

Lessons to Learn? Past Design Experiences and Contemporary Design Practices

Proceedings of the ICDHS 12th International Conference
on Design History and Design Studies

Edited by: Fedja Vukić, Iva Kostešić
Zagreb 2020

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The Coexistence of Preservation and Modernisation Design Strategies for the Textiles Heritage of Phlow Karen in the Rachaburi Province (Thailand)

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Karen textiles, cultural identity, strategic design intervention

This study investigates the factors behind the changes of Phlow Karen textiles and attempts to find ways to revitalise this declining craft. Research findings show that modern education, consumerism and material and weaving technology are the factors behind these changes. The locals' attempts to conserve and modernise it coexist with different supporting conditions. The authors propose a model to push Phlow Karen textiles forward in 2 strategic directions: towards preservation and diffusion purposes. One is to position it in a higher level of pride and creative inspiration, another is to make it affordable, practical and accessible. Nonetheless, the Phlow Karen's ethnic identity is the supreme element to be retained in all strategies. A series of new designs are created as the investigative tools and platform for the artisans and community members to cast their critical reflection upon. They can then shape the future of their own crafts traditions through this process.

Introduction

In Thailand, there are several ethnic groups that have migrated from various origins, near and far since prehistoric times with Karen being the biggest hill tribal ethnic minority. Rachburi, the province next to Thailand's western borderline became home for 2 major Karen clans starting in 1581 after they began to flee from Myanmar: (a) Pga K'nyau (b) Phlow. This research focuses on the traditional garment of Phlow Karen in the Rachburi Province, which features artistic and cultural uniqueness and is in jeopardy of extinction. Nowadays, there are approximately fewer than 100 active weavers, on average between 50 and 60 years old, who practise weaving as a part-time task. The popularity of Phlow costumes among younger generations is decreasing due to the bombardment of cheap factory-made clothes. Weaving skills are not fully transferred as few people are interested in learning them.

Apparently, the commercialisation of crafts by modernising traditional characteristics to please market tastes is widely adopted on different levels: from domestic commerce to international exports. However, this direction cannot guarantee success for every crafts community, not to mention sustainability. On the other hand, there are a few artisans who keep producing work in traditional ways that could

be placed in the market segments of conservative and collectible masterpieces. Their works are glorified as national treasures that should be preserved and protected from any changes. This approach is rather outside-in and top-down. This research, therefore, attempts to find out whether there are other models to sustain crafts from inside-out and bottom-up approaches by taking artisanal textiles practice and the cultural context of Phlow Karen textiles communities as a case to study.

Study Approach

In the current era, the definitions of ethnic minority have moved from the fixed term. The studies on this subject tend to investigate issues such as trans-border mobility, transnationalism and multi-identity, rather than trying to discover only handed-down heritages (Leepreecha, 2014). Further, studies on ethnic cultural heritage at arts and design academies always focus on arts and crafts wisdom in terms of aesthetic and design elements, crafting techniques and visual identity. The study goal is often geared towards preservation, which positions crafts as heritage. However, a deep understanding of social relationships, social networking and power structures within crafts communities, among different ethnic groups in the same areas and across geographical boundaries, can enhance strategic design towards a more well-rounded and sustainable development programme (Kanchanapan, 2016).

Therefore, in order to comprehend such a complex situation, design thinking, with its shifting design task from creating the objects to the process, systems and future, is adopted as a principle and a process in this study. Design thinking is assumed to help people speculate their own future as stated by Kevin Grove, 'Design orients thought and action not towards questions of how something came to be, but rather what something might become, crafting a new future from within, rather than outside, the present' (Grove, 2019). The empathise stage of design thinking that gives importance to understanding people and their context is designed based on the cultural circuit framework that examines five key processes in a development cycle of cultural artefacts including production, consumption, regulation, representation, and identity (Gay, 1997).

From the approach and conceptual framework mentioned above, the researchers consolidate the explorative issues into three essential questions focusing on 'the changes' that have occurred in the Phlow Karen textiles weaving community:

1. How have the Phlow Karen's textiles been changed, in terms of meaning, making process and consumption, over the last 50 years?

Research Methodology

2. What are the factors behind those changes?
3. How should the Phlow Karen's textiles exist, and what will support their continuing existence?

