

Clickety clack, let's look back: Typewriters return

July 3 2019, by Katherine Roth



This June 28, 2019 photo shows Paul Schweitzer standing in the Gramercy Typewriter Co. repair shop in New York, alongside a shelf of vintage typewriters. Schweitzer who, with his son, owns the Gramercy Typewriter Co, founded by Schweitzer's father in 1932. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, Schweitzer says. (Katherine Roth via AP)

For most of us, the clickety clack of a manual typewriter—or the gentler tapping of the IBM Selectric—are but memories, or something seen only in movies.

But at the few remaining typewriter repair shops in the country, business is booming as a younger generation discovers the joy of the feel and sound of the typewriter—and older generations admit they never fell out of love with it.

"What's surprising to me is that the younger generation is taking a liking to typewriters again," says Paul Schweitzer, 80, owner and operator of the Gramercy Typewriter Co., founded by his father in 1932. He now works alongside his son, Jay Schweitzer, 50, and—this summer—a grandson, Jake.

Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, Schweitzer says. Demand is so great that early this year, the family finally opened their own store, in New York City. Other surviving shops include Berkeley Typewriter and California Typewriter, both in Berkeley, California, and also founded in the 1930s.

Gramercy sold dozens of old typewriters over the holiday season, Schweitzer says.

Two recent documentaries, "The Typewriter (In The 21st Century)" (2012) and "California Typewriter" (2016), featuring collector Tom Hanks, have helped popularize vintage typewriters among young people, who also have a soft spot for other analog technologies like vinyl records and fountain pens.



This June 28, 2019 photo shows the exterior of Gramercy Typewriter Co. in New York, which sells vintage typewriters, all in working condition. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, the owner says. (Katherine Roth via AP)

At one time, Schweitzer says, there were six pages of typewriter repair listings in the New York City phone book (which also hardly exists anymore).

Schweitzer, who also services HP laser printers, still packs up his leather typewriter-repair bag and heads out on jobs at offices around the city, seeing to sticky keys and shredded ribbons. But these days, he sees to

just a handful of typewriters in any given office, as opposed to years ago, when he visited offices with as many as 700 typewriters, one at each desk.

"A lot of law firms and accounting firms still have typewriters in their offices. They have computers, too, but there are always times when typewriters come in handy," he says. They are convenient for smaller jobs, like addressing envelopes, and there are times you just want something done quickly and in triplicate.

The American Writers Museum, in Chicago, features a popular section with seven manual typewriters and an electric typewriter that visitors can try out.



This June 28, 2019 photo shows a display of vintage typewriters for sale at Gramercy Typewriter Co. store in New York. All the typewriters for sale are in working condition. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, the owner says. (Katherine Roth via AP)

"Typing for the first time is exciting, especially for younger people," says Carey Cranston, president of the museum, which now features an exhibit with 16 typewriters used by famous writers like Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, Maya Angelou and John Lennon.

"With a pen or pencil you can distract yourself by doodling, and of course on a computer it's easy to find distractions. But a typewriter was invented specifically for writing. There are no distractions. It's just you and the page," Cranston says.

Students who visited the museum on a field trip were so enamored with the typewriters that they started their own typewriter club, and Cranston says he'll never forget the reaction of one fifth-grader discovering typewriters for the first time.

"Wow, this is great! It's an instant printer!" he exclaimed.



This Aug. 10, 2017 photo shows a teenage visitor using a typewriter on display at the American Writers Museum in Chicago. A younger generation is discovering the joy of the feel and sound of the typewriter. Two recent documentaries, "The Typewriter (In The 21st Century)" (2012) and "California Typewriter" (2016), featuring collector Tom Hanks, have helped popularize vintage typewriters among young people, who also have a soft spot for other analog technologies like vinyl records and fountain pens. (AP Photo/Julia Rubin)



This May 5, 2017 photo shows a vintage typewriter on display for use at the American Writers Museum in Chicago. A younger generation is discovering the joy of the feel and sound of the typewriter. Two recent documentaries, "The Typewriter (In The 21st Century)" (2012) and "California Typewriter" (2016), featuring collector Tom Hanks, have helped popularize vintage typewriters among young people, who also have a soft spot for other analog technologies like vinyl records and fountain pens. (AP Photo/Julia Rubin)



This June 28, 2019 photo shows a working Smith-Corona typewriter from the 1950s, for sale at the Gramercy Typewriter Co. in New York. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, the owner of the store says. (Katherine Roth via AP)



This June 28, 2019 photo shows a display of vintage typewriters for sale at Gramercy Typewriter Co. in New York. All the typewriters for sale are in working condition. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, the owner of the store says. (Katherine Roth via AP)



This June 28, 2019 photo shows signs on the wall of the Gramercy Typewriter Co. in New York, which sells working vintage typewriters and ribbons for them, and repairs vintage typewriters. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, the owner says. (Katherine Roth via AP)



This June 28, 2019 photo shows a shelf of vintage typewriters in the repair shop of the Gramercy Typewriter Co., in New York. Vintage typewriters are sent for repair and restoration daily from around the country, the stores owner says.

