



# EVERYONE ~~POOPS~~ INKS THE TYMPAN

How to **change the tympan**  
on a Vandercook Press



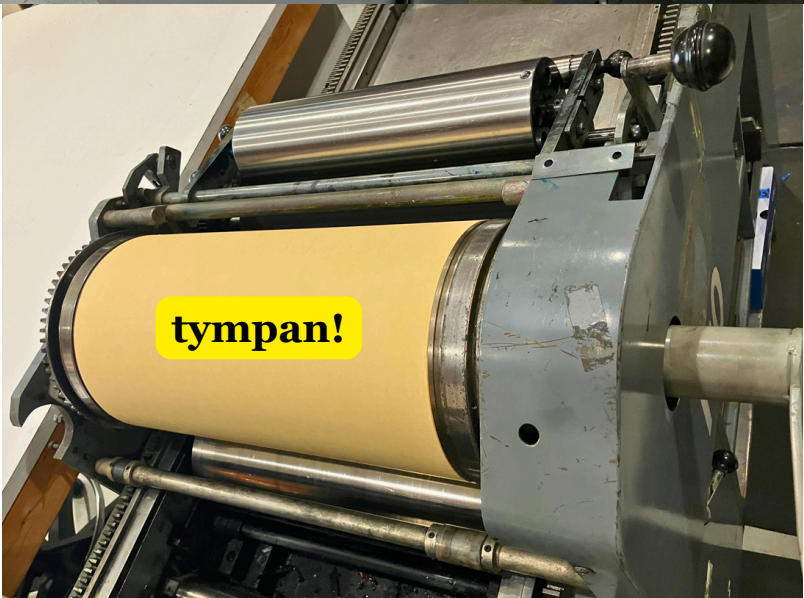
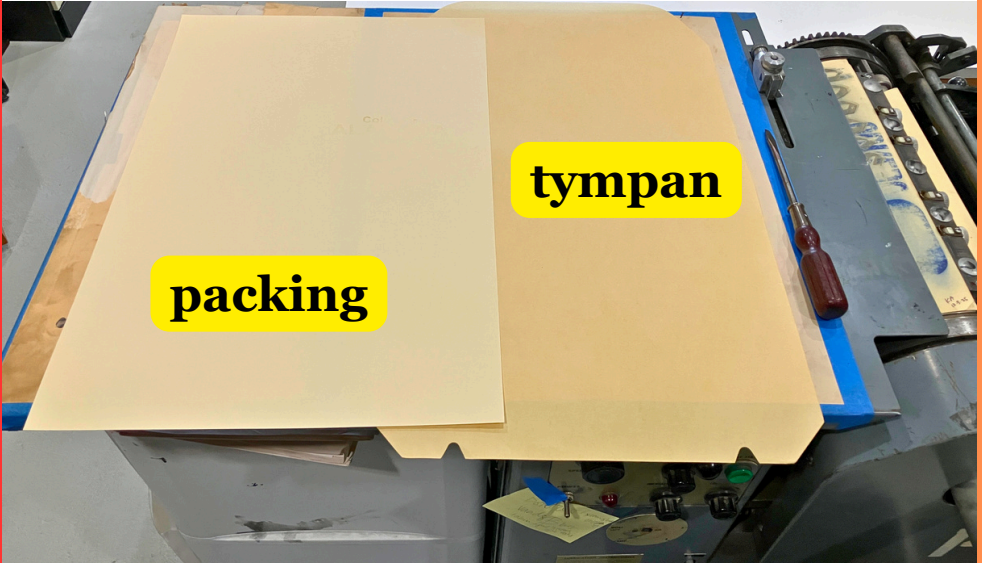
Amanda Wyatt Visconti

Letterpress for All!  
Series  
BRIOCHE #8

# TIDY TYMPAN TIME

**Tympan:** *the topmost cover sheet for the Vandercook's carriage cylinder (where grippers clamp the paper to be printed upon)*

**Packing:** *extra sheet(s) of various materials placed underneath the tympan; produce different printing effects by varying height & padding/give*



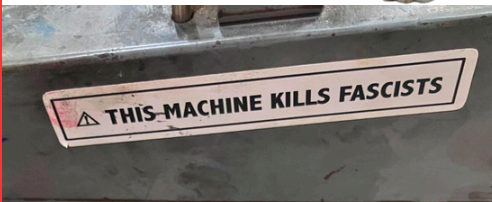
# TYMPANS NEED CHANGING...

