



# Lasting IMPRESSIONS

BY SARAH MOORE

## Over 300 years since the **printing press** came to America, **the craft is experiencing a renaissance**, with Maine at the epicenter.

**INK RUNS IN THIS CITY'S BLOOD.** Paper from Maine forests has turned brilliant ideas into stunning books and documents for centuries.

Even given the relentless, ephemeral nature of information in our digital age, it's little surprise that the **deliberate and tactile art of printmaking** is thriving. You may have noticed how the trend subtly pervades daily life in the Forest City. Menus incite hunger with delicious type, wedding invitations are stamped into heavy paper, and business cards are being crafted so artfully that Patrick Bateman, the *American Psycho*, would be incensed with envy. Keep an eye out for Gus & Ruby, the Portland letterpress shop that recently opened an outpost on Exchange Street.

But recent history tells us this is no flash-in-the-pan trend. The city houses a number of individuals for whom the traditional practice of printmaking is a lifelong fascination—and an art form. Today's burgeoning print scene is fresh growth from established roots.

In 1875, the Rev. Francis Southworth launched **Southworth Press** as a means to distribute religious documents to sailors (who may have benefited from some divine intervention). The company was renamed the **Anthoensen Press** in 1934 after it was bought by **Fred Anthoensen**, a Danish printer who began as Southworth's apprentice. Fred's vision and dedication to rare typography and design cemented the press's reputation nationwide as a standard-bearer of high-quality print production.

The high-toned *Boston Athenaeum* published its numbers here, resulting in our city becoming an international intellectual magnet. According to USM's special collections, which prizes original manuscripts and ephemera from **Anthoensen**, "For most of the 20th century, the Press was located at 105 Middle Street. A fire in 1970 temporarily shut down the press, causing some smoke and water damage to their rare types and the office collection of the books they had produced." Undaunted, "**The Anthoensen Press** moved to a new location on Exchange Street."

Having survived fire, the company was less prepared for dramatic changes in technology in the 1980s which replaced the exacting nature of letterpress—even its adroitness—with a rapid evolution of computer alternatives. **Anthoensen** limped along until 1987. Despite its departure, the legacy of traditional print lingers. If you want to see the ghostly residue of **Anthoensen's** painted signage on a brick wall in the Old Port, just have a beer on the Thirsty Pig deck.

Which brings us to the **crafty print merchants** of today.

### INKED

Designers used to maneuvering a mouse will be stopped short by the sight of **Wolfe Edition's** 2,000-square-foot workshop on the first floor of a 100-year-old former bakery on



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## TRENDS



Partially obscured by ivy, the Market Street-facing wall of the Thirsty Pig is a palimpsest of the Anthoensen Press, which occupied the space up until 1987.

Pleasant Street. Walls are lined with type cases and drawers amid a scatter of lead type blocks and swathes of paper. Heavy manual machinery gives the interior the patina of antiquity. The overall impression? We must be on the set of a steampunk movie. Owner **David Wolfe** rolled into Portland in 1979 to become a “printer’s devil” at **Anthoensen Press**, “sweeping floors, mainly,” he says. A graduate of fine art printmaking from Maryland Institute College of Art, Wolfe learned the slow, precise art of letterpress printing using Linotype machines and giant cylinder printing presses. Even then, he’d become part of a reverse trend, when the world was shifting rapidly toward alternative modern methods. Did he ever fear he’d chosen a soon-to-be obsolete career path?

“When Henry C. Thomas bought **Anthoensen** in 1982 and decided to modernize, I could’ve gone down either path: employing the new methods or staying with the old ones,” he says. “In fact, the ‘powers that be’ offered me the opportunity to become head of the traditional letterpress department, replacing my friend Harry Milliken. They wanted to push the old guard out. That didn’t sit well with me, so Harry and I left to start **Shagbark Press** in 1984.”

### OUT OF THE ASHES

In those years, a traditional print shop could be built on a dime. “I started out with nothing,” Wolfe says, standing within his empire of iron and paper. “There’s no way I would’ve been able to buy all of this if it weren’t for the flux the industry was in at the time. Companies were practically giving away inventory. I have machinery from Anthoensen, Curry Printing, Stinehour Press. “This cost me a thousand dollars.” He points to an eight-foot Linotype machine, a mad-scientist tangle of keys and levers. “I was told the *Press Herald* got rid of

FROM LEFT: BEER SNOB SQUAD; MEAGHAN MAURICE; BLAIR BEST (2)



Master printer Pilar Nadal runs Pickwick Independent Press on Congress Street.

about 50 of them!”

