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Sensational American Book Bindings

Bearing Witness to the Industrial Revolution and the Gilded Age

1. The development of moveable type and the printing press created a world in which multiple copies of works were produced almost simultaneously. Bindings for the works were needed, therefore, at an increasing frequency. Binding materials and styles were chosen for practicality, cost, and expediency. Bindings were, largely, utilitarian, unless a particular buyer commissioned a particularly special binding. *The primary roll of the binding was to protect the textblock within.*

2. That is not to say that there was nothing to be had but plain paper wrappers or unadorned leather boards. Paper was being marbled with natural dyes and used in bindings. Leather was being marbled, too, at times in intricate patterns, like the tree calf seen here on this 1780 work. Essentially, binders used materials and techniques available at the time to create plain to intricate decorations, while staying aware of the market. The peasant binding on the left, for example, was made in Germany but intended for the American market.

3. The Parables of Our Lord. New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1848. Monastic-style papier-mâché and plaster.

This volume was made in the early part of the Victorian era, at a time when people in American and England, where this style seems to have originated, were particularly interested in medieval art and architecture, including their hand-carved bindings and illuminated manuscripts (which

the text here imitates). This style of binding is called a papier-mâché binding, and was likely, at least in part, made of papier-mâché, but other materials were also used to create what is a surprisingly heavy object that bears a striking resemblance to carved wood, ebony, or iron.

4. Single board from a book or portfolio cover, papier-mâché inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Ca. 1850-1855.

This binding is also made of papier-mâché, enameled, and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The Library Company holds about 45 of this type of binding, almost all published in New York, and produced only for a very short period of time, around 1850-55. The technique used on these boards was quite popular at the time and was used to decorate all sorts of household and personal items, including everything from snuff boxes to furniture. The technique is extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming. It is no wonder then that, despite its beauty, the fad was short-lived.

5. Sarah Stuart Robbins. Win and Wear. New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1864. Blocked mauve cloth.

Perhaps nothing tells the story of the influence of the industrial revolution and prevailing fads on book decoration better than the story of mauveine, the first synthetic organic dye, developed by William Perkins in 1856. Mauve attire became wildly popular after Empress Eugenie of France took a fancy to it, followed quickly by Queen Victoria, who wore a mauve dress to her daughter's wedding. It didn't take long for mauve bookcloth to appear, and then saturate the market. Soon after, other synthetic dyes were produced, and books became more vibrant, until the aniline dyes faded, turning many spines a dull tan.

6. Front and back boards only; possibly a portfolio cover. "1858" written inside in seemingly non-contemporary hand. Metal and burlap.

Not all books were meant to be touched! Some bindings seem to positively scream Do Not Touch! There are metal spikes on this binding about a centimeter in length, and the cloth itself is a coarse burlap. Couple that with the bold title My Book, and the viewer gets the sense that they should keep their distance.

7. Left: The Golden Key of Heaven. New York: Salim Elias, 69 Washington Street, c1892. Imprimatur: Joseph Dwenger, Bishop of Fort Wayne. Velvet, metal, and bone. Right: Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church. Hemlandssanger: Utgifna af Augustana-Synoden. Rock Island, Ill.: Lutheran Augustana Book Concern, c1891. Leather, metal, and mother-of-pearl.

On the other hand, some books positively begged to be touched. The two religious works in the next slide invite the holder to touch the cross in the center. The one on the left is made of bone and metal affixed to velvet. The one on the right is metal and mother-of-pearl on leather. Both are quite small (ca. 11 cm.) and fit nicely in the palm of the hand. The one on the right in particular is just the right size and shape that, when holding it, one can hardly resist the urge to lay ones thumb upon the flowers on the cross, as though one placed the flowers there oneself. There is a very prayerful feeling in just holding this volume. It inspired reverence even before the cover was lifted.

8. Anna L. Ward, ed. A Dictionary of Quotations from English and American Poets. New York; Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell & Company, c1883. Padded embossed leather, beveled edges.