1. Because they get naturally worn, compressed, or marked (that light brown oily stamp in the shape of type) over time by normal use
2. Because of overly hard pressure (e.g. press bed height too high, too much packing or too-high makeready...)
3. Because you want a different amount or kind of packing for a particular project; or to use a top layer of protective material for new printers (e.g. a wipeable mylar cover)
4. ... & because **everyone sometimes accidentally inks the tympan** when they meant to be in trip mode!

*(photos of inked tympan in this zine are from me or printers whose work I admire!)*

*Maple knows everyone sometimes inks the tympan, or leaves an ice cube treat on the rug where it melts and surprises besocked feet, or similar perfectly natural occurrences.*



*She does not want you to feel bad when you ink the tympan! Learning to change the tympan means you can make sure to not leave it in a state where it's a problem for the next printer 🙌*

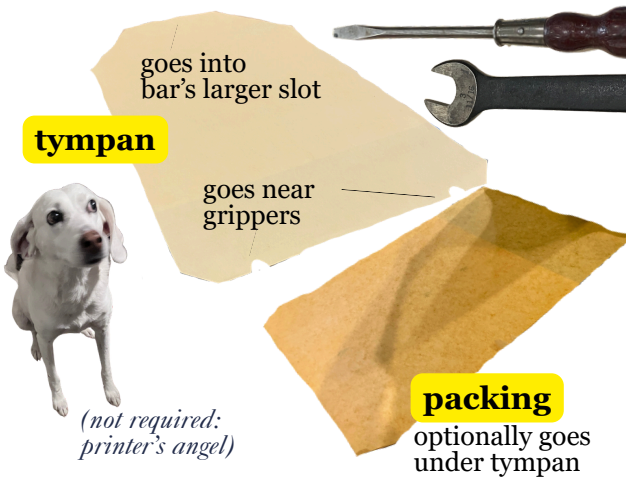


## Quick fix

Tympans are often made of oily, repellant materials. If you've just gotten a small bit of ink on yours, you can try quickly rubbing at it using a clean rag with some solvent, then rubbing it dry with a clean area of that rag.

# MATERIALS!

1. 1 tympan sheet
2. Any packing for under the tympan
3. Flathead screwdriver 
4. Cylinder wrench that fits the pawl (see page 6)
5. A pen for writing the date on the tympan (preferably one that can write small/thin & won't smudge) 



Folks use various materials for tympan & packing. If you're looking at a printshop's pile, tympan is more likely slightly oily or repellent, packing more like printing paper.

Look for corner cutouts that go around grippers, & into the bar slot near the end of the process.

*(just* **VIRGINIA BOOK ARTS** *things)*

At my current local printshop, you can find these materials:

1. **Tools:** small metal toolchest on the bottom shelf under Vandy B (under its quoin shelf). Don't forget to return the screwdriver here, so it doesn't start getting used for opening ink cans!

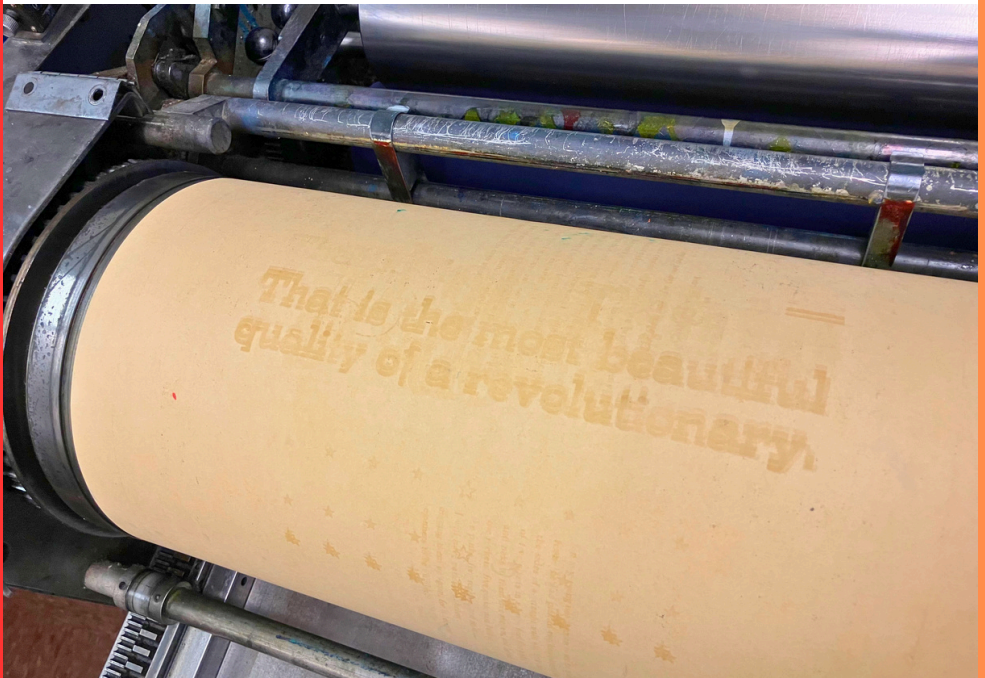
## 2. Tympan & packing:

