Art & Design

Artists and makers find joy in creating by hand with antique equipment or traditional processes.

making it slow

STORY BY
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Centuries come and go. Creativity stays constant as the sun in its daily arc. Technology transforms itself and everything around it. And still the hands remain the artist's greatest tool. The makers and artists who are choosing to create art today with the human-powered methods of the past didn't set out to eschew modern technology; instead, they steadily pursued their passion wherever it led them—less like a carefully plotted map and more like a homing beacon. Call it the long way. The old-fashioned way. The slow way. For a group of makers creating with antique tools or ancient processes, it's just the way.

Following that inner tug is how letterpress studio owners Jamie and Allison Nadeau found themselves carting a massive 100-year-old letterpress machine across state lines without a clue of what would come next. Or why weaver Alex Forby of Daughter Handwovens put her painting degree to the side to pick up a loom and teach herself the slow art of weaving. Across a range of disciplines, from a broad spectrum of backgrounds, the artists and makers featured in this story are compelled by a deep sense of connection to the present that comes from working with traditional tools or methods from the past.

"There's so much about our modern lifestyle that has quickened," explains Alex Forby. "Everything that we're doing is focused on how to do it faster or how to do it smaller—when it comes to technology, it's like, how small can we get the computer? We are constantly trying to compress and compress and compress time, or space, or energy. And I think it's really unique to have something that I just refuse to compress."

Alex Forby

Daughter Handwovens

Traditional weaver Alex Forby works with sustainable natural fibres and vintage looms to create beautiful pieces for home and wardrobe, such as bags, hand towels, tops and more.

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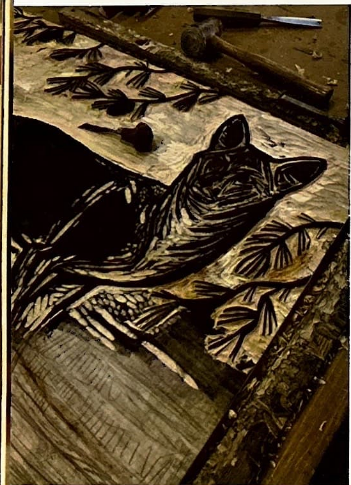
Of course, art and handcrafts have always offered a path to run counter to the pace of society, but there is something particularly special about doing so with the same tools a maker would have used a century ago. Alex's work—like all the work represented here—is time- and labour-intensive. It moves only as fast as her hands do. These human limitations once shaped all of society, but when technological innovation and modern manufacturing reshaped production and consumption, making something by hand became a significant act. And naturally, the things made by hand take on more meaning. "I think there is an innate memory in all of us where people just know when something is handmade and not machine-made. Maybe it's in our DNA," says woodcut artist and painter Kent Ambler.

The yearning for handmade that Kent describes is a powerful one, strong enough to kickstart many maker journeys. It did for the Nadeaus. The wife-and-wife team behind the successful letterpress studio Ink Meets Paper had corporate day jobs and no plans of building a letterpress business. But when Allison, a copy editor, took a printmaking class for fun, she fell in love with the visceral, creative process of letterpress printing and the joy of the tangible result. Soon enough, she and her wife, Jamie, were calling antique stores around the country in search of a letterpress printing machine. "When you put a letterpress printed card in somebody's hands, it stands out; it kind of wakes you up. You connect with something in the physical world and you can feel the difference," says Jamie.



Kent Ambler

Artist Kent Ambler makes woodcut prints and paintings from his print studio in his South Carolina mountain home. Working from an intuitive and aesthetic approach, he captures his life and his surroundings.

