

A bookmaker, unbound

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Remember that old saying about mousetraps and doors? The one that assures aspiring inventors that if they improve a humble, familiar product, the world will pay attention?

Apparently it applies to books, too. Even in this tech-obsessed time, a master book artist like Gaylord Schanilec can not only survive but gain international renown for his spectacular craftsmanship, all while living on a small farm outside tiny Stockholm, Wis.

Actually, the world didn't beat a path to Schanilec's door. Instead, he took his meticulously handmade books to New York, London and beyond, and collectors leapt at them like trout after mayflies. (More about mayflies below.) They're in special collections everywhere from Los Angeles' J. Paul Getty Museum to the New York Public Library, Harvard, Yale, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the Bodleian Library at Oxford.

Locally, both the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and Walker Art Center own his books, as do the Minnesota Historical Society and the University of Minnesota. Through Feb. 25, about 40 of his beautiful wood-engraving prints are on view at Minneapolis' Groveland Gallery, the first time the illustrations have ever been shown outside the slender volumes for which he made them.

"He's one of the two or three finest color wood-engravers ever. He's really that good," said Robert Rulon-Miller, a rare book dealer in St. Paul who has followed Schanilec's career for more than 30 years. "He's a man of many parts: engraver, printer, bookbinder, editor, writer, natural philosopher, and he brings all this stuff together into his books."

Handmade everything

A bibliography of Schanilec's print projects, recently compiled by Rulon-Miller, lists more than 600 items including dozens of books he's written, designed, typeset or illustrated, plus hundreds of bits of ephemera ranging from pamphlets to a special bookmark for the Hennepin County Library system.

Schanilec's books are no mass-market marvels. A typical print run might result in just 25 copies; his largest printing is about 1,000 volumes. Each is a labor of love for which the artist hand-sets each letter of type, designs every page, carves the illustrations into blocks of wood and prints them in multiple colors. He does not make the paper, but has on occasion done the binding himself. They take as long as two or more years to make and typically sell for \$150 and up.

"He's incredibly talented at using very difficult techniques to translate a visual narrative into beautiful artwork," said Jeff Rathermel, executive director of the Minnesota Center for Book Arts. "He just happens to be in our back yard, but he's



Gaylord Schanilec worked on fish illustrations in his studio.



"Pelicans" by Gaylord Schanilec

GAYLORD SCHANILEC: Engravings

When: Noon-5 p.m. Tue.-Sat. Ends Feb. 25.

Where: Groveland Annex, 25 Groveland Terrace, Mpls. www.grovelandgallery.com

Event: Artist talk at 2 p.m. Sat.

Admission: Free.

Web: See more of his work at www.midnightpapersales.com.

recognized internationally."

Over the years he has printed poems and broadsides for such luminaries as Robert Bly, Gary Snyder and Meridel Le Sueur, as well as memoirs by former Minnesota Gov. Elmer L. Andersen and philanthropist Kenneth Dayton. His two books about New York City include "The Bicycle Diaries," an acclaimed collaboration with writer Richard Goodman on the 10th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy.

Rooted in Minnesota

He is best known, however, for his own writing and illustrations on regional topics as wide-ranging -- and esoteric -- as St. Paul's now-demolished High Bridge, Mississippi waterfalls and "Mayflies of the Driftless Region." An award winner at the 2005 Oxford Book Fair, the "Mayflies" book involved four years of research -- which his wife, Brenda, calls "playful science" -- and features 13 pristine engravings detailing every aspect of the insects, down to the veins of their translucent wings.

"His work is so quintessentially Minnesotan it seems bred in the bone," said Patrick Coleman, rare books curator at the Minnesota Historical Society. His observations of flora and fauna are so keen that "fly fishermen and other people really melt," Coleman said.

Schanilec, 56, has lived in Wisconsin for more than 25 years, but he grew up in North Dakota. He fell under the influence of poet Thomas McGrath at age 16 and went off to the University of North Dakota intending to be a poet. When he discovered he "lacked the courage" for poetry, he retreated to the art department even though "the literary world was my base," he said recently.

"The whole small-press thing blossomed in the Twin Cities" after his 1977 graduation, Schanilec said, citing Coffeehouse Press, Milkweed Editions, Graywolf, New Rivers, Toothpaste and other small presses and the myriad writers, artists and printers they attracted. "That was the world I grew up in. Initially I was illustrating for them, drawing with pen and ink. That led to woodcuts and then wood engravings. I've always had this precision thing and couldn't help getting more and more precise with printing."

Out of the woods

His most ambitious project to date is "Sylvae: Fifty Specimens Printed Directly From the Wood with Historical Anecdotes and Observations." The 2008 production is an obsessive's tour-de-force to which he and collaborator Ben Verhoeven devoted 2 1/2 years. It was done in two editions consisting of 26 deluxe copies, priced at \$7,500 each, and 120 standard versions. The books document the different species of trees on Schanilec's 27-acre farm and include anecdotes about the trees plus 50 prints made from the trees themselves. Schanilec cut down and milled the trees, then printed impressions of both the long-grain and end-grain from each species. The deluxe volumes are bound in white pigskin over wooden boards (also milled on the property) and cased in custom-made boxes that include a tray containing 25 blocks of wood from the 25 species found on the property.

"The thing about a book like this is that you can do whatever you want -- make up your rules, break your rules," said Schanilec, who will talk about his work at 2 p.m. Saturday at Groveland Gallery. "It's a wonderful thing to be able to print your own book."

His work is, he readily admits, incredibly slow and time-consuming.

"If I spend 500 hours cutting a woodblock or hundreds of hours setting type, I have time to think," he said. "It all goes back to poetry. You never get it just the way you want it. Perfection is totally an illusion because you can't ever quite get it right. Finally you say, 'OK, this is the book and I've got to just get it out of here.' Time is this precious luxury for me, and fortunately I've managed to get enough people to go along with what I do so I can keep it going."

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