A labeled drawer in the upper metal file cabinet to the right of the thermostat (NW corner of room, near window).



# CHEATSHEET!

1. Loosen pawl & unwrap old tympan
2. Loosen gripper screws & remove old tympan/packing
3. Insert tympan with correct corners in; retighten screws
4. Insert packing underneath
5. Holding taught, rewrap tympan+packing
6. Feed tympan end through larger slit
7. Retighten pawl: finger, then screwdriver just until taut
8. Sign tympan corner with date & name



9. (Optional) Consider keeping the old tympan: a lovely record of multiple past printers & their work

(see end of zine for photos of a few more!) 5

# STEP 1



Looking toward the head of the press, on its right (non-crank) side: find this small metal "pawl", which sits on the teeth of a gear to prevent it from turning.





Use your flathead screwdriver to gently lift underneath the pawl so it rises off the gear.



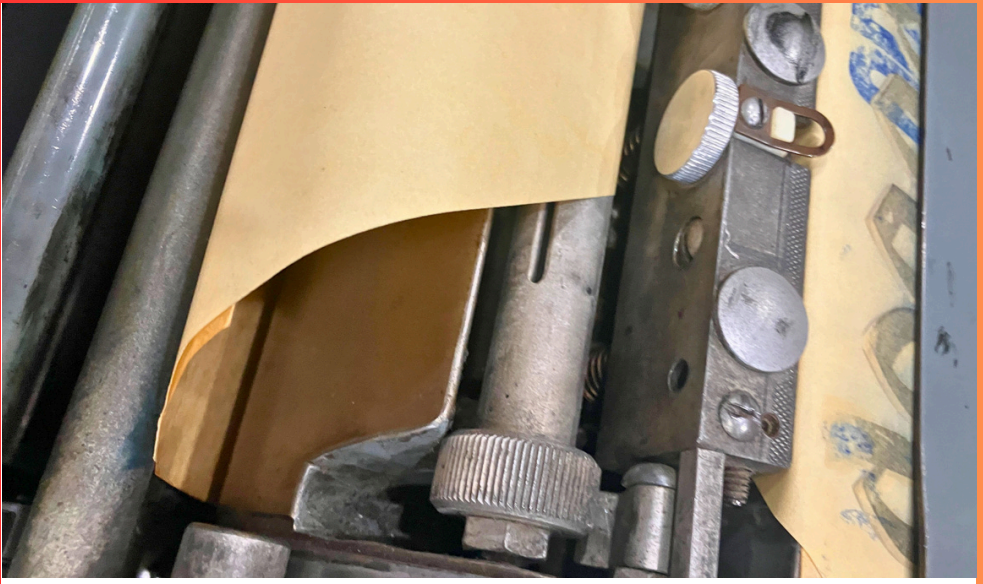
*insert forward*  
← - - - - -



*lift lightly*



You'll then be able to use your fingers to keep the pawl from re-engaging the gear (i.e. stopping it from turning), which is needed while removing the old tympan like we're about to do (gear holds tympan taut, & we need to loosen it).



