

A unique and priceless collection of heavy metal is stored across the West and it's an assembly of printing-related artefacts that Michael Isaachsen is on a mission to save.

Traders of the lost art

Printing | Stella Tzobanakis

LAYOUT SIMPLIFIED FOR EMAIL AND THE WEB

THE smell of molten lead gently wafts from a small, corner warehouse in Moreland St, Footscray. Follow your nose and you uncover a world of fonts, ink, kerosene and letterpresses and, more to the (pencil) point, you discover the last remaining type foundry in Australia.

Michael Isaachsen, the founder of the Melbourne Museum of Printing – or MMoP – is a man of many words when it comes to talking about the art, craft and history of typography and printing.

As Isaachsen leads me past pegged posters, trays of metal letters, drawers and drawers of font trays – 24 Garamond Light, 14 Times Bold – dictionaries and printing machines including an impressive Linotype, a machine that revolutionised printing. He is keen to show me how one of the machines works.

The lesson begins. It's only interrupted when the phone rings. It's someone from George Calombaris' Press Club restaurant. They spell out what they want: a series of metal fonts as ornaments. Isaachsen and his team of volunteers are already on the case. The tray is ready and a few minutes after the call, a courier comes to pick up "the job".

Isaachsen explains the tray needs to be picked up slowly and carefully so the letters don't move, but true to the nature of the courier's job, he's in a rush and ignoring Isaachsen's advice, grabs the tray. Isaachsen winces but when he opens his eyes again, he is relieved. The tray is intact. He escorts the courier to his car, just in case. To Isaachsen, this is not just another job, it's his life and the non-profit museum, and everything in it, his little characters.

He knows their language, their particular sounds, their maintenance needs. As we weave and duck in, out and around the endless stock of printing



Michael Isaachsen, the founder of the Melbourne Museum of Printing with his pride and joy. Picture: DAVID SMITH



ORIGINAL LAYOUT

equipment, examples of traditional printing methods and memorabilia, Isaachsen shoots off printing terms, thick and fast. Matrix, blower, slug, moveable type; they all largely belong to a bygone era but one he and other print enthusiasts consider worth sharing and saving for future generations.

"Our aim is to survive and thrive," Isaachsen says of the museum whose collection is scattered in secret storage locations across the western suburbs.

"It's a history of the art and craft of printing."

The Footscray site is obviously too small. There is a poster above me with the words "I hope something will happen soon" printed on it.

These fit Isaachsen's sentiments exactly.

"The collection is now too big for this place (Footscray site)," Isaachsen said. "There are six existing total premises scattered around the West. They're packed in so tight (in those places), the pieces are inaccessible.

"We plan to move (the whole collection) to Sunshine; somewhere near the (Sunshine) railway station."

"We're looking for sponsorship to help move."

For a man whose world revolves around words, Isaachsen crafts his sentences as carefully as he handles his stock, especially when talking about the museum's future.

What he does open up about is how the key to the museum's fate lies in the public taking an active interest in the working museum such as schools, teachers, students, artists and designers.

Isaachsen highlighted the museum's professional development classes such as letterpress and graphic students' workshops, as well as Friends of MMoP membership, was helping it stay afloat.

"We have plans but they are subject to funding," Isaachsen impressed.

"If we get support, the museum will survive and thrive."

Melbourne Museum of Printing, 36 Moreland St, Footscray.
Details: (03)9689 7555 or www.printingmuseums.com