Wolfe and Milliken ran **Shagbark** for five years before selling in 1992 to another former **Anthoensen** employee, Scott Vile. If **Anthoensen** was the source of Portland’s printing stream, **Shagbark** may have been the confluence—Vile and Wolfe have worked and collaborated ever since. Wolfe spent a further five years at the famous **Stinehour Press** in Vermont before returning to Portland and establishing **Wolfe Editions** in 1997.

“One of the things that has kept me here is my ability to adapt and change,” Wolfe says of his professional longevity. Original works span from letterpress posters designed for **Tide Institute of Modern Art** to the handmade exterior signage for **Woodford Food & Beverage**. Wolfe also collaborated with celebrated artist **Dahlov Ipcar** shortly before her death in 2016. Together they reproduced her famous oil painting

**Odalisque** (1960) as a series of one hundred woodblock prints for **Maine College of Art**, the proceeds of which benefit student scholarships. “We chose that painting because, well, everybody loves cats,” he says. “It was a pivotal piece in her career. It was one of her first forays into patterns. I had to cut the image out myself. She told me her hands were too crippled to hold the materials.”

Having weathered the uncertain years of the early 21st century, Wolfe now has the sense that Maine is poised to lead the print renaissance. His son, Sean Wolfe-Parrot, plans to open an **annex of Wolfe Editions** in Eastport to manage the steady workflow. Meanwhile, according to Wolfe Sr., “Big print shops in New York, Boston, and San Francisco are closing down because of rent costs. I’ve been getting commissions from clients in New York. It’s cheaper to work with printmakers here instead.”

## SOCIABLE MACHINES

Over thirty years into his career, **Scott Vile** of **Ascensius Press** is riding the current wave of print popularity with the calm air of a veteran of the craft. “Maine is thriving right now because of the large printing costs in this line of work,” he says. “I have a medium **Heidelberg cylinder**, a large **Albion handpress** from 1860, a couple of **Vandercook 4T** models—these machines take up space. A good friend near Boston is currently seriously considering closing business after 30 years. His rent alone is \$3,000 per month.” Meanwhile, Vile enjoys the luxury of affordable space in Maine. He recently relocated his studio to a 3,500-square-foot former supermarket in Bar Mills.

While Wolfe is a print polymath, Vile is a dedicated bibliophile. He launched **Ascensius Press** in 1988 with the aim to produce high-quality books and “books about books” for private libraries and arts organizations along the East Coast. He’s also witnessing the effects of a strangled print industry in the big cities, with the ripple effect felt in Maine. “I’ve been making stationery and literature for condo developers in Manhattan. They have plenty of money to spend. I really don’t like that kind of work, though,” he says, “I love making books. I still have some of **Anthoensen’s** clients from the 1930s and ’40s.”

Ascensius’s stellar catalog of creations includes an illustrated edition of **Henry David Thoreau’s** *The Maine Woods* printed on Maine paper and sold in a Maine-made white pine box. “All 45 copies sold in 2001. Last year, I saw that one of these editions was being re-sold for \$3,500.” In 2011, **Ascensius** printed a special edition of **David Foster Wallace’s** acclaimed essay, “Consider the Lobster,” with illustrations by David Godine, and, in 2014, an edition of **Robert Frost’s** *North of Boston* in celebration of the centennial of the anthology’s publication.

**Ascensius’s** Maine focus deepened further once Vile was enlisted to produce letterpress invitations, promos, and small books for the **L. L. Bean family**, including “materials for Leon Gorman’s funeral in 2015.” The partnership blossomed when a young Bean’s designer stumbled across **Ascensius** online and was captivated by authentic production quality of letterpress printing. According to Vile, this enthusiasm is bubbling up in a new generation that have grown up on a diet of screen and tran-





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“Big print shops in **New York**, Boston, and San Francisco are closing down because of **rent** costs. It’s cheaper to work with **printmakers** here in Maine instead.”—David Wolfe

sient digital content.