With your fingers, spin the gear counter-clockwise (whatever way it feels like it wants to turn—it's been holding the tympan in place, so lifting the pawl off it will allow it to "want" to turn in the direction that loosens the tympan) while gently tugging on the tympan. This should feel no-effort; just do it until you're able to pull one end of the tympan out of the bar slot it's been tucked into:





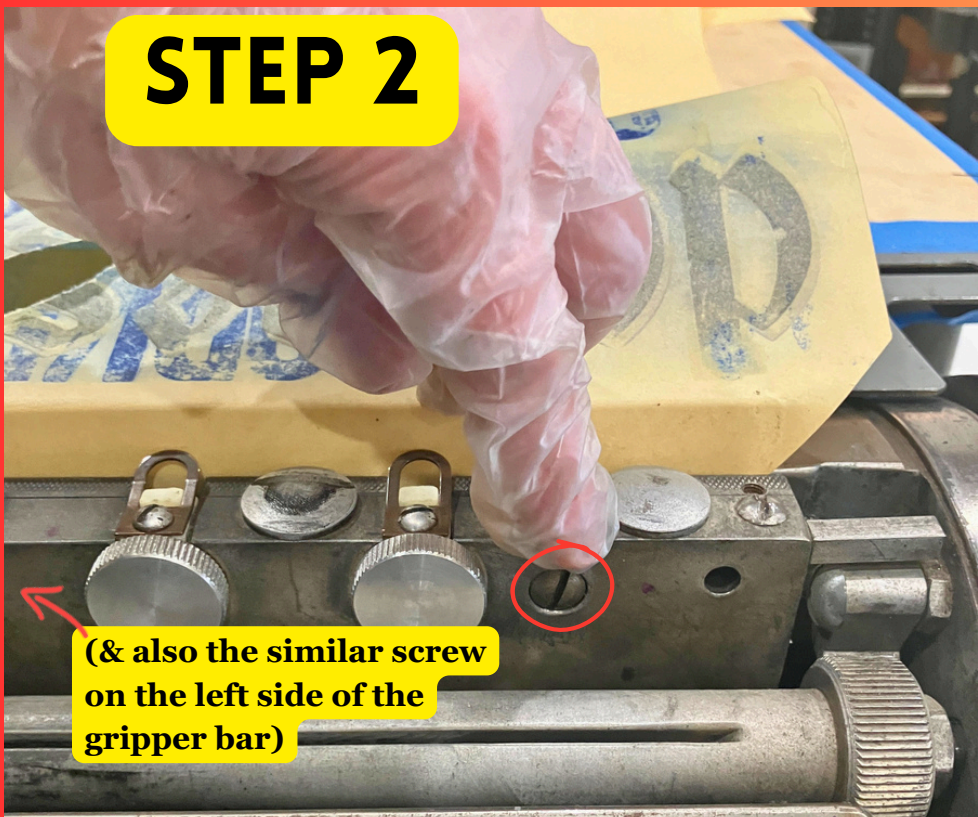
Continue to gently tug at the tympan to unwind it (& any sheets of packing beneath, with it).

You'll want to crank the carriage forward to help you unwind the tympan from that cylinder.

When you get to the other end of the tympan...

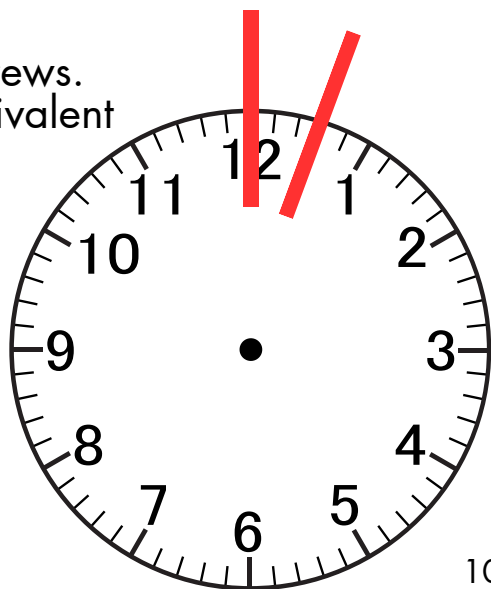


# STEP 2



Use your flathead screwdriver again to gently, **only slightly** loosen the 2 screws on the gripper bar (side facing toward foot of the press).

DO NOT remove the screws. Just loosen them the equivalent of 1/2 an hour mark on a 12-hour clock, to give you a bit of wiggle that will let you pull the tympan the rest of the way off the press. Go ahead & do that!



**cut-off-corners end**

**little-notches end**

**long slit where you should push tympan in**

# STEP 3



Lay your new tympan on the head of the press. The end with small notches should be closest to the gripper, not the end with corners clipped off.

Slide the tympan until it's evenly against the gripper bar, then push it underneath the thin slit the 2 arrows point to in the photo above. (This slit area is made accessible by the screws you just slightly untightened).

