

40 Years of *Amphora*

I was introduced to *Amphora* a few years ago at the Antiquarian Book Roadshow, put on each year by the Alcuin Society at the Vancouver Public Library. There was a table full of past issues of *Amphora*, ephemera, and copies of a variety of books and chapbooks created or commissioned by the Society. I perused the offerings and nabbed a couple of free copies of *Amphora*.

I found them to be quite interesting reading, although at that time I had little interest in letterpress publishing and the fine arts of typography and book design. After attending the Roadshow for two or three years, I had a small collection of *Amphora* lurking on my bookshelf.

In 2004, by a series of coincidences and chance connections, I was selected as the featured artist in *Amphora* 135. I hadn't realized that the journal's format had changed so significantly, and started collecting the recent issues because they featured artists. The new format thus fit into my art book collection quite well, and I was reintroduced to the book arts. This also impelled me onto a block cutting and printing spree, and I am grateful that *Amphora* continues to publish my work.

Early in 2005 I was asked if I would be interested in writing an anecdotal article on the forty-year-long history of *Amphora*. This sounded like an interesting project, and I immediately began collecting back issues of the journal for review. The Alcuin Society checked through their remaining back issues and sold me about fifty. The owner of MacLeod's Books put all of his copies of *Amphora* in a box for me to look through, and I found another fifty issues I didn't already have.

I compiled a checklist of issues and realized I now had all but fifteen of them. Richard Hopkins, chair of the Alcuin Society Publications Committee, looked through his collection and added a couple of recent issues I didn't have, leaving me thirteen short of a complete collection. I decided this was enough to serve as a solid foundation for a forty-year review and began reading my way through them all.

I ended up with partially read copies of *Amphora* on the kitchen table, in the living room, on the bedside table, on my desk at work and, um, yes, in the bathroom. They covered most of the free horizontal spaces in my apartment and also insinuated themselves into my briefcase, backpack and coat

pockets. It became difficult to remember which ones I had read and which ones I had not.

I read myself to sleep with them, ate breakfast with them, read them while waiting for my meal at restaurants or while riding in taxis, and even began dreaming about printing presses. Some of the prints by George Kuthan also insinuated themselves into my dreams. At last I'd read almost every issue, and added dozens of yellow Post-it notes to interesting pages.

I wrote an outline for the article, then put the project on hold for a couple of months while other tasks needed doing. Eventually emails began arriving asking how the article was going. Later, emails began to indicate due dates! It was clearly time to start writing in earnest, and I set about my task.

The issues varied widely in thickness and content. There were themed issues, anniversary issues, issues with ephemera enclosed, and a variety of cover images and colours. Many articles were reprinted from other sources, a number were written about local booksellers and letterpress publishers, and a great number of articles appeared to be written by people with unusual names.

The stories implicit in *Amphora's* history slowly became clear, especially with the help of Richard Hopkins and Jim Rainer. What emerged was a picture of an enormous and extended volunteer effort by many people to produce the journal for forty years. There were lean times, with pleas for help and money, and there were happy issues celebrating the Society's accomplishments.

Offerings were made for upcoming Society publications, and subsequent issues detailed the delays and setbacks encountered in producing books like *Flowers in Heraldry* and *In Praise of Scribes*. The issues waxed and waned in size, ranging from the 16 pages in Issue I to the 144-page *Amphora* "Millennium Issue." Recent issues have ranged from 24 to 60 pages, and it is clear that finding interesting and topical content remains an ongoing concern for the journal.

Amphora had a humble beginning, detailed in *The Alcuin Society: A Compilation of Its Publications from 1965 to 1998*, published by the Society in 1999. A series of letters and newsletters were sent to Society members beginning 1965, and continued to be mailed out periodically, even after the

first edition of *Amphora* in 1968, until at least the spring of 1993. *Amphora* Issue I, as mentioned, was a slight 16-page volume published in 1967. Issue II, published in spring 1968, was a hearty 40 pages long, designed by Wil Hudson and printed by Donald Atkins, with calligraphy by Ann Tresize.

The second issue provided a complete list of members of the Society, a copy of the Society's balance sheet listing \$1,893 in assets and a \$2,488 operating deficit, notes from the annual general meeting, and a number of articles including a lengthy one by Geoff Spencer, founding chairman of the Society, about publications by Thomas Mosher. Officers and directors of the Society were named, "Directors whose term of office expires in" made its first appearance, and committees were listed. The Society's terms of reference were given, including the limited membership of 875 with various categories. The Alcuin Society at that time was headquartered in a small room at the Arts Club Theatre, and Society members were automatically honorary members of the Arts Club.