For the whole study, two loops of iteration adapted from the design thinking process, which consist of the 5 following stages (Stanford, 2005) are planned with a qualitative research approach: **(1) Empathise:** participatory observation, in-depth interviews with 12 Phlow Karen weavers are conducted **(2) Define:** typological analysis and analytic induction are used to analyse the information gained from the empathy stage **(3) Ideate (4) Prototype** and **(5) Test:** these three stages are seamlessly combined. The researchers have materialised the research findings into a reflective short documentary and a series of new textiles design. As Grove (2018) discusses, design thinking refers to hypothetically placing a problem or a prototype solution in different situations to explore what new perspectives, ideas and possibilities are generated, the purpose of these stages is to prompt the weaving community to rethink how they would like to see their crafts practice continue.

Background

OCCASIONS TO WEAR AND SOME BELIEFS BEHIND THE MAKING OF THE DRESS

Growing up wearing white tunics with little red stripes until they reached puberty age, Phlow Karen girls had to undertake the ritual in which traditional Phlow dress played a crucial part. Those girls were dressed up in the traditional garment worn by either their mothers or grandmothers 3 nights before their first menstruation. It was believed to be an inauguration ritual for the Phlow girls' coming-of-age life event. Recalling the crafting process of these dresses as seen in Figure 1, some weavers remember their grandmothers helping each other thread the

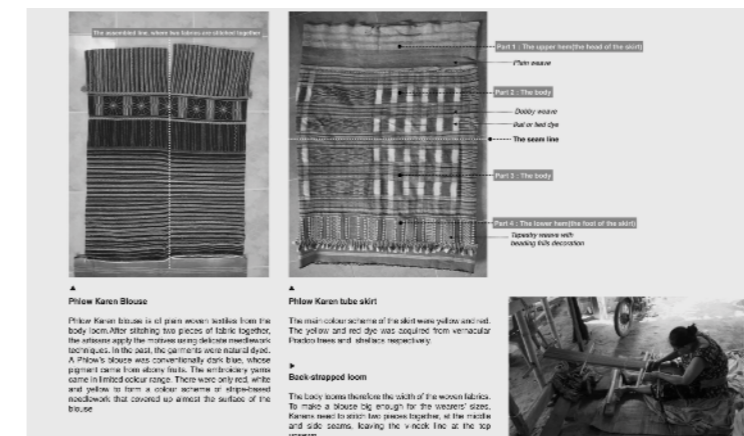


Figure 1. Anatomy of Phlow Karen dress.

warps as it was believed that if any bad news erupted during the warp threading, that would signify a bad omen and the threading process would need to be restarted. That was the reason why two weavers were needed: to ensure that the task would be done fast enough. Weaving is therefore considered a collective activity in the sense that it should not take too much time and impede on other social activities that villagers should also participate in.

SOCIO-POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Karen tribes have migrated back and forth between Thailand and Myanmar due to political turmoil. Some Karen remained and settled down in Thailand along the border where they occupied small plots of land and grew their own crops. In 1974, the Thai government granted concessions to the private sector to open several mines in the Suanpueng District, Rachaburi. Karen were then offered a new job opportunity as low-paid miners between 1974 and 1985. In 1995, the minority camp of Karen was beaten, and more Karen fled to Thailand. Later during the Cold War period, the Thai government pushed minority groups, including Karen, back to their homelands as they were suspected to be communists who undermined national security. By all those circumstances, the status of Karen in Thailand is considered suspicious and they become submissive to Thai domination and authority.

TENSION BETWEEN BEING KAREN AND BEING THAI

Today, the Karen who have settled in Rachburi still keep a connection with their Myanmar families and friends across the border. This connection plays a key role in sustaining Karen culture around Suanpueng. However, quite a number of migrated Karens still live illegally due to the lack of identity proof required by the Thai authorities. Since Thai schooling records are a requirement to receive Thai citizenship nowadays, Karen families always send their children to Thai schools. As a consequence, some aspects of Karen culture are gradually disappearing and are being somehow replaced by Thai culture. One of the informants mentions that 'Young people are shy to speak Karen or even wear Karen dresses. They want to sound and look Thai'. From their perspective, being blended as Thai is less suspicious and humiliating. Nowadays, many youngsters consider themselves Thai with a Karen ethnic background. They speak Karen at home and Thai in public and enjoy Thai festive ceremonies as much as the Karen new-year ritual. Young Karen always represent themselves with two identities: both Thai and Karen.