Push the tympan in as far as you can & make sure that's the same amount across the tympan's width.



**will look like this when done—most of tympan should still be sticking out!**



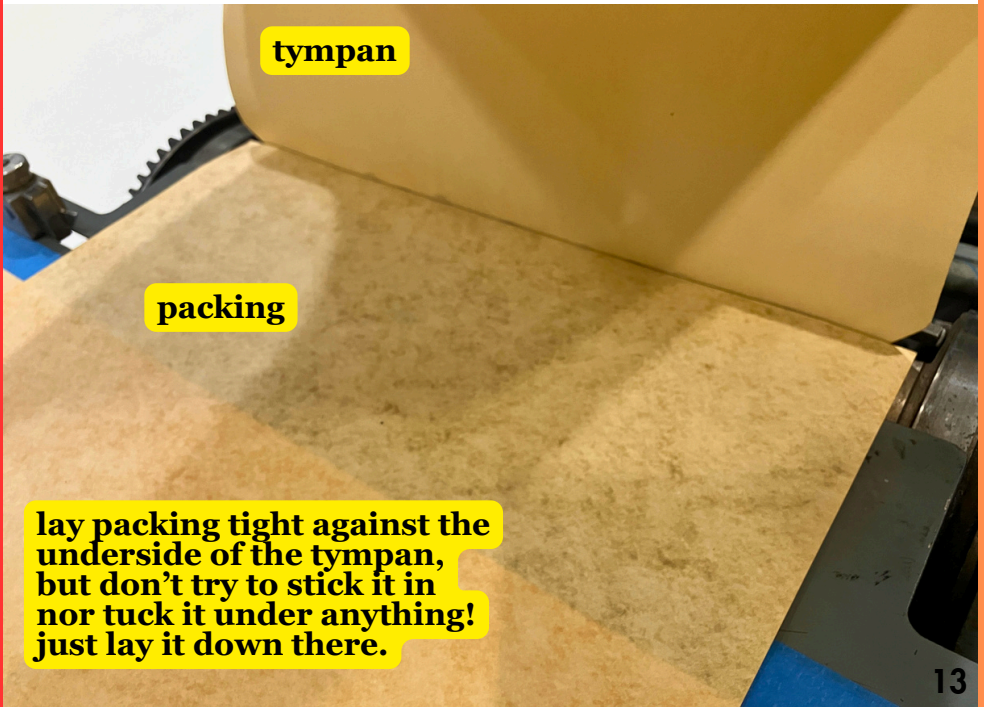
Retighten the 2 gripper screws you loosened back on page 10. You only slightly unloosened them, so you should need the same small amount of retightening (don't try to make it super tight).

# STEP 4

Now we'll add any packing we want, under the tympan. The number of sheets & kind of packing paper to use depends on your personal preferences & project. This example uses 1 sheet of packing.

Lay your packing on the head of the press, so the flat end lays tight against the tympan.

The cut corners are at the packing's other (left) end.



# STEP 5



Now we'll wind the tympan around the cylinder.

Let the tympan fall back over any packing. Place your hand gently on top of the tympan to hold it against the cylinder; this is like when pulling a print, *except* you'll want to hold it *more* firmly—the goal is wrapping the tympan & packing so they're as taut as possible (without ripping).

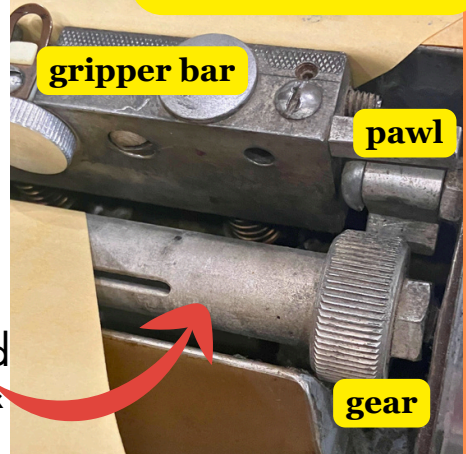
Crank the handle to move the carriage down the press bed, letting the cylinder roll under your hand but keeping the tympan taut as it passes beneath your hand. (It's okay if you lose some tautness—we'll tighten things in a moment.)



## STEP 6

You'll end up at the foot of the press holding the tympan against the cylinder, with an extra tail of tympan still sticking out.

