The Van Robinson Fine Press Book Collection

A Century Of Fine Press Books

Gallery Guide

“Reading Bear” woodcut by Michael McCurdy, 1984.
The Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library is proud to host the exhibit *A Century of Fine Press Books* and wishes to acknowledge and thank The Museum of the Big Bend and Van Robinson.
A Century Of Fine Press Books

This catalog was created for the opening reception and exhibit of “A Century of Fine Press” in celebration of the acquisition of 317 fine press books donated by Mr. Van Robinson of Fort Davis, Texas to the Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library on the campus of Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas. The exhibit and its catalog was designed by Valerie Howard, Collection Development Librarian. The opening reception was held at Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library on November 10, 2016. The exhibit ran from November 10, 2016 through January 30, 2017 with a special opening reception on November 10, 2016.
The Art and Luxury of Fine Press Books

Fine Press Books are created more for pleasure than profit as exquisitely crafted and highly refined pieces. They are often created in limited editions and are typically the result of collaboration with the best craftsmen, designers, typographers, artists, and authors. Fine press books are meticulously fashioned and may contain: quality papers of vellum or cotton, type laid out character-by-character, illustrations carved in wood, spines bound by hand, and covers of leather with titles stamped in real gold foil. All of these elements come together to reflect the mood of the story unfolding in the book. They compel us to revel in the tactile experience of holding, touching, and reading the book as a fine art object.

Books from the Van Robinson Fine Press Collection are produced by the finest book designers and printers in the United States and Europe. A century of book-making is represented featuring titles from the English Kelmscott Press in 1893 to the Arion Press of San Francisco in 1995. Other renown printers are represented including Ashendene, Arion, and Book Club of Texas. Many of these books are produced in limited editions, giving audiences a rare chance to see these volumes in person.

The collection is held at The Bryan Wildenthal Memorial Library on the first floor conference room 104. Visitors from the campus and community may view books from the collection by appointment during the regular operating hours of the Archives of the Big Bend. To request an appointment, contact the library at: 432-837-8123.
A Note on the Collection by Donor
Van Robinson

The collection started with fine press editions of the Greek classics. J. Frank Dobie in Guide to Life and Literature of the Southwest says "I think it is more important that a dweller in the Southwest read The Trial and Death of Socrates than all the books extant on killings by Billy the Kid."

So I read Plato's Crito, Apology and Phaedo. I wanted the very best edition of each book, and it turned out that each fine press printed one Greek classic, such as the Ashendene Press Thucydides.

All this changed in 1979 when the Arion Press published their majestic Moby Dick with wood engravings by Barry Moser. I had to have the book, but the 250 copies were sold out before publication. Finally I got a copy for three times the initial price. Now it is twenty times publication price.

I continued buying fine press books and helped start the new Book Club of Texas in 1988. I took up bookbinding so that I could bind my favorite books in leather.

“The fine press book collection has gone to Sul Ross State University, so that others can enjoy the books as much as I have for fifty years.”

Mr. Van Robinson
Photo courtesy of Michael Howard
Early English presses of the late 19th to early 20th centuries evolved as part of The Arts and Crafts movement. A reaction to the industrialization of Great Britain, the movement embraced a return to craftsmanship and individual artistry. It was championed by William Morris (1834-1896), founder of the Kelmscott Press. Books of this period were inspired by medieval manuscripts and often included architectural floral borders and calligraphic or gothic type with generous margins.

VENUS AND ADONIS.

VEN AS THE SUNNE WITH PURPLE-COLOURD FACE, HAD TANE HIS LAST LEAVE OF THE WEEPING MORNE, ROSE-CHEEKT ADONIS HIED HIM TO THE CHACE, HUNTING HE LOV'D, BUT LOVE HE LAUGHT TO SCORNE: SICK-THOUGHTED VENUS MAKES AMAINE UNTO HIM, AND LIKE A BOLD FAC'D SUTERGINNES TO WOO HIM.

THRISE FAIRER THEN MY SELFE, (THUS SHE BEGAN) THE FIELDS CHIEFE FLOWER, SWEET ABOVE COMPARE, STAINE TO ALL NIMPHS, MORE LOVELY THEN A MAN, MORE WHITE, AND RED, THEN DOVES, OR ROSES ARE:
Befitting a Literary Masterpiece

Many printers choose literary classics as content worthy of fine press printing. As a literary masterpiece, the story of Don-Quixote has inspired many printers, including Ashendene Press, who created this one 1927-1928. It is designed to pay homage to early presses, such as seen in the Kelmscott Press, with wide outer margins, gothic type, decorative borders and embellished letters beginning the text known as “drop caps.”
Pictured left and above: Two illustrations from *The First Part Of The History Of The Valorous And Wittie Knight-Errant Don-Quixote Of The Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra, printed by Ashendene Press, 1927-1928.
Fine Press in Texas

Fine Press in Texas was influenced greatly by Carl Hertzog, instructor of book design and typography at what is today The University of Texas at El Paso. While there in 1948, he founded the college’s print shop that would become known as the Texas Western Press.² You may see his influence in the fine typography, spacing and proportion of text, and in the high quality papers that come together to reflect the personality of the author’s content.


Page from *This Bitterly Beautiful Land* compiled by Al Lowamn, printed by R. Beacham, 1972.

A “Whale” of a Book

Moby-Dick; or, The whale went into production at Arion Press more than ten years after Robert Grabhorn and Andrew Hoyem began planning it. The book took over a year to print, from 1978-1979. In the 1990s the Grolier Club named it one of the 100 most beautiful books of the 20th century.

In order to render his boxwood engravings with authentic detail, Barry Moser spent hours doing research at whaling and maritime museums in New England and San Francisco. The text was set by hand in Goudy Modern, with initial letters printed in blue at the start of each of the 135 chapters in Leviathan Capitals, a special alphabet designed for the purpose by Charles Bigelow & Kris Holmes. The book is printed on Barcham Green's handmade paper, watermarked with the outline of a whale.
The Complete Listing of the Van Robinson Fine Press Collection

The following is a complete listing of books available from the Van Robinson Fine Press Collection. Patrons may search the library catalog at library.sulross.edu to find call numbers and further details about each book.


Edgar, J., & Angelo, V. [ca.1949]. Hymns To Aphrodite. (n.p.): Valenti Angelo.
Emerson, R. W. [ca. 1903]. English Traits And Representative Men. (n.p.): H. Frowde.
Harrison, J. E., & Mirrlees, H. (1926). The Book Of The Bear, Being Twenty-One Tales Newly Translated From The Russian. (n.p.).


Sir Emery Walker, Born 2nd April, 1851, Died 22nd July, 1933. (1933). (n.p.).


Twain, M., & Meine, F. J. (1938). *Mark Twain’s (Date 1601): Conversation As It Was By The Social Fireside In The Time Of The Tudors: Embellished With An Illuminating Introduction, Facetious Footnotes And A Bibliography.* (n.p.):


