Two Collections
Type on the Page at the Houghton and Newberry Libraries

Paul F. Gehl

Abstract
The period often considered the golden age of American type design (ca. 1900–ca 1940) saw the creation of a number of library collections specialized for the study of printing history. The most important of these were the John M. Wing Foundation at The Newberry Library of Chicago (founded in 1919) and the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts at Harvard’s Houghton Library (established in 1938). Both took inspiration from contemporary advances in bibliography and textual studies and both set out to exemplify printing history with specimens of type on the page for scholarly comparison; but they had differing emphases from the start, determined by the personalities and programs of their founders. The will of journalist John M. Wing (1845–1917), specified a collection that would allow study of “every significant development of the arts of printing and book production.” The first curator, Pierce Butler (1886–1953) began with incunabula and collected typeface by typeface through the centuries. Harvard’s Philip Hofer (1898–1984) was influenced by Butler’s classification scheme, but as an art historian, he began with aesthetic categories and emphasized design issues like illustration. As the two collections developed there were additional divergences, but also parallel interests, and both collaborations and rivalry. All the curators involved (Hofer in Cambridge and three successive librarians in Chicago) responded to ongoing developments in textual studies and in some cases anticipated them, both in their collection building and in their publications on printing history.

In April 1962, the Paris rare book dealer Georges Heilbrun (1901–1977) wrote to the order librarian at Chicago’s Newberry Library:

1. This essay owes a great deal to Jill Gage at the Newberry and Hope Mayo at the Houghton. Others who helped include Rob Carlson, Caroline Duroselle-Melish, Giovanna Granata, and Alan Leopold. The material was first offered as the 2013 Philip and Frances Hofer Lecture and in a talk that same year to the Society for Textual Scholarship. Portions appeared in Gehl 2019, 93–120. The following sigla identify archival materials: HPH = Harvard University, Houghton Library, Philip Hofer Papers; NLA = Newberry Library Archives; NWF = Newberry Library, Wing Foundation Documents (Case Wing MS Z 311.W769).
Dear Mrs. Erler, I am happy that your cable ordering some books on my last catalogue arrived one of the first, so that the Library has everything wanted. Some of these books have been asked by Philip Hofer, one of my old customers, but he arrived too late. . . . With my kindest regards to Mr. Pargellis, Yours very truly, Georges Heilbrun.

Heilbrun was claiming to honor the courtesy of the trade, first-come first-served, even when clients who might expect special consideration were involved. He was also complimenting the Newberry staff for acting fast in a competitive market. He knew that naming Philip Hofer (1898–1984) of Harvard, who was well known for snapping up desirable books, would flatter Mabel Erler (1904–1988) and Stanley Pargellis (1898–1968), then head of the Newberry. Heilbrun may also have known that Pargellis was a friend of Hofer’s. Their congenial rivalry contributed to the creation of the two most important printing history collections in America. But the parallel growth of their holdings is a story that goes back long before the 1960s and it should be viewed in the context of competition among ambitious American librarians. The curators at these two institutions were pioneers in collecting for scholars who conceived texts as material objects.

This American passion for collecting the phenomenon of printing from moveable types did not develop in isolation. The first third of the twentieth century was an age of intense typographic creativity. American designers in particular were busy creating revivals (so-called) of Renaissance typefaces suitable for the machine age. The scholarly study of early printed books, especially incunabula, had matured. Bibliographers were achieving significant results in understanding the original uses of exactly the types that the design professionals were claiming to revive. This essay offers a

2. Indeed, the collections are unrivalled in the twentieth century. Two other collections can now claim equivalent importance in the U.S., namely the Cary Graphic Arts Collection at Rochester Institute of Technology and the Letterform Archive in San Francisco. On Pargellis, see BILLINGTON 1965, 3–18; on Erler, see ROSTENEBERG and STERN 1997, 192.

3. There is an immense literature on library collecting but little on competition for rare books. See, however: JONES 2009 and 2013. For booksellers’ views, see ROSTENEBERG and STERN 2004, 11–23; CRICHTON 2006; EDELMAN 2013, 7–8 and 14–15; and OSBURN 1979, 101–14.

4. For opposing period perspectives see McMURTRIE 1927 and GOUDY 1937; a good recent account is KINROSS 1992, 52–61. The value of revivals is still debated: KELLY 2011; SHAW 2017; MARET 2021, 13–49; OLOCCCIO and PATAÑE 2022, 10–35.

case study of two specialized library collections that were formed just when scholars, type designers, and printers were pondering this history together.

