

*CODEX Foundation  
Raises the Ante*

A NEW ORGANIZATION dedicated to fostering traditional book arts has been created in San Francisco. The CODEX Foundation was initiated by Peter Rutledge Koch, a letterpress printer who has established an international reputation for publishing books that simultaneously reflect a deep understanding of the form's traditions and reveal a talent for introducing bold contemporary designs. When not working in his studio, he teaches the history of typographic design and printing on the Albion handpress at the University of California, Berkeley's Bancroft Library Press.

A communiqué issued at the end of 2005 announcing the foundation's creation read like a call to arms: "The art and craft of the book depends upon the knowledge of traditional forms, design, and hand-manufacture; as well as familiarity with the latest technologies, imaging sciences, and automated printing machines. The knowledge essential to the continued life of traditional forms of hand manufacture and the transmission of that knowledge is seriously endangered in our age of electromechanical reproduction and digital information. Now, more than ever, the fine arts of the book need patronage and strategic support in order to thrive."

Last spring Koch, one of five directors of the new foundation, agreed to an interview by e-mail with *Amphora* about the organization's ambitious purpose and goals.

*When was the idea for the foundation first voiced?*

"New Year's morning 2005 I awoke with a plan. I would start the ball rolling for a foundation that would support my long-time desire to see a great international book fair of fine arts here in San Francisco. A gathering of presses from around the world in a city with a vital marketplace, a rich book arts tradition, and a very active bibliophilic community."

*Why do you think the book arts are in the situation of requiring something as ambitious as the CODEX Foundation? Why did appreciation for the form of the book—the physical aspects—peak but also then decline, and so rapidly, in the last century?*

"I am going to divide this into two questions. First, why so ambitious: We are not as ambitious as we sound—we are not trying to solve the war in Iraq—but we are trying to address a real misunderstand-

ing. We are attempting to raise the ante when we talk about the book and typographic arts. Sculpture and printmaking are not misunderstood; they are 'fine arts,' but fine books are not so generally perceived as fine art. They are, when they are first encountered, usually just relegated to a pseudo-category of expensive elite books for rich people—gilded ornament for an idle moment in a well-upholstered library. Now *we* know better but we are the choir! There needs to be a real raising of the ante, real art-historical, scholarly, and critical work needs to be undertaken and published that will bring the discourse to the public mind.

"To date (published in America) the only writings that have been addressed to the book that bring scholarly and critical focus into play are restricted to the historical avant-garde (surrealists, Dada, Fluxus, and the like). With a few notable exceptions, such as Betty Bright's new book, *No Longer Innocent*, there are no arguments being published that bring the typographic sophistication of say a Hermann Zapf or a Robert Bringhurst into the same discourse with the art-historical mind of a Richard Wollheim, Peter Schjeldahl, or Robert Hughes. There is a great hole in the centre of the argument—no exhibitions in major museums! No critical apparatus to support a curatorial decision! No public awareness outside the camps of the converted. Now, that is partially due to the writers and scholars who have not provided material worth the effort to promote, publish or even read. But that is also the fault of those able to see the gap but not crossing over. The CODEX Foundation wants to cross the gap, or at least provide the encouragement to anyone in need of encouragement to build a bridge that will carry the weight of the art historical and intellectually critical integrity that a fine book embodies.

"Now, why did appreciation for the form of the book—the physical aspects—peak but also then decline, and so rapidly, in the last century? Because no one raised the ante! Because the fine press book in the middle of the 20th century was for the most part an exercise in good taste and fine craftsmanship; something was missing that would elevate it to a fine art! It is simply not enough to illustrate a book with prints by a successful artist to elevate the better sort of book to the level of a fine art. There must be the addition of the spirit at risk—taking risks that, when successful, will generate a spark that illuminates the human condition in all its horror and its glory. The reading public was not able to justify paying \$650 for a fine press book unless it really spoke to their condition, or added to their social perception of themselves. Sad but true! Easier to

