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Owner of Small Press Is Bound to Well-Made Books

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By Bill Eichenberger, Dispatch Book Critic

He loves everything about books. He loves the words and the ink and the typefaces and the paper and the bindings.

A bookmaker, Graham Moss loves to read books, of course, and also to touch them.

No wonder, then, that the security guards at the Philadelphia Museum of Art eyed Moss suspiciously last week as he perused an exhibit devoted to Japanese master Hon'ami Koetsu.

After all, Moss could barely contain the urge to turn on some romantic music, dim the lights and caress the scrolls.

"I can understand why they won't let you touch this art from the 17th century," Moss said recently with a laugh. "But it was very disappointing for me not to be able to pick them up, to actually feel the paper -- because you can't tell just from looking at them. Books have such a tactile quality."

Moss is the founder and owner of Incline Press in Oldham, England -- a private press that makes books available primarily by subscription, printing them in limited runs of 150 to 300 copies.

He opened the press in 1993 and, later that year, published the Oliver Goldsmith poem *The Deserted Village* with a set of contemporary illustrations. In 1999, he was joined in the running of the press by Kathy Whalen.

Other Incline Press books include *The Rose Bud, the Rose, and the Thorn*, a set of three poems by Robert Burns with a wood engraving by Ann Trout; *The Dogs Meat Man*, an anonymous tale from circa 1820 with embellishments by Joseph Crawhall; and *Playing Gershwin*, a story by Robert Graham with hand-colored illustrations by Peter Allen.

In 1933, printer Peter Gill defined a private press as one that "prints solely what it chooses to print, whereas a public press prints what its customers demand of it."

"We print the things that interest us," Moss said. "We don't print anything that doesn't excite us. So our subscribers don't simply get our books; they get us."

As far back as he can remember, Moss was intrigued with books.

"I read Jack London's *Call of the Wild* when I was a child. I can still describe that book to you now: It was covered in blue cloth, and the dust jacket had seagulls on it.

"And I was fascinated with title pages. I understood that the title pages told the story of how the book had been put together, that this is when the book had been reprinted, this is when the typeface had been changed, and so on."

Merely to read books was never enough, Moss said.

He had to own them.

"I had scarlet fever in the days when scarlet fever killed people," he said. "I was kept in isolation in the hospital, and when I left the hospital I made my mother replace all the books I'd read there."

A book is more than the sum of its parts, as Moss is fond of saying.

His press, therefore, takes great care in choosing the appropriate ink, typeface and paper.

Moss owns a book published in 1768 by John Baskerville, a pioneering 18th-century printer.

A former history teacher, Moss likes the idea not only of owning a piece of the past but also of reproducing it: He plans a book on Baskerville.

"It'll be Baskerville's text but my art," he said. "I gave a blank sheet of paper from the (1768) book to a papermaker. He analyzed it and came up with the same paper -- amazing. It's the same color, the same texture, the same thickness. It reacts to ink in exactly the same way."

Many printers love designing books but dislike the tedium of actually putting them together.

Not Moss.

"I'm happy to work slowly. I don't even have to work at slowing down," he said. "I just don't understand when people complain that their e-mail is slow. What are we talking about? Seconds? Fractions of seconds?"

All of his books are made by hand with "archival-quality materials -- linen thread and not polyester, nothing that damages the paper."

His favorite machine is powered by foot.

"I honestly enjoy every single part of the process, from the imaginative work to picking up a screwdriver to repair the press when something's got loose," he said.

Ultimately, Moss is as interested in whether a book "works" as in what it says.

Roger Payne, another 18th-century printer, made books that are difficult to open -- because they were "sewn and glued too tightly," Moss said.

Baskerville's Milton, on the other hand, is Moss' Milton of choice.

"The paper's good, it's attractively decorated inside and out, and it opens beautifully.

"On one level, everything I do is ephemeral. The only thing that saves my books from being ephemeral is other people's interest in them.

"So, yes, that's exactly what I'd like -- for someone a hundred years from now to open one of my books and think, 'This book really works.'"