

# Michael Torosian of Lumiere Press reflects on 35 years as a 'Printer Savant'

Photographer shares his love for the letterpress and why he published his new memoir

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In the 1980s, a young photography grad named Michael Torosian decided to establish a small press and began teaching himself how to make a book. He released his first in 1986: a monograph on Edward Weston with a text by the American photographer's son. Since then, Lumiere Press has published 22 titles, all set in lead type and printed on a vintage letterpress, bound by hand and issued in limited editions of about 250 copies.

In his *Homage* series, Torosian's subjects have included American modernists Aaron Siskind and Frederick Sommer, crusading documentarians Gordon Parks and Lewis Hine, and his mentor Michel Lambeth, the Canadian photojournalist.

Torosian's archive was acquired by the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto in 2017. To commemorate that transfer and celebrate more than 35 years in fine press publishing, Torosian has now written a memoir entitled *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant & Other Stories*.

**You trained as a photographer at what is now Toronto Metropolitan University but had no credentials in publishing. How did you start?**

When I came up in the seventies there were very few galleries, few museums showing photography. It was almost like an underground network where the language was passed on and studied through books rather than through exhibitions. Books were the medium of photography.

It was a matter of finding a way to do it that worked for me. Because the industrial method of trying to compete with big publishers is lunacy. I saw photographer after photographer attempt it and they would end up with a basement full of books they didn't know what to do with.

**Lead type and the letterpress disappeared from commercial publishing in the late 1970s, but you don't fetishize the old technology. You also use digital means to reproduce some photos. Why the letterpress?**

It's indisputable that the most beautiful way of getting words on paper is with lead type on a letterpress. The technology has been around for 500 years and nobody really figured out a way of making it better.

When I discovered it, it wasn't totally antiquated yet, but it really wasn't commercially viable for the big companies. Big printing plants, newspapers and book publishers were dumping all their equipment. What had been exorbitantly expensive equipment was being sold for just a bit over scrap value. So, I hit the sweet spot, the moment where I could scoop up all this stuff and set up my own shop.

**You began printing the *Homage* series, books dedicated to leading photographers. Why start with the big names?**

If I had emulated the photographic books of the day, they would



Above: Michael Torosian flips through his memoir, *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant & Other Stories*, at his Toronto workshop. He published the book to 'celebrate' the letterpress.

PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER KATSAROV/  
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Left: Torosian handles a slug pressed on a hot metal typesetting letterpress. He discovered the technology at a time when big printing plants, newspapers and book publishers were getting rid of their equipment.

Left: Torosian uses a book-sewing machine to bind pages together. He says *Lumiere Press* books are in more than 200 public collections around the world.

ber Shop, which is in the archives.

**How big is the archive?**

It was 85 boxes.

**Why did you publish *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant*?**

I wanted to celebrate the history of the press. It's not just a story about how you get from A to B or how you make a book or make a decision about a typeface. Every chapter deals with a different aspect of living a life in the arts.

I lived by the little commandments at the front of the book, in the chapter on Michel Lambeth. Put your best foot forward. Never give your art away. Do something every day.

For 50 years, I didn't distract myself by doing commercial photography or doing projects as a gun for hire. I just concentrated on what I felt was important in my life.

**What's the plan now?**

I don't want to end up with anything in the house. I want everything that I've created to be placed as intelligently as possible. *Lumiere Press* books are in over 200 public collections around the world. If I can ensure that every book I've created is in the hands of an appreciative collector and an important institution, then I will have checked off all the boxes.

If you make a movie and only a million people go to see it, you're talking to yourself. But when you make a book, the whole model is completely different. In trade publishing, if a book doesn't sell in its first blast, it's yesterday's news because there's 1,000 new books coming out that month. With the kind of book I make, it's treasured. If it goes into a library, it's going to be there to be studied and researched for generations. So, the impact of each book I make is curiously much greater than books that are published in bigger numbers.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

have been all pictures with a negligible amount of text. But if you're going to be a fine press printer then you've got to have words. So, my books are books about photography rather than just books of photography. And if you're going to have a lot of text, you better have something to say.

I wanted to explore the aesthetics of the medium. I wanted to explore the biographies of the creators and see how this informed their work. You said that I picked the big names. But when I started, there might have been 10,000 or 15,000 books on Picasso, but you pick one of the greatest figures of 20th-century photography like Alfred Stieglitz, there might have been six books on him. The literature on pho-

tography was very scant. That has changed in my lifetime.

**Why did you donate your archive to the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library?**

It was actually an acquisition/donation. They purchased half and I donated the other half.

I had hit this 30-year mark of publishing and I really wanted to have an exhibition at the Fisher. It is one of the most beautiful galleries for books. Most libraries or galleries just have a bunch of vitrines, but the space there is almost magical the way the galleries are suspended above the reading rooms.

I went to visit the director and I had barely got out my proposal for an exhibition when she said:

"We want your archive." I had no reason to believe they even thought I had an archive, but I had been very fastidious, very conscientious and, in fact, I had assembled a detailed archive.

When I did my first book in '86 on Edward Weston, I went to the New York Public Library and they were having an exhibition on Truman Capote's papers. It was really extraordinary: They had his little notebooks where he had handwritten in pencil, train tickets and scrapbooks. I was astonished at how you could tell the story of creativity through artifacts. I decided at that moment that I was going to save absolutely everything.

When I took Aaron Siskind to get a haircut one afternoon, I got a business card from Vito's Bar-