## ALCUIN ONLINE

*The Alcuin Society has just launched its re-designed Web site, featuring an improved visual style and enhanced functionality. Highlights of the new Web site include full details and images of this year's Alcuin Book Design Awards winners, access to articles from Amphora, and online membership application and renewal. The Society has also developed the Alcuin Blog, which will serve as a forum for news and commentary on Society activities and the book arts community. Developed by Greenboathouse Books' publisher and designer Jason Dewinetz, the new site can be found at [www.alcuinsociety.com](http://www.alcuinsociety.com) and the Alcuin Blog at [www.alcuinsociety.com/blog](http://www.alcuinsociety.com/blog).*

point at a piece of wall art than a book to improve your social standing and perceived sophistication.

"The peak of book appreciation was in the period between the wars and before the great stock market crash, well described in Megan Benton's *Beauty and the Book*, published recently by Yale University Press. Since then, there has arisen another culture within our culture, and they failed to take the book beautiful as their symbol of sophisticated acquisition and intellectual pride. Other, easier to digest art forms grabbed their attentions (antique cars, sporting scenes, fine food and wine). Education of the business classes declined, no more Greek classics, no more Latin or even French literature. The intellectual underpinnings that supported the republishing of the classics with contemporary art and the publishing of contemporary poetry have all but disappeared. I think we are talking about education here—or a lack of classical education—now only available in the very most elite schools, and even there perhaps endangered."

*A central, recurring theme of the treatise announcing the foundation's creation is tradition: retaining and sustaining traditional crafts that make up the book arts. There's a difference between retaining the knowledge of outmoded crafts and technologies—places like Williamsburg—and keeping them alive, thriving and relevant to contemporary society. But if crafts and techniques remain in use for as long as they are useful to or valued by a culture, and are then supplanted by others judged better (on whatever basis), what is the value in keeping the old ones alive (some might suggest, artificially so)?*

"None, other than an appreciation for their beauty. After all, we no longer need racehorses—why not just eat them? Well, because they are beautiful animals, and you can always enjoy a horse race, a bit of a thrill if you value betting as a means of entertainment etc...."

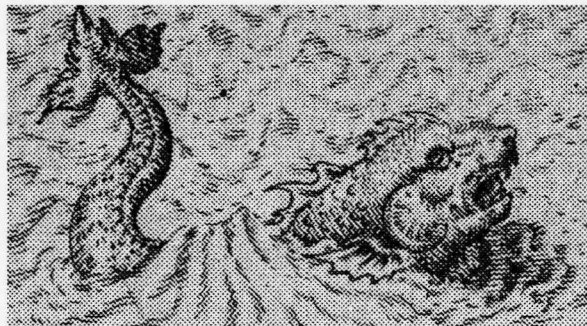
"When a traditional craft is no longer employed creating meaningful and/or useful objects and the actual practice is not enjoyable in itself, then who would mourn its passing but some idiosyncratic historian? But, obviously, such is not the case with letterpress printing or books in general."

*What relationship do you foresee between the foundation's goals and activities, and contemporary, mainstream publishing?*

"I already see mainstream publishing designers poking around my former students' studios and wanting letterpress printing, so no surprises there, and no one is taking seriously the argument that books are dead and over. Only the most demented artificial intelligence fanatics are still playing that old song. Books are here to stay, a noble invention and a very useful and satisfying one too. They even smell good when properly cared for, make good insulation on outside walls, and decorate your room with colourful graphic art."

## THERE BE MONSTERS

*For her second book, Andrea Taylor's Cotton Socks Press dove deep: *Sea Monsters* presents four etchings taken from Renaissance-era maps. Each monster is accompanied by a brief historical text of the map it was taken from. The etchings were done on copper and printed chine collé on BFK Rives paper. The text was printed in 10-point Italian Old Style, with 20-point *Augustea* for display. The sheets are sewn into an elaborate accordion-spined wrap made from Reg Lissel's vellum paper. The total edition is 20 signed and numbered copies, which can be purchased for \$225 from the publisher; see [www.cottonsockspress.com](http://www.cottonsockspress.com).*



The CODEX Foundation's first major event will be a three-day symposium, "The Fate of the Art, The Hand Printed Book in the 21st Century," to be held in Berkeley next February, just prior to the 2007 San Francisco International Antiquarian Book Fair. "This event is intended to be a landmark congress of the world's finest practitioners, presses, collectors, curators and educators, as well as an opportunity to raise public awareness of our existence and continuing creative vitality." Canadian Robert Bringhurst (who has collaborated with Koch on several projects) will be one of the keynote speakers. See [www.codexfoundation.org](http://www.codexfoundation.org) for more details.

