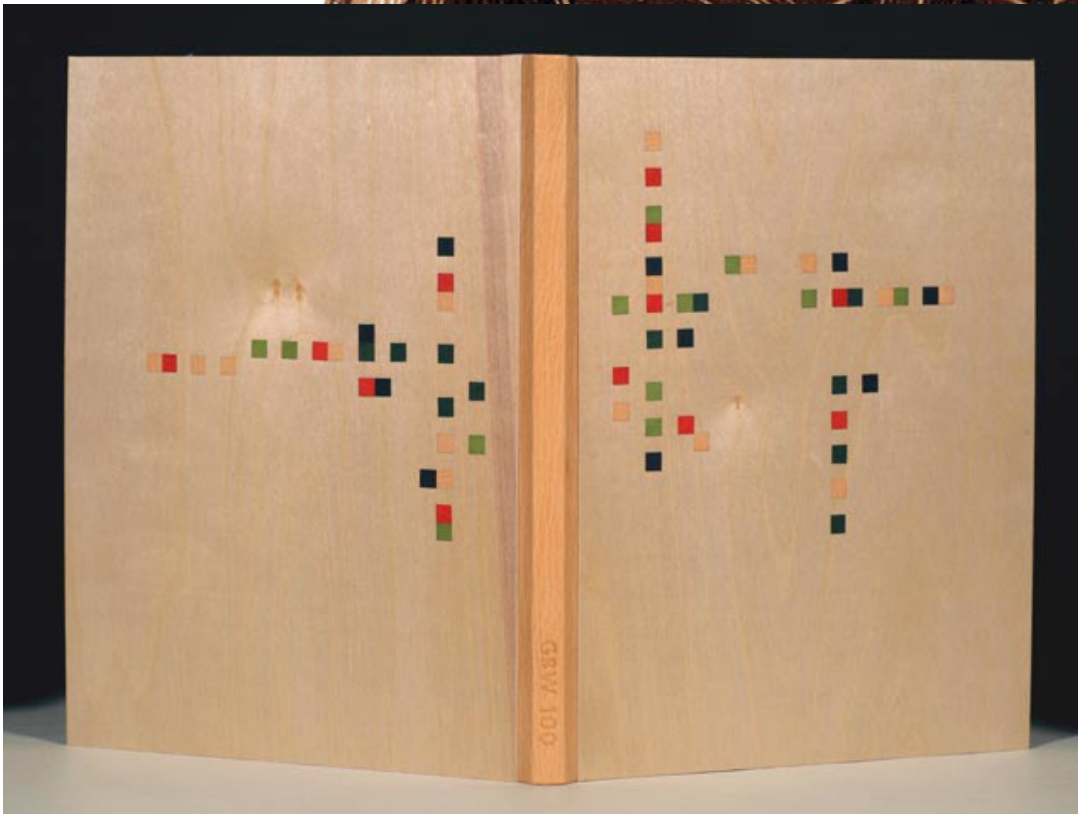


THE BUNDFOLDER

an e-journal for the book binder and book artist



Print of wild plum wood from the book Sylvae by Gaylord Shanilec (above) and Bind-O-Rama entry by Amy Borezo (left).

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Sylvæ: An Adventure in Fine Printmaking

By Gaylord Schanilec



My friend Rulon lives in a big house at the crest of Summit Avenue. When a trip to the Twin Cities requires a bed, I stay at Rulon's. Sometimes, if he has other guests, I stay on the third floor. On my first night up there, years ago now, I slept with the recently acquired private library of M. F. K. Fisher. On the second floor, adjacent to the master bedroom suite, is the primary guest room, and I stay there when it is available. It has a private bath, an impressive collection of twentieth-century first editions, and among other interesting bookish items, a mysterious canvas sack with "Jack London" printed on it. But it is the first floor of Rulon's house that holds the primary library. I can't begin to describe it here, but many of the books are very old, and very big. One morning Rulon showed me two old books. The content of both was the same, but one was larger than the other and made of finer materials. He said it was the "large paper" edition.

