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The Devil's Artisan is an occasional publication. Editors: Diane Egerton, Glenn Goluska, Alan Horne, William Rueter. Contributing Editors: Paul Hayden Duensing, Elizabeth Hulse. Enquiries should be directed to *The Devil's Artisan*, 191 Albany Avenue, Toronto, Ontario M5R 3C7.

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☛ The Gourmet Vandercook: Printing on a press never really designed for printing

A year ago one of our readers, Ed Fisher Jr of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, suggested that *The Devil's Artisan* might offer its subscribers practical information about printing successfully on cylinder presses. We asked him to prepare ten questions, based on his own printing problems, which we sent to a number of expert cylinder press printers. We received helpful and enthusiastic responses from Bruce Beck (Turtle Press, Evanston, Illinois), Jim Escalante (Iguana Press, Springfield, Missouri), Glenn Goluska (Nightshade Press, Toronto, Ontario), and Claire Van Vliet (Janus Press, West Burke, Vermont). All of the above use Vandercook proof presses, but many of the following technical tips could apply to almost any make of cylinder press.

We thank all the participants for sharing their knowledge and experience with us.

1 What weight and brand of plastic sheet do you put over the usual oiled packing sheets? Is it replaced frequently, or does its own 'memory' restore the smoothness after use?

BRUCE BECK: For about eighteen months I've been using the Vandercook system (second version) which is a .007" Mylar sheet over a .020" Kimpack underlayment. This is then built up to the specified packing thickness with the usual oiled tympan sheets, providing a very hard packing, which still has a little give to it. Kimpack has no memory and thus does not impress permanently, even when the occasional error allows a letter or two to strike much harder than intended. Because of this it also keeps the Mylar

from being damaged. In addition, the slight 'give' tends to eliminate much tympan makeready (which I've never worked out a satisfactory way to do). This is a very useful system. I've also extended the same idea to packing systems for the Washington and Colt's Armory presses.

JIM ESCALANTE: I purchase a two-piece Mylar cover sheet and an undersheet of a material that is fairly hard from Vanderasons. The cost for two pieces is around US \$28. The part number for my Vandercook SP15 press is X 025789 MOI Mylar top blanket. I build up the packing with oiled sheets. The advantages are: 1/ The blanket is very hard. 2/ It is easy to wipe off if ink gets on it. 3/ Oil doesn't transfer onto the sheet when you print. If you print line drawings or anything with a great deal of pressure, it will mark up the blanket, and it must be changed regularly.

GLENN GOLUSKA: I use a .007" sheet of Mylar above five .006" sheets of oiled tympan paper. The Mylar does seem to 'bounce back', and I replace the sheets of tympan paper far more often than the Mylar. Formes containing wood type and especially rules seem to affect the Mylar more, and I tend to have one sheet of Mylar to use for formes of straight text and another that I use for formes with rules and/or wood type.

CLAIRE VAN VLIET: I use Mylar, which I have in the past purchased from Vanderasons, Chicago. I change the top sheets, with their own packing sheets, depending on the job. I have three sets: super for repros; medium, which has been used for repros and now for book printing (type only); a third which has been much used for book printing and is now used for heavy work (woodcuts and wood type); and a fourth set for scoring and die cutting.

I haven't thrown one away yet – it seems like there might be a tough job around the corner for just that sheet. But I would not like to leave the impression that I am sitting on a sea of top sheets. In ten years the SP15 is on to number six (very pristine) and the SP20 in six years is on to number three.

2 *Are there any secrets to maintaining register on these cylinder presses?*

There are times when each sheet of paper seems to travel over the cylinder so that the position of the printed matter shifts slightly on every sheet.

BECK: Register has never seemed a problem, but then I don't think I've attempted setups which would demand the hairline kind you are talking about. However, Vandercook presses have been commercially reliable for precise four-colour process work. Someone once told me that it was very important on the Vandercook to keep the packing at the precise thickness specified on the press and that variations might cause slurs or misregister. Since then I've measured it with a paper micrometer whenever making changes.