## TRENDS IN COLLECTING

### *Collecting Bookers*

TO BEGIN, TWO important but not always understood definitions: *modern first editions* refers to all books published during the twentieth century or later; *hypermoderns* refers to books published within the past ten years that have escalated rapidly in price following publication. A hypermodern is caused by the simple rule of economics—lots of demand for a very limited supply of a desired book. The supply is often small because the author is "new," and publishers seldom produce large first printings of unknown authors.

Customers of Pages 'N Pages have shown a keen interest in books published within the past thirty years, especially titles that have been shortlisted for or won major literary prizes. There is no doubt that the Man Booker Prize generates the most amount of activity among book collectors, and it will be the focus of this first column.

The prize includes fiction written by a citizen of either the Commonwealth or the Republic of Ireland. (The largest criticism of the prize is that it excludes a country that consistently produces top-quality fiction every year—the United States of America.) Collecting Man Booker prizewinners in pristine condition (and especially signed copies) has become increasingly difficult in the past few years, as some of the earlier winners, such as Stanley Middleton's *Holiday* or Bernice Rubens' *Elected Member*, have become extremely scarce.

Aside from the scarcity of some of the Man Booker prizewinners, complexity is added because there is confusion with some of the winners as to which edition is the true first edition. J.M. Coetzee won his first Man Booker Prize in 1983 for his book *Life and Times of Michael K*. There has been disagreement among even the more established book

dealers as to whether the true first is the U.K. printing or the South African printing by Ravan Press. My research into this question so far has revealed that the U.K. edition was published in January 1983 and the Ravan Press edition was published simultaneously. I am, however, still investigating to determine whether there really was a simultaneous release or whether there was a slight time difference between the publication of the two editions.

Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, which won in 1981 (and then was named in 1993 the "Booker of Bookers" for being the best of the first 25 winners of the prize), has some history behind it as well. The U.K. edition—the more sought-after edition because it had a small print run of about 2,500 copies, of which an estimated 1,000 were absorbed by libraries in the U.K., and because Rushdie is a U.K. citizen who won a U.K. literary prize—is not the first published edition: due to labour strikes, it was released in early April 1981, about two to three weeks after the U.S. edition. Also, the U.K. edition was printed from the U.S. sheets (the U.S. edition was published by Knopf). Book dealers with the U.S. first printing will always claim that their copy is the true first edition (technically they are correct), but a collector of Man Booker prizewinners should be more interested in obtaining a really nice copy of the U.K. edition, for the reasons already mentioned.

*Steven Palter is owner of Pages 'N Pages Bookstore ([pagesnpages@hotmail.com](mailto:pagesnpages@hotmail.com)) in Toronto, specializing in literary prizewinners and Canadian first editions.*

## ALIQUANDO CENTENARY

*Canadian private-press legend Will Rueter continues his usual productive pace at The Aliquando Press, having already completed two books in 2006. He is beginning work on his 100th title, featuring a text by T.J. Cobden-Sanderson. "It will take at least a year of hand setting, but I'm sure I'll finally learn humility," he reports. His most recent publication is The Convergence of the Twain, a dark poem by Thomas Hardy on the sinking of the Titanic, printed "using a lot of very expensive Japanese paper. Reg Beatty, one of Canada's top binders, collaborated and the binding is a real joy." Rueter and Beatty are each binding half of the copies in the edition of 50. The horizontal format is 21.8 x 12.5 cm; the book is priced at \$65. Rueter's work (and workshop) can now be seen on his newly launched Web site, [www.aliquando.ca](http://www.aliquando.ca).*