

The Kelmscott Chaucer, represented by this leaf here, is one of the great books ever printed. It's the outstanding achievement in the Arts & Crafts period, and it's beautiful and important no matter what period of printing you're thinking of. A lot of people have written a lot of things over the years since it was published in 1896, so it's difficult to find something to talk about, it's even difficult to talk about something that's been said, but in a different way. I think I've done that. With 3 things helping me. I found a good topic, I've found a team of talented collaborators, and I've had a lot of good luck.

What this represents in front of me, is a new way to talk about the Kelmscott Chaucer. It's a leaf book. And that in itself is an unusual way to talk about the book. And, this is also an unusual leaf book. Leaf books always have two elements. A book element, and a leaf element. Most books are very slender, two or three pages sometimes. And usually, it's one leaf. In this leaf book, the book is 75 pages long, so it's a substantial text. And there are not one, but 5 leaves; we've got a Kelmscott Chaucer leaf, and 4 others hiding underneath and we'll talk about those in a little bit. I'm Phil Pirages, and I want to talk to you about the text, and I want to talk to you about the object, because I think it's a really wonderful achievement in terms of book arts, but first I want to talk about the background of the project, because it's an interesting story.

In November of 2012, we were lucky enough to buy a fragment, about 75% of the Kelmscott Chaucer. You just don't see Kelmscott Chaucer's coming up for sale that are imperfect. We sold a few leaves individually, and when we got down to 165 leaves, I said to myself, this would make a nice leaf book. But I didn't know what to say, I didn't know what to talk about, I didn't know what the topic should be. So, I did some research, and I found that the typeface of the Kelmscott Chaucer had some potential. A lot of people, a lot of people talk about the woodcut borders, and the woodcut scenes that are done by William Morris and Burne-Jones, but not so many people talk about the typeface or the typefaces in general that were used by the Kelmscott press. For example, Fiona McCarthy produced the definitive biography of William Morris, it's 350,000 words long, it's big enough to be a doorstop, it's big enough to kill small rodents, but

of the 350,000 words, she spent two pages talking about the typeface of the Kelmscott Press, not even just about the Kelmscott Chaucer. There have been some commentators, particularly William S. Peterson and a man named John Dreyfus, who say cogent and useful things, but there have been mostly people who conjecture, not very much has been written as I've indicated, but the commentary in general has been conjecture that's not often convincing, and then there have been some pretty bogus things. May Morris, for example, said that the Kelmscott Chaucer typeface jumped out of her father's head like a jack-in-the box. Well, it's just something that needs to be explained away, because it's simply not close to the truth.

The Kelmscott Press had two typefaces, Roman and Gothic. Everybody knows where the Roman typeface came from. William Morris and Emery Walker, the cofounders of the Press got together and said, what would be a good typeface to emulate to model our Roman typeface after? And they agreed that Nicholas Jenson, the Venetian printer, 1470s, was the person to emulate. There's more to be said about that, and it's all in the book, but that's basically where the Roman typeface came from, and nobody disputes that. However, there's so much mystery about the origins of the Gothic typeface, that this was the place, it seemed to me, for me to direct my attention. So, at this point, I had a topic, and I had a title. Title: Letters from the 15th Century (that's a little clever), and then it's a scholarly work, so it has to have a subtitle: Letters from the 15th Century: On the Origins of the Kelmscott Chaucer typeface. Ok, so it's a good start. Then, the fun began for me, because the more I studied the topic, the more I was heading towards a defensible hypothesis, that the Kelmscott typeface came from the German printers, the early German printers, and more specifically the German printers from the 1470s, and more specifically than that, 4 sort of all stars: Peter Schoeffer of Mainz, Johann Mentelin of Strassburg, Gunter Zainer of Augsburg, and Anton Koberger of Nuremberg. So now, like a really good scholarly book, I have a sub-subtitle, Letters from the 15th Century: On the Origins of the Kelmscott Chaucer Typeface. A study of the influence of the Early German Printers on William Morris' Masterpiece. I like the sound of that.

