had all sorts of blank cheques in it.

Yet if the economics of publishing didn't make standard business sense then, they make much less sense now. And yet the long list of presses fledged from the week-long printing courses Barbarian Press has regularly hosted is testimony to both Barbarian's influence and the ongoing appeal of such ventures.

Indeed, fine press printing probably made less sense at the dawn of the digital era than it does now, when people are rediscovering it alongside the rest of North America's industrial heritage. Small entrepreneurs are finding ways to reincarnate the sector even if this requires blending software with the hardware, as in the case of letterpress plates bearing designs created online. What's new is old again. Somewhat like Gaspereau Press in a later decade, however, Barbarian Press discovered a way to make private press printing a viable cultural force.

A COLLABORATIVE ENTERPRISE

While supplementing its early projects with small jobbing deals, Barbarian also pursued

collaborations that boosted its international stature. Its work caught the eye of Sam Hamill of Copper Canyon Press, which had set up shop in Port Townsend, Washington, in 1974 rooted in a "revolutionary conviction" to the way of poetry and a recognition that printing poetry would mean "poverty of all but spirit." Rather than have Copper Canyon publish the first English-language translation of Estonia's Jaan Kaplinski (made with the assistance of Alcuin Society member Riina Tamm), Hamill turned to the Elsteds in 1984 for a fine press edition of *The Same Sea in Us All*. When asked why, Hamill said simply, "Their work is breathtaking. Enduring beauty."

The timeless quality of Barbarian's work was also what attracted Berkeley printer Peter Koch to invite the Elsteds to collaborate on an edition of Joseph Brodsky's *Watermark: An Essay on Venice* (2006). "The last paragraph of this book is enough to break your heart, it is one of the most beautiful pieces of Brodsky's prose that I can think of. It is about a tear, it's about time, it's about loss, and about beauty," he said during a presentation in Vancouver in 2010. "[Crispin] was invited to shape the final paragraph, to whatever shape he wanted."

The breadth of Barbarian's work, its collaborations, and the various relationships that led to production of the Endgrain Editions series—launched in 2000 to showcase the work of individual engravers with prints from their original engraved blocks—attest to the scope of the

University of the Fraser Valley graphic and digital design student Gio Brauer discusses a book with Crispin Elsted during a 2013 visit to Barbarian Press. (Nicole Testini photo)





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*The Elsteds at their table at
 CODEX 2011 Bookfair & Symposium.*

Elsteds' vision. Yet the details are not lost in the big picture: Barbarian has also issued countless small productions, regularly featured and offered for sale at the Alcuin Society wayzgoose and other such festivals of the book arts. These humbler works are no less grand, and a way of making its work—and some fine works of literature—available even to those on the tightest of budgets.

Collected here are some reflections on the origins and challenges of executing that vision in a world that seems increasingly hostile to the printed word. While text abounds, often in digital space, its physical manifestation and quality deteriorates. By some estimates, more data comes into being every 48 hours than in the entire history of the world before; printed matter is a small part of our culture's production, and when it is produced, it's often with a sense of its own ephemeral quality. To steal a phrase from a recent essay on quite another topic, unless a person is steeped in the traditions of print culture, the notion that it's in a state of decay will sound simply incredible.

And yet, as Crispin Elsted points out, the infrastructure that enabled printers of



Additional reading

Barbarian Press has been the subject of numerous articles and profiles through the years. Some notable recent examples:

Michael Hayward, "The Gutenberg Effect: Living a Handmade Life," *Geist*, Winter 2012, www.geist.com/photography/the-gutenberg-effect

Nigel Beale's interview with the Elsteds at the *Nota Bene Books Blog* of the Literary Tourist, <http://literarytourist.com/2012/02/audio-interview-with-jan-and-crispin-elsted-on-the-barbarian-press>

John Shoesmith, an outreach librarian with the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, which holds the Barbarian Press papers, offers a case study of private press publishing in his profile of the Endgrain Editions series at <http://hpcanpub.mcmaster.ca/case-study/barbarian-press-endgrain-editions>.

the past to produce finely crafted books has largely disappeared. Many tricks of the trade need to be relearned, the tools improvised or developed anew. There is much for each generation to discover, lest it be lost forever.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that the Elsteds addressed the Alcuin Society during its 50th-anniversary year. Contemporaries of the Society, they remind us of the deep roots and traditions of print culture, and they show the potential for its survival against the challenges of economics and new technologies. This may well be the one achievement worth celebrating in any of our lifetimes, and the very essence of tradition—that carrying on into the future of what was received and given for our own journey into what may be.

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 ~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.