

# Of type and time: ASU's Pyracantha Press gets a new home

**Director Daniel Mayer reflects on past, present and future of studio, its centerpiece — an 1800s Columbian handpress**

By Mary Raha, ASU News  
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[Pyracantha Press](#) isn't just a studio.

Nestled for decades in the basement of Arizona State University's School of Art building, it has long been a space of quiet rhythm, carved wood type and slow, purposeful making.

"It's a space for research, instruction and experimentation," says [Daniel Mayer](#), who's led the press since 2006. "Students come in thinking it's about printing, but it's really about process and form — the kind that communicates just as loudly as content."

When asked what keeps that spark alive after decades of working with type, Mayer answers without hesitation: "Every project begins with a question."

It could be structural — like how a book might fold — or material: "Could this poem be printed on Thai banana paper?"

There's no formula, he explains. "Every idea brings a new shape, a new conversation with the press."

One piece in the studio always draws awe.

"There's often a pause," Mayer says. "Then a whisper: 'Whoa.'"

That whisper is usually for the Columbian handpress — 2,000 pounds of cast iron topped with a golden eagle.

"It was made in London in the 1800s and restored by Dr. Petko, a dermatologist in California who collected presses and type. When it's in motion, it's like choreography."

When asked what makes a Pyracantha project unique, Mayer doesn't point to the ink or the type — but the pace.

“Letterpress slows you down — in the best way. You set type, lock it up, ink it, pull the print. That gives you time to think: What am I saying? What am I making? The structure is part of the story.”

Now, that story is shifting. Thirty tons of type, presses and tools have been moved from Pyracantha’s longtime home to a new space in the new Mill Avenue residence hall.

“This is big,” Mayer says. “The new space brings research and instruction together. It’s visible. Students walking by will see someone printing a broadside. That curiosity — that’s where it starts.”

The transition isn’t simple. The Columbian had to be disassembled and wrapped like a sculpture. But it’s not the only delicate cargo.

“Some of the type drawers hold wood and metal fonts over a hundred years old,” he says. “They have to go back in the exact same order.”

What excites him most about the new space is what others will see.

“The presses will be visible from the hallway. Students will stop and look in. That’s a game changer.”

That visibility could also expand Pyracantha’s network of collaborators.

“We’ve had artists from Hungary, poets from New York, composers from Macedonia. The new space lets more of that happen — and more people see it while it’s happening.”

Why does letterpress still matter in 2025?

“Because it’s slow. Because it’s tactile. Because it gives you time to think,” Mayer says. “We use photopolymer plates and design digitally. But once it’s on the press, you feel it. That blend of old and new — that’s what makes it meaningful.”

He recalls past projects that capture Pyracantha’s voice — like the accordion-folded ecological cycle with Macedonian composer Dimitrije Bužarovski, or a slam poetry piece with poet and performer Mary McCann.

“One unfolded like a heartbeat. One felt like a map. One read like a song.”

After mentoring generations of printers, Mayer still sees wonder in their first press pulls.

“Everything changes. They see their own words and images — pressed into paper. They made that. There’s pride. A shift. They’re not just designing anymore. They’re communicating.”

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**Main image**



Daniel Mayer, director of ASU's Pyracantha Press, sets up the workshop's 1800s Columbian handpress during the move to its new location at the new Mill Avenue residence hall at the western edge of the Tempe campus on Aug. 6. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University

**Text image(s)**



Daniel Mayer pulls out a drawer of different type pieces during the Pyracantha Press move to its new location at the Mill Avenue residence hall on Aug. 4. Photo by Emma Fitzgerald/Arizona State University

## Gallery





The 2,000-pound Columbian handpress gets moved on a trailer across the Tempe campus to its new home at the new Mill Avenue residence hall.



From left: Daniel Mayer, graduate art student Jace Hermanto, third-year English student Elisa Gutierrez and nondegree seeking graduate student Morgan Maxfield help pack up pieces of the Columbian handpress during the Pyracantha Press move on Aug. 4.





A close-up of a label for the Columbian handpress during its move on Aug. 5.



A close-up of type pieces during the Pyracantha Press move on Aug. 4.





Daniel Mayer gets part of the Columbian handpress into position during its move to the Mill Avenue residence hall on Aug. 5.



A close-up of a wood-carved print block on the newly installed Columbian handpress at the Mill Avenue residence hall in Tempe.





Daniel Mayer shows off a hand-printed item using an 1800s Columbian handpress inside its new location at the Mill Avenue residence hall in Tempe on Aug. 6.