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A CAXTON  
MISCELLANY:  
THE CAXTON PRESS 1933 – 1958

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13 FEBRUARY – 17 MARCH / A CHRISTCHURCH ART GALLERY OUTER SPACES PROJECT

# A CAXTON MISCELLANY: THE CAXTON PRESS 1933 – 1958

13 February – 17 March / Central Library Peterborough / A Christchurch Art Gallery Outer Spaces Project

## A Caxton Miscellany: The Caxton Press 1933-1958

highlights the first twenty-five years of one of New Zealand's most celebrated printing houses. Established in Christchurch in 1932, The Caxton Press was originally named the Canterbury College Caxton Club and the Caxton Club. The first book to be published, *Oriflamme* (1933), was produced on a small table-top press in a basement at the Canterbury College. Initially, local poet Denis Glover was the driving force behind the press, but he soon recruited John Drew, Dennis Donovan and Leo Bensemann. Arguably one of New Zealand's most dynamic twentieth-century printing houses, The Caxton Press quickly became known for its encouragement of contemporary New Zealand authors and artists. As well as the work of notable writers including James K. Baxter, Ursula Bethell, Charles Brasch, Allen Curnow, A.R.D. Fairburn and Glover himself, it also produced artist's books by Leo Bensemann, Rona Dyer, E. Mervyn Taylor and illustrated titles with works by artists including Rita Angus. This was a generation often described as nationalist and whose work often focused on conveying the New Zealand experience.

The Caxton Press embraced the modern typographical principals espoused by leading twentieth-century typographers like Stanley Morison and Eric Gill. Glover,

Drew, Donovan and Bensemann's aspirations to design and print books of the highest standard to the best of their ability saw the work of historical writers including the Brothers Grimm, Giovanni Boccaccio, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Oscar Wilde being published with a fresh modern look.

The quote below from Morison is one that The Caxton Press took to heart, reprinting it in *A Specimen Book of Printing Types* (1940). In many ways it sums up the approach to typography at the press which is evident in the Caxton Press titles on display in this exhibition:

*Typography may be defined as the craft of rightly disposing printing material in accordance with specific purpose; of so arranging letters, distributing the space and controlling the type as to aid to the maximum the reader's comprehension of the text.*<sup>1</sup>

Peter Vangioni

Curator, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

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<sup>1</sup> Stanley Morison in *A Specimen Book of Printing Types*, Christchurch, 1940. (unpaginated)





**A**MONG THE NOBLEMEN AND GENTLEMEN OF ANCIENT RAVENNA THERE ONCE LIV'D a young man, *Nastagio degli Onesti*, who inherited from his father and one of his uncles a very great fortune. This *Nastagio*, after the manner of young men, succumb'd to the charms of a daughter of Messer Paolo Traversaro. The damsel's love he had hopes of winning with gifts and the usual methods of courting, but these, though all very well in their way, afforded him no help,

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**NASTAGIO AND THE OBDURATE LADY**

and indeed had a contrary effect, such unrelenting indifference and even harshness did the lady show towards him, and so disdainful did she prove of anything that gave him pleasure. All this *Nastagio* found so hard to bear that it was difficult to dissuade himself, being more than once of that mind, from ending his life. In vain did he essay every device to drive her from his thoughts, or at least return her scorn. As his hopes became the less, the greater his love.

This doleful state led to an extravagance not only of the feelings; and certain of his family and friends, alarmed at the wasting away both of the young man and his fortune, counselled him often to quit Ravenna for a climate that would abate his ardour and restore him to health. After a while *Nastagio* grew weary of refusal, and heard them out, with the result that he equipped himself as for a distant journey and rode forth from Ravenna on his way. But at Chiassi he halted, being at three miles from the city, and sending for tents and pavilions told his companions they might make their way back, for that there he meant to stay. And pitching his tents in that place he resumed the lordly way of life to which he was used, with entertainment to which he would often invite his friends.