Rumor has it there is a mummy in Rulon's attic...

Ben Verhoeven graduated from the Rhode Island School of Design in the spring of 2005 with a diploma in illustration. That fall, his uncle, a neighbor of ours, brought Ben by the shop, thinking he might find the goings-on here at Midnight Paper Sales interesting. Not surprisingly, his education at a prestigious art school did not include any mention of fine printing. He had never before seen letterpress, real type, or an engraved block of wood. I doubt that he had ever handled a finely printed book.

Ben was interested, indeed, and agreed to stay on for a three-month internship. Besides helping around the shop with various MPS projects during his stay, he produced a small book of his own called *Twenty Rows In*. In the introduction, he explains, "Begun as *An Abbreviated Sylva of Pepin County*, this book was to catalogue the dominant trees of the area, with illustrations and historical anecdotes. Though an enticing idea, it would prove more than my three-month visit could afford.

The trees were winnowed down to four, but with autumn fast approaching I settled on one: a cottonwood on the acreage of Hazel and Gaylord Erickson." The book contains a reproduction of the first record of ownership for the property: a letter from President James Buchanan giving the property to a Civil War veteran, James H. Spotts. It also includes a brief description of the mathematics involved in estimating the height of the tree, complete with a mysterious but interesting listing of the equations involved.

When Ben arrived, I had just finished printing *Mayflies of the Driftless Region*, a four-year project, and I was tired. My plan was to launch a boat, a floating observatory of sorts, on the Mississippi River as a first step in spending the rest of my days in thoughtful repose. This plan would involve printing books of course, but I envisioned a more relaxed pace for my future projects, given that *Mayflies* had provided a bit of financial breathing room. Ben's little book, however, changed everything. His eye for design, the clarity of his vision, and his youthful energy were impressive and appealing.

I too had an interest in trees, having developed a passion for harvesting them (occasionally) and milling them into lumber on a neighbor's saw mill. Perhaps, if I could persuade Ben to stay a while longer, we might make an interesting book. I suggested we produce a full-scale *Sylvæ* together, based on the twenty acres of woods surrounding this studio. He was intrigued, and we managed to negotiate a two-year plan. The boat would have to wait.



In the spring of 2006, Ben and I concentrated on collecting and sawing wood specimens, with the notion of printing from them. Twenty-five different species were gathered and sawn, each supplying both end-grain rounds and long-grain boards. Every species was given an identification number, and the specimens were stacked and stored wherever we could find dry space. A living tree, of course, is composed primarily of water. It is like a bundle of straws that draws water from the roots to the crown. Most of this water must be removed before the wood can be used; otherwise it will twist and crack as the water leaves and the wood adjusts to the surrounding air. Most wood, if stored beneath a roof here in Wisconsin, will dry to a moisture content of about fourteen per cent in three-months time. We constructed a small dehumidifying kiln to reduce moisture content further, to approximately seven per cent, a level at which the wood is stable enough to be used for book

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boards and boxes. We did not kiln dry our printing specimens, however. Instead, air-dried wood (about fourteen per cent moisture content) was put on the press immediately after it was machined, giving it little time to move. If it did move, it could be dealt with. I had assembled the woodworking tools necessary to machine type-high blocks from the various woods. One of the more useful tools is a drum sander. If a block warps slightly, for instance, it's relatively easy to sand it flat again. The specimen blocks vary in size from a small end-grain half round of two-by-three inches, to the long cross section of a root that measures twelve-by-twenty-four inches.