It was also noted that "members receive copies of *Amphora*, the Society's semi-annual magazine, along with a bonus distribution of such printed curiosities as may strike the fancy of the Selection committee." An editorial by Geoff Spencer stated: "We need a minimum of 350 members to break even. At this moment we have 175 in good standing," with 12 members having let their memberships lapse.

Speaking of selection committees, I noticed in at least one *Amphora* that the selection committee for *Amphora* articles had been broken into a "younger" group and an "older" group, their separate recommendations being put to the chair of the committee for final decision. It would be interesting to know the story behind that.

Amphora was published semi-annually until Issue XIV in 1973, after which it was published quarterly, a schedule that continues to this day, albeit with occasional lengthy periods between issues and a subsequent flurry of catch-up issues. The slender eight-page Christmas Issue XVIII was the last to use Roman numbering.

Besides frequency and thickness, the size of *Amphora* has also varied over time. The dimensions of *Amphora* II were 8.3" x 5.6". *Amphora* IV, on the other hand, was 9.625" x 6.25", and was printed letterpress with woodcuts

by George Kuthan. *Amphora* V retained the same size as the previous issue, but had a letterpress cover and lithographed contents, a format that would recur over the years. *Amphora* VI returned to the smaller size of *Amphora* II, a size that would remain in use until the current format of 11" x 7.25" was adopted for *Amphora* 126 in winter 2002.

While these format changes may seem trivial, they actually illustrate the effects of technology on printing; for example, the smaller size of *Amphora* VI was rationalized by the following reasons:

1. The larger size was too wasteful of paper and the reduced size cut the cost of *Amphora* from \$200 for Issue V to \$90 for Issue VI.
2. A new cylinder press installed in December 1969 allowed for the smaller format and also matched the offset press size.
3. An extensive range of Times New Roman had been purchased.

The content of *Amphora* also gives an interesting account of the Society's state of affairs through time. *Amphora* VII, for example, included a one-page call for members titled "Help Us to Mushroom," illustrated by a nice wood engraving by Kuthan. This battle for support would continue for many years.

In spring 1981 the Alcuin Citations were inaugurated. Winners were noted in *Amphora* for many years, until the citations were renamed the Alcuin Awards, were expanded, and received a dedicated annual publication of their own.

Amphora 63 was a special edition, an exhibition catalogue for Hand to Hand: A Gathering of Book Arts in British Columbia. The exhibition was intended as a historical chronicle of books arts in B.C. It featured the work of many important letterpress printers and publishers as well as artists, calligraphers, papermakers, bookbinders and type designers.

Amphora 79, March 1990, was an emergency stop-gap issue. As Madeline Williams, then chairman of the Society, notes in "What Happened to the Cover," plans for a twenty-fifth-anniversary issue, "the best of *Amphora* over 25 years," didn't work out as planned because of "resource difficulties" (*Amphora* 79, page 1). The editorial also noted the transition to computerized systems for producing *Amphora* while asking the subscribers to "bear with us" during the time of transition. The cover



