A Book by Its Cover:

Decorative Book Bindings from the Medieval Codex to Contemporary Artists’ Books

# Introductory Panel:

**A Book by Its Cover**

“No pattern should be without some sort of meaning.”

---William Morris, *Hopes and Fears for Art*

A first encounter with any text is shaped by its outward appearance. A book’s spine, covers, edges, even its size and shape, all say something about where that book comes from, who it may be speaking to, and how it may be regarded by the people who made it, and those who owned it. Bindings frame a text physically and, with innovations in structure and design, metaphorically, too.

The transition from the papyrus and parchment roll to the codex during the fourth century C.E. made bindings a practical necessity, and early bindings were chiefly utilitarian. Made of stiffened vellum or hardwood boards covered in leather, codex bindings were designed to protect the works they enveloped and make them more convenient to store and to read. Decorations were few and generally limited to tooling and stamping, though medieval treasure bindings used gem and precious-metal ornament to reflect the preciousness of the book at hand. Coats of arms and other markings were occasionally applied to a binding to indicate ownership and give some clue to the work contained within. The visual cues were subtle, however, and the relationship between a text and its binding was never as explicit as seen in today’s hardbound and paperback books.

The utilitarian aspect diminished in the nineteenth century when bookbinders, some of whom were informed by principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement, explored ways in which bindings might enhance the subject matter of the books they contained. Changes in manufacture and design techniques led to artistic innovations that made the binding essential to the text, a crucial part of the story from the very point of entry.

# Concluding Panel:

**The Way We Read Now**

“I judge a book by its cover; I judge a book by its shape.” – Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading*

Throughout most of book history, the binders of books have remained anonymous and almost entirely silent. And yet, with close observation, a binding can be read for the many clues it offers about the text inside it: where it came from, who made it, who it might be intended for and how it may have been received. Unlike printer’s devices or manuscript colophons, material traces of the identities of bookbinders are few. Binders’ signatures do not appear with any regularity until the nineteenth century, when the distinctive styles of a number of fine binders became recognizable in their own right. For the Guild of Women Binders, one artisans collective, was to ensure a correspondence between the binding and the subject matter of the book, the lasting influence of which can be seen in this exhibition.

# Frankenstein Didactic:

**“Thus Strangely Are Our Souls Constructed…”**

The quotation from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* continues: “and by slight ligaments are we bound to prosperity and ruin.” What a beautiful metaphor for a text’s relationship to its binding. Packaged, sometimes humbly, sometimes imperfectly, sometimes nobly and stunningly, books are sent off into the world to find their way … or not, depending on how they are judged, often at the reader’s first encounter with their material embodiment. Like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, Adam, a noble soul stitched together from that which was dead and discarded, Chicago book artist Karen Hanmer’s patchwork binding cloaks a text of uncommon grace. The novel, begun by Shelley when she was in her late teens and first published in 1818, remains widely read today. This edition, published by Centipede Press, features arresting woodcut illustrations by Lynd Ward. Hanmer’s binding, like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, complicates the notion of judging a book by its cover.

Arabian Nights Pillar Label:

**Binding design by E. J. Detmold**

***The Arabian Nights*, illustrated by E. J. Detmold**

London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1924

Binding: publisher's pictorial vellum with gold stamping; top edge gilt, fore and bottom edges untrimmed.

*Purchased on the Joseph and Helen Regenstein Rare Book Fund*

Call number: ARREARAGE 2019-136

The spine detail on the pillar face, opposite, is taken from a sumptuous full-vellum binding commissioned by the publisher Hodder and Stoughton. The design, stamped in gilt, is by the E. J. Detmold, well-known for his career as a book illustrator. The binding conveys, with deft use of negative space, the vastness of possibility, symbolized by the Arabian desert and embodied by the never-ending quality of storytelling in the narrative text of *The Arabian Nights*. The complete binding is on view in the cases at right on “Publishers’ Bindings.”

# A Christmas Carol Pillar Label:

**Bound by Sangorski & Sutcliffe**

Dickens, Charles

***A Christmas Carol in Prose, with illustrations by John Leech***

London: Chapman & Hall, 1843

*Purchased on the Joseph and Helen Regenstein Rare Book Fund*

Binding: Binding: Green morocco with gilt-stamped floral decoration and the letter "E" in upper corners and "XMAS 1908 in lower corners; publisher's original brown cloth bound in; signed: Sangorski & Sutcliffe

Among fine binders, Sangorski & Sutcliffe rank near the top. Known for their spectacular, be-gemmed bindings in the tradition of medieval treasure bindings, the firm is perhaps most famous for its fabled “Great Omar,” a binding of The Rubáiyát studded with a thousand jewels – but a book that went down with the sinking of *The Titanic* in 1912. Influenced by the teachings of T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and the Arts and Crafts Movement, Francis Sangorski and George Sutcliffe founded their bindery in 1901. The binding on exhibit here, for Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, was completed in 1908 and has several interesting associations. The binding bears a more typical binders’ signature, but the book itself bears the manuscript signatures of Sangorski, Sutcliffe and the London bookseller Walter Spencer, who was a friend of Charles Dickens. What’s more, this copy of *A Christmas Carol* includes a tipped-in original gilt pen-and-ink drawing of a London street scene at Christmas, possibly by the illustrator Alberto Sangorski, Francis’s brother. The original publisher’s cloth binding of *A Christmas Carol* is also bound in.