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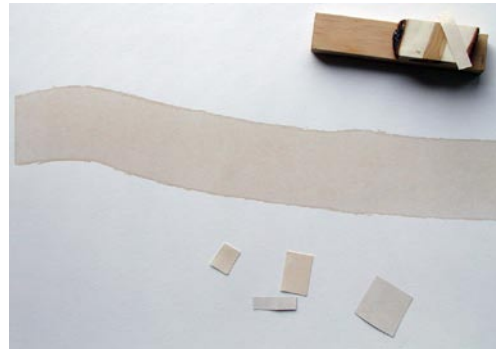
The process of printing so-called "fine" books generally leaves little room for surprise. An army of details must be put through drills until every one is as regular as the sound of the printing press. The structural elements of design and typography, as well as the mechanical and aesthetic properties of paper and binding, must be carefully considered: they *must* accommodate the entire campaign. In spite of the practiced elements of the most careful plan, surprise is inevitable. To the fine printer, surprise presents a problem that must be dealt with. Printmakers on the other hand, if they are both the maker and the printer of the block, can view surprise as an opportunity.



Printing wild plum long-grain on the Vandercook.

Printmaking became the central element of our *Sylvæ*. Ben and I would study both the end-grain and the long-grain specimens of a species and plan how we might produce two compatible images representative of the actual look of the wood, while keeping the number of press runs down to a

reasonable number. We adopted a policy of "raising" a voice as opposed to "changing" a voice. Our aim was to be true to the nature of the specimen, but we were willing to exaggerate a particular element in order to make a point. For instance, if you have ever tried to split elm for firewood, you know how difficult it is. On proofing our long-grain elm board, the resulting stained surface of the wood made the interlocking nature of the fibers—the reason the wood is so hard to split—plain to see, so we exaggerated the value of the final printed color in order to make this more obvious.



Considering colors for the background of sweet viburnum

When a thin layer of ink is applied to the surface of wood and impressed onto paper, the resulting image is a direct representation of that surface. It is more accurate than a photograph, which is a step away from its subject. There is intimacy in this process, and often there is surprise, due to the difference between what we see and the relief characteristics of the wood as rendered by impression and ink.



A two-color impression of the surface of end-grain white oak.

Long-grain white oak was printed in two colors to illustrate the nature of rays. In the tangle of lines and colors evident in the surface of the wood (a large cross-section of a knot formed where a branch had extended from the tree's trunk),

the fine lines of the rays, which extend out in straight lines from the center of the knot toward the bark, are lighter in color than the surrounding wood. Our plan was to print the entire surface in a light color, then cut away the rays themselves and print the block again in a darker color. The complexity of the wood surrounding the rays was simplified into a single dark color, allowing the rays themselves, which had been cut away after the initial printing, to stand out in the lighter color.



Long-grain white oak

Ink, when printed directly onto the right paper, is absorbed slightly into the paper fiber, making a clean and crisp impression. When broad background colors are printed onto the paper first, they form an uneven, slick surface that inhibits the absorption of ink into the paper of the final, usually more detailed key block. Sometimes, when holding detail was especially important, we would print the more detailed key block of an end-grain specimen first. This required the introduction of a second, separate block, since the key block had to be cut away before the background color could be printed. Such was the case with wild plum.

First, the lightest colored areas of the key block (the plum itself), were cut away, and the block was printed in a reddish brown. At the end of the press run, we transferred an impression from the key block onto a block of end-grain maple. This transfer was accomplished by attaching a sheet of Mylar to the impression cylinder of the press. The inked surface of the key block was printed onto the Mylar. Then, the key block was replaced in the bed of the press by the second, blank block, and the impression of the key block (still wet ink on the Mylar sheet) was printed onto the blank maple block.

The key block was then cut further and printed in a darker color. Finally, second block was cut, leaving the entire shape of the image, which was printed in a warm background color over the previously printed colors.



Wild plum key block.



Wild plum second block.

In past projects, I have relied on multiple rounds of preliminary proofing to determine how best to approach printing an image. This was not possible with *Sylvæ* since most of the images involved reduction cutting, and we didn't have the time to work out the details of fifty separate images ahead of time. Though certain methods and colors emerged as useful approaches to more than one image, each specimen offered a unique challenge. At times, in the middle of printing an image, our course would be deflected by some new revelation: the preliminary plan for printing each image had to remain flexible. This allowance for spontaneity led to a closer relationship between the process of printing and the final image.

