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Museum of Printing History

Where, when, who

We, as a class, traveled to the Museum of Printing History located on 1324 W Clay St, Houston, TX 77019 from 9:00 AM to 12: PM, January 24, 2013. Our tour guide's name was Charles Criner who is an artist and registry lithography printer. For the time we had to wait for Charles, Prof. Jerry Waite, UH DIGM coordinator, teacher, and director of the Museum of Printing, took us to what would be our second stop and told us a bit about the exhibit.

What we saw

Stop Number One: The Gutenberg Press

Back in 1450's to have a bible you had to hire calligraphers. Like the live-in maids of today the calligraphers would stay at your house and write down each page of the bible, taking 5 years or so to finish. If they had family they would come too. So at the time bibles were only for those who could afford it which wasn't many. When Johann Gutenberg crafted the first press he revolutionized print and put the age of calligraphers to rest. Gutenberg was not the one who invented printing though. He got this idea from the Chinese, but the Chinese didn't have much use for print machines because they had too many symbols in their alphabet. When print is cast it is backwards so when it is pressed you get the mirror image on the paper, which is then in the correct position. The cast letters are put into what is called a case and the wooden part of the machine was called the furniture; this is most likely where we got the term for furniture. All of the art seen in the Gutenberg bibles were done by artists, and the Ink was made from vegetables. Gutenberg was a great craftsman but not a good businessman, therefore he did not make the kind of profit he should have from his invention. He died bankrupt and blind; even so he is considered the most important man of the millennium.

Stop Number Two: Columbian Press

The machine seen in this exhibit is the real printing press from 1850, the Gutenberg press was a remake model. The eagle at the top of the machine is not just for decoration, it serves as a weight to keep it working right. This printing press was important because it was the only form of documentation and made printing available for everyone. After being used for print, each and every letter had to be individually cleaned before being put away

in shelves called a type cases. The tall or bigger letters were kept in the upper case and the small letters were kept in the lower case. This is how the terms Upper and Lower case for letters came to be. The people who manned the machines would become so accustomed to it that they eventually did not have to look at where to pick up and place the letters in the type cases; just the same way as modern day scribes don't need to look at the keyboard. Our slang was born from the mistakes press printers made.

Stop Number Three: Linotype Printing

In 1886 the Linotype Casting machine was invented by Ottmar Mergenthaler. This process of printing printed more accurately, because it casted metal custom typed lines or sentences instead of having to place each letter, which risked more mistakes. This machine also was less labor intensive. After use, the casts did not need to be cleaned anymore, like in the presses before it; they were just dropped back into what they called the bucket. There the casts were re-melted to be casted again. The ink that was left on the old cast would float to the top of the molten metal and be spooned off afterwards. This also meant that printing didn't require uneducated workers anymore. This machine's casts were printed using the Cranston Press. The linotype machine seen in the museum is powered electrically, but the original was steam powered.

Stop Number Four: Star Wheel Press

The Star Wheel Press is a Lithography Printing press created by a German called Seinfeld. This press could print drawn images, not just text. The image is drawn on limestone with an oil based pencil then pressed onto canvas or paper material. Bavaria, Germany has the best limestone for this press.

Stop Number Five: Post-Modern Printers

The Harrison Press is an offset lithography press revolutionized "quick printing". It was invented by A. B. Dick who was friends with Thomas Edison. 1959 Xerox crane came with its own internal fire extinguisher. The first typewriter was made for men, but men couldn't keep it all to themselves for long. After finding out that women had a niche for typing, type writers were then revised to fit their needs. This finding helped women in the Women's Suffrage Movement. Vander cook's proof machine was geared toward men as well, but only because it required heavy duty work.

Stop Number Six: Letter Press

Mr. Hatfield was a student of Benjamin Franklin who had a printing company and became very rich off of it. Franklin loved eagles and Hatfield could draw. Every time he would come to meet him he would bring him sketches of an eagle.

The Kelson Press was the first vertical press; all the others before it were horizontal. This press was used for small quantities of work, but it was still a very important machine in its time. It's most frequent user was children; they would use it to make their own calling cards. Charles, our tour guide and speaker, thinks the other printing press inventors got their inspiration from this press.

Last Stop: Harvest of Wisdom

Harvest of Wisdom is a movie created by a Texan, Nolan Moore. This movie was one of the most important things he did with his life. The film takes us along a journey which explores how humans developed documented communication. Without print we would be so ignorant about our history.

Why I would choose to have a product printed by the printing process utilized by the Company.

If I had to choose to have a product printed by the Museum of Printing History I would choose the lithography printer. I would love to draw on the limestone and have the option to make several prints out of that one drawing. The quality that it has is something else too. Charles, our tour guide and speaker, seems to use this press a lot himself for his artwork and sold me on the idea of using it one day.

How the trip impacted me

This trip impacted me in a multiple of ways. I am a digital media major and my field is very much intertwined with print, and from what I learned so is our whole history. I have a new found appreciation for the technology we are all able to use and the documents we are able to read from long ago. It is funny to think that it all started with cave drawings.

How the trip influenced my career plans.

My ultimate career plan is to become an animator for Pixar, but before I get there I do want to explore and experience other graphic communication jobs. When it comes to designing documents for print it is important to know your printer. Going to the Museum of Printing History was definitely an eye opener to how utterly important print actually is in communication. It serves not only in letting us wander through the past, it also aids in preserving our history as it is being made every day.