ESCALANTE: The SP15 has two sheet fingers that are designed to hold the paper next to the carriage as they roll down the press bed. If you lift the metal rollers and pull the rear forme roller out you will see a small rod that runs across the carriage. You should have two bent sheet fingers on the carriage. These fingers can be moved to correspond to your paper width. I usually set them so they hold the edge of my paper. If they are spaced where they run over type or an illustration they can smudge the ink. They are designed to hold the paper and allow tight registration. Most old presses I have seen have broken pieces where the fingers used to be. I keep extra ones on hand in case of breakage. The part number is X20726.

If I have a short piece of paper or there is an extremely tight registration problem, I put a piece of drafting tape on the bottom end of the paper and tape it to the cylinder as I feed it into the press. I keep the drafting tape on the blanket until it loses all its stickiness and change it as often as I need to. Usually I can achieve a very tight registration without this step, but the tape gives me an extra measure of security.

GOLUSKA: Consistent, attentive hand feeding from sheet to sheet, ensuring that the paper always goes squarely against the front guides and the side guide. On long, narrow sheets, the side guide should be extended by attaching a piece of furniture or a magnet to the feedboard. The paper must always remain firmly against the cylinder while printing, or else register anywhere away from the gripper edge will be impossible. While printing, the left hand should hold the paper against the cylinder, and for very short

sheets or when printing type quite near the bottom of the sheet, a piece of double-sided masking tape can be attached to the cylinder to hold the paper in place. The two friction fingers beneath the cylinder should be adjusted for the width of paper used and replaced if broken or missing.

VAN VLIET: The only secret to maintaining register is to hold the sheet firmly with the palm of your left hand against the cylinder for as long as you can. If you are printing the short end of the sheet into the press an additional guide on the feedboard is helpful.

3 *Some colours – yellows, oranges, certain light blues and greens – seem to print in a slimy, transparent manner; they lack sharpness and substance. Is there a way to correct this?*

BECK: A printing colleague and I have had the same problem with transparent inks. The easiest solution has been to use opaque inks. You can make any ink more opaque by adding small quantities of white – even to some black inks – without changing the colour. That's not a complete answer, though, and there are many times one would like a very transparent ink used on a soft letterpress paper.

ESCALANTE: I have not had the opportunity to use rubber-base inks. I use oil-base inks from Sinclair & Valentine, 14930 Marquat Avenue, Santa Fe Springs, California 90670 (phone 213 / 921-3493). The lack of sharpness is perhaps due to ink that is soft or runny. I stiffen ink with magnesium carbonate.

GOLUSKA: I don't use a lot of colour and haven't had much trouble aside from the fact that I seem to have to use a lot of ink to get good solid colours with rubber-base inks.

VAN VLIET: Add a little opaque white.

4 *It seems to be almost impossible to buy letterpress inks. If offset*

rubber-base inks are used, can something be mixed with them to make them print better? I notice that dark inks left on the press for a few days run much better than fresh inks. I have heard that remixed inks can be put into empty 'food tubes' sold at hiking supply stores.

BECK: Ink is one of the fascinating mysteries about printing. A can which is several years old sometimes seems priceless because it prints so well. We don't have any final solution. My favourite black ink comes from Lewis Roberts, Inc. at 72 Union Street, Newark, New Jersey 07105. It is a matte black, number #87695, made with no dryer at all. It keeps beautifully, never skims or cakes in the can, doesn't dry on the press, and is absorbed into the paper. Since I don't print on coated or calendered papers, I'm not sure how it would work with such a sheet. There is an opaque white, number #87696, with the same qualities and characteristics.

For special colours I usually order by PMS number from Cardinal Color Inks, 5420 N. Damen Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60625. They will supply to your specifications – no drier, opaque, cover weight, etc. – and will package the ink in either cans or cartridges. The cartridges are a great convenience, dispensed with a caulking gun. They dispense well in small quantities, never dry out: so no waste ink.