The process of making images of wood is similar to that of making images of mayflies. The subject is studied, and a plan of composition, color, cutting, and printing is developed. With wood, however, the subject is also the printing block, and by default, one enters into the world of "nature" printing, a genre that has been in existence for hundreds of years. However, in cutting the surface, deliberate decisions are made, and one leaves the world of faithful reproduction of nature.



Key block printed, re-cut, and printed again.



Image over-printed with second color.

Most of the wood specimens required significant cutting to produce a satisfactory image. The use of wood-engraving tools on end grain is, for me, familiar territory. The variety of hardness, consistency, and structural make-up of the grain of the various species of wood in our *Sylvæ*, however, made for an interesting departure, as I have cut exclusively in end-grain maple for over twenty years. It has been even longer since I cut into long-grain wood with wood-carving tools. I enjoyed the coarse nature of the woodcut: a pleasant change from the careful precision of wood engraving. In the end, our specimen printing for *Sylvæ* resulted in twenty-five color wood engravings and twenty-five color woodcuts.

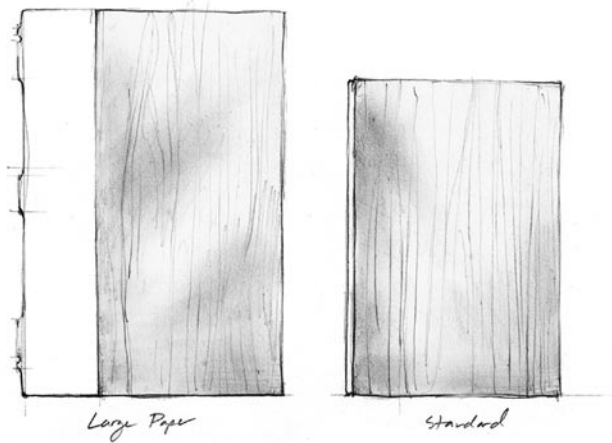
“What will you do for a text?” This question is often asked when I describe some big idea for a new book. Text is everywhere, and its relevance is largely a question of context. This has been my belief since reading Philip Gallo’s masterpiece, *Found Poetry* (The Hermetic Press, 1990). From overheard conversation in a skyway to a florist’s instructions with a bouquet of flowers, from graffiti to corporate typography, Gallo shows us that words, in a finely printed book, acquire fresh resonance and meaning.

In our *Sylvæ*, both Ben and I contributed text. I was determined that my contribution accentuate the immediacy of our image making, so I made notes on the process of collecting, cutting, and printing our specimens. While this approach introduced the slight tactical difficulty of an unfinished text (until the specimen printing was finished), it did allow for immediacy. These notes will be set in a small type size and likely printed in a color other than black. The heart of the text, however, is a continuation of Ben’s investigation that began with the lone cottonwood in *Twenty Rows In*. He has spent countless hours in the libraries and governmental archives of Pepin County and beyond, following leads of history, science, mathematics, and instinctual curiosity.