Both the independent Newberry and the Houghton Library at Harvard collect printing history in transatlantic, even world-wide terms. Their founding curators faced a fundamental question: what to collect to serve the evolving field of type and printing history. The short answer was to collect type on the page, that is, books and ephemera that evidence the design and use of moveable type from Gutenberg forward. The curators would also look for books about type and for specimens of illustration, but the most important historical evidence was to be found in telling examples of books and other printed material that used type creatively and in collections of sufficient size and breadth to allow useful comparative study. This answer was not entirely obvious. There was no such thing as design history at the period and even printing history was a limited field. The advances in bibliography in the early twentieth century had largely been achieved through close examination of individual typefaces, not from consideration of their application.6

Although the two collections have commonalities, their contrasting histories betray differing approaches to the book as a material object. The Harvard collection was the brainchild of a single collector, art historian Phillip Hofer (1898–1984), working from the late 1920s until his death. The Newberry collection, founded in 1919 with an endowment bequeathed by publisher John M. Wing (1845–1917), had three curators with varying expertise across the same years and grew by gift and bloc acquisition as well as by individual purchase. Harvard’s collection was intended to support academic research and undergraduate teaching, while the Newberry’s aimed to serve a broad public including the many printing industry craftsmen and designers in Chicago, then a vibrant center of the commercial printing industry.7

**Assembling Type Libraries**

Both foundations reflected a relatively new field of book collecting, concerned with printing history as such rather than with bibliography

---

or bibliophilia more generally. In America, this new impulse was occasioned in part by the crisis in the printing industry brought about when mechanical typesetting displaced hand setting, disrupted the labor market, and marginalized the typesetters who had been the most literate industrial workers in the Western world. Printers and others began to think anew about the history of metal type. In the United States the technological innovations led directly to the creation of a near-monopoly in the production of foundry type in the hands of a conglomerate, the American Type Founders Company (ATF). Technology also sparked what many consider the golden age of American type design, from about 1900 to 1940, as printers began to demand sophisticated modern types. The new types were industrial products — created with pantographic engravers, typically designed with mechanical typesetting in mind, and intended for high-volume printing. The aim was a modern look on the page, including even color and a high degree of regularity, an appropriate aesthetic for the machine age. The simultaneous popularity of revivals meant that designers demanded historical specimens that could be photographed and measured precisely.

These commercial and industrial impulses led directly to the first type library in the United States, designed for both research and public relations by ATF, which claimed it would rival the best European collections. Curator Henry Lewis Bullen (1857–1938) planned it as a resource for the company’s designers, but he also hoped it would become the nucleus of a national printing museum. It opened in 1908 at the ATF headquarters in Jersey City. A decade later the Newberry Library entered this new field with a collection on printing that was conceived in more scholarly terms. The Newberry’s collection is named for a benefactor who had imagined a “great typographical library” and provided a bequest for it, but the real creator was Pierce Butler (1886–1953), styled Custodian of the John M. Wing Foundation on the History of Printing. Appointed in 1919, he shaped the Newberry’s printing-history collection through the 1920s.

Butler’s models were three specialized typographical libraries then in existence: the Börsenverein des Deutschen Buchhandels in Leipzig, the St. Bride Library in London, and Bullen’s new library at ATF. The Börsenverein was an association of publishers and book sellers; St. Bride started as a

9. On these developments see Maret 2021.
school for apprentices in the printing trades; and ATF was a corporate library. Those earlier libraries took their departure from the business end of printing. Butler contrasted his goal — a specialized, scholarly department within a large research library — with that of these commercial libraries. The Chicago collection would present type design and use as the central fact of printing history. Butler may have had in mind the project of pioneering bibliographer Henry Bradshaw (1831–1886) to create a “museum typographicum” within the Cambridge University Library. By designating scholarly research as the collection’s mission, Butler’s work presaged that of Philip Hofer at Harvard.

Philip Hofer was one of the greatest American book collectors of the twentieth century. He established a Department of Printing and Graphic Arts at the Houghton Library in 1938, incorporating his already substantial personal collection into a larger project in the service of his alma mater. While Butler was a medievalist, Hofer was an historian of art. Art history was a developing discipline in the 1920s and 30s. It offered new perspectives on printing history, as Hofer demonstrated in one of his earliest articles, on intaglio book illustration. Hofer’s crucial insight was that copperplate engraving was embraced by early modern publishers as a way of attracting sophisticated customers for artistic books. Printing was to be counted among the elite fine arts, and publishing must be understood as a market-driven social phenomenon. These insights, original at the time, are now accepted commonplaces in book history. Building on them, Hofer oriented the new collection at Harvard toward the finest products of the printing art.

In many respects, then, the two collections in the present case study are not strictly comparable, but both were born in the interwar period and each developed as a specialized department within a larger research library across later decades. The collectors involved knew each other, and their contrasting personalities were important to the future of their institutions. They competed for rarities. A focused comparison of printing-history materials at the two institutions allows us to see that Philip Hofer’s

12. Butler 1921; compare Bramhall 1921.
14. Catalogue of an Exhibition of the Philip Hofer Bequest in the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts 1988; Philip Hofer as a Collector: A Symposium in Conjunction with the Exhibition of the Philip Hofer Bequest to the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts 1988; Bentinck-Smith 1984.
early collecting for Harvard was influenced by practices at the Newberry and that in turn a new curator in Chicago in the 1950s took substantial advice from Hofer. The two collections are linked as a single chapter in the larger history of library collection development in America because both reflected the scholarly turn toward seeing metal type and type on the page as material conditions of textual history.