Padded bindings became a popular option in the 1880s and through the start of the next century. They provided not just a protection for the text, or a description of the content, but an experience for the reader that went beyond the visual. The volumes were meant to be held and squeezed, not propped on a table or a stand. Padded bindings varied greatly in materials used, amount of padding, and design. Some, as the one in this slide, were very reminiscent of earlier bindings.

This one resembles embossed leather bindings that were popular in the second quarter of the 19th century.

9. Charles and Mary Lamb. Tales from Shakespeare. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., [not before 1878]. Padded embossed cloth.

The next padded binding, as the previous, has added dimension in the raised floral pattern. This certainly adds to the tactile experience, but one glance at the cover of this book shows us how color was employed on bindings such as this to enhance the three-dimensionality, to make the padded binding not just an enhanced tactile but an enhanced visual experience.

10. Left: Anna L. Ward, ed. A Dictionary of Poetical Quotations. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., ca. 1883. Padded alligator.

Right: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The Song of Hiawatha. Minnehaha Edition. New York: Hurst & Co., c1898. Padded embossed imitation alligator paper.

Padded binding were made for a large swath of the economic spectrum. Some publishers were known for the quality of the volumes they produced (like T.Y. Crowell), and others were known for their down-market wares (like Hurst). Both produced padded bindings. Here we see a fine alligator padded binding from Crowell (the top of the line option for any particular title), and the knock off from Hurst, which is actually quite well-executed imitation alligator embossed paper.

11. Left and Right: Oliver Wendell Holmes. The Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., c1900. Padded embossed cloth.

So, buyers had options. The next slide show two copies of the same imprint bound in padded cloth with different designs. There's nothing new in giving buyer's options. For a long time people had the option to take the book in the binding in which it was sold and keep it that way, or choose to have it rebound. In the first half of the 19th century, books were routinely sold in a

variety of bindings, varying cloth grains and colors, leathers with varying levels of quality and adornment. Nothing new here. EXCEPT!

12. Sir Walter Scott. Christmas in the Olden Time. New York: Cassell & Co., 1887.

Left: Leather spine and borders around velvet panels on front and back; front panel has leather label affixed.

Right: Leather spine and borders around moiré silk panels on front and back.

With the possible exception of bibles, which were routinely displayed on stands or tables, books, however beautiful, were expected to be shelved, with the covers hidden by other books, save only the spine, where the title might be displayed. And so they *were*. That's why we routinely see spines that are faded (as in our mauve volume).

But now books are becoming more of a decorative object in their own right, to be displayed rather than shelved. The bindings in this slide are both for the same work, same imprint. The spines are identical. If you intended to shelve these, it wouldn't much matter which you bought. These volumes are special because of their boards. The differences here are striking, one in velvet upholstery cloth, the other in brilliant silk moiré. One had the option of choosing a binding that matched their décor.

13. Felicia Hemans. The Breaking Waves Dashed High. Boston: Lee and Shepard; New York: Charles T. Dillingham, 1883. Stiff chromo-lithographed paper wrappers with chenille fringe around three sides of front and back wrappers.

Until 1903, when Cedric Chivers developed the method of bookbinding called vellucent, various methods were developed to illustrate bindings, but these were quite limited, too costly, and usually, too fragile. Here we see one such attempt in this copy of a Felicia Hemans work from 1883, which has stiff chromo-lithographed paper wrappers and is further adorned on three sides with chenille fringe. The illustration is in remarkable condition, considering the delicate nature

of the paper. The fringe shows a bit more wear, and demonstrates the particular weakness of extra dimensional bookbindings.

14. Left: Matthew Arnold, editor. Selected Poems of Lord Byron. New York; Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., c1893 (and c1884). Red cloth with molded hand-colored celluloid plaque affixed to front board.

Right: Robert Browning, editor. Poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. New York; Boston: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co. Not after 1899 (based on inscription). Green cloth with molded hand-colored celluloid plaque affixed to front board.

These two volumes illustrate another example of the frailty of extra-dimensional bindings.