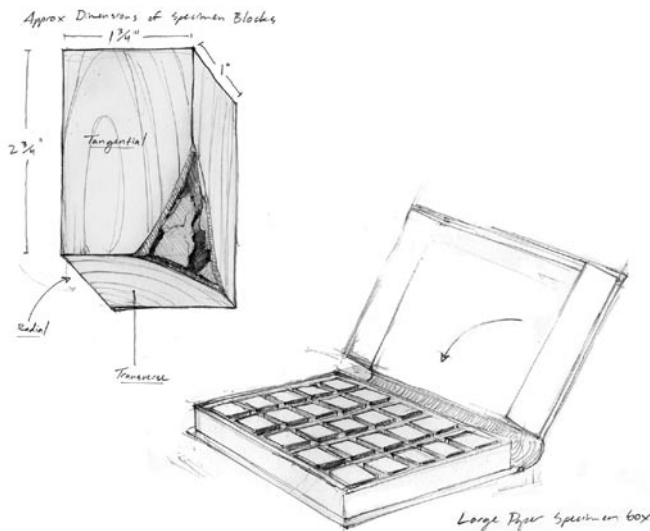
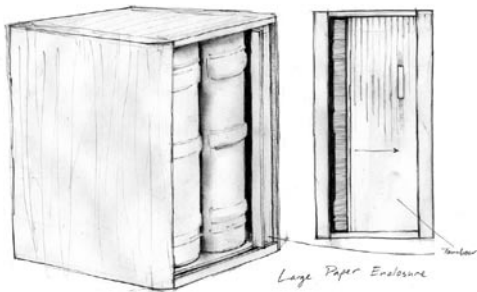
I have come to accept that a book of this scale ends up in a “collection.” It is not read as we would normally read a book. The text operates at a level parallel to the tactile and (or) visual nature of the book, and it can be hard pressed to hold it’s own. Ben’s text for our *Sylvæ* could easily have been far more extensive: it was kept to a single page per specimen. We both aimed to keep our contributions interesting, entertaining, and brief.

This brings me to Rulon’s library and the “large paper” edition. It was once pointed out to me (unfortunately I can’t remember the book or who did the pointing) that the page in an old book to which the fold-outs were attached was intentionally left blank, so that the fold-out could be folded out and the previous leaf turned back, allowing the preceding spread of the book to be viewed at the same time as the fold-out. This became a central component of our “large paper” *Sylvæ*. In both the large paper and standard editions, each species begins with a title page, followed by a spread with the end-grain specimen printed on the left and the text on the right. The next spread is comprised of any continuation of text on the left and the long-grain specimen (which often folds out) on the right. For practical reasons we decided that the standard edition would have no tipped-in sheets—that each sheet could be printed, in its entirety, on a single pass through the press. Since some of the images are three-panel foldouts, it was not possible to leave a blank page next to the long-grain image. The large paper edition, however, afforded us the opportunity. It will be possible to view both the end-grain and long-grain specimen printings of a species, the entire text pertaining to it, and an actual specimen of the wood itself, all at one time.



Ben's drawing of the large paper and standard editions.

In the past I have often printed both a standard edition and a special edition of a book. The special edition lets one incorporate finer materials and allows the binder extended opportunities. It is also a favorable marketing strategy, as special editions seem easier to sell than standard editions due to their limitation and their lavish nature. As for the idea of "large paper," I like looking at old books for ideas. It is much like Gallo's approach to text: in adapting some lost antiquarian convention to a contemporary book, context changes perception.