It was about the beginning of May, fine weather, and thoughts of the lady's cruelty began to crowd upon his mind. Bidding his servants leave him, the better to be undisturbed, he strolled off one day in the direction of the pine-wood. He had walked a good half-mile through the wood, heedless of time or place, when there broke in upon his thoughts a sound as of a woman wailing and uttering the most piercing shrieks; at which he raised his head. He wondered to find himself in the wood, but even more to see running towards him through a copse set thick with undergrowth and brambles, a lovely woman, naked, all torn by brambles, who wept, and cried mercy. Hard upon her track, and harrying her, ran two fierce mastiffs that

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## CASE 1

1.

E. Mervyn Taylor

*A Book of Wood-Engravings* 1946

Robert and Barbara Stewart Library  
and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery  
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

2.

Rona Dyer

*Engravings on Wood* 1948

3.

Leo Bensemann

*A Second Book of Leo Bensemann's  
Work Exemplified in Twenty  
Drawings, in Pen & Pencil, Together  
with Six Engravings on Wood and  
Specimens of Calligraphy and  
Typography, with A Grand Piece  
of German Text, and Other Select  
Pieces Never before Engraved* 1952

4.

Leo Bensemann

*Fantastica: Thirteen Drawings* 1937

5.

The Brothers Grimm

*Adventures of Chanticleer  
and Partlet* 1941

Robert and Barbara Stewart Library  
and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery  
Te Puna o Waiwhetu

6.

Giovanni Boccaccio

*Nastagio and the Obdurate Lady:  
A Tale from the Decameron* 1940

7.

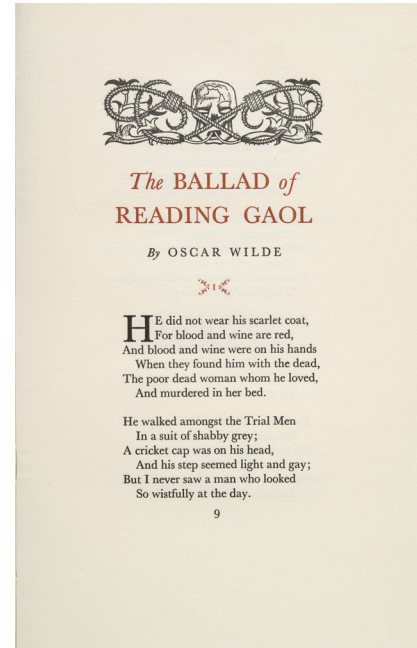
Samuel Taylor Coleridge

*The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*  
1952

8.

Oscar Wilde

*The Ballad of Reading Gaol* 1958



8. Oscar Wilde *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* 1958





PART FOUR

*The Wedding-Guest  
feareth that a Spirit is  
talking to him;*

'I fear thee, ancient Mariner!  
I fear thy skinny hand!  
And thou art long, and lank, and brown,  
As is the ribbed sea-sand.

*but the ancient Mariner  
assureth him of his  
bodily life, and pro-  
ceedeth to relate his  
horrible penance.*

I fear thee and thy glittering eye,  
And thy skinny hand, so brown.'—  
'Fear not, fear not, thou Wedding-Guest!  
This body dropt not down.

Alone, alone, all, all alone,  
Alone on a wide wide sea!  
And never a saint took pity on  
My soul in agony.

*He despiseth the  
creatures of the calm,*

The many men, so beautiful!  
And they all dead did lie:  
And a thousand thousand slimy things  
Lived on; and so did I.

*and envieth that they  
should live, and so  
many lie dead.*

I looked upon the rotting sea,  
And drew my eyes away;  
I looked upon the rotting deck,  
And there the dead men lay.

THE RIME OF THE ANCIENT MARINER

I looked to heaven, and tried to pray;  
But or ever a prayer had gusht,  
A wicked whisper came, and made  
My heart as dry as dust.

I closed my lids, and kept them close,  
And the balls like pulses beat;  
For the sky and the sea, and the sea and the sky,  
Lay like a load on my weary eye,  
And the dead were at my feet.

*But the curse liveth for  
him in the eye of the  
dead men.*

The cold sweat melted from their limbs,  
Nor rot nor reek did they:  
The look with which they looked on me  
Had never passed away.