# Plants of New Zealand Pillar Label:

**Bound by Eleanor Joachim**

Laing, R. M.

***The Plants of New Zealand***

Christchurch, New Zealand: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1906

*Purchased on the Joseph and Helen Regenstein Rare Book Fund*

Binding: bound by Eleanor Joachim, signed in gilt rear dentelle, "19 M.E.J. 08"; full Niger Morocco over boards; heavily gold tooled with stylized Rata tree on cover, similar leaf motifs on rear cover, spine, and wide dentelles; gilt edges.

Call number: ARREARAGE 2021-18

Mary Eleanor Joachim was a student of Sangorski and Sutcliffe’s, the authors of the binding for Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, featured at left. Although Joachim was born in England, her parents emigrated to New Zealand when she was two years old. Joachim’s feelings about her home country might be inferred from this lovely binding, one of three she has been known to have done for the text, one of which, according to the book historian Marianne Tidcombe, was presented to Queen Alexandra.

# Bookbinding Today

Binders, book artists and publishers continue to experiment and innovate, using the paratextual material of spines, covers, book edges, dust jackets, and historical binding structures, to enhance and even transform the texts that they envelop. Some of the best contemporary book covers add essential meanings to the texts they hold – meanings that are lost when the text is separated from its material packaging, as in a book that has been microfilmed or digitized without the binding and other paratextual material included.

# Bindings to Treasure

The bindings in this case are all crafted in the tradition of the medieval “treasure binding” – luxurious bindings covered in tooled gold or silver and often studded with jewels and gemstones, or decorated with detailed narrative scenes. Treasure bindings get their name not only for the value of the materials used to make them, but also because they, along with saints’ relics, vestments and plate, once formed part of a church’s treasury. Books with treasure bindings undoubtedly lend prestige to the texts that they envelop – in the medieval period these texts were typically liturgical and devotional manuscripts – as well as to the person or institution that possesses them.

# Paper Bindings

Paper marbling, one of the most common techniques for decorating paper, began in the East and migrated West, with practitioners setting up guilds in Europe in the sixteenth century. Marbled papers are most closely associated with bookbinding, as they were commonly used as endpapers and as wrappers for un-bound or yet-to-be-bound books. In addition to marbled patterns, papermakers devised other techniques of decoration, including pulled-paste papers, which have a three-dimensional quality, block-printed papers, cut papers, foiled papers and Dutch gilt papers that evoke the quality of brocade. The protection that paper wrappers from the early-modern period offered were flimsy when compared to board bindings from the same time, and survival of fine specimens of decorated paper wrappers has been more precarious. Patterned papers are still used to decorate the bindings of books, often pasted over the boards of a binding or used as endpapers.

# Publisher’s Bindings

Publisher’s bindings are decorated bindings issued in quantity – as opposed to the bespoke work of a member of the Guild of Women Binders, for example, or a firm known for fine binding, such as Sangorski & Sutcliffe. The designs of publisher’s bindings are commissioned, paid for and brought to market by the publisher, rather than by an artist, bookseller or purchaser. The quality of the materials, workmanship and aesthetics found in publishers’ bindings run the range from plain and simple to beautiful and profound, as evidenced by the examples chosen for this case, and the case at left. In some publisher’s bindings, the person or persons responsible for the design of a binding or book jacket are not the same as the person who, or machine that, crafts the binding. Even more common is for neither the binder nor its designer to be identified. Bookbinding, unlike writing, printing, or publishing, remains largely an anonymous art.

# Women Binders

Bookbinding is a largely anonymous art, and as it is the product of physical handwork, one might assume that women had little role in it historically. However as is true of printing and other books arts, women have made lasting contributions, and beginning in the nineteenth century, they chose not to remain hidden in the margins. Although many noted women binders of this period learned from master binders such as Douglas Cockerell, Francis Sangorski, George Sutcliffe and others, Sarah Prideaux, for example, wrote extensively about and trained others in the art. The Guild of Women Binders – not a guild in the traditional sense – was a collective of women binders active from 1898 to 1904. The Guild got its start after Francis Karslake, a London bookseller, mounted an exhibition at his shop in Charing Cross of artistic bindings, all of them made by women. Karslake acted as agent for the Guild members’ work. The Guild’s aim, informed by the Arts and Crafts movement, was to revive the art and appreciation of handwork and individuality, particularly as counterpoint to the uniformity of machine-made books and bindings. Guild members worked only with fine materials – calf, morocco, vellum – and their bindings are noted for their rich colors, exquisite tooling and patterning. One key aim of the Guild, the lasting influence of which can be seen in this exhibition, was to assure a correspondence between the binding and the subject matter of the book.

# Binder’s Tools

A variety of tools used in hand binding, generously loaned by the University of Chicago Library’s own Head of Conservation, Ann Lindsey, whose scientific analysis of the binding of the sixteenth-century antiphonary can be viewed in the wall case in the rear of the gallery. Among the tools on display are an awl, bone folders, a brush, clamp, cutting mat, mallet, needles, a ruler, thread, and a tooling wheel.