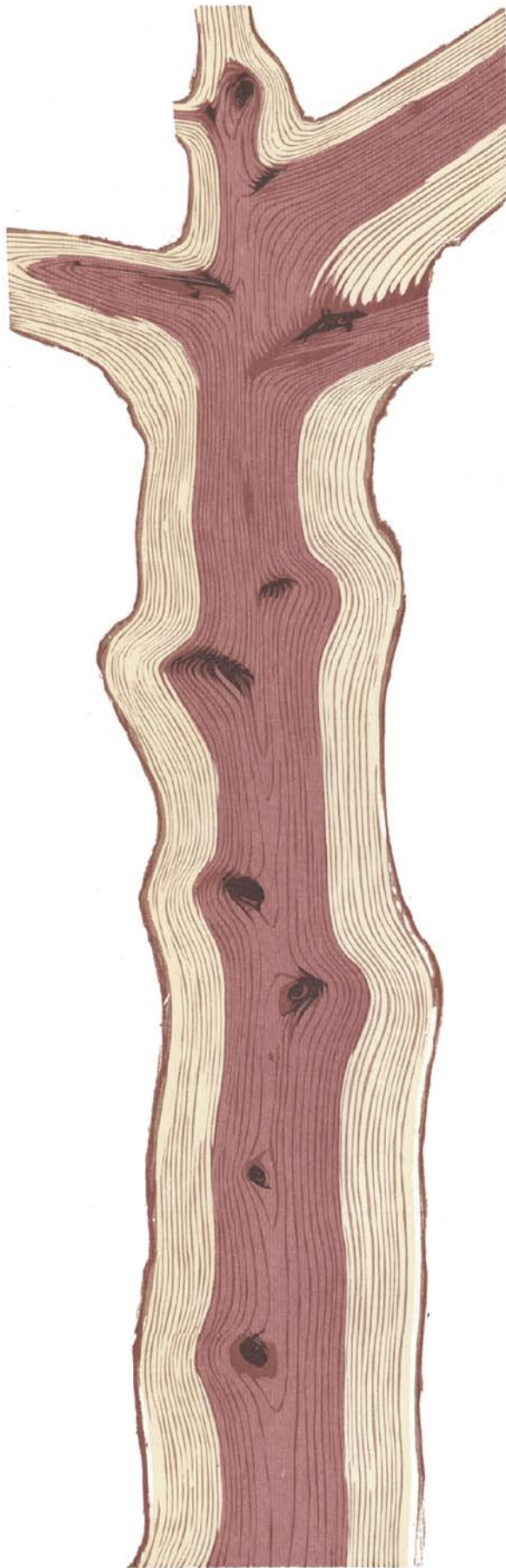


For our large-paper *Sylvæ* we decided to print the text on Twin Rocker handmade paper and the images on a special making of Zerkall 7625 known as Edwina Ellis. Edwina is a British wood engraver whose work is very fine. She was frustrated by the slight texture of 7625 smooth and prompted the mill to calendar the paper further to make the smoothest sheet possible. This seemed the best possible paper to capture as much delicate detail from the surface of the wood as was possible (Zerkall 7625 is known as Zerkall Book in the U. S.).

An interest in using wooden boards (from our trees) for the covers of the *Sylvæ* led me to Iowa City. I had seen images from the University of Iowa's Bookbinding Model Collection, and Gary Frost, a conservator at the library there, agreed to show me models of wooden board bindings. Through Mr. Frost, I found Craig Jensen of Booklab II, who will be binding both editions.



Thirty-one large paper copies will be bound in a medieval style binding with laced quarter sawn white oak boards and quarter tawed goatskin covering. The challenge for Craig was in adapting this structure to accommodate the multitude of separate sheets attached to the book block. The details of his solution to this problem--basically a rethinking of the manner of attachment, along with the introduction of a concertina support for the sewing--were worked out before we began printing. The book will be contained in a wooden tambour-fronted enclosure along with a separate box of twenty-five specimens of wood, one for each species represented. A tambour is like the cover of a roll-top desk: a series of strips of wood are glued to piece of fabric, and each end of the construction is placed in a channel, where it rides as the tambour is pulled open and shut. Not in my wildest dreams would I have imagined such a thing incorporated into a book project, but when I described this one to woodworker Dick Sorenson, it was the first thing that came to his mind. I suspect it is something he has thought about for awhile. One hundred twenty copies of the standard edition of our *Sylvæ* will be bound in a quarter tawed goatskin wooden lapped case binding, and contained in a wooden slipcase.



As I write this, all fifty specimen images have been printed. The 150 press runs took nearly five months to accomplish. Over 500 board feet of lumber have been cut, dried, and delivered to the shop where the woodworking will take place. The text has been put through the editing process and is being prepared for type casting. I had hoped, at this time, to report that our *Sylvæ* is finished. But it's not...

There is, however, a mummy in Rulon's attic.

The North Dakota moon stuck in Gaylord Schanilec's pocket in 1971, and he started down a road of bookish activity. Later in the 70's he moved to the Twin Cities, where he founded Midnight Paper Sales in 1980. Today he lives and works on the shoulder of the Mississippi River near Stockholm, Wisconsin. He can be reached at <gaylordschanilec@midnightpapersales.com>.

*Edition and subscription details for the *Sylvæ*, along with Ben Verhoeven's monthly "in progress" updates can be found at <<http://www.midnightpapersales.com>>.*
