

Peter Koch

A short introduction

ROBERT BRINGHURST

IN 1949 AND 1950, WHEN Peter Koch and I were both snotty-nosed little boys scampering around Missoula, Montana, nearly all the books produced in North America were set in metal. Most were printed letterpress on decent and durable paper, and most were sewn and cased. The type foundries were still quite healthy—or were healthy once again, after the hard years of

the Second World War. In Germany, where the foundries had suffered heavy damage, craftsmen had reassembled, repairs were underway, and one of the greatest type designers who ever lived, Hermann Zapf, was just beginning his career.

Peter and I knew nothing of this then.

We were so dumb we didn't even know of each other's existence, though for a year or so we lived in the same small town, near the same big lake, in the same big mountains. I was packed off to Alberta while I was still a little kid. Peter stayed in and around Missoula for more than 20 years, and it was there that he started to print. Then he made his way, via Paris and Majorca and Tangier, to San Francisco, where for the past hundred years there has been more fine printing than anywhere else in North America. He apprenticed in San Francisco with Adrian Wilson, arguably the finest, most creative North American typographer and book designer of his generation.

Peter is a very different creature from Adrian,

but I think he can be described in pretty much the same terms. That is, I don't believe there is an artist printer anywhere in North America doing finer work. I also think that T.S. Eliot was right when he said there is no progress in the arts. The cave painters working at Chauvet in the Ardèche some 30,000 years ago were every bit as good as any painter working here and now,

and the best printers of 15th-century Venice and 16th-century Paris were every bit as good as any printer at work today. But there is progress in the lives of individuals and in the life of a society, there is temporary progress, in the form of ups and downs.

That is to say, precious and wonderful things

get found and lost and sometimes found again.

More books were manufactured in the past 24 hours here in North America than were produced in 15th-century Europe during a whole year. There are also far more people buying books and reading now than there were then. But most people living now have never seen or handled a real book. By real, I mean a book that is made to last—as all books were in 1500 and most still were in 1950. The printing and publishing industries have shifted, in the past 60 years, from making books to making mostly simulacra: imitations of books, which are made to be consumed and thrown away. They are fine simulacra, to be sure—triumphs

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Photo courtesy of Peter Koch

of sophisticated technology—but they bear the same relation to real books that photographic and digital reproductions of oil paintings bear to the real thing. They lack physical presence: something that we as physical beings desperately need in order to find ourselves in the world.

Peter Koch is a real printer, and he makes real books. He's also a real artist, and he lives in real time, where things are as they are instead of the way we think we want them. And so, along with making real books, he plays real and serious games with simulacra, making powerful use of historical photographs and translating two-dimensional, weightless, disembodied digital type back into the three-dimensional physical form its makers thought it didn't need. He's a deadly serious artist who has enormous fun, and finds enormous joy, in doing what he does. He has obsessively high standards, as real artists always do, but he has something else which many artists lack. You could call it a social conscience, though I don't think that's the phrase he'd use. He wants things to be good not only for himself but for his colleagues, his profession, and the

world in which he lives. And so, while he is thoroughly up to date and eager to make outlandish experiments and take professional risks, he's also somehow wonderfully old-fashioned.

The great printers of the past didn't order their type from catalogues or download it over the Net. Some of them cut it themselves—like Nicolas Jenson and Simon de Colines and the late and much lamented Jim Rimmer. Others, like Aldus Manutius, Johannes Froben and Christophe Plantin, commissioned someone else to cut it for them. Peter belongs to the latter tradition. He is, I believe, the only printer on the planet who has, in our lifetimes, commissioned a new Greek text type, which was cut by hand in steel, using pretty much the same tools and methods that Francesco Griffo used to cut Greek type for Aldus. I'm sorry I didn't pay him more attention back there in Missoula when I was three years old and he was six. He was probably worth knowing even then. But I've watched him work for twenty years, and I can tell you that the world is a better place because of the work he's done and the way he's done it. 🐼