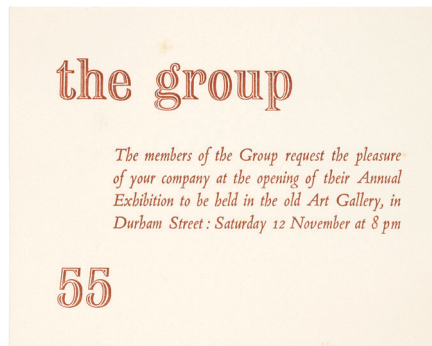
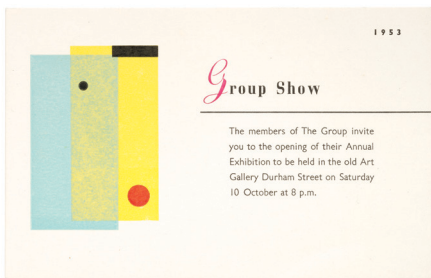
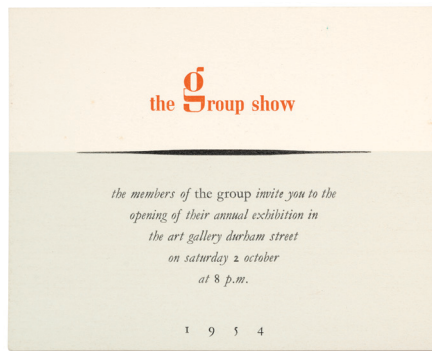
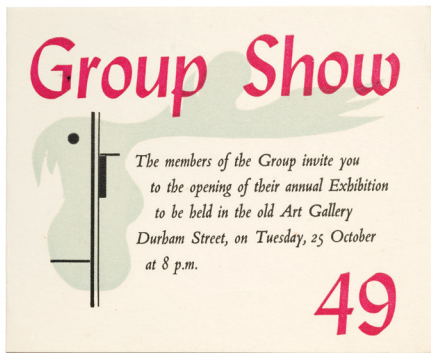
An orphan's curse would drag to hell  
A spirit from on high;  
But oh! more horrible than that  
Is the curse in a dead man's eye!  
Seven days, seven nights, I saw that curse,  
And yet I could not die.

*In his loneliness and  
fixedness he yearneth  
towards the journeying  
Moon, and the stars  
that still sojourn, yet*

The moving Moon went up the sky,  
And nowhere did abide:  
Softly she was going up,  
And a star or two beside—

