

“To breathe Paris is to preserve one’s soul.” Well over a century ago, Victor Hugo wrote these memorable words celebrating the French capital’s enduring spirit. So much of the world has changed since then, but the allure of *la Ville Lumière* remains virtually intact.

Located at 49 rue du Montparnasse—at the heart of the eponymous Parisian neighbourhood famous for its lively artistic community—the lithographic printing studio Idem is one of those places that encapsulates the city’s magic. Originally built in 1881 by lithographer Eugène Dufrenoy, this historic *imprimerie* was later owned by the Michards, who specialized in map printing. It was not until the late ’70s that the address became a mecca for artists and lithography lovers, after the renowned *imprimerie d’art* Mourlot established its atelier there in 1976.

The process of lithography, invented in the 1790s by German actor Alois Senefelder as an inexpensive method of publishing theatrical works, involves applying ink to a grease-treated image on a flat printing surface, traditionally limestone but nowadays often aluminum. Due to the application of grease, parts of the printing surface are ink-resistant, others ink-retaining; this creates the “positive” and “negative” images when the surface is finally applied to paper by means of a special press.

Heir to a dynasty of printers, Fernand Mourlot (1895–1988) converted his family business into a studio dedicated to printing fine art lithographs. During the 19th century, lithography had become a popular artistic medium. In France, Géricault and Delacroix were among the first lithographers, and Impressionist painters like Monet and Degas experimented with the technique too. Many of Toulouse-Lautrec’s masterpieces are lithographic works. However, at the beginning of the 20th century lithography was increasingly out of fashion among artists.

Nevertheless, thanks to the exceptional print quality of their posters for international museums including the Louvre and Tate, the Mourlot family established a reputation for themselves among the artistic community during the ’20s. On the strength of this, from the ’30s onwards Fernand and his brothers invited cutting-edge artists—the likes of Matisse, Miró, Léger, Dubuffet, Chagall, Giacometti and Cocteau—to visit their atelier and work on location, creating unique

prints. A glorious new season for art lithography had begun!

In 1945 Fernand Mourlot met Pablo Picasso through Henri Matisse and Georges Braque. This encounter soon developed into a friendship and fruitful collaboration that lasted three decades. The Spanish master produced over 400 different graphic images and editions at the Mourlot studio.

49 rue du Montparnasse was the final atelier occupied by Fernand, and his print presses, which gave birth to many of the most important fine-art lithographs of the 20th century, are still *in situ*. Jacques Mourlot, Fernand’s son, followed in his father’s footsteps and managed the studio until 1997, whereupon the company name changed from Société Mourlot to Idem.

A world of wonders lies across its threshold. The workshop is an expansive two-level space, covered by a 1,400m² glass ceiling that allows natural light to flow in. The ground floor is dominated by a double row of 19th-century Voirin and Marinoni presses. Known as *machines plats* (flat machines), these presses are operated by a system of pulleys and belts driven by a propeller shaft. A gas-fired steam boiler provides the necessary energy. Upstairs, one can find the hand presses used to carry out preparatory tests for print designs, several drawing cabinets, and a photographic laboratory.