AMPHORA

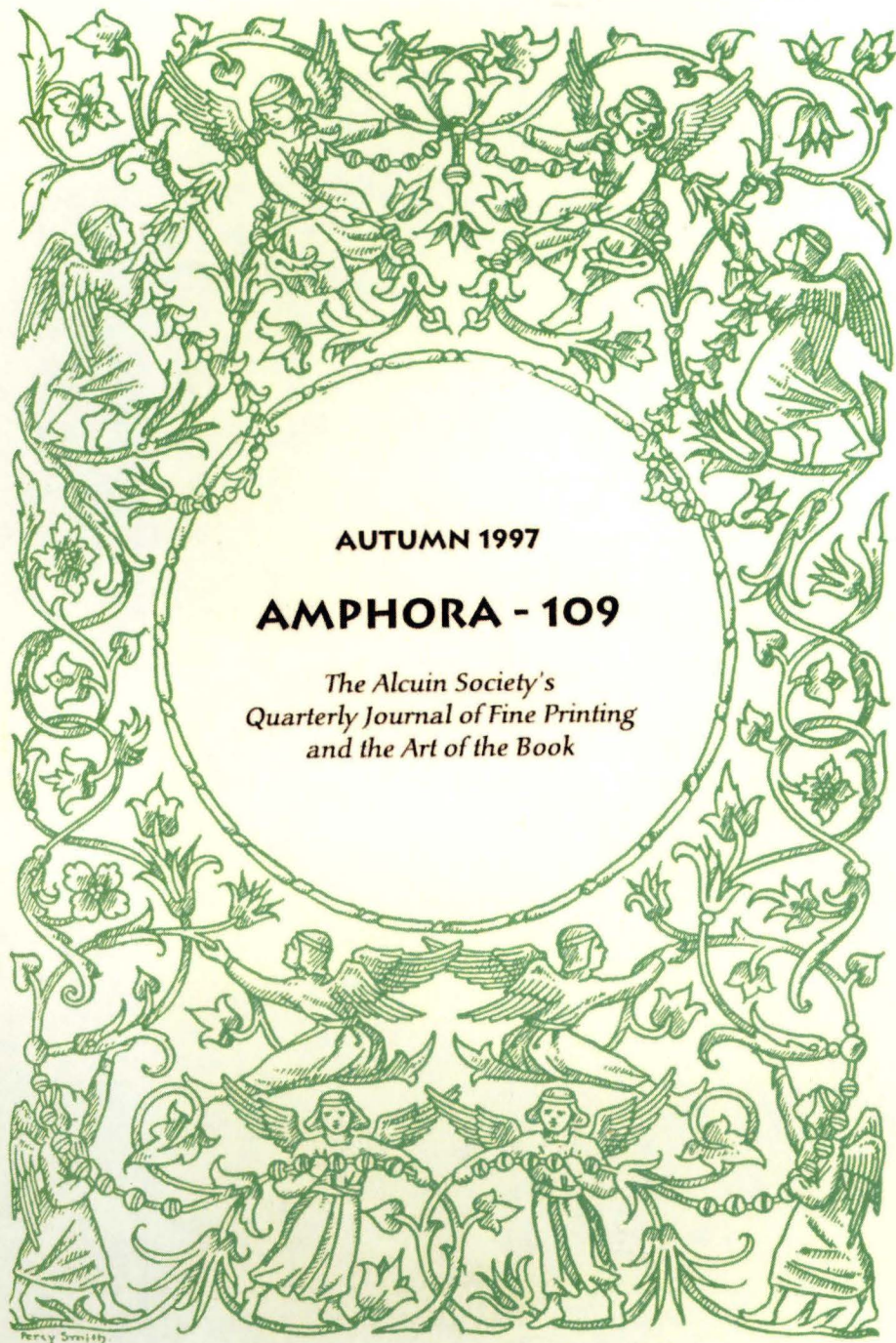
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DECEMBER 1990

Amphora



Number 4, 1975



A Shedding of Autumn Leaves, including Books as Personal Accessories, Series Booklets, Bookbinding Styles, Gone with the Wind, The D.T.P. Saga of a Benedictine Nun (concluded), Public Libraries in the Mixmaster, The World's First Wood Type Museum, Dürer's Decorated Alphabet, Fore-Edge Collecting, Hypertext: The Collective Brain etc.



AMPHORA - 113

AUTUMN 1998

*The Alcuin Society's Quarterly Journal
of Fine Printing and the Art of the Book*

THIS ISSUE IS MAINLY ABOUT EARLY PRINTING
PLUS AN AUTUMNAL SWEEPING
OF LEAVES FROM MANY TREES



was printed letterpress by Stuart Isto on his tried and true C&P press in the basement.

Amphora 80, June 1990, was another special edition, issued for the Alcuin Society's twenty-fifth anniversary. This issue consisted of a table of contents for the first 79 issues. Images were not listed, nor were page numbers, but it is still a useful list when looking for a specific article that you "know is in there somewhere."

Despite all the changes *Amphora* has undergone, it has had surprisingly few editors over its forty-year history. Geoff Spencer was the first editor, and for a while he and Neil Brearley were alternate editors. In a number of issues, no editor was named.

Barbara Hemphill, Guy Robertson and Jean Macdonald were listed as editors in various issues. Geoff Spencer took up a second tenure as editor, holding the position until 2001, when the current editor, Richard Hopkins, was appointed.

Over the years different editors have taken quite different approaches to their task. *Amphora* XIII introduced the first article in what would become a long series written by a large collection of authors with unusual names, in this case T.W.O. Hoots. Although this practice commenced slowly, and one hopes with caution, eventually many issues had numerous articles by "authors" of dubious origin, including Eugen Faltenbugler, Olga Glockenspiel, B. Gorrah, Rose Blight, C. Urchin, George Lidlifter, A. Sonovabic, Horst Feathers and Axel Feathers.

Many of these "authors" had a mini-biography following their article. For example, here is the note on Axel Feathers: "This contributor is an admirer of the late Marie Stopes and has been trying ever since to develop a method of achieving involuntary birth control in rabbits by playing Schonberg's music continuously in their hutches. By trade he is a chick-sexer, trained in Arkansas. He hopes to break new ground by using a similar technique for alligators in the Florida Everglades."

Cautious enquiries to various Alcuin Society members elicited the fact that all of these authors, and many more, were pen names for their long-time editor. He was simply "fluffing up" the issues with snippets of book history,

erotic letterpress images and commentary or the odd personal rant against something or other—the Canada Council, as often as not.

