

Printers' Marks in the Rhode Island State Library



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History of Printers' Marks

Printers' marks, or devices, were used by early printers beginning in the middle of the 15th century to identify a printer's work. Essentially an early trademark, the marks identified individual printed works, established quality, and prevented forgeries and intellectual piracy. Johannes Gutenberg printed the first book in the West in 1455. The second book printed in 1457 included the first printers' mark indicating that quite quickly printers felt the need to lay claim on their works.

Often reminiscent of a seal or crest, the design motifs, illustrations, and mottos were personal to the individual printer or press. In most cases the origin or intention of the design is unknown, however, scholars have been able to surmise the reasons for some marks. Some are visual puns on the printer's name or an aspect of their business. Often the pictorial symbols or mottos had religious or mythological significance.

Printers' marks have long been a popular design element in the design of libraries. They were especially popular in the Victorian, Beaux Arts, and the Arts & Crafts design movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries. They are seen in ornament and interior design elements in libraries such as the Library of Congress, the Harper Library at the University of Chicago, Andover Hall at the Harvard Divinity School, Houghton Library at Harvard University, Boston Public Library, and the Rhode Island State Library.

The Rhode Island State House was designed by architects McKim, Mead, & White in 1891. Only a few years before, the firm designed the Boston Public Library where they commissioned sculptor Domingo Mora to carve thirty-two printers' marks and the seals of various American and European universities to be used in the spandrels of the window arches on the exterior of the building. Domingo Mora (1840-1911), a Spanish-American architectural sculptor originally from Catalonia, was the chief designer for the Perth Amboy Terra Cotta Company in New Jersey. In that capacity, he



was commissioned to design architectural sculpture for hundreds of buildings including the Metropolitan Opera House, Suffolk County Courthouse (Boston), Congregational Library & Archives (Boston), and the Music Room of the J.P. Morgan Library. Mora based his designs for the printers' marks from rare books within the Boston Public Library collection. Because the designs were chosen for their decoration and not necessarily because of the reputation of the printer, a number of lesser-known printers were included.

Chiefly responsible for the design of the Rhode Island State House, Charles P. McKim designed the State Library with a highly ornamental vaulted ceiling in a dome border with a milk glass skylight. The dome border utilized sixteen of Mora's original designs from the Boston Public Library sculpted in stucco and gold leaf surrounded by ornamental borders of oak leaves and monograms for the State name in gold leaf to create a result that is reminiscent of the spine of a leatherbound book.

When originally installed, the dome included fifteen printers' marks and the seal of Harvard College. Several explanations have been surmised; however, no records are available to confirm the reason for the collegiate seal. One suggestion was that it was included as the sole representation of the history of printing in North America as the first press in the American colonies was set up at Harvard College. Another theory was that because McKim attended Harvard University, he utilized the opportunity to leave a more personal mark on the interior. In his first term as a state representative, Theodore Francis Green introduced a bill in 1907 to replace the seal of Harvard College with that of Brown University, but the bill died in committee. He continued to introduce a bill each year while he served in the House, but it never passed. In 1936, during his tenure as Governor, Green took independent action. The State Library was closed for renovations and when it was reopened the seal of Harvard College was replaced with the printers' mark of William Caxton, the first English printer.



Inventory of Printers' Marks

Beginning in the northwest corner of the Library (on the left over the windows), the marks are identified moving clockwise around the room.



PRINTER

Hieronymus
Polus

Venice, Italy

Active:
late 16th
century

BIOGRAPHY

Polus is most known for his 1587 edition of the Louvain Vulgate (Bible) – the standard scriptural text of the Catholic Church from 1547-1590. The volume included 600 engravings of woodcuts by Hans Holbein and illustrations by Bernard Salomon.

PRINTER'S MARK

A celestial frame with the globe of the earth and the signs of the Zodiac. The motto "Polus Articus-Polus Antarct" translates to "North Pole, South Pole." Together, this mark could represent that the printer's work represents knowledge of both the physical and spiritual worlds.



PRINTER

David Martini

Antwerp,
Netherlands

Active:
early 17th
century

BIOGRAPHY

In the 16-17th centuries, Antwerp was prominent as a center for printing in Europe, especially for religious texts and engravings. Although little is known about the printer David Martini, he is known to have published Catholic texts and a collection of biographies of notable Belgian writers and figures.

PRINTER'S MARK

A Bible bound in a circle of light. The motto "Vetai Mori" means "To die old." The mark suggests the idea of personal legacy preserved through art.

**PRINTER**

Simon de
Colines
(1480-1546)

Paris, France

Active:
1520-1546

BIOGRAPHY

Simon de Colines was one of the most important and prolific printers in 16th century Paris. He worked exclusively for the University of Paris from 1520-1546, printed over 700 works, and created the standard for French old-style type design. He developed many of the standard components in books that we know today, including title pages, page numbers, tables of content, chapter headings, and bibliographies.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts Father Time as a satyr with his scythe and hourglass. The motto "Hanc Aciem Sola Retundit Virtus" means "Only Virtue Blunts This Blade." Together, the image and text indicate that only one's virtuous legacy can blunt the impact of death.