ESCALANTE: I use oil base inks, which means that I ink up when I start to print and clean up at the end of the day. It is time-consuming, but I always know what shape my ink is in. When I mix a colour, I mix what I think will last me for several runs, and I store the extra ink in either aluminum foil or waxed paper.

GOLUSKA: I don't like leaving ink on the press longer than a day and can't believe it's good for the rollers, I prefer fresh ink and don't get good results from ink left on the press too long, but my shop is heated by wood, which tends to dry things out fairly quickly. I still find rubber-base ink the most convenient to use, but I'm not satisfied with the black, which seems to have too much blue in it.

VAN VLIET: Use oil-base offset inks. Refer to Jack Powers' discussion on ink at the Columbia University Fine Printing Conference.

[The proceedings were reviewed in DA 12.] Copies available at US \$10 postpaid from Publications Clerk, School of Library Science, Columbia University, New York, NY 10027.

5 *The printers' magnets available locally and used for lockup assist are so close to type high that they sometimes print on the sheets. Is there a source for letterpress accessories, such as magnets, that is reliable?*

BECK: In the Chicago area, just ask Jack Frank.

ESCALANTE: My lockups fill the press bed with wooden furniture and are tightly held in place by two-part quoins. I do not use a positive lockup bar, as I find mine gives uneven pressure. American Printing Equipment and Supply Company, 42-25 Ninth Street, Long Island City, NY 11101 has a good supply of printing materials.

GOLUSKA: If magnets less than type-high end up inking and printing, there's a definite problem other than the magnets. Most likely the forme rollers are set too low or you're using badly sagging composition rollers. I print a lot of linotype, which has a shoulder very close to type-high, but with properly adjusted rollers there's never any problem.

VAN VLIET: You can get AWT magnetic galley locks from American Printing Equipment and Supply Company. I've never had them print on me.

6 *I have heard that there is a product that allows one to make line or coarse halftone cuts with simple technology. Can you supply details?*

BECK: Paul Duensing uses 'Nylaprint', a plastic plate using ultraviolet exposure and an alcohol-based developer. I've tried it, but with no luck. Possibly wrong timing or something. The source in Chicago is Era Plate Company, 113 S. Clinton Street, Chicago, Illinois 60606. We'd like to know more.

GOLUSKA: I've heard about this, but don't know any details. Why would anyone want coarse letterpress halftones, anyway?

VAN VLIET: I don't work in photo media, but I think you mean KPR.

7 *Some papermakers claim that handmade paper cannot print well on cylinder presses like the Vandercook. Isn't printing with handmade paper more a matter of using softer packing and keeping a higher moisture content in the paper?*

BECK: Why softer packing? That doesn't seem to be determined by the paper, but rather the kind of impression desired. I've quite consistently used hard packing with dampened paper. It permits more impression, more compression of the paper fibres, but less show-through. I guess I also don't understand the need for more moisture when printing on a Vandercook.

ESCALANTE: I don't have trouble printing on handmade paper using the SP15. I use the same Mylar blanket as packing. I use well-formed book weight handmade paper – not too stiff or soft.

The reason I dampen any paper is usually to extend the life of my type. I dampen my sheets lightly by placing ten or fifteen sheets between damp blotters and I store my stack of dampened papers in plastic bags for several hours before printing.

GOLUSKA: I find that dampened handmade paper and mouldmade sheets like Rives print fine on a Vandercook. I sometimes add a sheet of newsprint just below the Mylar for a bit of extra bite to the impression. Rubberbase ink seems to dry while the paper is still damp so that I don't have much offsetting onto the cylinder.

VAN VLIET: Sized handmade paper prints cleanest damp no matter what kind of press is used. A soft packing will wear your type more, so I try to avoid it.

8 *What do you do with the printed sheets to prevent the offsetting from*

transferring to the backs of the other sheets? I slipsheet them. Is there another way?