## CASE 2

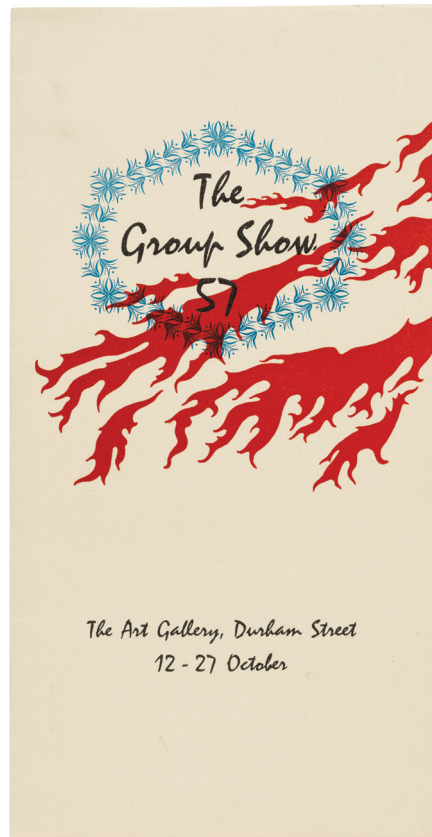
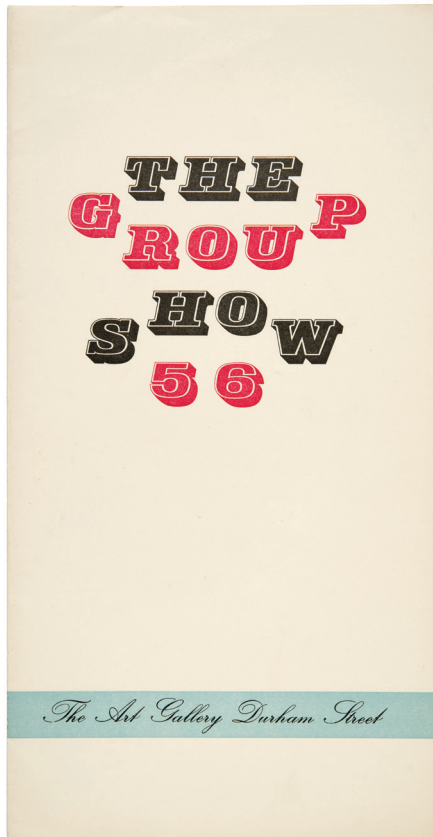
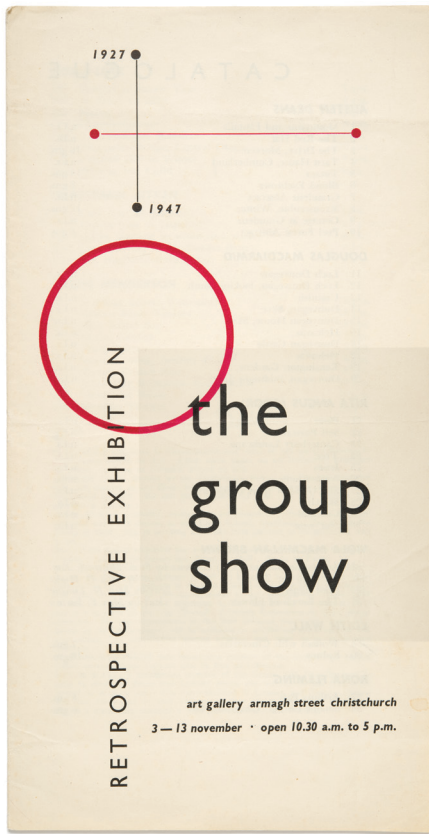
- 9.**  
*A Catalogue of Publications from the Caxton Press, Christchurch* 1941
- 10.**  
*The Caxton Press: Book List 1952*
- 11.**  
Group Show Catalogues 1947–58  
Group Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 12.**  
Group Show Catalogue 1945  
Olivia Spencer Bower Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 13.**  
Group Show Invites 1949, 1953–6  
Group Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 14.**  
Group Show Invite 1957  
Olivia Spencer Bower Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 15.**  
Group Show Poster 1952  
Group Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 16.**  
Printing Types Prospectus 1948
- 17.**  
*Exhibition of Landscapes in Oils and Watercolours by William A. Sutton, Pioneers' Hall, Dunedin* 1947  
W.A. Sutton Archive, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 18.**  
A Concert of Works by Douglas Lilburn, Canterbury College Hall 1943  
Gift of the Bensemman Family, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 19.**  
Programme for *Othello, the Moor of Venice* by William Shakespeare performed by the Canterbury University College Drama Society 1944
- 20.**  
Programme for *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare performed by the Canterbury University College Drama Society 1947  
Olivia Spencer Bower Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 21.**  
Programme for *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* by William Shakespeare performed by the University of Canterbury Drama Society 1958  
Olivia Spencer Bower Archives, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu



13. Group Show Invites 1949, 1953–6

14. Group Show Invite 1957





Group Show Catalogues

## CASE 3

22.

*Book: A Miscellany nos.1–9 1941–7*

23.

*Printing Types: A Second Specimen Book of Faces Commonly in Use at the Caxton Press, Christchurch, New Zealand 1956, second edition*

Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch  
Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

24.

*A Specimen Book of Printing Types 1940*

25.

*Printing Types: A Second Specimen Book of Faces Commonly in Use at the Caxton Press, Christchurch, New Zealand 1948*

26.