PRINTER

Geeraerd van
Wolsschaten
(1563-1634)

Antwerp,
Netherlands

Active:
early 17th century

BIOGRAPHY

As a major commercial trade center in the 16th century, Antwerp was influenced by arts and culture from across Europe and it developed as a pivotal city for print culture. While little is known about Wolsschaten personally, he is known to have printed religious and historical works.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts an anchor being held by two hands and the symbols Alpha, Omega, and Chi Rho. Chi Rho were the first letters of the name of Christ. The motto "Concordia" signifies harmony and translates to "with one heart."



PRINTER

Jehan (Jean)
Frellon
(1517-1570)

Lyon, France

Active:
1540-1570

BIOGRAPHY

Jehan Frellon was a prominent Protestant printer working in both Paris and Lyon in France in the middle of the 16th century. Working alongside his brother Francois, he was well-known for their printed editions of Hans Holbein's woodcuts of religious scenes known as *The Dance of Death*.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts a crab with its claws ready to clip the wings of a butterfly. The word "Matura" is often accompanied in Frellon's works by the full motto, "Make haste, a long delay is harmful, all hope is in the wings. He who wishes to seize you is at hand, butterfly." Scholars posit that this may refer to the danger that Frellon faced as a Protestant living in Catholic France.



PRINTER

Johannes
Columbius

Deventer,
Netherlands

Active:
17th century

BIOGRAPHY

Johannes Columbius was a Dutch printer working in the middle of the 17th century best known for printing Johannes Lomeier's *De Bibliothecis Liber Singularis* in 1669 – an early work on the history and organization of libraries.

PRINTER'S MARK

The motto “renovarbitur,” meaning “it will be renewed,” amplifies the visual symbolism of the phoenix, the symbol of rebirth, and the Greek letters Alpha and Omega, which refer to the beginning and the end.



PRINTER

Thomas
Vautrollier
(died 1587)

London, England
& Edinburgh,
Scotland

Active:
late 16th century

BIOGRAPHY

Thomas Vautrollier was a Huguenot refugee who worked as a bookseller and printer in both London and Edinburgh, Scotland. He began his career as an agent for the famous Dutch printer Christopher Plantin before opening one of the most successful presses in London. He was a well-known printer of Protestant theology, classical works, music, and textbooks. On several occasions, he got in trouble with authorities for works he published. He had to flee to Scotland for printing the sermons of Martin Luther without a license and his copies of John Knox's *History of the Reformation* were seized. His wife Jacqueline ran his press alongside him and took over the business following his death.

PRINTER'S MARK

This mark was used first by Vautrollier and later by his apprentice Richard Field. It depicts an anchor entwined with leafy boughs with a hand reaching from above. It incorporates the motto "Anchora Spei," or "Anchor of Hope," a widely recognized Christian symbol of strength and steadfastness.

**PRINTER**

Thomas
Woodcock
(1576-1594)

London,
England

Active:
late 16th
century

BIOGRAPHY

Woodcock was a stationer and bookseller with a shop at the sign of the Black Bear, in St. Paul's Churchyard in London. His father-in-law was John Cawood, a stationer who was appointed printer to Queen Elizabeth in 1560.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark is assumed to be a pun on the bookseller's name as it depicts a cock (rooster) on a Roman funeral pyre of logs. The motto "Cantabo Jehovahae quia Benefecit" means "I will sing to Jehovah because he has done good."

**PRINTER**

Guillaume
Rouillé
(1518-1589)

Lyon, France

Active:
1545-1590

BIOGRAPHY

Rouillé was an esteemed bookseller and printer in Lyon, France in the 16th century. He was a successful merchant and prolific printer of humanist works especially related to medicine, history, and iconography. Trained in Venice, he was most notable for printing in the vernacular of French, Italian, and Spanish as opposed to Latin. He invented the sextodecimo book format – a smaller, pocket-sized format.

PRINTER'S MARK

One of four known marks that Vautrollier used, this mark depicts an eagle standing atop a globe with two snakes. The eagle symbolizes power and victory while snakes are often associated with health and luck. The motto "In Virtute et Fortuna," or "In Virtue and Fortune," reinforces the iconography.



PRINTER

Anton Bertram

Strasbourg,
France

Active:
1585-1628

BIOGRAPHY

Strasbourg was significant to the history of printing as several early printing presses were opened in 1460 and as the birthplace of the first newspaper in 1605. Anton Bertram, or Antonius Bertramus, would have been part of a vibrant print culture during his period of professional activity. He is most known for his printing books related to the history of medicine.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts two hands clasped around a bunch of flowers. Clasped hands are a signifier of fraternity and friendship. The motto "Spes Mea Christ" means "Christ is my Hope."



PRINTER

Aldus Manutius
(circa 1452-
1515)

Venice, Italy

Active:
1494-1515

BIOGRAPHY

Aldus Manutius was a scholar, publisher, and printer who founded the Aldine Press in 1494. A multi-generational publishing house, it produced the finest printed publications in the world for the next century. Manutius invented the portable book format – the predecessor of the modern paperback, standardized punctuation including the comma and semicolon, and created some of the most magnificent, illustrated books of the period. He published the first editions of Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, as well as particularly rare classical texts. In the preface to his edition of *Greek Grammar* by Lascaris, he wrote, "To a life of ease and quiet I have preferred one of restless labour. Man is not born for pleasure, which is unworthy of the truly generous mind, but for honourable labour."