There's a round bar with 2 slits along its length: if you remember the gear we took the pawl off at the start, that gear is at the end of this bar! It runs next to & parallel to the gripper bar.



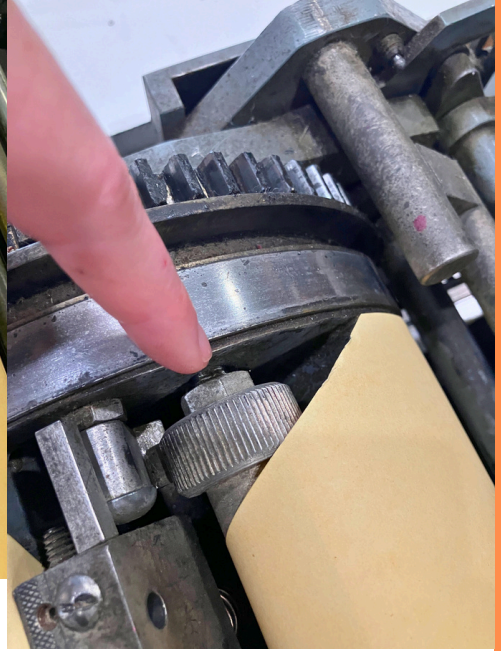
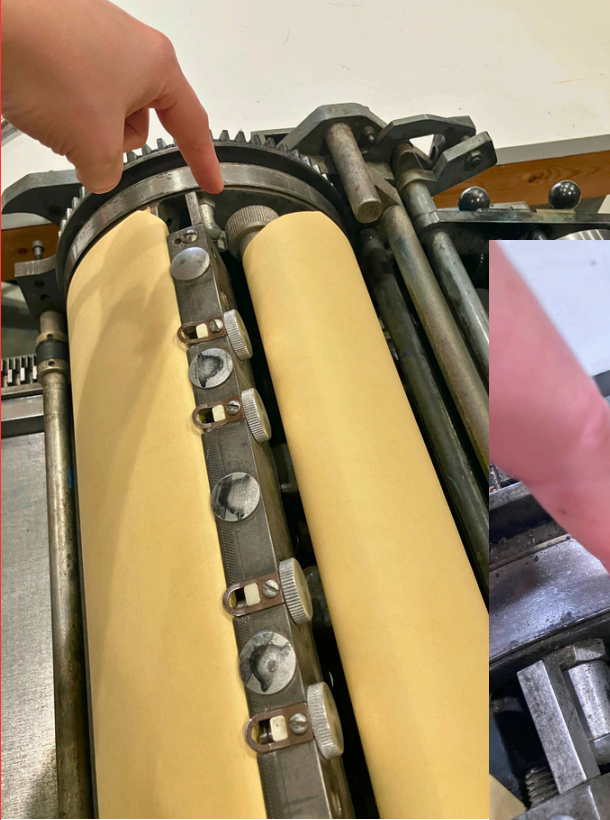
We removed the old tympan tail from its slot back on page 8.

The 2 slits on this bar don't match each other: 1 is narrower & 1 (180 degrees around on the other side) is wider. Turn the bar so the *wider* slit is visible.

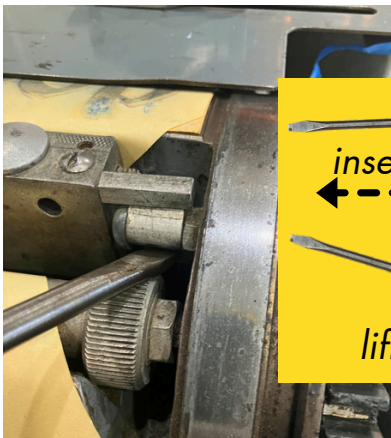


Stick the end of the tympan into the slit, and push as much of the tympan tail in as you comfortably can.

To get all of the excess tympan into the slit, we need to lift the pawl again (like we did on page 7) and turn the gear that spins the slitted rod.



You'll feel the tympan tighten around the cylinder...

