

# French Typographic Patrimony, Conservation and Teaching

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## Abstract

Presentation of the Conservatory of Punches, its content and its activities. Punchcutting today, its usefulness, its future, its developments, for the “Imprimerie nationale” as well as in the framework of the trade of typography. Practical and research possibilities of the different elements that compose its collections. What can be done today in hopes of saving this patrimony and the knowledge that resides there.

## Résumé

La gravure du poinçon typographique aujourd’hui, son utilité, son avenir, ses développements, à l’Imprimerie nationale ainsi que les pratiques possibles dans le cadre privé de l’exercice des métiers de la typographie. Les possibilités d’utilisation ou de recherche des différentes pièces qui composent ses collections. Comment peut-on aujourd’hui espérer sauver ce patrimoine et les savoir-faire qui s’y rattachent.

## Introduction

The Conservatory of Punches is the nucleus of the French National Printing House (*Imprimerie nationale* — IN). There are two punchcutters at the IN, Nelly Gable and myself.

This punchcutting workshop (creation, restoration) is also the place where the IN’s engraving collections are held. The collection consists of over 500,000 items; a simplified inventory:

- 230,000 steel punches (the earliest examples date back to François 1st) employed to print our own IN publications;
- 28,000 steel engraved die-stamps (for medals);
- 14,000 steel punches for printing of musical scores from engraved plates;
- 224,000 Chinese wood-engraved ideograms;
- 15,000 wood-engraved types for poster printing;
- 1,300 wood-engraved blocks for book illustration;
- 3,000 copper-engraved plates for book illustration;
- and 2,500 gold-blocking tools.

In 1946, Raymond Blanchot, director of the IN, had the typographic punch collection listed as a “Historical Monument”, and Christian Paput, your modest engraver servant to the Conservatory of Punches, had this classification extended in 1994 to all of the punches and engraved material found since 1946, including all the engraved coins belonging to the IN.

The classification “Historical Monument” by the French Ministry of the Culture registers a collection or

a work, ensures its protection and security, and prevents against any possible sale of all or any part of this collection.

## *The oldest punches at the Conservatory*

The collection of western typographic punches is well known through the famous lineage of Garamont, Grandjean, Luce, Didot, Marcellin-Legrand, Jaugeon and Gauthier. But many other lesser-known characters are also in use at the IN, for example, calligraphic character punches of “ronde”, “coulée” and “bâtarde”, cartography signs, music signs, and chemical and mathematical symbols. The Conservatory of Punches houses those as well as punches by Jacquemin, a certain number of Bodoni punches, some Gothic punches engraved for Arthur Christian, director in 1906, which bear his name, etc.

This general listing of the material, which does not claim to be exhaustive, is almost complete when one considers the Oriental collection belonging to the Conservatory of Punches, including the first wood-engraved Chinese types created under the direction of Fourmont, on the order of the Regent between 1723 to 1730, as well as characters as varied as Hebrew, Arabic, Telugu, Nagari, Cuneiform, etc. These characters, mainly engraved during the course of the 19th century, constitute a treasure whose value cannot be calculated, relating to a wide range of wholly different cultures. Today, seventy languages are represented in one hundred different forms in this collection.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, there have been many developments.

First, the restitution of the last remaining punches of the Peignot collection that had been bequeathed to the Conservatory of Punches by the Haas Switzerland Typefoundry. Subsequently, Neufville Typefoundry Barcelona donated types to the Conservatory of Punches. Punches of the company Plon-Nourry have also been recovered; these are essentially “decorative vignettes”. This was followed by the purchase of the Tantarri Workshop, which has enriched our collections with punches of music, as well as with the complete set of tools required for this type of engraving and printing.

### *Various productions of the French National Printing House, particularly of the Conservatory*

A collection of books has been published by the IN. All are composed by hand from metal types.

A workshop is supported, specializing in producing artists’ books and original prints, and also catering to the needs of other publishers, in the fields of lithography, etching, engraving and collogtype. It is also in this workshop that letterpress printing is practised.

This is why it is the mission of the Conservatory of Punches to preserve typographic punches in perfect condition, suitable for supplying characters for printing.

In practical terms, the composing workshop orders its supply of characters from the typefoundry. The foundry casts type according to the needs of the compositors using the matrices in its extensive type library, as long as the condition of the actual matrix permits. Otherwise the request goes back through the system of production to the Conservatory of Punches which supplies the original punch necessary for the restriking of the defective matrix. Where a punch is damaged, it is completely recut, identical to the original, using the time-honoured methods passed down to us by our forebears. This is the restoration sector of our activity.

The Conservatory of Punches today pursues several aims in order to show its worth, and build its archive outside of the employment of these hand-engraved pieces:

- We participate in various exhibitions, in France and abroad, also loaning material. Notably, we have lent punches to the Seville Universal Exhibition as well as for a display accompanying a conference in Athens. Nearer to home, the Didot exhibition allowed us to present a selection of punches, while an exhibition about Lebanon showed a composition of classic Phoenician in lead type. The Print Museum of Lyon organized an exhibition to celebrate the three hundred year anniversary of the first utilization of the “Romain du Roi” and, for this oc-

casion, borrowed a number of historical items from the IN.

- More recently, we have had the opportunity to increase our collections from donations and, whenever possible (we have no special budget for this purpose), we have also bought historical material.
- Study and experimentation (through lack of time) of traditional techniques — such as hand-composing, music engraving, printing and casting — is undertaken whenever possible, to preserve a dying craft.
- We have created and we continue to increase a library of type specimens, thanks to our suppliers and contacts with the trade.
- Passing on of our knowledge of engraving is sometimes dispensed at the Conservatory of Punches through internships and organized visits. Approximately one trainee per year has been received in our workshop since 1989.
- The creative side to our work, apart from the creation of the typeface “Gauthier” in the 1980s, is presented by the engraving of characters missing from ancient fonts; it is especially evident lately through various projects and creations (character “Humane” and expressive vignettes).
- Through my work as lecturer at École Estienne, I pass on my knowledge of the history of handwriting and typography.
- Inventories of our collections have been undertaken to allow the Historical Monument classification. Today these inventories need to be specified qualitatively to be able to be properly exploitable.

In a few lines, I trace the present situation of the Conservatory of Punches. We know that the French National Printing House must move; for this reason, over the last six months we have resumed collating all of the engraving collections in order to reference and prepare them for transportation to a new installation site. The collection should go into a workshop-museum at Choisy-le-Roi in the months to come.

I have obtained for this preparation the services of an ex-student from École Estienne, qualified in engraving and etching. He will assist me until June 2003, then he will stay with the Conservatory of Punches during his training in the art of typographic punchcutting (three years are envisaged). This training is possible thanks to the action of the Ministry of Culture, in the context of the scheme of “Maîtres d’Art”, initiated by them, to safeguard crafts.

Thus, a young engraver is allowed the chance to obtain rare skills in the area of typography which he can use in his future profession, which, for him, seems to be the creation of handmade artist’s books.

This experience, designed to be self-perpetuating, should permit this craft to continue both within and without the IN.

*References*

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