THE PRINTING ROOM

*Printing is to manuscripts
what the theatre is to women :
it highlights both beauty and flaws [...].*

Honoré de Balzac, *Lost Illusions*.

This room is a reconstruction of a print workshop similar to those which Balzac would have frequented. As a writer, a novelist is clearly closely linked to the printing world, but at the very beginning of his career, Balzac also tried his hand at the printing profession.

Balzac the printer

In 1826, a year after the creation of his own publishing house, Balzac went into partnership with a master printer[1], André Barbier, buying a print shop at 17 Rue des Marais-Saint-Germain[2], Paris, and obtained his *brevet d'imprimeur* (printing qualification)[3] thanks to Madame de Berny, his first love. But like David Séchard in *Lost Illusions*, the novelist made a terrible manager, with a tendency to confuse his own personal spending with that of the company. The print shop went bankrupt in 1828, and Balzac's debt rose to 60,000 francs[4].

H. Balzac's print shop

In two years, two hundred and twenty-five leaflets, booklets and literary works were printed by *Imprimerie H. Balzac,* which employed thirty-six workers and, as of 1826, made use of Stanhope presses[5]. To imagine the working atmosphere, we can read the description of David Séchard's workshop in *Lost Illusions,* translated by Ellen Marriage, which was probably inspired by Balzac's own experience :

The gaping newcomer always failed to note the perils of the passage through the shop ; and while staring at the sheets of paper strung in groves across the ceiling, ran against the rows of cases, or knocked his hat against the tie-bars that secured the presses in position. Or the customer's eyes would follow the agile movements of a compositor, picking out type from the hundred and fifty-two compartments of his case, reading his copy, verifying the words in the composing-stick, and leading the lines, till a ream of damp paper weighted with heavy slabs, and set down in the middle of the gangway, tripped up the bemused spectator, or he caught his hip against the angle of a bench, to the huge delight of boys, "monkeys" [6], and "bears" [7].

Balzac, a bad manager?

Regarding the idea that Balzac was a terrible manager, some details should be kept in mind. When entering the world of publishing, Balzac did not know that he was making a mistake. This was a world that was dramatically changing. The publisher Werdet thus explains that it was difficult for a printer to maintain himself due to significant credit and reading rooms which reduced the sales of books to individuals and upheld the book pricing system.

1. Master printer : head of the workshop.
2. Now Rue Visconti in Paris.
3. Administrative document created under Napoleon I (1810) to order to exercise more control over book-related professions. Two letters of recommendation from Madame de Berny's husband were needed for the writer to obtain his qualification on 1st June 1826.
4. Including more than 50,000 francs owed to his family (the equivalent of over 200,000 euros today).
5. Stanhope Press : named after its inventor, Lord Stanhope (1810), who designed a hand press made entirely of metal. Other differences compared to the old wooden presses were the levers and the cast marble.
6. Monkey : worker specialising in composition of texts using movable type (also called: typographer, compositor).
7. Bear : worker who handled the press (also called : pressman).

Printing in the 19th century

Thanks to the spread of primary education and increased literacy in the 19th century, reading rooms were increasingly used by more people. This widening of the book market was accompanied by changes in production methods. Print characters and presses, previously wooden, were increasingly made of lead and cast iron. Procedures became mechanised and steam presses appreared shortly after, with the era of chain form paper. Lastly, illustration developed with the emergence of new techniques such as lithography[8], wood engraving[9] and then photography. Despite this progress, by the mid-19th century it was still only possible to print a few dozen pages per hour, and several months were needed to print a book.

Lost Illusions: Balzac, painter of modern realities

The first forty pages of *Lost Illusions* were drafted at Saché between June and November 1836. The novel tells the life story of David Séchard, a printer in the 1820s. He has just taken on the family print shop in Angoulême when large-scale capitalism enters the scene and threatens to engulf the small craftsman :

> At the time when this story opens, the Stanhope press[5] and the ink-distributing roller were not as yet in general use in small provincial printing establishments. Even at Angouleme, so closely connected through its paper-mills with the art of typography in Paris, the only machinery in use was the primitive wooden invention to which the language owes a figure of speech —"the press groans" was no mere rhetorical expression in those days. Leather ink-balls were still used in old-fashioned printing houses ; the pressman dabbed the ink by hand on the characters, and the movable table on which the form of type was placed in readiness for the sheet of paper, being made of marble, literally deserved its name of "impression-stone". Modern machinery has swept all this old-world mechanism into oblivion; the wooden press which, with all its imperfections, turned out such beautiful work for the Elzevirs, Plantin, Aldus, and Didot is so completely forgotten, that something must be said as to the obsolete gear on which Jerome–Nicolas Sechard set an almost superstitious affection, for it plays a part in this chronicle of great small things. (Translated by Ellen Marriage)
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8. Lithography (from the Greek *lithos*, stone, and *graphein*, to write) : invented by Aloys Senefelder in 1796 in Germany, this printing technique enabled the reproduction of multiple copies of lines either in ink or soft lead pencil on limestone. Enabling greater freedom of execution than previous printing methods, lithography was very much appreciated and used by artists during the first half of the 19th century.

9. Wood engraving : engraving process that appeared at the end of the 18th century, whereby the engraving template is composed of small cubes of wood sawn from the tree in a transversal direction and glued together, conferring significant hardiness and thus enabling more delicate engraving.
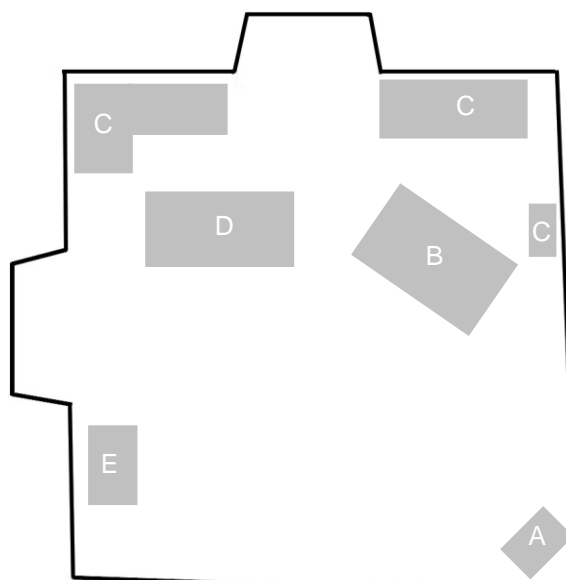
A. *Binding press*
Wood and cast iron, early C20th.
BZ 1999.1.88

B. *Printing press*
Cast iron, c.1840
BZ 2001.11.1

C. *Benches, racks and printing blocks*
Wood with lead print, first half of C20th.
BZ 1999.1.90-92

D. *Lithographic press, called a "horned beast"*
Wood and metal, early C20th.
BZ 1999.1.87

E. *Paper guillotine*
made by E. Lecoq
Bronze, c.1860
BZ 2001.10.1