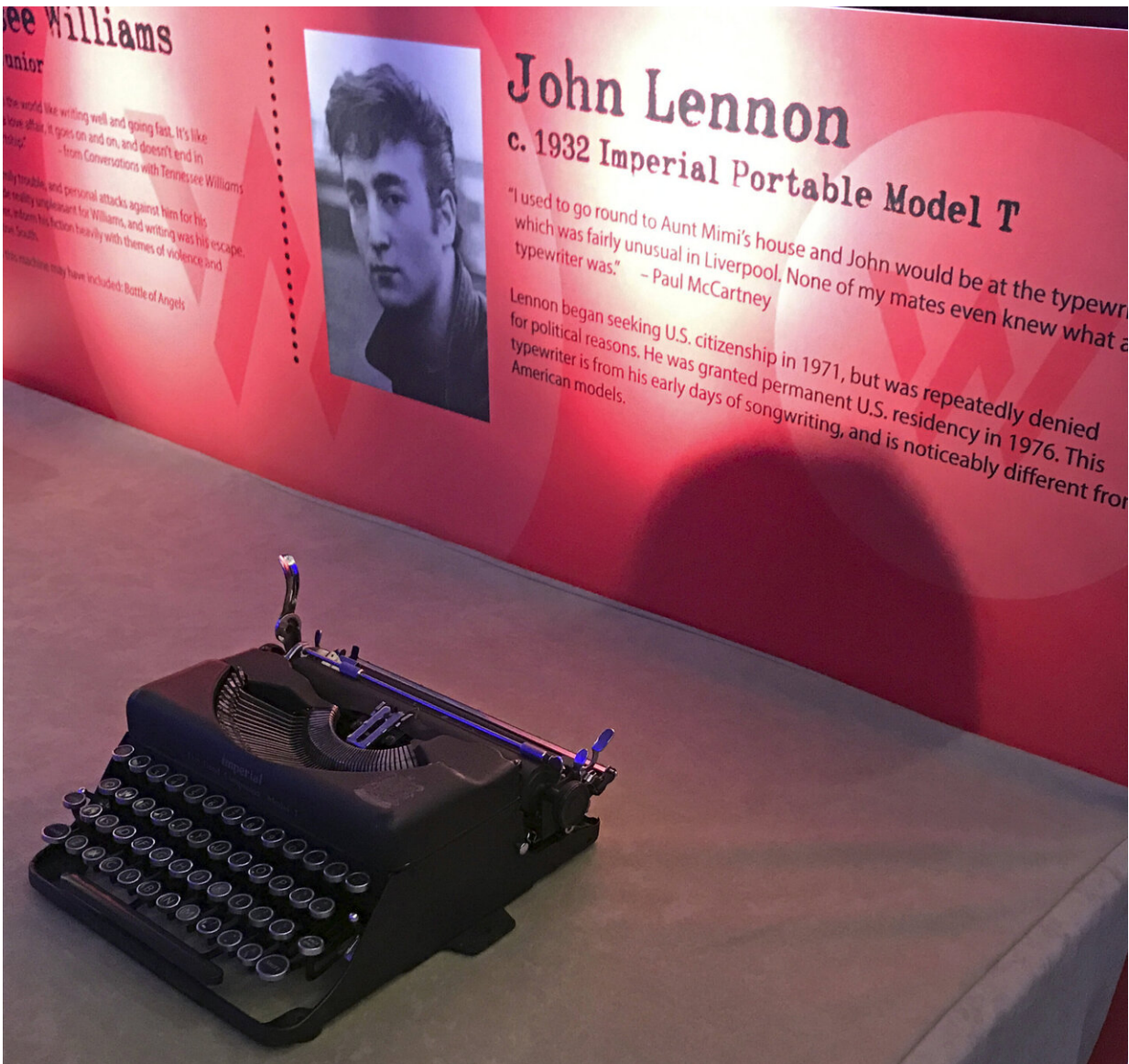
(Katherine Roth via AP)

Ellen Lupton, senior curator in contemporary design at the Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum, which has an array of typewriters in its collection, says, "There's an irresistible tactility to typing on a typewriter, a satisfying sound, a feeling of authentic authorship. No one can spy on you and there are no distractions," she says.

She notes that typewriters' legacy can be seen in smart phone and computer keyboards.

The "shift" key, for instance, was originally meant to literally shift the position of a typewriter key, to a capital letter from a lower-case one. The return key (or lever, on manual typewriters) originally returned the carriage into position for the next line.

"And we're still stuck with the QWERTY keyboard—even on phones—which was supposedly designed to prevent keys from sticking together when someone is typing quickly," Lupton says.



This March 9, 2019 photo shows a typewriter once owned by John Lennon and now on display in a special exhibit on typewriters at the American Writers Museum in Chicago. A younger generation is discovering the joy of the feel and sound of the typewriter. Two recent documentaries, "The Typewriter (In The 21st Century)" (2012) and "California Typewriter" (2016), featuring collector Tom Hanks, have helped popularize vintage typewriters among young people, who also have a soft spot for other analog technologies like vinyl records and fountain pens. (AP Photo/Julia Rubin)

While early typewriters of the late 19th century were designed purely for function, "by the '20s and '30s they'd become quite stylish," Lupton says.

"We have quite a few very stylish Italian typewriters in our collection. They're very chic, with wonderful geometry and unusual lines. Olivetti was a big producer of office equipment and they are really invested in design," says Lupton. "Another reason for the appeal must surely be the beautiful and authentic appearance of a typewritten page."

It's common for typewriters to allow for typing in red and black, and to feature a "ribbon reverse" function to maximize use of the ink ribbon by running it in the opposite direction once it reaches the end of the spool.

And as with every tool, there are tricks to using a typewriter. To save on the number of keys, there is generally no number "1" on older keyboards (a lower case "L" suffices), and to make an exclamation point, a period is simply topped with an apostrophe.

The "cent" key seems decidedly quaint today.

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