# *Beginnings*

The *Printers' International Specimen Exchange* was launched in London in 1880, issuing sixteen volumes before ending in 1898. This bold experiment came about as the result of the intersection of industrial progress, the need for technical instruction, and a search for new artistic styles. It was no coincidence that it began when it did, in a country with a proud history of printing where improvement was desperately needed and the lack of it keenly felt.

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The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London marked the beginning of a golden age of world's fairs celebrating the latest advancements in the arts, science, industry, and exploration. Among the many wonders on display were the latest marvels of printing technology. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert came to see the new four-feeder cylinder press of the *Illustrated London News* in operation in the Crystal Palace, the magnificent exhibition hall built for the event. Newspapers at thousands of impressions an hour must have seemed marvelous, but the *art* of printing in England had been in decline for half a century or more. Among exhibits and juried classes
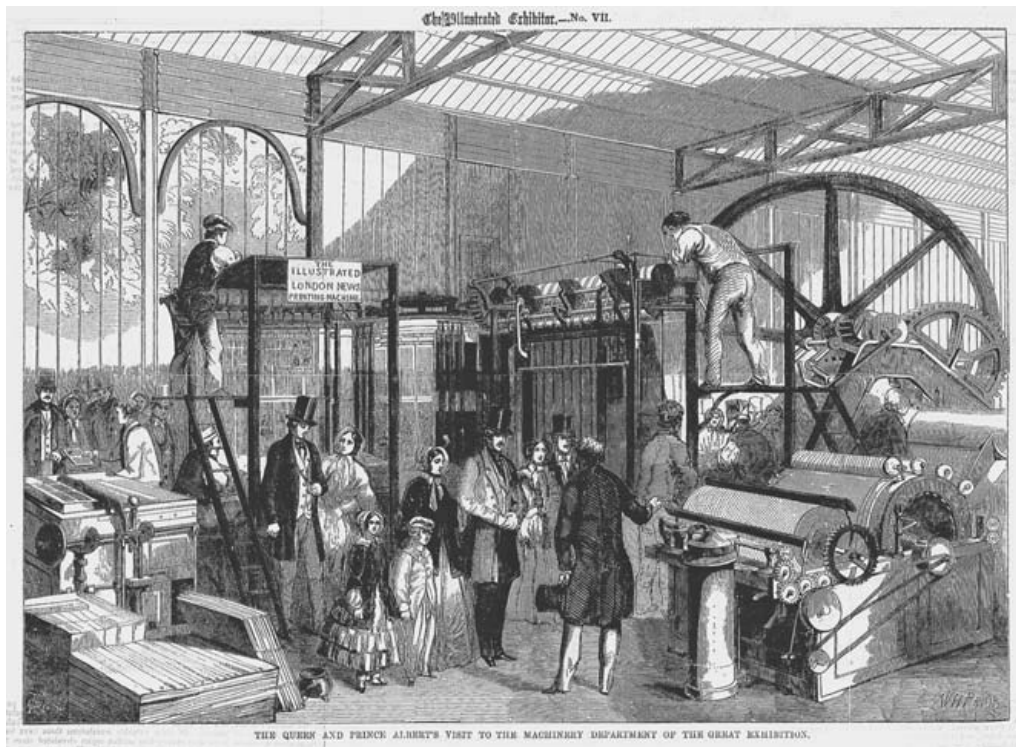

Queen Victoria and family at the Great Exhibition of 1851 (*Illustrated London News*).

of printing at world's fairs over the years, it was clear how little the average English letterpress printer cared about his craft. Henry Stevens, transplanted Vermonter and library builder, reported of his experience a quarter century after the Great Exhibition, "It is probably no breach of confidence as a juror at Paris in 1878, to say that almost every juror expressed his disappointment at the comparative quality of the English exhibit in this class. Two gold medals found their way across the Channel, but it need not be explained how far courtesy and merit got mixed."[1]

If English book printing was an embarrassment, job printing was worse. Handbills, advertisements, trade cards, invitations, posters: all were approximations of already bad title pages, often with a multiplicity of conflicting fonts, sometimes surrounded by ornamentation, and carelessly printed with worn type on the poorest of paper. As John Johnson, printer to Oxford University, put it in 1936, "Poverty and pusillanimity were the features of early Victorian type and type display."[2]

New printing presses and other inventions were becoming available to job printers—though not yet in England, so innovations in the use of new technology to improve quality (as opposed simply to generate quantity) were being made primarily on the continent and in the United States. In the same year as the Great Exhibition, Stephen Ruggles of Boston patented his Card and Billhead Press, a movable platen treadle press. Building on earlier designs of fellow Bostonian Daniel Treadwell, this press led to the transformation of small job printing offices, allowing one person to produce hundreds of consistently imprinted, properly registered impressions in a matter of hours. George Phineas Gordon of New York saw the Ruggles design and came up with his own version in which the bed was positioned vertically and hinged to the lower edge of the platen, which was fixed at a 45 degree angle. Requiring dexterity and good reflexes, it was nicknamed the "Alligator" due to its tendency to snap at the fingers of careless operators. By 1854 Gordon had further advanced his design—supposedly with the help of a visit from Benjamin Franklin in a dream—and the result was the Franklin Press, shown in London in 1862, versions of which became the standard in job printing for well over 100 years. However, not until 1867 was it made available in England as the "Minerva" press.
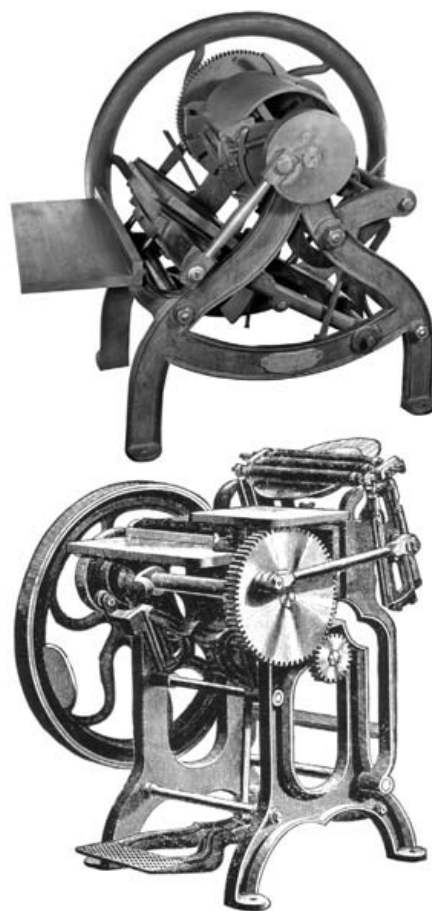
Above: a Ruggles Card and Billhead Press; *below:* a Gordon Franklin Press.