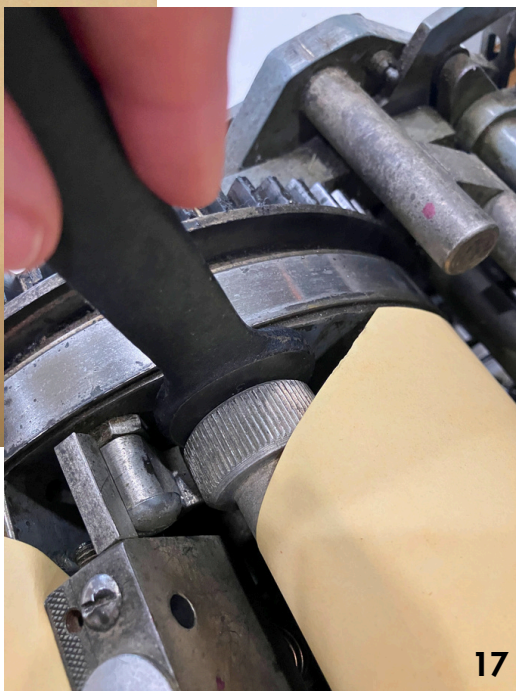
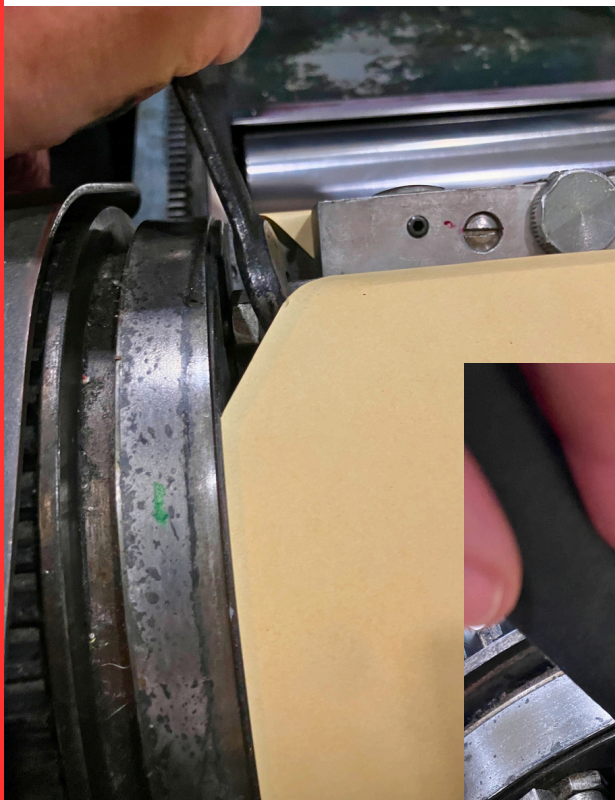


# STEP 7

To finalize tightening the tympan, we'll use our wrench to turn the gear just a bit more than we were able to do with our fingers.

You don't want to tighten the tympan so much that it rips/breaks, but you really don't want a ballooningly loose tympan. The tympan should be as tight as

it was before you replaced it, if you need a reference for "how tight is tight?"



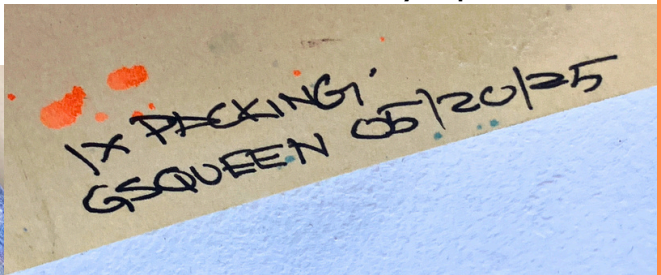


# STEP 8

You've replaced your tympan!

As a final step, use a fine-tipped pen or marker (something that will dry completely & not smudge, so not a magic marker) and write your initials & the date in the corner of the tympan nearest you, when the carriage is at rest at the head of the press. You can also note how much packing you used.

This lets other printers know how long the packing & tympan have been in use (helpful in guessing whether it needs changing to not mess with a delicate project), and who to ask any questions (including who can teach them about tympan changing).