### The Newberry’s Typographical Library

Butler established basic policies for the Newberry’s John M. Wing Foundation. It was to center on specimens of printing types in use. The logic of such a collection derived from Wing’s bequest of 1917, which specified that the curator was to assemble

> representative and typical specimens of the work of all the typographically or historically important presses of Europe and North America . . . [so that] the typographer, historian, and bibliographer may be able to trace at first hand, from original materials, every significant development of the arts of printing and book production.17

That description, however, was broad. The first curator chose to concentrate on type, not to the exclusion of other arts of the book, but as the primary physical fact of Western printing history.

Butler began with the earliest printers, collecting typeface by typeface.18 In this he was situating the new collection within the established field of incunabula studies. But, since he was starting virtually from scratch, he plunged into a competitive market where the major players were American millionaires. He had enough money to start an ambitious collection, but he had to avoid expensive bibliophile treasures.19 In a popularizing account of his collecting for *Publisher’s Weekly*, he noted that during a ten-week buying trip in 1926 he bought “194 incunabula from 32 cities, and 111 presses, showing 277 different faces of type. Four of these cities are new [to the Newberry] as are 91 of the texts, 30 of the presses, and 97 of the type faces.”20 Note that Butler enumerated fifteenth-century cities, texts, printers, and typefaces,

---

17. NWF n.d. [1919], 4.
but said not a word about illustration and ornamentation, nor indeed about beauty, quality, or state of conservation. His approach was distinctly not bibliophile. Even the texts were secondary, included just to show that he was adding to other subjects collected at the Newberry.

Throughout his collecting career, Butler thought in numbers — primarily counts of typefaces, as we have seen, but also prices because his budget was limited. He had arrived in London in July 1926; the city was then taken as the standard market for American book collectors. He reported that prices there were rising rapidly. Bibliophile incunabula were now expensive in London and Paris, but Butler could still find the typographic specimens he wanted relatively inexpensively in Munich, Vienna, Milan, Florence, and Rome, where his average price per volume was less than one hundred dollars. Still, he added that “the English dealers with their common language and closer social relations will always have an advantage in winning and keeping the American trade against their southern rivals whose difficult tongues and more foreign character will always be obstacles.”21 The ever-thrifty Butler was able to take advantage of the early Depression years to make another ambitious buying trip for the Newberry in 1931. He acquired over three hundred incunabula that year for an average price of seventy-five dollars.

Pierce Butler, as instructed by the Wing will, aimed at a public of professional bookmen, among whom he counted designers and practical printers as well as scholars. One early report described three specialist readers: “a type designer who spent many days in minute examination of certain fifteenth-century books”, “an authority on the history of punctuation”, and finally, a scholar “working on a problem of literary history through typographical evidence”. The same report remarked “non-technical visitors” who take away “some definite ideas regarding the history and aesthetics of book-making.” Butler wanted to justify the existence of a specialized and relatively costly collection within the library’s broader mission, which was then (as now) to provide service to a general public.22

Although much occupied with the typefaces of the fifteenth century, Butler also set out to acquire later printing specimens as well as the literature on printing history more generally. He set booksellers in Chicago and London to looking for reference works, landmarks in printing history, and rarities, working systematically through the standard bibliography of the period.23 He was able to buy heavily at some significant auctions that

came along in his early years. Before he left the Newberry in 1931 to teach at the University of Chicago, he had amassed nearly seven thousand volumes including thirteen hundred incunabula and 1,690 sixteenth-century books.\textsuperscript{24} As we will see below, he also devised a classification scheme that would foreground the printing history significance of individual books.

\textbf{Hofer's Unique Collecting}

Institutionally, the Harvard collection, inaugurated in 1938, is almost twenty years younger than the Newberry's. But in fact, Philip Hofer began collecting personally in the 1920s and his thoughts about book history were evolving just as Butler was developing the Wing Foundation. Harvard became his principal focus in the 1930s. Hofer did not need to collect incunabula to document early printing since Harvard already owned thousands of them. He would eventually acquire two hundred fifteenth-century imprints on behalf of the university, chiefly books important for their illustrations. One fellow collector characterized them as incunabula “of the choicest artistic quality”, but incunabula as such were never his greatest interest.\textsuperscript{25} Then too, Harvard’s libraries were among the richest in the United States for most historical subjects, so Hofer did not need to buy basic books or standard ones at all. He was free to develop his specialized collection within the larger university context, which included several special libraries and museums. The accession books of his new department show that he was permitted to draw in rare books from existing Harvard collections.\textsuperscript{26} In this he was following a widespread American trend to create special collections within existing university libraries. There is evidence to suggest that existing special libraries like the Newberry offered a model to many of these new rare-book departments.\textsuperscript{27}

