

The History of Chapbooks

By: Kate Thomas

For many people that do not know, a chapbook is a pocket-sized booklet dating back to the 17th century. The term is derived from *chapmen*, (chap coming from the Old English *céap* meaning "deal, barter, business") a type of peddler, who sold such booklets for the equivalent of about twenty-five cents today. Chapbooks encompassed a variety of printed material such as pamphlets, political or religious tracts, nursery rhymes, poetry, folk tales, children's literature and almanacs. The small paper-covered booklets were often illustrated with crude woodcuts, which later resurfaced in numerous books unrelated to their original context. Chapbooks were an important medium for the dissemination of popular culture to the common people. They were most people's only source for information and offer a record of popular culture and generally unreliable history. They gradually disappeared during the mid-19th century in the face of competition from cheap newspapers. Unfortunately, due to the poor paper quality and disposable content (think today's version of a tabloid), preserved examples of original chapbooks are rare.

During the Industrial Revolution a more sophisticated public became disenchanted by the chapbook's old-fashioned style, and publishers realizing the increasing demand for children's literature, began to adapt chapbooks for the juvenile market. From 1780 on many booksellers advertised children's chapbooks. Smaller in scale, they contained *ABCs*, catechisms, riddles and jokes, stories and rhymes. They also cost less than earlier adult chapbook; they were better printed and included a wide selection of woodcuts and had attractive colored papers or card wrappers.

Chapbooks reappeared during the 1950s when Beatniks chose them as a tool to distribute their poetry. "Anti-establishment poets were aware of chapbooks' democratic past. Beginning with the Beats, followed by Deep Imagists, post-objectivists, and others, writers seeking to include their aesthetics in the discussions of late Modernism began printing chapbooks as an affordable way to broaden the poetic playing field" (Miller 6). Poet Allen Ginsberg's exemplary works *Howl* and *Mind Breaths*, published as chapbooks, helped redefine the medium's new role. While this marks a turn to lesser-known publishers, what is most notable about Ginsberg is that both books were designed as unified wholes where the book, rather than the poems in it, became the focus.

Perhaps the most successful example of the chapbook as a vehicle for the dissemination of experimental poetry is Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *Pocket Poets Series*. These paperbacks, produced beginning in 1955 by City Lights Publishers, were the first introduction for many readers to avant-garde poetry. According to Ferlinghetti, "From the beginning the aim was to publish across the board, avoiding the provincial and the academic...I had in mind rather an international, dissident, insurgent ferment (i)". Publication of the *Pocket Poet Series* is ongoing with a current collection of 60 books, including work by Jack Kerouac and Kenneth Rexroth.

Poetry chapbooks are still available through independent publishers and poet's websites. Poet Susan Howe is known for creating books layered with historical and mythical references often presented in an unorthodox format. While the work of Cole Swensen is hybrid in nature, sometimes called lyric-language poetry emerging from a

strong background in poetic and visual art traditions. Today chapbooks represent the work of younger writers yet “another, curiously connected assumption is that chapbooks represent the work of an avant-garde, the best of whom will find their work reprinted by mainstream presses once the culture-at-large gets around to accepting their radical practices” (Treacle 1).

A newer incarnation of the chapbook is the Artists’ Book. "Artists' books are books or book-like objects over the final appearance of which an artist has had a high degree of control; where the book is intended as a work of art in itself" (Bury 1). Artist and writer, Jacki Apple, created *Partitions*, in 1976 using thin paper traditionally found in chapbooks, which allows her text to be read through multiple layers. *Jails* by Romaine Perin is an examples of the chapbook’s transition to artists’ book. By incorporating photocopies of poetry, Perin evokes memories of Jack Kerouac’s typewritten poetry mixed with the experimental compositions used by Susan Howe. *How Mickey Made It* by Jayne Anne Phillips is an example of the fully realized transition to hand crafted, printed and, stitched chapbooks now recognized as limited edition artists’ books.

The majority of the books and authors mentioned, along with selections from the MCAD Library’s Artists’ Books Collection are now on display in the Library!

Works Cited

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