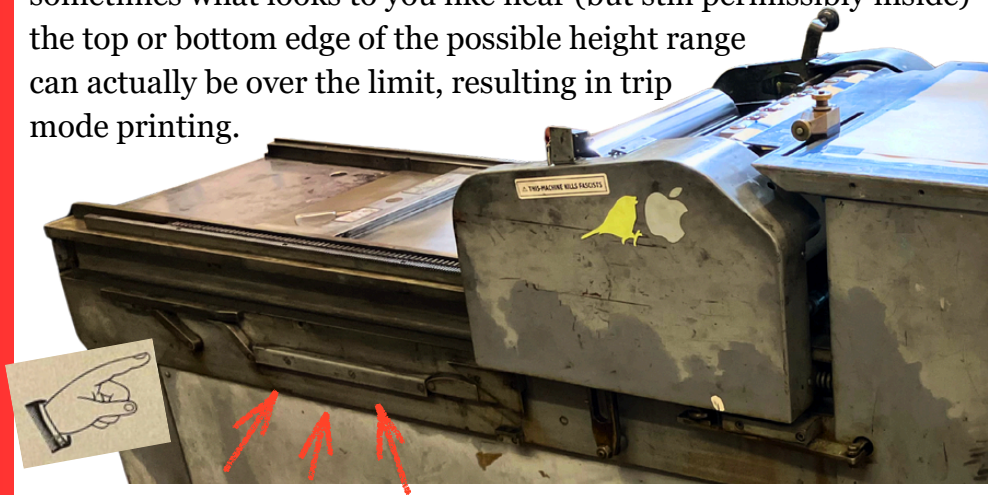
Plus it's a nice little treat for taking care of the press for the community :)

# TROUBLESHOOTING!

***“I have 100% established I’m correctly in trip, not print, mode—but my Vandy is still printing to the tympan???”***

*(literally from a weird problem i was having a while back!)*

Make sure you’re going all the way to the far foot end of the press bed with the carriage each time, in case you’ve gotten into a habit of returning the carriage before it goes quite as far as it needs to away from the head of the press (to engage the trip mechanism after printing). For adjustable bed height Vandercooks, if the press hasn’t been calibrated for a while, Garrett Queen advised that sometimes what looks to you like near (but still permissibly inside) the top or bottom edge of the possible height range can actually be over the limit, resulting in trip mode printing.



For a better sense of what your press is doing: if you haven’t watched the railroad-track-style print-trip mechanism that’s on the other long side of the press (from the carriage crank) before, ask someone to print while you’re looking there.

And if your printshop is loud, getting a chance to hear the press’s little mechanical-action sounds (via a YouTube press video, if turning up volume would help) might also be useful. E.g. with our Vandy Uni 1s, I listen for 2 gripper click sounds when approaching the end of the press—and even when I can’t hear them because of shop noise, leaving time for the rolling action that makes those sounds stays part of my printing-movement rhythm.



**newsprint  
taped over  
tympan!**

**Easy help:** If you don't need (or want to set up) a protective tympan (e.g. clear mylar, which wipes off easily but is a harder surface than many prints need), you can use blue painter's tape to temporarily affix 1-3 sheets of newsprint over the tympan.

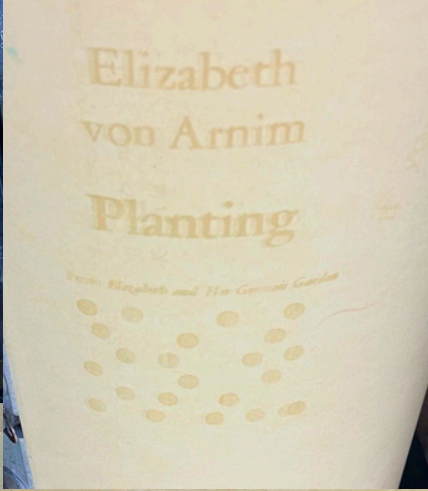
Put the newsprint against the edge right before going under the grippers, but don't actually put the newsprint under the grippers (you aren't printing in that area so don't need to protect it, and it will make adding & removing each printing sheet harder because less space). Don't put tape under the grippers (hard to remove, adhesive may build up; put tape between grippers instead). Don't put tape anywhere you want to print (this may mean affixing with very thin pieces of tape, if you're printing near the entire edge of paper). Afterward, remove tape slowly to avoid ripping the tympan (& make sure you're in trip not print, while moving the carriage to remove the newsprint).

### **Troubleshooting:** *offsetting ink on the back of your print?*

Tympan that have fresher ink on them (e.g. ink that got there within the last couple hours) can offset that ink onto the back of your prints.

If the ink got onto the tympan from a different project, note that the offset on the back of your print won't look the way the ink on the tympan looks—rather, it'll be in the shape of whatever type you're using now, as that's where the pressure is pushing ink against paper.





Beautifully well-used tympan  
from the  
Virginia Center for the Book  
/ Virginia Book Arts'  
Vandercooks



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