Now, got the topic, got the title, refining the text, and I'm thinking to myself, that we've got wonderful Kelmscott Chaucer leaves, wouldn't it be wonderful to get a leaf from one of these 4 printers that Morris so admired. Well, there was a big roadblock to this, and the roadblock was that like every other reputable antiquarian bookseller, I don't take apart complete books in order to sell individual leaves. In 40 years of bookselling, I've never done that. So, I needed to find a defective copy of one of these 4 printers in order to pair up the Kelmscott leaf with an early leaf that I believe influenced the design of the type. Not only that, not only did it have to be defective, but it had to be the right typeface, because, these 4 printers didn't all use just one typeface. And we know because William S. Peterson has done a wonderful inventory of Morris' library, we know all the books, well, you know, as many as anybody can figure out, all the books that Morris owned, he owned more than 500 incunables, we know what typefaces are represented by these 4 different printers, and more than one exist for the various printers that he esteemed. So, we've got to find a book that's defective, and that has the right typeface, the typeface that meant more to Morris, that was represented more liberally in his library, and it's got to be in good shape. I don't want to put a leaf book out that has leaves from early books that are all water-stained and torn up. And finally, it really would be better if it were a large folio or a large format leaf, because a majestic leaf like this, next to an octavo or quarto is going look kind of clumsy. So, I waited, and waited, and waited. Now, I did other things, I played table tennis, I watched TV, but basically, I waited for 6 years, and in the course of 6 years, by inexplicable good luck, we were able to put together leaves from all 4 of Morris' all star printers, all 4 met all 4 criteria, and it was a stroke or a series of strokes of good luck that were so unexpected and so spectacular that I can hardly believe it, and I'd like to pass on that good luck to you.

Let me talk about the text. We talk about the leaves, where they came from the whole story, we talk about the printers, the 4 printers, and a whole bunch of other printers, because we have to eliminate, we say in the text that Morris admired a great many printers, but these probably didn't affect, didn't influence him in the design here, and these didn't and these didn't, but these 4 we did. We talk about the books they

produced and something about their lives. We talk at length about the Kelmscott Press, about the friendship and the collaboration between Morris and Emery Walker, and we talk about how the Kelmscott Press was founded, which is a terribly interesting story. You probably know it. Basically, the Kelmscott Press came to be because Emery Walker was almost pathologically timid when facing an audience and he gave a lecture and he had to use slides and it's all in the book, it's a very interesting story. Then the text looks at William Morris' library. Because if you know what books are on his shelves, you got to imagine that those were the books that influenced him the most, the ones that are most liberally represented. And we look at remarks that he wrote on flyleaves. He did a lot of writing in a number of volumes from his library. Usually very complimentary about how beautiful the typefaces are here. You got to figure that he's giving us clues about what early printers would have influenced his typographical design. And then we talk about a few other things that are really intriguing and enigmatic and I don't want to give it away, because again, I want to leave something for you to read about. Then we make a case for each of the 4 printers. The case for Peter Schoeffer, the case for Johann Mentelin, and so on.

Next, and this is where we break new ground, no one's ever talked about this, we take aesthetics and we merge them with mathematics. So many people have said, again there hasn't been a lot of commentary about this, but when there has been commentary, they've said, "Well, the Kelmscott Press Chaucer typeface looks like Koberger, or it looks like Mentelin," but, it's all subjective. And I can put them down next to each other and there's a short segment in the text that does that. But I thought, wouldn't it be wonderful to make this subjective commentary into objective commentary. And so what I did was I established numerical resemblance quotients. I looked at all of the letters that were used, all the letterforms that were used by all of the 4 early printers that we're talking about and all the letterforms that are in the Kelmscott Chaucer. Uppercase A, lowercase A, uppercase B, lowercase b, and so on. And I said, OK, Uppercase A Koberger, Uppercase A Kelmscott, how much are they alike? If they were very close, I gave them a 3. If they were rather like, I gave them a 2, and if there was some at least vague resemblance

I gave it a 1, if there was no resemblance at all, they got a 0. And so, a chart came out of this, and if you want to know the winner, because inevitably there is a winner, it's in the leaf book.

