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27 October, 2008

Mr Michael Isaachsen
Honorary Curator
Melbourne Museum of Printing
36 Moreland Street,
FOOTSCRAY, VIC. 3011

Dear Michael,

I am pleased that I was able to accept your recent invitation to visit and tour the current operating premises of the Museum. Throughout the tour, it renewed in me, a running series of déjà vu experiences! I will confess that it has been quite a number of years since I have been in an environment that allows one to actively engage in the 'full circle' of hot metal typesetting-to-proof. However, as much as I enjoyed the visit, it is because of some of the topics of our discussions, that I write this letter to you.

I am, I suspect, one of the last of the dying breed of industry exponents who began their career as a Hand Compositor, having started a four-year apprenticeship on 20 January, 1970. My apprenticeship was undertaken at Trade Composition Pty Ltd (a subsidiary of The Markby Group), the foremost typesetting Trade House in Australia. At the conclusion of my Trade School training at Melbourne College of Printing and Graphics Arts (MCPGA), I was fortunate to achieve Apprentice of the Year, and was a finalist in the Victorian Apprentice of the Year Awards.

The skills and knowledge I attained during my apprenticeship in Hand Composition (and also Machine Composition [but that's another story]) held me in good stead whilst working as a journey man at companies such as Victorian Government Printer, David Syme & Co (*The Age*), and Miller Business Forms. These working experiences culminated in taking-up an offer, in 1979, to train as a Trade Teacher at MCPGA.

Obviously, since that time, there have been 'momentous' transformations to the technology-side of 'The Trade'. Having been both active and pro-active to changes from Hot Metal-based typesetting to the common usage of today's off-the-shelf software applications, I find it somewhat ironic that my Hot Metal-based trade training, undertaken some 30+ years ago, 'continues' to remain highly relevant in today's 'Computer Age'.

It is from this [accurate] perception that I firmly believe the Museum has much to offer today's (and tomorrow's) students and teachers. To add credence towards this

belief, I borrow a somewhat popular quote: "How do we know where we are going if we don't know where we have been?". I clearly know where we have been, and it is in fact this 'experiential' knowledge, that has allowed me to remain totally, and comfortably, connected with the changes I have been an active part of. In understanding the past, I have 'welcomed' the software changes as they move more and more closer to offering features that I considered commonplace in 'the past'; the software is not there yet! In an article in this month's edition of an *Australian Printer* magazine, the author, Chris Heric, concludes: "…thank the old-schoolers, and their insistence that the computer needed to be refined in order to not take that step backward in quality."

I carefully chose the word 'ironic' earlier, because it identifies to me that, although the 'Tools' have changed, the underpinning knowledge needed to effectively use them remains the same. Open 'any' Industry-standard software application such as Adobe Illustrator, QuarkXPress, Adobe Photoshop, *etcetera*, and you 'should' immediately recognise that all of these applications have in them, 'deeply' embedded Industry 'jargon'. The 'jargon' originates in the application of the components for Hot Metal: points, pica, leading, em, en, x-height, baseline, set width (tracking), fixed spaces, kerning, *etcetera*, *etcetera*, *etcetera*, *etcetera*! Today's students and teachers operate under the assumption that much of the jargon is only conceptual, rather than tangible elements that are both visible and tactile.

At the MCPGA, when we finally ceased teaching 'Hot Metal' typesetting as part of our normal curriculum, we found that it still remained 'critical' to show and demonstrate to our students the 'visible and tactile' elements of typesetting. Even now, as part of RMIT University, we still introduce the 'old' Hot Metal elements to our students in order for them to understand precisely what the two-dimensional (and more often 'invisible') menu items on the computer actually relate to. Although we use state-of-the-art technologies at the International Centre of Graphic Technology (ICGT), this 'old' technology makes a significant, and positive, difference to our students understanding, learning and outcomes.

During my visit, you related to me, and the differences between, two key programs offered by the Museum: Graphic Students' Workshop, and Roots of Printing. I thoroughly endorse both of these programs, as each enables the 'closing-of-the-gap' between an ethereal understanding of typesetting (and Graphic Reproduction!) elements fundamentally available conceptually on the computer screen, to a concrete understanding of their actual application.

Whilst we retain a relative 'modicum' of Hot Metal collections from the past for the purposes of teaching, you have at the Museum a veritable cornucopia in the collection I have seen, that, arguably, is the finest in the World! To experience the full collection would, I believe, leave me at a total loss for words. I find it unsettling that the 'Gutenberg Museum' is internationally renowned, and yet the full collection of the

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'Melbourne Museum', which surpasses the 'Gutenberg Museum', is left to an undecided future.

I am aware the Museum has, for many years, continually struggled to provide an opportunity to 'properly' educate students and teachers in the Industry, as well as provide an educational opportunity to the general public. To have to struggle for so long is an extremely sad indictment on the Printing Industry as a whole, and Government itself, that the Museum has not received sufficient support and resources.

What you have achieved 'as a lone voice in the wind' in gathering this collection together is outstanding and should be publicly acknowledged as nothing short of miraculous. **It would be a historic tragedy of incalculable significance should the Museum cease to exist.** I am at a total loss when attempting to understand why the Museum has not been showered with assistance, at the very least by Government (State or Federal), either financially or with appropriate rent-free facilities that can show-case the collection in its entirety.

I possess a strong anticipation that the Melbourne Printing Museum will garner the proper support it needs and that its future for generations to come is recognised not just locally, but also internationally.

Yours Sincerely,

John Magnik
Programs Director
RMIT International Centre of Graphic Technology
School of Design (TAFE)