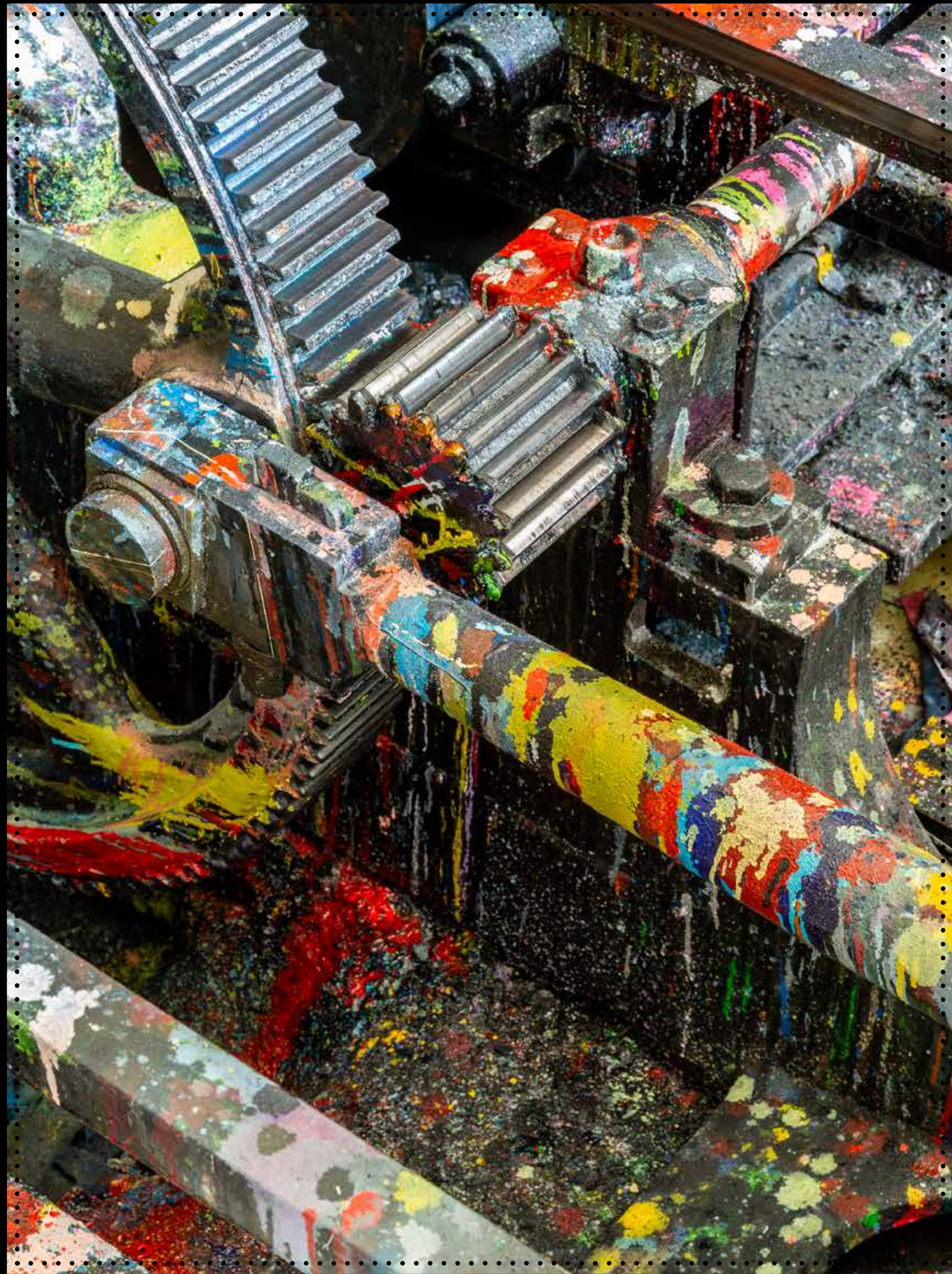
At the atelier, artists have access to an extraordinary stock of diversely sized lithographic limestones. Guided by experienced printers, they can explore and experiment with the countless possibilities offered by this centuries-old printing technique. Collaboration between artist and artisan is at the core of Idem’s practice, and is the secret of its enduring success.