Changes and the Factors Behind Them

From the cultural narrative that accompanies Phlow Karen's clothmaking are hints of traditional wisdom such as respect for nature, ritual and community collectivism that were once strongly embedded in the Phlow Karen textiles. The following section describes the changes that Phlow Karen textiles have encountered and the factors behind them.

THE CHANGE OF WORKING CONTEXT WHERE SELF-SUFFICIENCY WAS REPLACED BY CONSUMERISM

In the past, Phlow women would prepare traditional dresses for their daughters or nieces since they were little girls. They wove those clothes after their daily farming chores. The weaving time synchronised well with their routines and seasonal schedules. Nowadays, the Phlow families own less land than before. Suanpueng is considered quite a fertile land for farming and a scenic area for local tourism. Investors, both locals and from afar, have convinced the Karen to sell their land and then become the labourers employed on their own land which is often turned into massive farms for vegetables and sugar cane. The capability to financially self-support is therefore ceased and replaced by dependency on low wages. Most of their time is dedicated to earning money to spend on daily supplies, including dresses. Industrially made ready-to-wear cloth is obviously cheaper than weaving their own cloth, which requires additional time that is no longer available.

However, the persistence in tradition is very strong. Many Phlow women always show a strong will to acquire traditional clothes for themselves and family members to wear on important occasions such as new year and the wedding ceremony regardless of its relatively high price (approximately 460 us dollars for a set). The textile artisans who still regularly weave the fabrics have shifted from making traditional clothes for themselves to making them to sell.

HOMESCHOOLING WAS CONVERTED TO FORMAL EDUCATION

When the concept of formal education was introduced through government-supported schools, and having official schooling records became crucial proof to acquire Thai citizenship, the learning space of Phlow children was gradually shifted from home and community to schools. At school, Karen culture could be introduced through a variety of classes: language, music and dance. For weaving, some schools, as well as a few local cultural centres, provide it as an extra-curricular and vocational-based activity. With a human resource shortage, it can be arranged only for a few students and for a certain period of time.

In spite of having those programmes, formal education is seemingly the key factor influencing the disruption of cultural transfer. 'There used to be quite a number of girls and boys who came to learn weaving at the centre, and they did it well. But soon after they went to continue their college studies in town, they stopped weaving. Perhaps they need more time to focus on their harder studies' said Mrs Thongrai, the weaver. Young Karen seem to set the same goal in seeking their opportunity to uplift their social status through education.

Rachburi has recently been promoted as a tourism destination for its scenic locations and multicultural heritages. Cultural artefacts which were once made for one's own purposes have now become souvenirs for sale. The colourful Karen bags and simplified Karen blouses are among tourists' favourite items. However, the traditional Phlow dress is not considered a sellable product as it is rather expensive.

The municipality has promoted new cultural spaces for locals to express their cultural roots too. Instead of completely suppressing the minority groups, the local agency has tried to assimilate them with compromising manners. For attending authoritative local events, Phlow Karen would wear their traditional outfits. Local Thai schools also spare one day in a week for their students and teachers to wear ethnic costumes. During the major Karen cultural events such as New Year week, Thai authoritative officers also wear Karen outfits to join the celebration with their fellow Karens. These practices raise local demand for Karen traditional outfits. The makers therefore adjust their choice of materials and time-consuming process to serve these needs.

Introduction of New Technology and Materials. Since the 1980s, shuttle looms, industrially-made yarns and synthetic dyes have gradually pervaded the craft-cottage industry around Thailand. Phlow body-loom weavers have adopted these new materials and equipment. The semi-automatic tool enhances weaving speed and allows weavers to weave wider fabrics, so they do not have to assemble fabric pieces to form a blouse or a skirt. For industrially-made yarns, they did not only come in variety of colour palettes, but they also guaranteed a smoother weaving process with their unbreakable properties. Synthetic dyes were easily accepted among the dyers because the colours are vivid and the fastness was at high level. From field research, the weavers mentioned another new popular material, which is acrylic knitting yarn. These yarns provide endless colour options with fluffiness. They make the woven patterns look graphically bold and the bigger yarn volume makes the weavers complete their fabric faster. With this new material, Mrs Thongrai, the weaver, invents her own weaves, using tapestry techniques with the shuttle loom to create a more fanciful striped texture than those found in the original pattern. From afar, as seen in *Figure 2*, her blouse still seems in line with traditional ones, but with slightly unusual details and a colourful gleam. She mentioned that 'For Karens, it is important to blend in with the group. No one wants to be a black sheep of the flock. As long as we look in line with the others, it is ok'. It is the cooperative pro-