Hofer, however, began with highly original insights he had developed through his personal collecting and writing. His great love was for books with engraved illustrations, by definition not everyday products of the press. His constant term of reference was the book beautiful; the most important dimension of printing history was innovative high-end production. Not incidentally, this preference involved more intaglio

\textsuperscript{24} Wing accession books, NLA 12/04/51 vols. 39–40; Butler 1933, x–xi: Samuels 1988, 176–78.
\textsuperscript{25} Vershbow 1988, 35; compare Walsh 1997.
\textsuperscript{26} Houghton Library, Typ accession book, 1938–1939; compare Mortimer 1964, ix.
\textsuperscript{27} Harris 1990, 63–71.
printing and correspondingly less relief work, more image reproduction and less typographic design. Hofer steadfastly refused to see bookmaking in isolation from other graphic arts. His name for the new collection, the Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, announced his ambitions in this regard. Rather than the specialized type libraries that inspired Pierce Butler, Hofer modeled his “study center for the graphic arts” on the British Museum. In its early years, Hofer gave a series of talks outlining his ambitious plans. He claimed rightly that the Houghton would be the only library in America to attempt a broad synthetic collection bringing books, prints, and drawings together. No wonder, then, that Hofer would eventually be remembered as a “Prince of the Eye”, whose aim was “to show the interrelationships among author, artist, scribe, and printer” in the context of a study collection.

Hofer conceived the new department as a teaching collection too, and he frequently specified the enrichment of undergraduate education as a goal. His devotion to Harvard was that of an alumnus. He took delight in meeting with students, served as a freshman advisor for many years, gave talks to student groups, and taught classes on book history. Almost from the start, he was interested in the artifacts of printing processes, and he proudly touted the department’s practical printing shop. These two aspects of Hofer’s project — a synthetic view of the graphic arts and the cultivation of undergraduates — allowed for a broad collecting scope; almost any well-made or interesting graphic work could be considered useful. Still, Hofer always collected within the context of Harvard’s other collections and keeping in mind the power of juxtaposition to stimulate new research and new educational experiences. He devoted time, energy, and financial resources to the Houghton, asking in return “complete freedom to accomplish his ambitions for the Library.”

29. HPH, scripts for talks to the Harvard Visiting Committee in April of 1939, the American Library Association in June of 1941, the Rowfant Club (Cleveland) in August of 1941, and the Club of Odd Volumes (Boston) in October of 1941. Compare Hofer 1947, 252–53; also Hofer 1966, 3.
33. Hofer 1947, 253; Duroselle-Melish 2013, 47–49, 60, 63–64.
35. Bentinck-Smith 1988, 8.
Over the years Hofer identified certain areas that seemed essential to printing history including a series of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts that exemplified the basic problems of script, layout, and illustration. Other specializations came to be represented in depth: eighteenth-century illustration, William Blake, Edward Lear. Even within the broad field of illustration, he expressed distinct preferences and followed enthusiasms rather than attempting a systematic approach. He wanted the Harvard collection to be “paramount in some areas”, specifically the illustrated books of the European 16th to 18th centuries. For Hofer the great *livres d’artiste* of his own day were the logical development of a tradition of book making and book collecting that could be traced unambiguously to the sixteenth century. He did not ignore type but, as he put it in 1964, “emphasis . . . has been laid upon books that contain woodcuts or engravings by superior artists, rather than the typography of the great printers.”

In subject terms, collecting scope, and audience, then, the Harvard collection contrasted with that of the Newberry even though both professed to offer their users resources for studying printing and book history across its entire chronological arc. Other important differences resulted from the institutional contexts. Although he conceived of his collection as made for Harvard, Philip Hofer was both a single-minded and a single-handed collector. His collecting proceeded independently and largely without consulting the potentially contrary opinions or varying priorities of his colleagues. He bought both personally and on the library’s budget and did not always make the distinction clear. Some books he kept “on his private shelves” in the Houghton until the time of his death. The curators of the Wing collection had no comparable private means and were dependent on the collaboration of their superiors at the Newberry — head librarians and colleagues, but also interested members of the board of trustees. Although the Wing collection had its own endowment, the spending of it was closely supervised by a trustees’ committee. This practice only changed in the 1960s, so that the third curator of the collection, James Wells (1917–2014), achieved more independence in decision-making and came to have a role more like that of Hofer at Harvard.

37. HPH, talk to undergraduate fine arts majors, December 1950.
Specimens for the Systematic Study of Printing

The new Harvard collection and the older Newberry one had two important things in common. In both libraries, printing history was understood as a specialization within much larger holdings. And from the start each collection included a separate and highly selective run of specimen imprints chosen to provide a capsule view of printing history — the matter of type in use on the page, often together with other graphic elements. As we have seen, the logic of such a specimen collection was suggested by the Wing will, and in 1919 Butler devised a classification scheme to implement it. The classification for Harvard's Department of Printing and Graphic Arts was probably adapted by Hofer from the Newberry system.42 Although they are similar, the exact degree to which the two differ is revealing.