BECK: With the inks previously mentioned, there doesn't seem to be offsetting, at least on the softer papers that permit enough impression to depress the ink area below the surface.

GOLUSKA: Slipsheeting is the only method I know, but it's usually only necessary when using calendered or coated stock or for large solids or formes of wood type. I also try to avoid disturbing the stacks of printed sheets unnecessarily. If you need to slipsheet sheets of straight text printed on an antique paper, you're probably overinking.

VAN VLIET: Slipsheet – there's no free lunch.

9 What general advice can you give private press printers who own Vandercooks?

BECK: Many printers seem to feel that they can make-up and lock-up on the Vandercook bed without a chase. They can, of course, but this makes it impossible to use make-ready on the *back* of the type or wood block or photo engraving and, on a Vandercook, underlays are often very useful. The chase also allows the type to be shifted slightly after lock-up to get better position or register.

ESCALANTE: Buy a manual and read it. They are available from Vandersons. Keep the press clean and well-oiled. Clean the edge of the carriage and the smooth track on the side of the bed. Purchase a roller height gauge and adjust the forme rollers so the ink strike is between $\frac{1}{16}$ " and $\frac{1}{8}$ ", depending on the typeface and point size of your forme.

GOLUSKA: Don't leave ink on the rollers overnight. Oil and clean the press frequently. Keep the press covered when not in use to minimize dust, cat fur, and other debris. Leave the motorized ink drum running while printing, but turn it off and raise the rollers

when interrupted. Ink seems to dry out faster with the rollers running. On larger formes, such as posters or four pages of text, the two forme rollers don't seem to provide adequate coverage; double-inking each impression is better than simply adding more ink to the rollers.

VAN VLIET: Keep the under bearers (counter-impression) and top bearers (cylinder) *very* clean with an oiled rag. This should be done at the start of each day that the press will be run. Oil the press each day it will be run.

Make sure the press is *absolutely* level side to side; lengthwise is not so critical.

Wipe the cylinder with kerosene whenever you change the packing. Wipe the bed of the press with kerosene occasionally.

10 Is it possible to get operating manuals and parts for the different models of Vandercook presses?

BECK: Here in Chicago you can contact Vandersons (phone 312 / 437-6143), or, of course, Jack Frank.

ESCALANTE: For years I have purchased parts from Vandersons.

GOLUSKA: I don't really know. I have a manual for a Universal I if anyone needs a Xerox.

VAN VLIET: Parts are available (as well as manuals for current models) from Vandersons, 2020 South Carboy Road, Mount Prospect, Illinois 60056, (800 / 323-5374). Suggestion for older Vandercook models: if any reader has a manual, perhaps *The Devil's Artisan* could make photocopies at cost for those who do not have manuals. Vandersons can only supply photocopies and often the copy quality is poor.

FURTHER COMMENTS

BECK: Printing handmade paper on the Vandercook, and espe-

cially printing more than one colour in register, is often complicated by deckles. It is sometimes suggested that the sheet can be unobtrusively 'filed' in the two spots needed for the gripper, but that is also a problem. I've worked out a system for pin registering on the Vandercook which permits me to print and register on a sheet with four deckles. However, it's too complicated to explain in a paragraph.

I've thought many times about ways of doing make-ready on the Vandercook tympan, but with very little success. My current method – admittedly not perfect – is to tape a tissue on the tympan, registering it to cross marks on the Mylar, proofing on this surface, and then doing make-ready in the same way it would be done on a platen press. When this sheet has been finished, with its overlays, etc., it should be buried beneath the top Mylar in register with the cross marks made when beginning. It works, but it's a nuisance. Someone must have a better way.

Final query: Many printers feel that using the Vandercook rollers and inking system isn't 'pure' enough for a private press, and only hand inking is right. Is this because it really does produce a better inked forme? Or is it simply elitist? As long as the Vandercook and the private press is the subject of this questionnaire, shouldn't the parameters of its use be included?