Figure 2. Changes of materials and weaving tools.

duction among weavers that helps speed up the making process. One skilful weaver, Aunt Klueng of Tahka, weaves not only the plain dark blue fabric as usual, but she simultaneously inserts a series of linear stitches, using a crochet needle, across the fabric width. The result is a piece of cloth with the guideline for another artisan to fill the needleworks into the blouse. The same concept of distributed workforce based on individual skills is also applied to the making of a tube skirt. The Ikat tied-dyed part is a good example showing that only skilful dyers will produce it for others who lack tie-dyeing know-how.

New Design to Cater to the Users' Needs. The original Phlow dress was rather thick and oversized. After a long period of migration from the northern to the southern hemisphere, the dress no longer suits the hot and humid Rachburi climate anymore. The very first adjustment to fit the wearers' need is that the cloth is woven thinner. When compared with an almost-100-year-old Phlow blouse made from hand-spun cotton, the new blouse is obviously finer and thinner with industrially-made yarns.

One traditional Phlow outfit normally takes a weaver several months to finish. As it is completely handmade with intricate embroidery details covering up both the front and the back, the price is set rather high, especially for the locals. One weaver received a request once from a schoolteacher who needed to wear the ethnic uniform regularly once a week to make a one-sided embroidered blouse. That would make the dress more affordable for her.

Another case was a request from a school headmaster, asking the weaver of Baan Yangnamkladnuer to produce hundreds of students'

ethnic uniforms with school identity colours. Pink and purple are then embedded as stripes or hems on the white tunics. The traditional white tunic with only a red accent is altered to represent the new hybrid identity. Last but not least, Mrs Jeane, a weaver from Baan Hinsee, has mentioned about her tube skirt selling point that, along the lower hem, there is an embellishment of shiny vivid beads where she assigns specific colour schemes to attract different types of wearers: pastel beads for young women and a bluish scheme for mature single ladies. She also welcomes all kinds of customer preferences as long as they are still in line with traditional visual characteristics.

New Meanings. There are not only traditional rituals and ceremonies, but also popular local festivals such as fruit fairs that welcome Phlow costumes to the stage. The Karen Cultural Centre of Baan Hinsee once sent their representative to a beauty pageant held during the Mango Fair. Mr. Jeane recalled the costume that the Hinsee young lady wore as ‘glowing and glittering’. They wove her blouse and skirt using brighter yarns, so that when the stage lighting struck them, they would shine and illuminate her face to stand out from her beauty rivals. The Phlow traditional dress can be seen as fancy costumes similarly found in other beauty competitions. It is also found that those contemporary cultural events always encourage the weavers to try new designs. On one fashion runway, Baan Tahka presented their re-created Phlow costumes as sleeveless fanciful gowns that borrow complicated patterns from modern dresses. Ms Aree accepted that ‘It worked only on the runway, as in daily life, we have no places and occasions to wear such dresses’. According to tradition, this oversized garment functions to conceal the feminine body. Once when one of the weavers transformed her own traditional blouse and skirt into

a modern patterned top and a short skirt, she was blamed by the seniors for shamelessly displaying her body in the outfit. For her, this garment makes her more blended with other Thais and fits into her current lifestyle, where her routines are expanded from home and the farmland to other territory such as markets and meeting halls. As seen in *Figure 3*, while the weavers with creative minds struggle to get their modernised outfits accepted, the conservative weavers make traditional Phlow dresses even more elaborate than in the past. The dresses become a point of status identification, as well as a symbol of pride, for the people who can afford them.