Compare the classing of almost any book found in both collections. A good example is the French translation of Albrecht Dürer's *Four Books on Human Proportion*, published at Paris in 1557. It is a book worth having for its beautiful typography, for its illustrative scheme by Dürer, and because it concerns proportion as an aesthetic category. The French translation also provides evidence of the reception of Dürer's ideas across Europe. As the accompanying figure shows, both Harvard and Newberry call numbers for books classed as specimens of printing have three lines. The top line indicates the specialized printing collection — “Typ” at Harvard and “ZP” at the Newberry (where both sigla indicate a book arts specimen). Below this is a number that embodies chronology and country of production: in this case “5” for the sixteenth-century at both libraries, plus “39” for France at the Newberry and “15” for France at Harvard. Thus, “539” at the Newberry and “515” at Harvard indicate a sixteenth-century book printed in France (see Fig. 1, below).

---

42. This seems highly likely, but I have not been able to document a direct influence. It is clear that Hofer knew the Newberry classification system by 1939 when he visited the Newberry for the first time. A draft for the Harvard scheme made in that year (HPH) bears annotations about “Mr. Hofer’s desires”, including the fact that “He cares nothing about having the individual printers or authors kept together”, which directs the catalogers away from their normal professional practice (of classing authors together) and also away from the Newberry scheme (which brings printers together, as described here). For a contemporary view on collecting and arranging printing specimens, see Mason 1926.
Figure 1. Comparison of the Classification of Printing Samples.

Harvard copy classed: Newberry copy classed:
f Typ f ZP
515.57 539
.341 .P412
Thus far the principle is the same, and we see that the French sixteenth century will have its own section of specimens in each collection. The Harvard numbers have a decimal extension for the year of publication, thus “515.57” indicates a book printed in France in 1557, so that within the classification scheme and on the idealized shelf, French books of the sixteenth century are arranged in chronological order and all the French books printed in 1557 are together. This is not true at the Newberry, where the shelving order within the French sixteenth century is determined by the alphanumerical construction of the third line. That line, called the “Cutter”, determines the exact location of the book relative to others in its class.43 At the Newberry, the letter at the start of the line is the first one of the surname of the printer, in this case Charles Perier, and the numbers that follow place the book chronologically within his career. At Harvard, the Cutter is a numerical equivalent for the first letters of the author, Dürer, so that sixteenth-century French books shelve first chronologically and then by author.

Book-history research prompted the logic of both classification systems, each of which was intended to create an idealized study collection with comparable books together on the imagined shelf. Both systems privilege nationality and chronology over all other grounds for comparison. In the case of Dürer’s Proportion, both libraries have the original 1525 Nuremberg edition in German and early reprints and translations (in Latin, French, English, and Italian). One reason for collecting multiple early editions is to compare texts and illustrations. But the several editions of this work do not come together in the classification or on the shelf in either library because they were produced in different countries. Moreover, both systems give absolute priority to the notion of century, following an old bibliophile convention of thinking of incunabula as distinct from books of the sixteenth century and defining the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as equally coherent eras. This scheme often separates first and subsequent editions of important works. To take a single illustrious example, the Latin first edition (1499) of the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili of Francesco Colonna sits at many yards distance on the shelf from early Italian (1545), French (1557), and English (1592) editions, even though they are related in typography and share different versions of the same famous illustrations.44

43. The Cutter Expansive Classification system was once widely used in North America; see Miksa 1977, 57–61, 171–89.
44. Hofer published on this book early in his career; see Hofer 1932.
A given French printer’s career can be reviewed at the Newberry by browsing the stack or the shelf-list. A comparable browser at the Houghton finds a chronological view of French printing more broadly; each shelf will hold a variety of books produced in France at about the same time. The two systems embody different perspectives on the history of printing. The Newberry system stays close to printing craftsmen and their careers, while the Harvard scheme privileges changing design ideas, with specific reference to national traditions. As the department’s cataloger noted, “The relation of illustration to type area is significant,” but “emphasis here is on the pattern of publication and illustration rather than . . . textual developments.” Thus, the Newberry’s collection is more about craft, industrial, and business history while Harvard’s is more about art and design history. Behind-the-scenes documents at both institutions confirm the difference in collecting philosophy. Still, both collections assumed that the future of book history lay in close reading of material evidence, specifically type and/or illustration as used on the page and how comparing works from a given period could illumine the visual culture of professionals in the book trade.