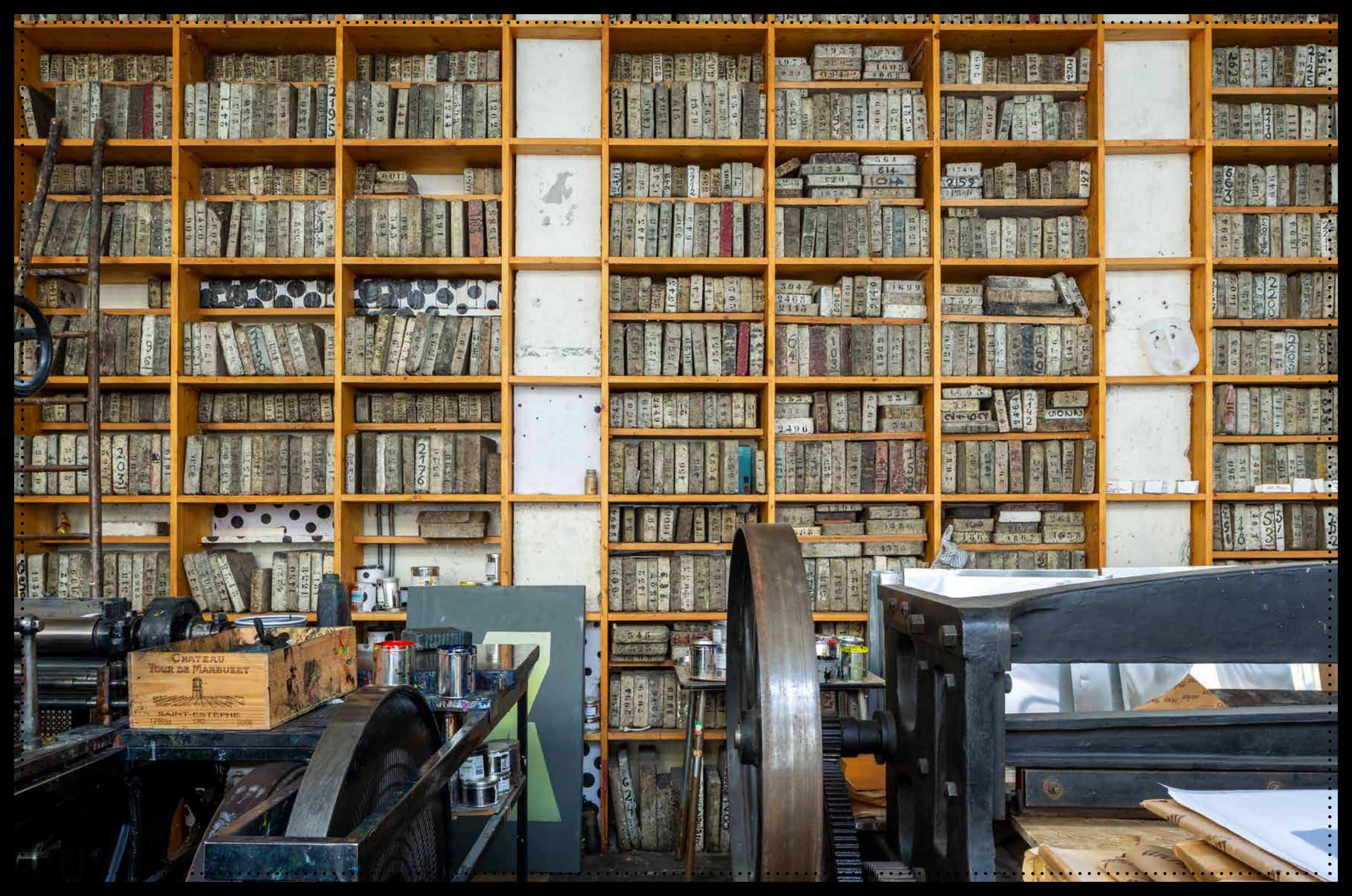
Since 1997, Idem has once again become a destination for creative minds from all over the world. In 2013 David Lynch filmed a short movie, *Idem Paris*, documenting life at the rue du Montparnasse studio. Like many neophytes, Lynch was mesmerized by “this brand-new world of the lithography and the magic of lithography, the magic of the stones... And I think the place is very important—in other words, the same stone could be moved to another place, and I think the work that comes out would be different.”

If Paris is like a book and every corner of the city has a story to tell, then certainly the story of Idem is one of the most inspiring: a tale of passion, tradition, perseverance, innovation, and above all, beauty.