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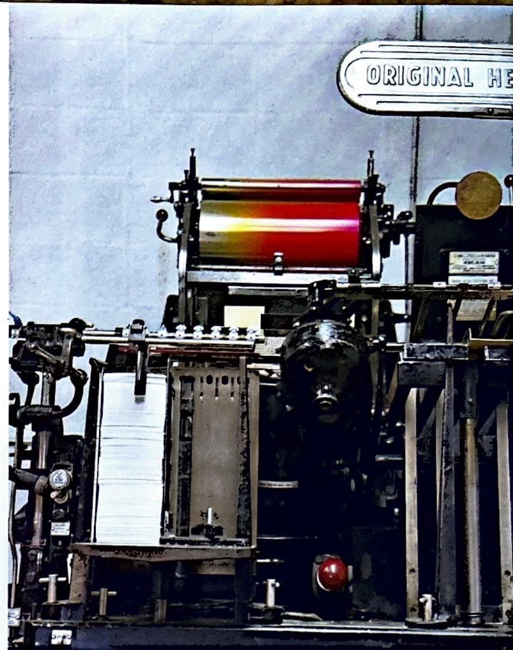

Letterpress is a fading craft that has undergone a recent revival, as a new generation of makers discover the presses that offset and digital printing made irrelevant. Letterpress machines that once handled all sorts of utilitarian printing (think newspapers and books) now turn out art and cards and posters from small studios. Despite the resurgence of interest, no one is manufacturing modern letterpress machines, so for the Nadeaus, pursuing their passion meant bringing home a 1923 Chandler and Price press. As they learned the basics of letterpress printing, they also had to learn how to operate a heavy, decades-old and potentially dangerous machine with no manual or customer support line. Ironically, they point out that modern technology came to the rescue—specifically, grainy YouTube videos and Facebook groups where letterpress printers trade knowledge—and helped them learn the craft.

There are a few other parts of Ink Meets Paper's process in which new technology has offered small improvements, but largely, the work of printing happens just as it would have decades ago. "It does force us to slow down and be mindful," says Allison. "For example, I can't be looking at my phone while I'm operating the press. There's something to slowing down and being in the moment and being with your thoughts." Mindfulness is a common by-product of making art. The work demands a certain attention, a singularity of focus that shuts out distractions. The result is an immersion in the moment of making that some people call flow—and others see as a quiet act of resisting the relentless pace of contemporary life.

Allison and Jamie Nadeau

Ink Meets Paper

Allison and Jamie Nadeau are the founders of Ink Meets Paper, a greeting card and paper goods letterpress studio based in South Carolina. Their work celebrates the joy of handwritten correspondence.

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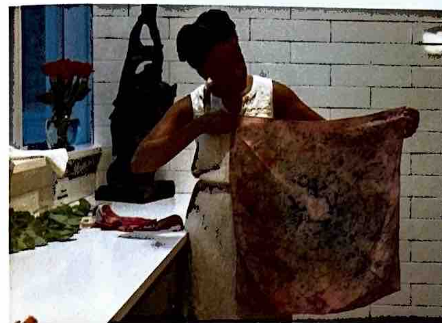
Alex Forby, who works primarily on an old 1970s loom and a 100-year-old Union rug loom, describes the act of weaving as "meditative." The antique rug loom came to Alex dirty and in pieces, dust-covered from someone's attic. She carefully cleaned and refurbished the loom for production, imagining the practical, personal goods that would have been made on her vintage looms over the years: a coverlet for someone's bed, a wall tapestry, a baby blanket. Today, Alex is creating items with her Daughter Handwovens inventory in mind, but the actual weaving process on the loom remains unaltered by time. After sketching her pattern design and selecting her yarn colours, Alex then threads the loom—a long, painstaking phase—before settling into the zen-like rhythm of weaving. "I really have chosen it specifically for the slowness," she says. "There are computerized looms available, and even that for me is almost too much like cheating. I want to weave the way they have always done it. The whole point is that it is handmade with a very human touch."

For Abena Motaboli, a Chicago-based multidisciplinary artist, the traditional, laborious work of creating natural dyes and earth pigments grounded her in a sense of time and place. "Getting into natural dyes is something that really helped me slow down and learn how to notice and listen," Abena says. Working with the rhythm of the seasons and her location, Abena gathers plants, flowers, bark and soil, including some from the garden she has planted and tended herself. She repurposes secondhand fabric and gives it new life by washing, soaking and dyeing it to become anything from tea towels to scarves to large-scale installations. Nature dictates the outcome: beautiful, subtle expressions of colour that vary according to season and geography.