While the raised designs on both are still intact, they were both originally hand-colored and sadly, very little of that coloring remains. These two depict an early use of the newly developed plastics in bookbinding decoration. The first thermoplastics were parkesine and xylonite (1862 and 1869 respectively). Celluloid, as trademarked by the Celluloid Manufacturing Co., was first manufactured in 1872.

15. Louis K. Harlow. Green Pastures and Still Waters. Boston: Samuel E. Cassino, c1887. Celluloid front and back covers, sewn to text; no spine. Back cover decorated with wood grain.

It is likely that most of the plastics used on the bindings in this presentation are Celluloid, but I can't be certain of that at this point. Perhaps insignificantly, but perhaps not, the name Xylonite comes from the Greek "xylon" meaning wood. The back board of this binding has a wood grain, as did many of these early plastic bookcovers.

16. Left: Charles Kingsley. Song of the River. Boston: Estes & Lauriat, c1887. Limp light yellow celluloid, textured on outside, tied with silk ribbon.

Center: John White and Annie Hathaway Chadwick, compilers. Out of the Heart: Poems for Lovers Young and Old. Boston: Joseph Knight Company, c1891. Limp cream celluloid with crimped edges. Unlike the other two, this plastic has no shine or texture, but is rather matte and smooth, and has a wood-grain.

Right: Dwight L. Moody. Brilliants. Boston: Samuel E. Cassino, c1894. Limp red celluloid, textured outside, glossy inside.

All bindings are one piece of plastic wrapped around the text and then stabbed through, with Kingsley still having its silk ribbon.

The new Celluloid was superior to xylonite and parkesine in part because it was much more pliable. With more pliable plastic, a simple but beautiful wrapper could be made out of plastic, in any color. These next have delicate crimped edges and otherwise are reminiscent of limp vellum bindings. Plastic could also be textured, made rough, or given luster. While these three appear quite similar, the differences in them become apparent when touched, and when opened, where an entirely different looking and feeling plastic is found on the inside of the wrapper.

17. Left: [Photo] Album. Not after 1893 (based on inscription). Padded blue velvet with metal spring clasp and molded celluloid plaque on front board. Early shape book. Right: Thomas Moore. The Poetical Works. New York: E. & J.B. Young & Co., not after 1888 (based on inscription). Padded blue velvet with molded celluloid plaque on front board.

Deluxe styles of binding, those perhaps most representative of the excesses of the gilded age, combined plastic, padding, and velvet. Velvet was beloved since its creation, but was prohibitively expensive before the development of industrial power looms. Even then, though velvet was a very popular upholstery fabric, it was still too expensive to constitute a large presence in many homes. A book bound in velvet might have to suffice as a decorative element for people of more modest means.

18. Left (and background): [Blank] Album. Not after 1900 (based on inscriptions). Gray velvet back board and spine; hand-colored gray plastic molded over board. Stamp on back pastedown: Patented Sept. 15th [9?]3.

Right: [Blank] Album. Not after 1887. Padded purple/burgundy/wine velvet with metal plaque affixed to front board.

In the next slide, we again see plastic and velvet and, on the lower right, padded velvet with a metal plaque. The gray volume, the back of which is featured as the background of this slide, has a patent date stamped on the back pastedown. I have thusfar been unable to identify the patent

that is being referred to here, but I suspect it has something to do with the way the plastic is molded around the front board, resembling more traditional binding techniques.

19. [Photo album]. Undated but metal spring clasp resembles that found on volume in slide #17, which is no later than 1893. Back and spine are green and gold upholstery fabric, not padded but with evidence of a possible plaque missing; front is metal, painted and enameled to resemble something like mother-of-pearl; with metal corner pieces and spring clasp; front board has mirror affixed with metal border.

This photo album is undated with no identifying information whatever. The spring clasp allows me to tentatively date it to around 1893. The back is velvet upholstery fabric and may have, at one time, contained a plaque. The front of this volume is a wonder. It is metal, painted and enameled, apparently pretending to be plastic, and with a crescent shaped mirror in the center. Pictures don't do this book justice. It represents the Gilded Age spectacularly and flamboyantly and, as such, is truly sensational, in every sense of the word.