The Guardians of Print

Words by Marco Mansi
Images by Mark Luscombe-Whyte





CHATEAU
TOUR DE MARBUZET
SAINT-ESTEPHE
1996

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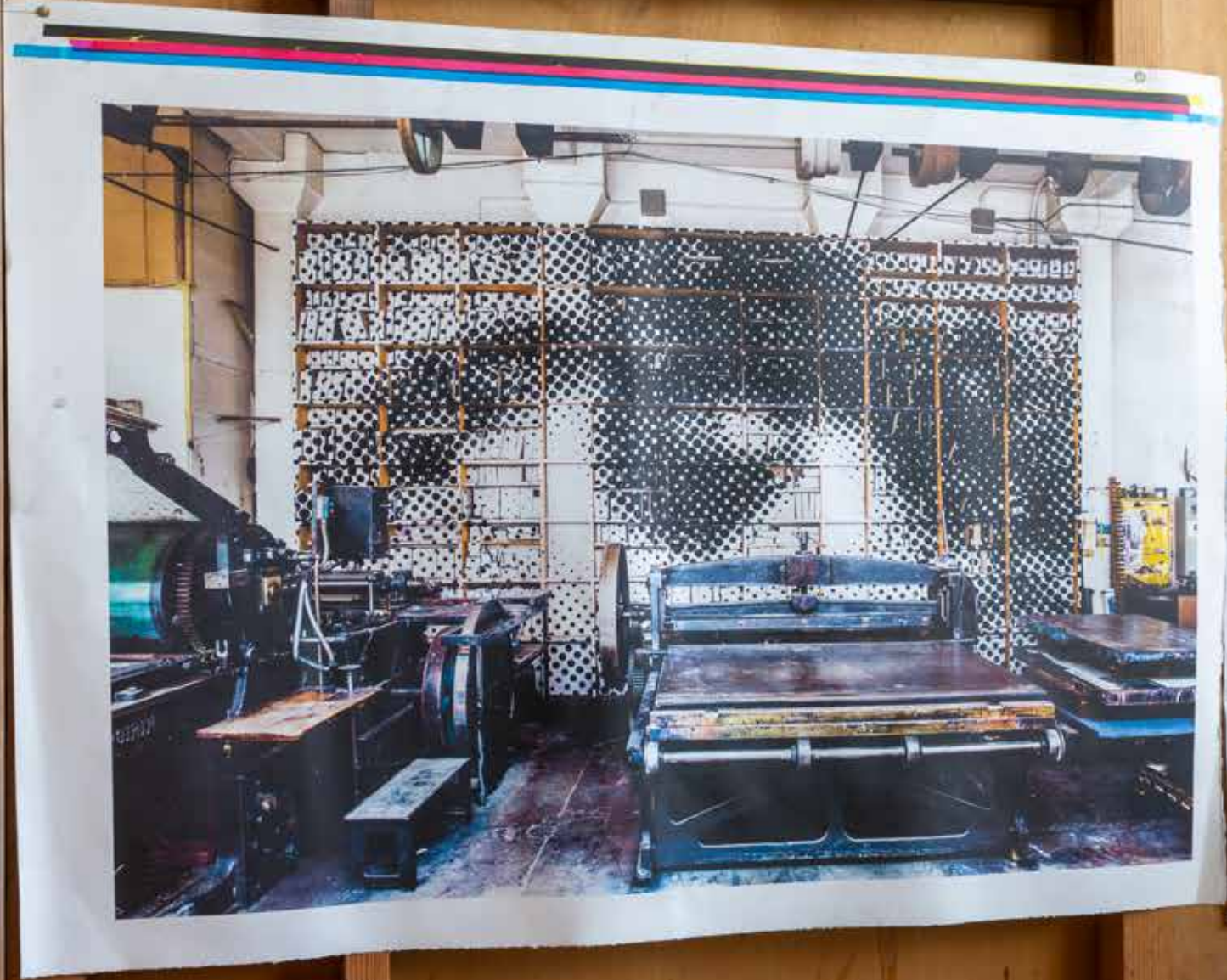
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AN ARTS COUNCIL EXHIBITION



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16 SEPTEMBER 1960
SUNDAYS 2-8 ADMISSION 3/6