Anyway, the text concludes with a look at Morris' contemporaneous scene because he was affected in some degree by what was going on around him in England and on the Continent. And then the text talks about the Kelmscott Chaucer affected the history of printing. Because a lot of people say that this was the book that changed the course of printing history. When you get done with the text, I'm going to tell you that it really is the most thoroughgoing treatment of this particular topic. This particular topic is a little part of the world, but nobody has said as much about it and certainly not in the same way as we do in the text.

Now I want to talk about the object, because the people who have been working with me, the designer, the binder, the printer, are all people who have gifted hands and who have refined aesthetic sensibilities. And their work has produced what I think is just a sensational book arts object. A man named Arthur Larson from Massachusetts, has printed the book on beautiful paper and he has done such a good job, that I told him that even though I wrote the text, I had wanted to keep reading the book again, because it was such a lovely work of art. He worked for 18 years for the Gehenna Press, printed 30 books for Leonard Baskin and he is just well, basically, he's one of the best printers at work in the country. The binder is Amy Borezo, she is also from Massachusetts, have a look at this wonderful tray case, it's beautifully designed with a magnetic closure and the book that I was just showing you is a wonderful adaptation of the Kelmscott Press's own limp vellum, and we'll compare those in a little bit a little more closely. She has done a job of beautifully realizing the designs that I suggested and then she has gone beyond those to produce things that are really quite beautiful. And the person who has designed the project and who has worked with Arthur Larson in setting the type visually, is Jill Mann, who is actually working on my staff, she's got art degrees from the University of Chicago and the Art Institute of Chicago and considerable experience in graphic design. She's also the videographer taking this video. When you get done

considering this, I want you to think about it in terms of 4 ways to collect. 4 points of interest. It's a book about the Arts & Crafts movement and the Kelmscott Press. It's a book about early printing, and the two related. It's a wonderful book arts, contemporary book arts production, and it's a collection of leaves, I'm going to spread these out in just a second. And the leaves in conjunction with the text allow you to have a collection that provides a beautiful insight into printing from Germany in the 1470s and it's a wonderful group of printing artifacts.

So here are the 5 leaves. Now that they're pulled out of the case, and you can see, if you put them next to the Kelmscott Chaucer, there's a resemblance, there's a clear resemblance. You can also see that they're beautifully printed, that they're stately, elegant, and they're worth having as individual aesthetically pleasing historical objects, not to mention being the works of important printers. Now, each one of these leaves actually comes from a book that's interesting as well. The only one that might not be so interesting, might be a little dull is this book on canon law. But even this one has something that none of the others has, and that is a lovely woodcut initial. Which we have replicated at the beginning of the introduction of the leaf book. So it's a nice assemblage of early printed leaves.

Next I want to show you the three versions of the leaf book. The leaves from the Kelmscott Chaucer are decorated to various degrees. Some of them have just text or text and small initials. Others have text with 6-line or 10-line initials. Some have full woodcut borders, and then the very special leaves have full woodcut borders with Burne-Jones scenes. And it made sense to us to produce bindings that matched these three levels of decoration. These three levels of decoration are also marked by varying price points. The least expensive copies are bound in the blue paper boards with linen spines which many of you will recognize as a kind of echo of the Kelmscott bindings. The most expensive and the most elegant and the most decorated leaves. Those copies have the flexible vellum, just like some of the nicer Kelmscott bindings did. And the ones that are in between, the ones with the larger initials but not the borders, we

tried something slightly different. We didn't echo the Kelmscott bindings, but instead chose a cloth binding, but not just any cloth, this is ebony cray, which is a design that William Morris produced.