

Museums

Fit to print

At the Museum of Printing, 'We're trying to save the past for the future'

By Mark Feeney
GLOBE STAFF

HAVERHILL — The Museum of Printing may have the least imposing exterior of any museum in New England. Its setting is seriously nondescript, too. Slightly more than one story high (there's a sort-of mezzanine on top), the building is made of reddish corrugated metal and sits in a small parking lot off a side street, two miles from downtown Haverhill.

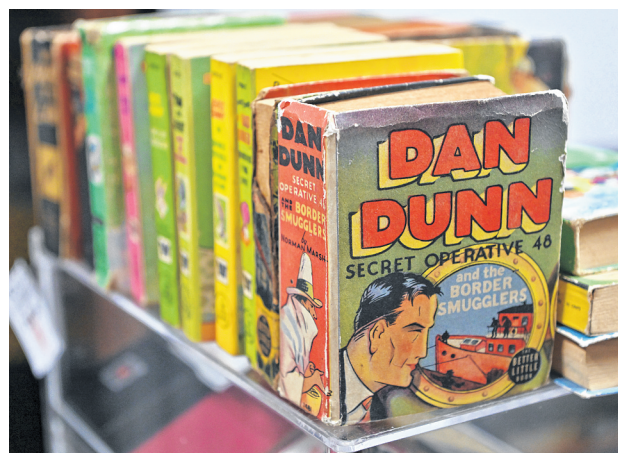
The structure looks more like a warehouse for a lighting distributor than a museum. That may be because that's what it originally was.

Inside is a very different story. What a visitor finds is a museum as marvelous as any in New England. Here is Ali Baba's cave crossed with a print shop and pressroom. One of only three museums in the United States dedicated to printing and graphic arts, it has "the largest collection of typographic technology and ephemera in the world," says MoP president Frank Romano. "We're trying to save the past for the future," he says.

There are more than a million items in the collection. "Having them is one thing, finding them is another," deadpans Romano. The Museum of Fine Arts, by comparison, has about 500,000. In fairness, most of MoP's holdings are pieces of type; but, still, a million is a million.

"People expect something much smaller and rudimentary," Romano says with a chuckle. He chuckles a lot. The abundant pleasure he takes in the museum and its holdings is infectious. "They're amazed how much there is here."

Inspiring that amazement are, in no particular order: 20 lithography stones; one leaf from every Bible printed in Colonial America, and more than 50 complete rare Bibles (including one in



PHOTOS BY JOSH REYNOLDS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Clockwise from top left: type and graphic elements in a Ludlow slug holder; a collection of typewriters; vintage comic books; museum president Frank Romano with a 1950 linotype machine.

shorthand and a salesman's Bible sample book); typeface cabinets; a Braille labele; microfilm reels; and a video clip from a 1937 Busby Berkeley musical of a couple tap dancing on giant typewriter keys. "I couldn't resist," Romano says. The museum has a further Hollywood connection: It provided props for Steven Spielberg's "The Post" (2017).

There are 55 typewriters, though none of them are giant. There are also IBM typewriter balls (remember those?); mimeograph machines; adding machines; a UPI teletype machine; and 14 Linotype machines, two of them in working order.

"We try to make it so that every time you turn around there's something of interest," Romano says, and much of the place has a happily harum-scarum feel. The library is an exception. With glass-enclosed cherry bookcases and leather easy chairs, it has the traditional look of an old-fashioned gentleman's club. More important, it has 11,000 volumes. Most of them came from the collection of MoP's president, hence its name, the Frank J. Romano Library. Among those books are 89 written by its namesake.

He's at work on a 90th.

Romano, 83, has spent a lifetime in printing. Traces of his native Brooklyn are audible when he talks, and he's a first-class talker. Romano grew up near the headquarters of the Mergenthaler Linotype Company, which once was to printing what the Vatican is to salvation. He started working there at 19, rising from office boy to assistant ad manager. No wonder that his favorite item in the museum's collection is a stock certificate from the company's initial public offering.

Romano would go on to work for the Wilmington-based Compugraphic Corp., a pioneer in typesetting. He later owned New England Printer & Publisher magazine, started a string of other printing-related magazines, and taught for 20 years at Rochester Institute of Technology, in New York, and consulted for Apple.

The museum has computers, including such rarities as an Apple Lisa, a Xerox Alto, and a NeXT. There are also monitors, computer mice, thumb drives, floppy disks, laser discs, disquettes, and punch cards. The first color

scanner is on exhibition. It's the size of a not-so-compact compact car. It retailed for \$1 million. This was back in the 1960s, when a million dollars really was a million dollars.

From a much more distant past, the collection includes 1,300 leaves from books printed in the 15th and 16th centuries. One of the museum's treasures is a copy of "The Nuremberg Chronicle," a history of the world, in Latin, from 1493. Although complete, the copy is disassembled. "Which is good for us," Romano says, "since that means we can exhibit more of it." The pages not on display are "in a gigantic safe in the back. That safe is so big I think Jimmy Hoffa could fit in there."

Considering the extent of the collection, a visitor suggests, maybe he *is* in there.

"Could be," Romano says, not missing a beat.

The museum was founded in 1978. The Boston Globe was getting rid of its Linotype machines, and a group of printing and publishing people, Romano among them, took possession. The machines were moved to Lowell, then

MUSEUM OF PRINTING

15 Thornton Ave., Haverhill
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and by appointment
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Lawrence, then North Andover, the collection acquiring all sorts of new additions along the way. The museum's been in Haverhill since 2016.

The museum is operated by 30 volunteers. There's no paid staff. The annual budget is around \$200,000. "The biggest expense, as you would expect is utilities, gas and electric," Romano says. "Insurance is very high." The museum does own the building, but the roof dates to 1972 and needs to be replaced. They'd also like to put on an addition, for the periodical collection (which includes newspapers, magazines, almanacs, comic books, and directories). For now, two 40-foot-long shipping containers adjacent to the building are used for overflow.

The museum has no endowment. One source of income is fixing up old machinery and selling it. MoP holds two "garage sales" a year. The next one is Nov. 11. Also generating income are memberships — "We have just over 500 members," Romano notes — admissions, and the gift shop.

Admission revenue is limited, since the museum is open only on Saturdays and by appointment. Gift shop revenue is limited because the museum does very little mail-order business. "We have no easy way of shipping," Romano says. Items available are as distinctive as the museum. They include chocolate type and "Who is Etaoin Shrdlu?" T-shirts. Those two nonsense words derive from the Linotype keyboard arrangement.

"Our problem is we don't really have anywhere to grow," Romano says, "unless we buy the land next door to us. That would be a million dollars, I think."

In the meantime, there is space for the likes of a specimen book for the typeface Bodoni that has the Lord's Prayer in 97 languages; Vermont license plate U&LC (short for "upper and lower case"); and a set of doorknobs bearing the letters "PCB." They're from the Printing Crafts Building, in New York City. Romano noticed them on the sidewalk, being thrown out, when the building was being renovated. He nabbed them. "Anything weird I want," he explains.

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