

Monkey Business Press

We present the first in a series of original prints commissioned by the Alcuin Society from Canadian printmakers. To give some continuity to the project, each artist was asked to create a press device, or press mark, for an imaginary press—one that never existed, and probably never will. We also asked them to provide a brief narrative to accompany the print. ¶ To kick off the series, we feature Alberta artist JIM WESTERGARD. Jim taught at Red Deer College for many years. Retirement allowed him to focus full-time on his engraving and book work, which have been attracting growing attention from international publications and collectors in recent years. For the Alcuin project Jim chose the name he'd originally considered for his own press (from which he was, Amphora thinks, unfortunately cautioned away; the world of "fine press" books and limited editions takes itself very seriously and would benefit from a bolus of Jim's irreverence). Here is his story of the Monkey Business Press.

A few years ago a friend gave me an old Vandercook SP-15 proofing press. I had been printing my wood engravings on an older Vandercook at the college where I taught, and when I began to think about retiring, I knew I would need a studio. When the studio was completed I moved the new Vandercook in and decided to give it a name—a name for the machine itself, not for the printing establishment. Ships and boats have names, such as the *Queen Mary* or the *Bluenose*, so why not a cranky old press? I had just completed a series of wood engravings of insect images that were selling rather well. One of the prints in the series was my version of what a Spanish fly should look like. So I gave the old machine the name Spanish Fly.

I retired in 1999 and started a series of wood-engraving portraits. They were "retired" Mother Goose characters. After creating three or four of these, I decided to compile them into a book, which led me to learn about hand-setting type, which in turn led me to realize how very little I knew about putting a book together. I sought the advice of Jan and Crispin Elsted, of Barbarian Press, who were extremely generous and helpful with advice and assistance. Crispin told me I should have a press name, and when I said, "Oh! I already have one! It's Spanish Fly!" Crispin looked at me patiently and said, "I think you may want to reconsider," or something a little more definitive than that.

I had already established a Web site and printed business cards, labels and letterhead with Spanish Fly, but I took Crispin's advice and registered the press under my given name instead of the one I had playfully given my printing machine.

When the offer to design a press mark for the Alcuin Society's project came along, my first inclination was to come up with a name and design a press mark for myself. I started thinking of the nature of the images I make and the kinds of things that interest me. Usually these are images that come to me when I see the irony or humour in situations. One of my favourite quotes (from somewhere) is, "Anything worth taking seriously is worth making fun of." I made lists of press names and sketched out ideas. One of the names I liked for a press for my own use was Monkey Business Press. Monkeys often seem to enjoy play and sometimes appear to not take themselves seriously. I felt the drawing I had come up with, showing the monkey standing on and behind the handle of an ink brayer, worked to reflect my attitude towards image making.

Before starting the engraving I knew the block would be the property of the Alcuin Society, and there would be conflicts if I were to use the press mark and name as my own. So I'll reluctantly relinquish the Monkey Business Press and keep searching for another name for my imprint.

Jim Westergard is still searching for a name, all the while continuing to produce new engravings, some of which can be seen at www.telusplanet.net/public/jimwest/. Alcuin members should note that he kindly agreed to sign a handful of the prints tipped into this issue of Amphora, which have been distributed at random. We would enjoy hearing from any Charlies who received a golden Wonka ticket. Our next issue will feature a new print from Shinsuke Minegishi (who has agreed to follow Jim's lead and sign a few dozen copies, so keep your eyes peeled for more monkey business).



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Wood engraving by Jim Westergard.

Printed from the block by Jan Elsted at Barbarian Press.