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark, used by the press from 1502 to 1546, depicts a dolphin twisted around an anchor. Instead of a motto, he used his name "ALDUS." He first used his name in the printing of *Le Terze Rime di Dante* which, printed in the duodecimo format, was the first edition of Dante in portable form. The symbol of the dolphin and anchor was originally used on a Roman coin with the phrase "festina lente," or "make haste slowly." Due to the high reputation of Manutius as a printer, the mark has become synonymous with printing quality and was adopted by many publishing houses and organizations.



PRINTER

Johann Froben
(1460-1527)

Basel,
Switzerland

Active:
1491-1527

BIOGRAPHY

Froben was one of the most respected printers of the Renaissance in northern Europe in the 16th century. The success of his press and his friendships with the philosopher Erasmus and artists Hans Holbein and Albrecht Durer made Basel the center of the book trade in Switzerland. He printed the first Bible in the octavo format, printed the first *New Testament* in Greek using the first Greek typeface, and was known for his dedication to the aesthetics of printing. The scholar Erasmus described Froben as, "...enthusiastic for good learning, and felt his work to be his own reward. It was delightful to see him with the first pages of some new book in his hands, some author of whom he approved. His face was radiant with pleasure."

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark, designed by the artist Hans Holbein for use by Froben, features two hands holding a staff on which the caduceus of Hermes is entwined and on top of which a dove is perched. The motif is an allusion to the biblical scripture, "Be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" from Matthew 10:16 – a metaphor for navigating a hostile world while maintaining a pure heart.



PRINTER

Christophe
Plantin (circa
1520-1589)

Antwerp,
Netherlands

Active:
1545-1589

BIOGRAPHY

Christophe Plantin was a French Renaissance humanist and printer whose Plantin Press established Antwerp as the center of book publishing in Europe in the 16th century. A prolific printer and prosperous bookseller, his most important work was the *Biblia Regia*, also known as the King's Bible or the Plantin Polyglot. The eight-volume bible was printed in folio and included parallel texts in Latin, Greek, Syriac, Aramaic, and Hebrew. It took four years and fifty-three men using thirteen presses to complete. After its publication, King Philip II of Spain named Plantin Arch-Printer to the King, giving him the privilege of printing all Roman Catholic liturgical books.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts a hand reaching down from a cloud to manipulate a compass. The motto "Labore et Constantia" means "Through Labor and Perseverance." Plantin used various marks, but this was his most well-known. He first used it in 1557 and explained in the preface of his Polyglot Bible that the compass signified constancy and work.



PRINTER

William Caxton
(died 1491)

London,
England

Active:
1476-1491

BIOGRAPHY

Caxton was a merchant, diplomat, writer, bookseller, and printer. He introduced the first printing press to England and printed the first book in English. Well-known especially for printing classical and historical works as well as chivalric romances, he printed the first English translations of Aesop's *Fables*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, and Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. With the success of his translation work and the sales of his publications, he is credited with standardizing the English language from a wide variety of regional dialects of Medieval English to the Chancery standard based on the London dialect.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark is a decorative display of "W 74 C." The letters represent the initials of the printer's name; the numbers are assumed to be an abbreviation of 1474, likely referring to a landmark date in Caxton's life or career – possibly the year that his printing venture began.



PRINTER

Vincenzo
Valgrisi (born
1490)

Venice, Italy

Active:
1532-1572

BIOGRAPHY

Valgrisi owned a book and print shop at the sign of "The Head of Erasmus" in Venice. He is known to have published approximately 200 works. A somewhat controversial printer, he was chastised by the printer Jehan Frellon for pirating Frellon's copy of Holbein's *The Dance of Death*, and in 1570, the Roman Inquisition found him guilty of selling and storing 1,150 prohibited books. As a printer, his works were notable for including full page illustrations at the beginning of a canto (i.e. chapter).

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts a serpent coiled on a tau cross held upright in a pair of hands. The tau cross is a symbol of faith and devotion associated with St. Francis of Assisi. The motto "Vincent" is likely a pun on the printer's name as it translates from Latin to "they conquer."



PRINTER

Henning Grosse
the Younger
(1582-1622)

Leipzig,
Germany

Active:
1605-1622

BIOGRAPHY

Henning Grosse the Younger was the son of Henning Grosse (1553-1621) who was also a German printer. Henning the Younger bought his brother Friedrich's press and bookstore and, after his death, his widow continued the business and passed it to their son.

PRINTER'S MARK

The mark depicts the Greek mythological hero Hercules wearing a loincloth and carrying a club. Hercules symbolizes strength and perseverance in overcoming obstacles. The phrase "Sic Itur ad Astra," or "Thus one's journey to the stars," was taken from Virgil's *Aeneid* and refers to the journey to immortality.



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