Analysis and Conclusion

COEXISTENCE BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNISATION IN THE CULTURAL ECOSYSTEM

From the phenomenon observed in this study, there is a coexistence between attempts to preserve and to modernise this wearable heritage. There is also tension between maintaining the original aesthetics and allowing functionality to become a part of Phlow textiles. This finding can be summarised in a diagram shown in *Figure 4*. Phlow traditional dresses mostly fill up the quadrant of Aesthetic/Conservative, and secondarily the quadrant of Functional/Conservative. There is scarce evidence showing that Phlow textiles tradition inspires the creative options focusing either on Aesthetics or on new functions in the lower part of the matrix.

Based on these findings, design intervention can play a complementary role for the weavers' community to bring equilibrium to their producing/consuming ecosystem. **On a strategic level**, the experiential occasions, events or campaigns can be designed to anchor the Phlow costume not only as culturally and historically communicative wares, but also as inspiring resources. The new cultural spaces with recollection and communication of rich cultural narratives would assure the appreciation and the transfer of crafts wisdom among the producers and consumers. The celebration of high craftsmanship with new imagination to reinterpret the beauty of Phlow cultural ideology in the form of wearable art pieces would connect the past to endless possibilities and eventually make this craft able to gracefully sustain itself. Design intervention relating to these quadrants responds to the interrelated **preserving and innovating purposes**.

On a pragmatic level, new production technologies that can lower the cost, but still maintain cooperation among the community crafts suppliers, should be brought into the ecosystem. The lower cost will make the new Phlow-inspired costumes reach a wider group of consumers. Design intervention relating to these quadrants: Conservative/Functional and Contemporary/Functional, responds to **diffusing the cultural artefacts to people**. To help them more easily connect to their own route will

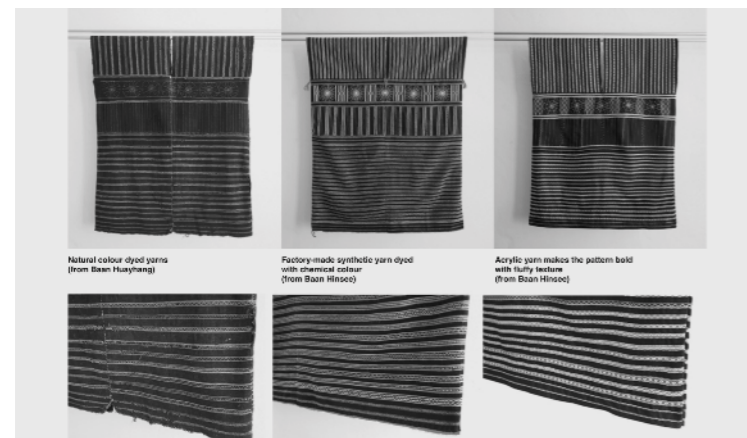


Figure 3. Wearing purposes and occasions.

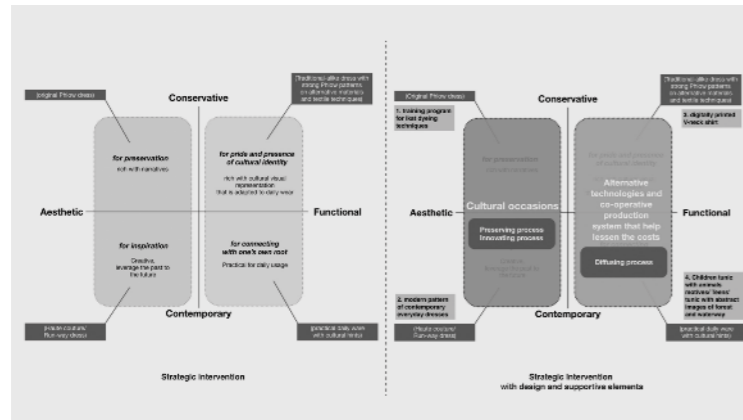


Figure 4. Strategic Intervention Model.

worldview is proposed. The first tunic dress expresses the Karen's respect for Mother Nature through abstract images of waterfalls and jungle scenes. The second dress is designed especially for kids with clear and direct representations of abstract textiles motifs, such as tigers and wild plants. They aim to communicate with children about the origin of the motifs and their related stories.