As the two collections developed further, other individual emphases developed, specifically with regard to printing specimens that could offer material evidence of printing and publishing practices. Hofer increasingly enlarged the Harvard collection in the direction of prints and drawings, and those items, although housed in his Department of Printing and Graphic Arts, were often excluded from his “Typ” classification. Perhaps the most original of his collecting areas was drawings for book illustration, which he considered works of genius as well as documents of the creative process of bookmaking. By the time the Houghton mounted a major exhibition of drawings of the sort in 1980, the Hofer collection included over a thousand examples, ranging from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries. Drawings for specific books received a “TypDR” class, but the Cutter was constructed by artist rather than author. Thus, the imagined shelf envisioned by the original classification scheme does not extend to bringing the various phases of work on a specific book together. A similar enlargement of the classification scheme at the Newberry allowed for bringing together books by individual designers or illustrators in addition

45. Mortimer 1964, ix-xi.
46. See NWF n.d. [1919] and Samuels 1988, 171–75; compare Hofer’s many talks, HPH as in note 29 above.
47. Becker 1980, 8.
to printers. The Cutter in these cases was simply assigned to the artist or designer, so that their work (by whomever printed) came together on the shelf.

Meanwhile, Butler’s successors at the Newberry were fascinated by the potential of printed ephemera to complement the history of printing as embodied in book form. They acquired extensive files of new job printing, chiefly advertising work, that impressed them as original and interesting. In this they followed the lead of Chicago printing industry professionals who collected such items as specimens of good design. This impulse was encouraged by Newberry fellow Konrad Bauer (1903–1970) in a 1949 report on the state of the Wing collection at the thirty-year mark. He warned against a collection composed only of beautiful books, opining that ephemera were both important in design terms and necessary evidence for understanding printing as a cultural force:

A collection destined to illustrate the history and development of the printing craft cannot be governed from an exclusively aesthetic point of view. . . . [It] should be able to exemplify the real output of the printing presses, the changing conditions and achievements of the trade. . . . Book printing never has been the only task of the printing trade and today it certainly is not the most important one. . . . The printing and design of handbills, posters, trade cards, letterheads, catalogues, price lists, advertising booklets, folders, book jackets, even timetables offers interest from various points of view to the historian of the art of printing as well as to the practiced printer.

In the 1950s and 1960s, many groups of historical ephemera were purchased. Butler’s original classification scheme lumped such items under the catch-all term “Small Printing”, but later curators, realizing that that term relegated ephemera to minor evidentiary status, classed individual pieces and significant groups of such things within the “ZP” specimen sequence. For example, broadsides, trial sheets, and proofs printed by Giambattista Bodoni were classed together with great and small books by that much-admired eighteenth-century printer.

---

48. Among them Will Ransom, design director William Kittredge, calligraphers James Hayes and Raymond F. DaBoll, and type designers Douglas McMurtrie and Robert Hunter Middleton, all of whose papers eventually came to the Newberry.

Calligraphic Rivalries

Personal relationships and mutual interests also developed between Harvard and Newberry personnel. The second Wing curator, appointed in 1931, was Ernst Frederick Detterer (1888–1947), a calligrapher in the Johnstonian tradition who had taught at the Chicago Normal School and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Prompted by calligraphy collector and Newberry trustee Alfred E. Hamill (1884–1953), Philip Hofer contacted Detterer in 1939. From 1942 onward Hofer also corresponded with the director of the Newberry appointed in that year, Stanley Pargellis. Before 1938, Hofer's institutional horizons were largely circumscribed by the great libraries of the East Coast. In talks he gave around that time about his new department, he referred to major printing collections only at the Morgan Library, the New York Public, the Smithsonian Institution, and the Library of Congress. He foresaw no other rivals until he visited the Newberry in May of 1939, met with Detterer, and came away impressed. Hofer started to include the Newberry among his shop-talk list of major printing collections.

Hofer shared a passion for calligraphica with these several Newberry counterparts. Perhaps inevitably, they began to compete in the market. Detterer was a dedicated teacher of the art and he maintained that calligraphic study necessarily informed typography. The two techniques of making letter forms developed, he felt, in close parallel. He found an ally in Alfred Hamill who supported the purchase of the immense private collection of Chicagoan Coella Lindsay Ricketts (1859–1941), giving the Newberry in one grand gesture the largest institutional assembly of printed books on handwriting in America. Hofer approached the subject from a different angle, attracted above all by the elegance of calligraphic books and their place within the tradition of making beautiful books. By 1935 Hofer owned some thirty calligraphic titles; he had acquired an additional twenty-eight by 1940, when the prospect of the Ricketts collection going to the Newberry became public knowledge. In 1943 alone he made purchases totaling an astounding 112 new titles. Hofer had become very competitive;

51. NLA 03/05/02 box 2 folder 62; compare HPH, letters to both Newberry figures. Further on these three individuals, see Gehl 2019, 110–12.
the Ricketts collection at the Newberry represented an achievement against which to measure his own success.54