The first printed response to these and other instances of unusual content came in *Amphora* 115, Spring 1999: “The directors do not necessarily agree with views expressed by contributors to *Amphora*.”

The same wording appeared in Issues 116 and 117, but in 118 (Winter 1999/2000) the wording was subtly revised to be, perhaps, a bit more inclusive: “The directors do not necessarily agree with views expressed in *Amphora*.”

This disclaimer disappeared entirely in *Amphora* 119 and remained unseen until Issue 124, but the matter hadn’t entirely gone away. By Issue 125, Fall 2001, the matter was settled, and From the Editor’s Desk introduced a new editor, Richard Hopkins, a long-time director and supporter of the Society. His two-page editorial summarized some of *Amphora*’s long history and partially explained recent events leading up to his appointment as editor.

Richard Hopkins’ name had first been noted in *Amphora* in Issue V, where it was announced at the 1969 spring convocation that he had won the first Alcuin Society Prize while at the University of British Columbia. He became one of a number of long-standing members of the Society who contributed an immense amount of time over the years to supporting the Society.

The former editor, Geoff Spencer—founding chairman of the Alcuin Society and much more—founded his own journal, *The Broken Urn*, and continues to attend Alcuin events such as the Wayzgoose first held at the Vancouver Public Library in 2004.

Shortly after Richard Hopkins took over as editor, the Society asked Robert Reid to design a new look for *Amphora*, and the new format appeared in Winter 2002, *Amphora* 126. The front and back covers could be printed in colour, the paper stock was improved, and the larger size in combination with Reid’s page layout produced a handsome journal. Issue 126 featured reproductions of block prints by seven Canadian artists, including Alistair Bell, Leonard Hutchinson and Robert Bruce Inverarity, whose colour woodcut graced the cover.

As mentioned previously, many excellent examples of George Kuthan's work had been published in *Amphora* over the years, including eight letterpress woodcuts in *Amphora* IV alone. Recent issues have continued this tradition by featuring artists such as Alistair Bell, Michael Kluckner, Andrea Taylor, Arnold Shives, Jim Rimmer and Shinsuki Minegishi.

Advances in technology also affect the production of the current format of *Amphora*. Issues are laid out in Pagemaker or Quark XPress, text is dumped from a number of digital document types, and images are scanned and digitally inserted. The final document is copied to CD-ROM and sent to the printer, where it is output on a Docutech high-speed digital printer.

Most of the finished run of the magazine is shipped in bulk to a mailing service, where the copies are put into mail-merge labelled envelopes for delivery, perhaps along with a letter or piece of ephemera. Almost all issues of *Amphora* have been printed at Benwell Atkins, although some early work was done by the printing class at Vancouver Vocational Institute. Don Atkins has been a long-time member of the Society, and his support has been fundamental to the survival of the Society: we cannot thank him enough.

A number of copies are kept for later sales, membership offerings and as samples at events where the Alcuin Society has a display. Ironically, the upgrade in quality of publication has also resulted in attempts to keep the print run down, and thus the overall cost to produce it.

When *Amphora* had a smaller size it was less expensive to produce. More copies were printed, and these formed the bulk of the spare copies that were handed out for free—and are still available. The recent limited print runs of the higher quality version have already gone “out of print,” and no stocks are on hand for later use. Currently around 400 copies are printed of each issue.

Many keepsakes and pieces of ephemera were included in issues of *Amphora*. Although most of the issues that I myself collected for review prior to writing this article were bereft of the bonus piece, a few issues did hold little treasures either stapled into the centre of the journal or loosely tipped in.

The Alcuin Society plans to include a series of limited edition woodcut prints in future issues of *Amphora*. The woodcuts are to be based on the idea

of a printer's mark that "should have existed, should exist now, or should exist in the future."

FORTY YEARS OF *AMPHORA*. ONCE AGAIN MY DESK IS COVERED IN PILES of multicoloured volumes—letterpress, litho and laser. What a rich history, what a massive legacy of book arts, commissions, books, ephemera and keepsakes recorded and promoted in its pages. It is, in sum, a compelling and magnificent record of the work of many volunteers, of their many thousands of hours of work.

The success of *Amphora* is also built upon the support of the Alcuin Society's members, whose fees not only entitle them to receive *Amphora* four times a year, but also enable the Society to host events such as the Antiquarian Book Roadshow—where I first encountered them—and the Wayzgoose, held very successfully in 2004 and repeated in 2005.

The Society has every right to a just pride in their accomplishments over many years. The proof is before us in 140 issues of *Amphora*. Best wishes for another successful forty years!