1. "Who Spoils Our English Books?," presented to the Library Association Conference, Cambridge, Sept. 1882.
2. John Johnson, "The Development of Printing, other than Book-Printing," the *Library*, Vol. XVII, No. 1 June, 1936, [22]-35. (Summary of a paper given at Oxford, 20 January, 1936.)
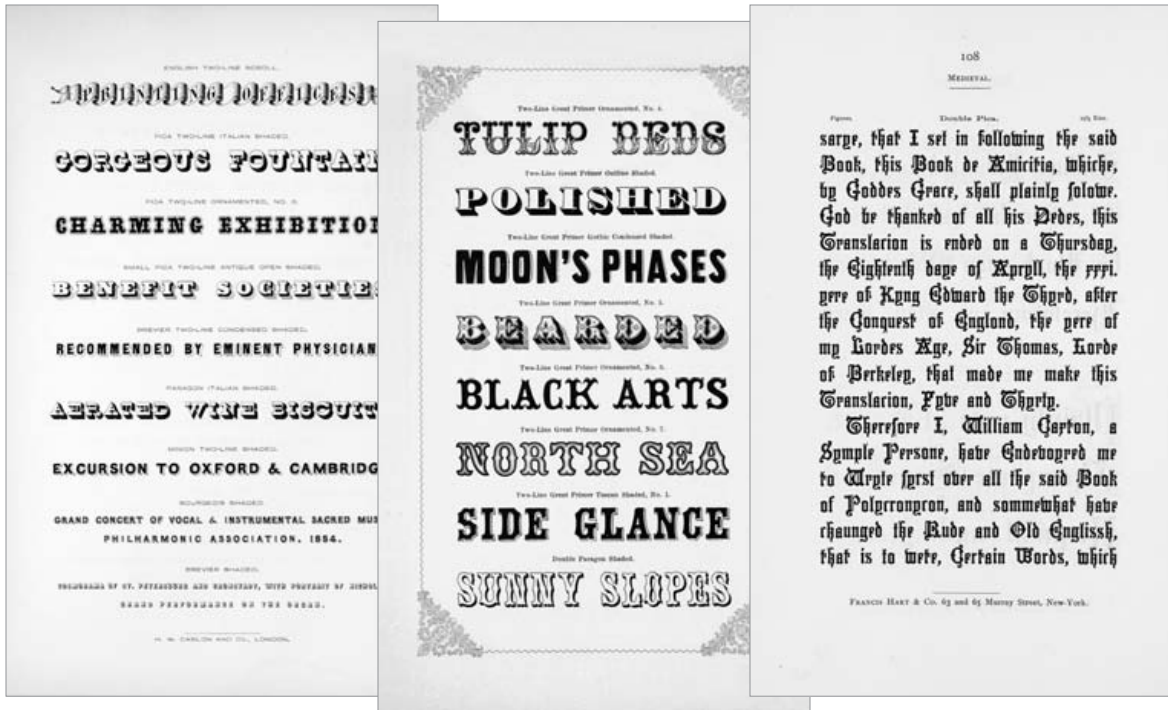
Type specimens sheets *(l. to r.)*: H. W. Caslon & Co. (London, 1862),
Rand & Avery (Boston, 1867), and Francis Hart & Co. (New York, 1878).

The proliferation of tools available to mid-century printers included decorative fonts, ornaments, brass rules, combination borders, and new color and metallic inks to print them with. Exposure to Near Eastern and Oriental art (at international expositions and by import) resulted in various fanciful typefaces and borders. Manufacturers and foundries, especially in America, were contributing to an emerging aesthetic and English job printers were being left behind.

Another important technical innovation during this period was the development of the American typographical point system. In France, a point system had been devised in the 1690s by Father Sébastien Truchet, but it was never implemented. In 1737 Pierre Fournier published his own system, which Ambroise Didot later adapted to the legal French foot (the basis of Truchet's system), thereby making it the European standard. In the early 1870s, Nelson Hawks of the Pacific Type Foundry of San Francisco began to develop a point system after the materials of his Midwest partners, Marder, Luse & Co., were destroyed in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. In 1878 Marder, Luse implemented the "American System of Interchangeable Type Bodies," based on the pica of MacKellar, Smiths & Jordan of Philadelphia. Many American printers began using it immediately, as it standardized type specification and allowed for precise geometric measurement of all aspects of typographic design. In 1886 the United States Type Founders' Association adopted the system, and after resisting for years the British Associated Type Founders eventually did as well, making it the standard in the English-speaking world.[3]

3.   *See:* Theodore Low De Vinne, *The Practice of Typography* (New York: The Century Co., 1900), 149-152.