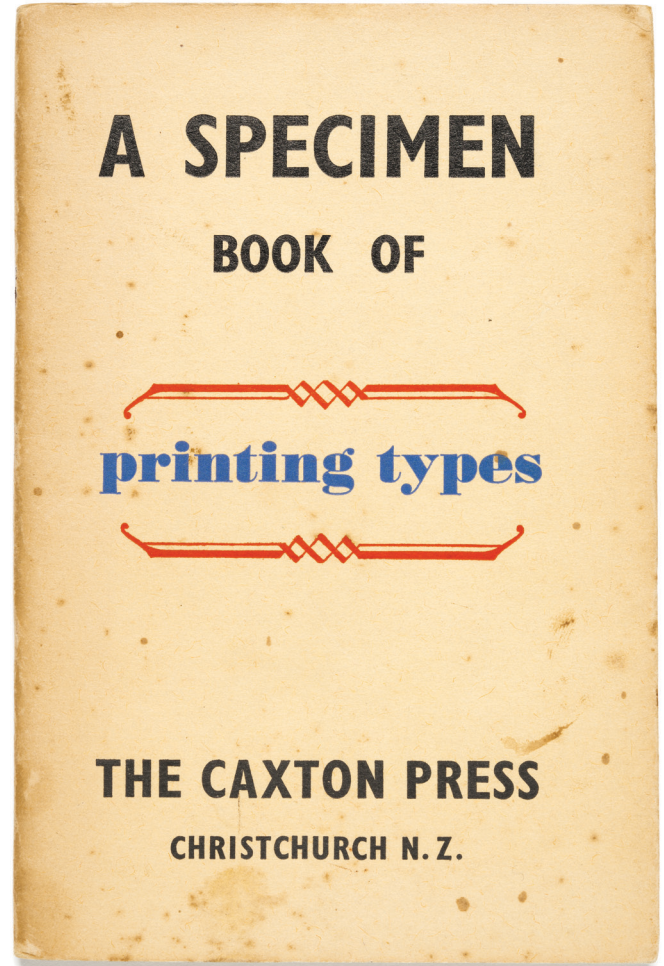
*Printing Types: A Second Specimen Book of Faces Commonly in Use at the Caxton Press, Christchurch, New Zealand 1948*

Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch  
Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu

27.

*Occasional Pieces 1945*

Gift of the Bensemann Family, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu



24. A Specimen Book of Printing Types 1940

## CASE 4

- 28.**  
*Oriflamme* no.1 1933  
Collection of Christchurch City Libraries  
Ngā Kete Wānanga-o-Ōtautahi
- 29.**  
*Sirocco* 1933
- 30.**  
*Another Argo: three poems* 1935  
Collection of Christchurch City Libraries  
Ngā Kete Wānanga-o-Ōtautahi
- 31.**  
Anton Vogt  
*Love Poems* 1952
- 32.**  
Denis Glover  
*D Day* 1944
- 33.**  
*Whim Wham: Verses 1941–2* 1942
- 34.**  
*Recent Poems: Curnow, Allen;  
Fairburn, A.R.D.; Mason, R.A.K.;*  
*Glover, Denis* 1941
- 35.**  
Frank Sargeson  
*When the Wind Blows* 1945
- 36.**  
James K. Baxter  
*The Fallen House* 1953
- 37.**  
W.H. Oliver  
*Fire Without Phoenix* 1957  
Robert and Barbara Stewart Library  
and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery  
Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 38.**  
Charles Brasch  
*Disputed Ground: Poems 1939–45*  
1948
- 39.**  
Allen Curnow  
*Poetry and Language* 1935
- 40.**  
J. T. Allen  
*Face Values* 1936
- 41.**  
Denis Glover  
*The Wind and the Sand:  
Poems 1934–1944* 1945
- 42.**  
Ursula Bethell  
*Collected Poems* 1950
- 43.**  
*Landfall* vol.1, no.1 March 1947  
Robert and Barbara Stewart Library  
and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery  
Te Puna o Waiwhetu
- 
- Further reading:**  
Pat Lawlor, *The Caxton Press:  
Some Impressions and A Bibliography*,  
Wellington, 1951  
Gordon Ogilvie, *Denis Glover: His Life*,  
Auckland, 1999  
Peter Simpson, *Fantastica: The World  
of Leo Bensemann*, Auckland, 2011  
Noel Waite, *Adventure and Art:  
The Caxton Press*, Wellington, 1998





Lino-cut  
by F. Akins

SIROCCO

JULY 1933

THE  
CAXTON CLUB

AT THEIR  
OWN PRESS



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Unless otherwise stated, all books are from the Peter Dunbar collection, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu, purchased with assistance from the Dunbar Family and the J.L. Hay Charitable Trust.

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Cover: Leo Bensemann, illustration for Oscar Wilde *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, Caxton Press (1958). Peter Dunbar Collection, Robert and Barbara Stewart Library and Archives, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetu. Reproduced courtesy of the Bensemann Family

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