“About 15 to 20 years ago, young people could still remember the old days of letterpress. But this new generation has never been exposed to it before. There’s a sense of excitement among young artists discovering printmaking for the first time.”

## FRESHLY PRESSED

**Pickwick Independent Press** may be a relative newcomer to the print scene, but it’s perhaps the most visible to Portlanders. Situated above Space Gallery on Congress Street, **Pickwick** is a collective of printmak-

ers responsible for many of the posters that herald music and art shows on the city’s fly-posting walls. Owner **Pilar Nadal** runs this community art space for around 25 paying members who have 24-hour access to a number of letterpress, woodcut, lithography, and silkscreen printing systems.

The organization was bought by Nadal in 2015. She’d begun to take an interest in the art of traditional printmaking in 2006 while living in New York, working as a graphic designer for Whole Foods. “I had a happenstance education in print up until I moved to Maine,” she says. “Then I grad-

## AN EXACT ART

“**W**ith printmaking, there is definitely a fine line between art and craft,” says artist Jessyca

Broekman. I had the chance to personally

walk that line and witness the inner workings of nonprofit printmaking studio **Peregrine Press**.

“We work together, we teach each other, and we help each other,” Broekman

continues, as four other female artists, dressed in ink-stained aprons, prepare paint and type trays around us. Surrounded by carving tools and paint-covered work tables, it’s captivating standing alongside these artists and watching their meticulous printing processes. I’m particularly drawn to one printer and her journey. Jenny Scheu is an architect and has been using monotype printing while adding layers of ink, glue, sand, tape and watercolors to create large abstract printing plates. When her third print of the morning rolls through the press, I watch her struggle carefully to peel it off. “I might end up coloring it or cutting it up for a collage. It doesn’t feel very successful to me, so I’m still trying to experiment. I’ve been working on developing this plate for a whole month,” Scheu says. There is a palpable sense that these printers share a love for the fine art of printmaking and embrace the long, challenging processes involved. They even trust me to pull the heavy press wheel on one of the proofs myself and watch the inked print reveal itself on the paper below. Consider me a print convert. — *By Blair Best*







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## TRENDS

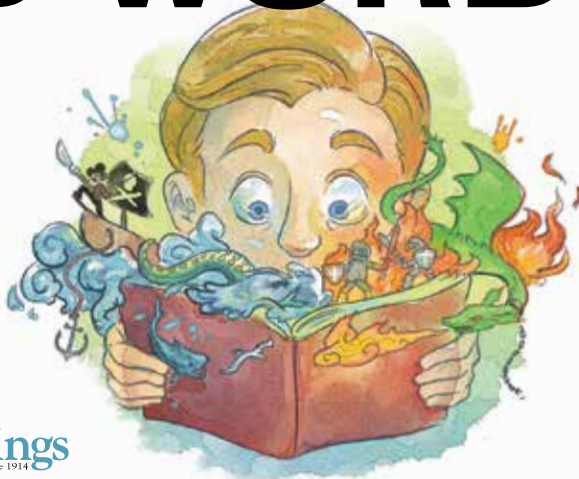
uated from MECA with an MFA in 2013 and spent two years training with David Wolfe to become a **master printer**.” These days, “Ninety percent of my time is dedicated to running **Pickwick**,” Nadal says, leaning against a worktop in the sunlit studio that’s plastered floor-to-ceiling in posters, members’ artwork, and color charts. “We have our annual print sale in Congress Square Park, the second New England Art Book Fair, open studio events, and commissions.”

Nadal is exuberant about the growing hunger for traditional print methods. “I think there’s always been a pretty robust print scene in Portland, but I think it’s coming to the surface more. There’s this idea that doing something by hand is harder than doing it on a computer.” She laughs. “It’s not really. They just use different motor skills. I see students get really excited about printmaking. It’s a physical, tactile process. I think there’s a real longing to create something with a tangible, material presence in the world.” ■

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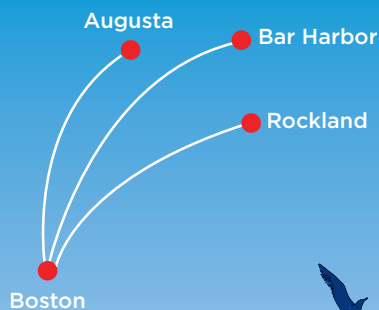
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