As shown, the new designs bring along not only the opportunity to reimagine the continuation of Phlow textiles heritage in various ways, but it also puts tension between crafts heritage preservation and modernisation into the debate on the different value that technologically supported and handmade production provide. The debatable issues below are planned to be shared with the local artisans to stimulate their critical reflection upon the future challenges:

- (a) Is there a mismatch between laborious hand-made fabric and modern pattern cutting, the regular practice that is always applied when one wants to 'contemporarise' the traditional textiles?
- (b) Should modern patterns cutting be rather paired with fabrics made using modern technology?
- (c) Would it be relevant to use new technology like digital printing to replicate long-lost ancient pieces, so the original value of 100% handmade quality will not disappear along the way?

It is in our future plan to use these prototypes to reflect the findings and to stimulate a dialogue among the community weavers about what they desire to create. The ultimate goal of the project is for the Phlow Karen members to identify their direction of design development and generate their own action for their textiles heritage.

POSSIBLE INTERVENTION

make Karen cultural items return to daily lives, rather than being preserved for only a few special occasions.

By understanding the Phlow Karen textiles ecosystem, an intervention can be made in order to help this indigenous craft withstand the coming challenges. Once they are made present, emphasised on their divine glory in the right spaces, affordable and relevant to people's real daily needs, they will continue to last. With these assumptions, the researchers have created a set of prototypes as probing artefacts in Figure 5, corresponding to the attributes in each quadrant.

For preservation: rich with narratives and crafting know-how. The weavers wish to learn the techniques but access to information and their skills are insufficient. Therefore, a training program for Ikat Dyeing techniques which is nowadays unknown to the weavers is proposed.

For inspiration: creative, leveraging the past to the future. A modern pattern from contemporary everyday dresses is proposed. The patterns from Phlow original textiles are simplified and re-imagined with digital printing technology. Fine fabrics are chosen to offer new perspectives on Phlow Karen's motifs.

For Pride and Presence of Cultural Identity: rich with cultural visual representation that is adapted to daily wear. A digitally printed V-neck shirt, entirely resembling original patterns and motifs of the Phlow Karen blouse is proposed.

For Connecting with One's Own Roots: practical for daily use. The new design for printed motifs based on the re-interpretation of the Karen



Figure 5. Probing artefacts.

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Italian Typographic Heritage: A Contribution to Its Recognition and Interpretation as Part of Design Heritage

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Print culture, typography, graphic memory

In the early decades of the twenty-first century, parallel to digital technology developments and growing concern about sustainability, design literature recorded a renewed interest in early typographic practices, such as letterpress printing, handmade paper and binding, and short-run editions. This interest materialised in various ways: the digital revival of historical typefaces; 3d printing of physical type; 'independent' letterpress printers; and archives, collections and museums dedicated to type and typography.

This state of affairs provided new perspectives and concerns for design as a field responsible, among other things, for the conception and production of printed artefacts. It also posed a call for new ways of capturing and describing the multiple aspects of typographic culture and history.

One of the main sites where typography developed historically in Europe, is the city of Venice and the Veneto region, where pioneer letterpress printers and type designers, such as Aldo Manuzio and Francesco Griffo, as well as important binders, paper mills and ink manufacturers have worked since the fifteenth century. This article presents and discusses the results of a research project that examined how design studies and methods can contribute to a better understanding and to the preservation of typographic heritage in Italy.

Introduction

There is a renewed interest today, in Italy and abroad, towards forms of typography and publishing tightly linked to the revival of pre-digital tools and techniques (Bonini Lessing, Bulegato & Farias, 2019). Over the past thirty years, the instantaneous speed of mass production made possible by digital technologies has been accompanied, almost as a natural counterpoint, by the interest of producers, designers and users in rediscovering manual production and the material, aesthetic and sensory qualities of short-run or custom-printed artefacts. This 'rediscovery' was, to a great extent, motivated by an appreciation for craftsmanship, that is, for the skill required to make things by hand, but also for the imprecision inherent in the techniques used. It is also linked to the emergence of more selective and competent consumers, supporters of 'slow' consumption practices, custom-made goods, and of issues such as sustainability, ethics, and respect for tradition. As we will see, this revival was fuelled both by the interest of design historians and theorists in original or long-neglected forms and sources, and by the interest of designers and printers in collecting and reviving typefaces, presses and tools for typesetting by hand, papers and