Abena, who is from Lesotho in Southern Africa and came to the US to study fine art at Columbia College Chicago, began exploring plant and earth pigments when she started painting with tea and coffee. Years of creating with these "plant guides" inspired her to study natural dyes from traditions around the world and eventually begin creating her own, right in Chicago. "The more that I work with plants, the more that I feel in touch with what's going on around me, more connected to the earth," says Abena. The seasonality of her work has trained her eye to take in more of the natural world, a habit that creates what she calls "spaciousness" in her everyday life.



ABENA MOTABOLI PHOTOS BY RENAVISION AND THE PINEAPPLE COOKS

Abena Motaboli

Working across disciplines that include natural dyeing, painting and installations, artist Abena Motaboli explores and responds to the natural world and our place in it. She is based in Chicago.

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Art as a response to nature is a timeless instinct. For artist Kent Ambler and ceramicist Julie Spako, the mediums that felt right to share their observations and memories of the natural world also happened to be some of the earliest forms of art: woodcut printmaking and hand-built pottery.

In the 1990s, when Kent was studying art in college, he took a printmaking class and instinctively understood the language of woodcuts. "It just clicked. Somehow I could visualize it in my head," he says. Woodcuts are the oldest form of printmaking, and the tools required are very simple: a block of wood, various carving tools, ink, paper and some sort of tool to apply pressure for transferring the design—even a wooden spoon could work, Kent notes.

He went on to grow a successful career in art around woodcuts and paintings, working from "observation, intuition and memory." His home on 12 acres in the woods of Upstate South Carolina informs his subject matter: birds, dogs, trees, town life. Often described as "painterly," his woodcuts begin with an observational sketch before he carves a block of wood with quick, shallow cuts that he intentionally keeps loose. Each block is hand inked with its own colour and pressed in layers onto the paper. Kent limits his woodcuts to a run of 20 to 30 prints and does not make digital copies, finding a strange dissonance in a digital print of a hand-made print. "If someone sees a woodcut of mine, they know I printed it myself from the block," he explains. From start to finish, making one of his woodcut prints involves hours of his time. Such an investment of time imbues each print with meaning and value—a timeless part of art and craft's appeal.

Julie Spako

Spako Clay

Austin ceramicist Julie Spako makes hand-built, hand-drawn and hand-painted pottery that marries simplicity of form with elegant, complex floral designs.

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Austin ceramicist Julie Spako's pottery-making process is equally time intensive. Trained in ceramics and printmaking in college, Julie returned to making pottery later in life once her children grew older. Although she tried wheel throwing, the method didn't resonate with her artistic vision. "I one hundred percent prefer hand building my pieces, because if I have a more loose form, it works better with a complex or refined design," Julie explains. With her high fire porcelain and stoneware ceramics, she juxtaposes her delicate, hand-painted florals and embroidery-inspired designs with simple, hand-built pottery forms. Inspired by the blue-and-white china she grew up with and many childhood hours spent in her grandmother's garden, Julie interprets classic florals through her memories of the past.

Like Kent and his woodcuts, every step of Julie's process is done by hand, the traditional way: rolling out clay into slabs, shaping forms, casting the clay stoneware in porcelain slip, drawing, painting, glazing, firing. It is heavy, messy, satisfying work. Modern technology's only significant role comes at the end with Julie's three home kilns, powered by electricity for greater safety, sustainability and efficiency. "I work with a gallery owner who says you can just tell how much time and energy I put into every single piece," she says. "With handmade pottery, you think about the maker. You think about how much work went into it. It connects with you more than something that was just made in a factory."

Perhaps connection is the greatest motivator of all. Thanks to digital technology, our global community has never been more linked to each other or more accessible—and yet there is still a shared cultural hunger for a connection to something more real, more lasting. Each of these artists and makers who have chosen to work the traditional way has found value in grounding themselves in a tangible, hands-on process. Anchored in ancient methods, their work connects them to the past, the richness of the present moment and the future. ⓤ