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From the clay tokens of the Neolithic era (Schmandt-Besserat 1978) on to the cuneiform tablets of Sumeria and the first codex books of the early Christian era (Hobart and Schiffman 1998: 91), books and their predecessors have played a central role in human culture. Each shift in book technology was embedded in and helped to bring about a vast series of social and intellectual developments. The birth of the printing press in the fifteenth century "left no field of human enterprise untouched" (Eisenstein 1979: 11)

The advent of digital media meant a revolution in book production and book publishing. Halfway through the last century, electromechanical typesetting systems began to change the book production process. In the late 1980s, personal computers and digital typesetting pushed developments farther. Electronic publishing has now become a central feature of the information age, transferring the content of paper media to such electronic media as CD-ROM, DVD, and the World Wide Web. What the digital media have not done is bring an end to the book as a communications medium, an information artifact, and an art form.

When scholars and futurists began predicting the death of the book, they failed to reckon with the convenience and congeniality of the book as a reading medium. In the 1990s, many believed that the World Wide Web would render books obsolete. Instead, the Web has increased the market for new books and extended the circulation of used books. Access to richer information sources brings more books to the attention of more readers, while book sales and book reading have grown through the impact of on-line booksellers and web sites (Friedman 1996). Rather than replacing books, digital media supplement them. Beyond this, however, digital media now contribute to the growth and continued health of the book as a physical artifact. This is where Douglas Holleley's Digital Book Design and Publishing begins.

Holleley has produced two books in one. First, an explicit, comprehensive textbook covers every aspect of digital book production from concept to binding. Second, a visual tour de force illustrates the book production process with beautiful examples of books from recent artist books to historical
printed artifacts.

The crisp structure of the text makes this an excellent manual. It is suitable for classroom use in book design and production classes. It is also a helpful personal guide.

After an opening chapter on the nature of the book, ten chapters systematically chart the steps in making a book. Chapter 2 on the process of design covers conceptualization, development, and the general printing process. Chapter 3 covers typography, giving a nice overview of basic issues and a selection of important details. Chapter 4 covers the physical set-up of the book, including a discussion of folding and stitching. Chapter 5 discusses page layout programs. While the chapter is written for Quark-Xpress, it can be used with all major programs. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 discuss images - scanning them, correcting them, and acquiring them in other ways. Chapter 9 covers printing, with special attention to the relationship between digital media and final print production. Chapter 10 discusses the printing surface and materials, while chapter 11 covers binding. Chapter 12 is a discussion of the copyright and legal issues that have become increasingly important in an era of computer technology. The book includes a useful bibliography covering artist's books, bookbinding, design and typography, photography and digital imaging, printing, and periodicals. This is followed by a useful glossary of terms and a thorough index.

If I were to suggest modest improvements to a new edition of this fine work, it would involve covering two gaps. The first would be a chapter that offers a broader and more general vision of the book in today's digital world. While this book is written from the perspective of artist's books, it is such a fine book that it will find a far wider audience and larger uses. That makes a slightly more general perspective helpful in conceptual terms. This can be covered in a single chapter.

The other improvements would be to the bibliography. Two important topics are absent. The first topic involves the history of the book as a communication medium and cultural artifact. A selection of half a dozen titles would cover this admirably. The second topic involves a selection of titles on general book making, book production and publishing. Those who use this book to develop project for commercial publishers will want to know more about large-scale book production and publishing.

"Of making many books, there is no end" writes the weary
author of Ecclesiastes 12:12. Douglas Holleley's beautiful text is more optimistic. Holleley gives reason to hope that books will be made for centuries to come. This practical and entertaining guide to book production meets today's needs and suggests new avenues for book production in the future.

References


