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Collector's Handmade Volumes Combine Art, Literature

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

In his essay *The Novel Addict's Cupboard*, English literary critic Cyril Connolly wrote:

"There are some publishers whom I refuse to collect, because all their books look exactly alike and destroy my conception of a bookshelf, which should be a mass of gaudy variety."

You'll find just such a mass of gaudy variety on the bookshelves in the Upper Arlington home of **Marcia Preston**, programs director of Columbus' Aldus Society.

For years, **Preston** has collected handmade books of all shapes and sizes. Her home is a bibliophile's wonderland.

"**Marcia** has one of the finest collections of its kind in central Ohio," said Geoffrey Smith, the head of rare books and manuscripts for Ohio State University libraries.

"It's not just that she's collected handmade books, which in itself is unusual, but that she has such good taste in books and has built such a fine collection."

Preston discussed her collection with *The Dispatch* via e-mail.

Q: What was the first handmade book you purchased?

A: The Letter of Columbus, printed at the Logan Elm Press at Ohio State University. When my calligraphy teacher, Ann Alaia Woods, showed me the book, I was in awe at the amount of handwork that had gone into it. She had hand-lettered the title page and 22 initials in all 130 copies. All the paper had been made by hand, some from anchor rope. On every page were bright-colored pictures printed from hand-inked zinc plates by the artist. The whole design suggested a journal that Columbus might have carried on his journey.

To handle this book was a very different experience. Victor Hammer of the Anvil Press has said, "The mystical quality of handwork: it is that trace of life that lingers on things made entirely by the human hand."

And I felt it in this book.

Q: You correspond with the makers of these books. Describe that personal aspect of collecting.

A: Although the books are available through dealers, I have bought most of mine directly from the presses, and I enjoy the communication we have through e-mails and letters.

They report what they are working on, and the last step in the process is when the book arrives at my home. It makes for a more intimate experience in collecting books.

Q: The subject matter of handmade books can vary widely depending on the makers of the books.

A: Yes, the printers choose the subjects (that) interest them, and sometimes they can be pretty esoteric. An unusual one is Old Ream Wrappers from the Bird and Bull Press, which tells about papermaking in the 17th century and shows examples of the papers (that) wrapped the reams for shipping. These had elaborate illustrations, and surprisingly, this is one of the most beautiful books I have.

Another very special book is the Whittington Press Chinese Ceremonial Papers, which has tipped-in (pasted) samples of the decorative spirit papers (that) are burned at burials in China.

Other more traditional books have introduced me to the life and work of important artists of the book -- typographers, designers, illustrators, printers and marblers. And that has led to further study of the book arts, a whole new world to me.

Q: These books can be a little pricey. What advice do you have for someone starting to collect?

A: The large deluxe editions can be pricey, but a large part of my collection (is) small books (that) have been made with the same love and care as the more important ones.

Vance Gerry at his Weatherbird Press makes by hand small books with hand-colored illustrations and a colorful paste-paper cover, which sell for \$35. Many fine books sell from \$60 to \$85. One of my favorites is a long poem, *The First Wife*, relating the life of Katherine of Aragon with many original wood-engraved illustrations and a binding of hand-decorated paper, signed by the author and artist. It was \$80 from the Incline Press.

Paperback books are useful and trade books attractive, but beautiful editions, such as the Tern Press *Alice in Wonderland* with original lithographs, will be cherished for possibly centuries. We need all kinds of books.

Q: What are the largest and smallest books in your collection?

A: The largest book is actually a handmade wood box (21 inches by 15 inches) containing a Logan Elm Press book *Epodes*. The box becomes a platform on which to display the impressive handmade book. The smallest book (2 inches by 2 1/2 inches) is *The Lady* about Estelle Doheny, one of the great women collectors, and it has her little leather and gilt bookplate in it.

Q: What idiosyncrasies make collecting handmade books enjoyable?

A: While these are not artists' books, the illustrations in particular, make these books unique. They may be wood blocks, linocuts or wood engravings printed from the block, or lithographs from the stone. Some have color applied through stencils, and a few have original watercolor illustrations.

Q: Why is it important to support these artisans?

A: My desire is for more people to know that these books are available and to have them appreciated as interesting books, which are also works of art. The Gutenberg Bible is one of the finest books ever made, and the methods he used are being preserved by these printers.

In this advancing age of mechanization, books such as these will survive and become treasured as expressions of the best qualities of the human spirit.