Competition aside, Harvard and the Newberry began a collaboration in these same years, nursed along by the growing friendship between Hofer and Pargellis. Already in 1942, Hofer suggested joint publications. Pargellis in turn proposed they start a collaborative series of calligraphic facsimiles.55 The initial book in the new series was a translation and facsimile of a portion of G. B. Verini’s Luminario of 1527, announced in the first issue of the Harvard Library Bulletin and in the Newberry Library Bulletin.56 Both men meanwhile continued to collect energetically. In 1947, Pargellis consulted Hofer about an expensive manuscript on offer from the New York dealer William H. Schab; Hofer replied that he did not want to compete for it, and the Newberry purchased it for half the asking price. It seems that dealers believed they could take advantage of the two collectors’ rivalry, but Hofer and Pargellis would not play the booksellers’ game. Still, they were happy enough to continue their friendly competition.57

Hofer’s Influence in Chicago

It is notable that in the 1940s, as Detterer and Hofer became acquainted, a significant part of the Wing budget was spent on illustrated books of the French sixteenth century, Hofer’s specialty. One of these came from Hofer’s personal collection.58 However, the most significant exchange of ideas between Cambridge and Chicago developed after the appointment of James Wells as the third Wing curator in 1952. Wells had studied the fine press movement in London, and typographer Stanley Morison (1889–1964) recommended him to Pargellis for the Wing curatorship. Before arriving in Chicago, Wells embarked on an intensive reading program to

54. HPH, Hofer to Detterer 9/22/44. Hofer 1947, 252, refers to the good Harvard collections and “still greater holdings in Chicago’s leading research library”.
55. HPH, Hofer to Detterer 9/22/1940 and Hofer to Pargellis 3/21/44 and 8/29/45; cf. NLA 02/05/02 box 2 folder 62, Hofer to Pargellis 3/2/44.
56. Harvard Library Bulletin 1 (1947), 262; Newberry Library Bulletin 1, no. 5 (September 1946), 31–32. HPH correspondence on this subject runs from August 1945 to November of 1946; compare Hofer to Pargellis 3/5/46, 1946 in NLA 08/04/03 box 6 folder 221.
57. A similar agreement not to compete was made in 1950; HPH letters back and forth 12/8/47 to 1/8/48; HPH Hofer to Pargellis 3/20/50; Gehl 2019, 113–15.
58. Samuels 1988, 32–33; Gehl 2019, 311.
see what calligraphy and type design were all about, and he took lessons in calligraphy. Hofer was then publishing actively on script history and book illustration and those essays influenced Wells’ thinking on several important subjects. One area of influence was calligraphy and its role in type design, another area was French artist’s books, and a third was book illustration more generally.

Wells took his most direct inspiration on the matter of calligraphy from Morison, who had also mentored Hofer’s collecting. One influential essay of the period, likely suggested to Wells by Morison, was Hofer’s introduction to a 1941 facsimile edition of George Bickham’s *Universal Penman*, presented as a response to interest in calligraphy by commercial designers. When he arrived in Chicago, Wells discovered that a flourishing calligraphy study group for designers had been meeting at the Newberry since before the war. By the 1950s, the library had the largest institutional collection on calligraphy and Harvard was already in second place. It is no surprise, then, that much correspondence between Hofer and Wells concerned calligraphy. They exchanged research notes and they fretted over the collaborative publication series which they attempted, with little success, to carry forward.

Wells made regular acquisitions of printed books on handwriting throughout his career. Although there is no direct reference to it in their correspondence, it seems that Hofer turned his attention in the 1950s more and more to calligraphic manuscripts while Wells bought manuscripts only rarely. Still, there was cordial competition between the two men. In August of 1959, for example, they exchanged letters about their respective European buying trips. Hofer complained jokingly that he was late in getting to the major dealers in calligraphy who told him that “Mr. Wells” had already snapped up what calligraphica they had had to offer. He continued, “Luckily I do not feel deeply competitive. . . . I found some nice illustrative material” (i.e., prints and illustrated books). Wells replied, “I did not find much calligraphy either,” though he then named nice pieces he got from the very dealers who had rebuffed Hofer. He added, “Like you, I think it is a good idea to have more than one back up [field] . . . and I go after typography and printing instead.”

---

60. Hayes 1978, 61–66. See also NLA 08/04/03 box 2 folders 69–74, box 9 folder 338a, and box 14 folders 476–82.
61. HPH, Hofer to Wells 8/13/59 and 8/19/59; compare Hofer to Pargellis 6/27/51, 4/24/52, and 6/22/52 in NLA 02/05/02 box 2 folder 62.
competition for calligraphy was direct; and the contrast of secondary fields is instructive. It confirms our sense of the different directions the two institutions had long since taken in building collections on printing and book arts.

After Stanley Pargellis retired in 1962, the head librarian’s job was re-styled President and Librarian and his successor, Lawrence W. Towner (1921–1992), delegated overall collecting policy for the library to Wells, who eventually acquired the title of Vice President. Necessarily, this change meant that Wells spent less time on printing-history matters and more on the larger priorities of the Newberry. On the other hand, it gave him considerable budgetary discretion and allowed for purchases beyond the Wing endowment that contributed to the study of printing. Some areas that Hofer embraced in his Department of Printing and Graphic Arts — notably medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and emblem books — were also actively collected at the Newberry, but outside the closely defined scope of the Wing collection.62 While the Hofer collection grew ever richer as a distinct entity within the Houghton Library, Wing became more and more integrated into that of the Newberry.

A second field in which Philip Hofer established a reputation was in French livres d’artiste, not an active collecting field for Americans at midcentury. In his 1950 article on early modern book illustration Hofer enunciated a theme he would repeat many times, that French illustrated books were simply the best in the world both in the twentieth century and for centuries before.63 Unlike calligraphy, where there are abundant documents of Hofer’s influence on James Wells, for livres d’artiste there is only circumstantial evidence, namely, that the Newberry had few such books before Wells’ time and had an interesting, small collection of them by the time he retired.64

Another of Hofer’s goals for the Harvard collection was to rival the Spencer Collection on book illustration at the New York Public Library.65 His influence in Chicago stopped short in this area. Wells clearly shared some of Hofer’s enthusiasms, e.g., for the woodcut artist Rudolph Ruzicka.66 Closely tied by its first two curators to the study

---

64. See especially NLA 03/06/02 box 40 folder 1201.
66. Hofer 1978, 328–38; Duroselle-Melish 2013, 55–60. Ruzicka had several Chicago clients who no doubt also influenced Wells.
of letterforms, however, the Wing Foundation had its own tradition which did not emphasize illustration. Wells devoted his limited funds to developing that tradition. He no doubt also felt that both Harvard and the New York Public could do a better job documenting the history of book illustration.

Postscript: Books as Objects

Hofer's influence in Chicago was considerable, then, but it did not change the complexion of the Newberry's Wing collection. The most tangible result was to broaden the curatorial impulse to include more than type and page layout in the formula for understanding the book as an object. This was not an entirely new insight, but James Wells, rather more than his predecessors, thought of books as confected objects with design issues — problem solving — in three dimensions. The more ambitious the book, the more amazing the object. Thus, with the support of trustee Suzette Morton Davidson (1912–1996), Wells began purchasing a few high-end artistic bindings on twentieth-century artist's books. Meanwhile, well beyond Hofer's book-beautiful ideals, Wells was also influenced by post-World War II collectors' preferences for books in presumably “original” condition, which often involved humble, even makeshift bindings. Among contemporary printing specimens he began to include quirky, non-traditional items, down-market artist's books, and commercial printing and lettering at every level of ambition and pretense. He clung to the Wing tradition that the most interesting work had to do with letterforms, but his collecting was catholic in the extreme, embracing ephemera of all sorts, sculptural books, distressed type, dry transfer and rubber-stamp printing, ditto reproduction and Xerography.

If we look at the Harvard and Newberry collections as broadly reflective of the book arts and scholarship of their time, we can see that their curators all worked (perhaps a bit avant la lettre) in directions that were taken by book history scholars from mid-century forward. Hofer and his counterparts in Chicago clearly wanted to exemplify the physical book in its many manifestations — from scribal letterforms and type design, through the many intermediate processes, to finished objects embodied on the page or pages, in codex form or otherwise. Starting from the insights of the bibliographers of the early twentieth century, who studied type on the page intensively, they created collections that even today allow for deep research dives into historical and contemporary book-making.
James Wells retired in 1984 and Philip Hofer died that same year. The date represents the end of an era of parallel interests, intermittent collaboration, and friendly rivalry. Although both institutions were indelibly marked by their curators of fifty and sixty years, and although the collecting traditions they had developed continued, the two specialized printing departments went forward with different personalities, differing priorities, and minimal communication. By contrast, the tale told in this essay is largely one of shared interest in a particular kind of book history, that which emphasized the materiality of books printed from moveable type. Both Chicago and Cambridge at mid-century could boast ambitiously growing, research-oriented collections for printing history that included rich, classified series of representative products of the press. Monumental and everyday specimens of type on the page were at hand to document typographical phenomena across time and to inspire present-day practitioners. The classification scheme at each library embodied a notion of printing history that proceeded by juxtaposing specimen books that could inform each other when examined together. The ideal at both libraries was to enable concentrated historical study of embodied printed objects.

The Newberry curators, like Hofer, knew about other collections in their fields of interest. In the first half of the twentieth century collecting was conceived in fairly local terms and would remain so until digital imaging changed ideas about the availability of sources. Rare book collections in particular were the province of “bookmen” (so-called) who competed for the best books.67 Much of the public for a given rare book collection was going to be local. Both Hofer and the curators at the Newberry understood that it was not enough to collect; they also wanted to encourage scholars to write the kind of printing history in which they believed. They had to bring researchers to their collections. They publicized their work by publishing, public speaking, and teaching, as well as by traveling and participating actively in regional, national, and international associations. They kept up with and promoted new scholarship. And they competed for the books they wanted their communities to have to hand. It is fair to say that these curators and the collections they assembled contributed materially and substantially to the dynamic book history that developed in the second half of the twentieth century.

Newberry Library

Works Cited


