THE RARE CRAFT OF BOOKBINDING
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THE RARE CRAFT OF BOOKBINDING

BY RICHARD ATCHESON

As intricate as it is delicate, this centuries-old occupation is preserved as an art form by a vanishing breed of artisans.

When Henry VIII wanted a book bound, and he often did, he referred the matter to Thomas Berthelet, his printer and binder. Berthelet was celebrated in England for his ability to produce gold-tooled leather bindings “in the Venetian manner.”

And if you should care to emulate Henry today, and have a book bound for your own collection, and could locate one of the very few first-rate bookbinders in America, he would do for you exactly what Berthelet did for Henry.

In fact, while machine binding is the process for all mass production in the book-making industry today, hand binding – its methods and simple tools – is almost entirely what it was and has been for the past 400 years. Clearly, bookbinding is a craft which is not notably susceptible to innovation.

We know from the letters of Saint Jerome that as early as the 4th Century, books were being cased in leather and decorated sumptuously in carved ivory and precious stones. But, ornamentation apart, the basic process was already in place at that time. Very early books had been made up of folded single sheets of vellum, or paper, which were gathered into sections and sewn together onto bands or thongs set at right angles to the backs. For their protection, these sewn sheets were placed between thin boards. It didn’t take some monk very long to figure out that it would be easy and convenient to connect the boards to the ends of the thongs, and even better to put a leather covering over the backs and across the boards. The basic principle of construction of a book was then fully evolved and remains the same today.

The trade of bookbinding is most often thought of, when it is thought of at all, for the elaborate ornamentations specified by the great collectors of many centuries; these rare and precious products of the craft are today, for the most part, in libraries and museums (the Morgan in New York, for example, and the Victoria and Albert in London), and in private collections. The relatively more ordinary bindings done in the trade through the centuries have mostly been lost, so we are

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looking at a biased sample. However, it is still possible to find a few binderies where only the simplest form of the craft is still done. And while the number of artisans at either end of the scale has undergone a quantum shrink in the past couple of hundred years, it is also still possible to find a very few experts whose work transcends the craft and — following an ancient tradition — lifts it into the stratosphere of high art.

George Shattuck, the proprietor of Smith Bookbinding in Princeton, New Jersey, aspires to nothing so rarefied. In his small shop on Witherspoon Street, he and one assistant work methodically and with great concentration at an amazingly varied array of projects in what he defines as “two stages: text preparation and case-making.” (In the trade, the front and back covers and spine of a book are its case.) Text preparation includes the sewing of the sections of the one work. Case-making involves the wetting and gluing of leathers to the covers. Shattuck also does gold-stamping on fronts and spines, which is achieved by pressing letters onto the leather under heat. Any slip of the hand can ruin the entire case. “I don’t make mistakes,” he says with a laugh.

Princeton is a good town for a bookbinder because the university provides plenty of work. Doctoral theses come to lodge with Shattuck, as well as first editions of local authors. But there is much else piled everywhere, waiting for covers:

"Transactions of the American Society of Agricultural Engineers," for example; "Journal of the American Chemical Society"; even "Journal of the Magic Collectors' Association." Also waiting is the entire past 15 years of Gourmet Magazine. "That's nothing," Shattuck says. "I have one customer who has bound every copy of Sports Illustrated from Volume I, Number One." Shattuck also binds copies of record for local newspapers, and does a steady trade in the repair and/or binding of old hymn books and family Bibles.

Shattuck says he prefers to work in bonded leather rather than in calf, because it cuts the costs in half. His operation is probably nearest to the journeyman tradition of the trade as still exists. But this is not to diminish the elegance and precision of his work, which is beautiful to watch for its very simplicity, concentration, and modesty. It is interesting that he has clients all over the country, who send projects to him for binding and casing.

The establishment of H. Weitz, on Lexington Avenue in New York, is very definitely a book of a different cover. This is the place to go if you seek the kind of elaborate work that rivals the great masters of the past, and when money is no object; these characteristics of the enterprise are immediately apparent before you ever step into the shop. Through the front window you can see a young man in a light cotton jacket, busily oiling the leather covers of rare books. Through
the right window you can gaze at towering bookshelves on which rows of books, richly decorated in gold, glow expensively and impressively. At the door you are more than likely to see the proprietor, Herb Weitz, himself—a man of middle age and middle size whose capacity to talk about rare books and fine binding is overwhelmingly larger than life, and whose enthusiasm for the work of his binder-partner, Billy Halpin, knows no bounds. "If Ferdinand, the King of Spain, had seen Billy's work," he says, "he'd have fired his guys and hired Billy."

"A major collection of tools in the world" enables Halpin to produce work in the style of nearly any historical period.

Herb's father, Leo, went into the rare book business on his arrival in America in 1909. "My father's particular specialty was beautiful sets in fine bindings, and single gorgeous books. If that's what you wanted, you went to Leo Weitz," Herb, who inherited the business in 1972, has continued that tradition in collaboration with Billy, whose father also was in the trade. "John Halpin died in 1979," says Weitz, "and his son Billy had been binding for his father since he was a kid. So we have here a man of 35 who has 23 years of experience. It's like a throwback to the time when crafts were always passed on from father to son, or to a young apprentice."

The working relationship between Weitz and Halpin is a kind of classic one, in that Halpin keeps to his workshop in the basement under the retail shop—a truly silent partner in the sense that he rarely opens his mouth, while Weitz, the front man, is characteristically loquacious. "I'm up here talking to customers, doing what I'm supposed to do. And Billy is down there, silent as a clam, doing this beautiful, skilled work, which is what he's supposed to do."

Do not suppose, however, that the taciturn Halpin works in an atmosphere of monastic silence. Far from it. He does his exquisite blind stamping (that's when leather is worked without gold), gold stamping, and complex leather inlays of many colors to the accompaniment of Continued
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Weitz: an aesthetic beyond time and material.

clamorous hard-rock music from the radio. "There was an antiquarian scholar here one time," Weitz recalls, "who was so thrilled to see Billy work with this fine collection of antique bookbinding tools we have, and he was beside himself to hear all this rock music blasting away. I don't think he knew whether to laugh or cry."

Weitz's collection of tools, by the way, could not, in his estimation, be assembled again for less than half a million dollars. He is willing to describe it as "a major collection in the world" which he says he was "lucky to capture." It enables Halpin to produce work in the style of very nearly any historical period, and in negotiation with the client, the details of decoration are customarily tailored to the period of the text in question. Both Weitz and Halpin do very extensive research to find the best models, and then Halpin designs a mode of expression which tends to echo the original intent without any hint of imitation.

Most of the product from H. Weitz is in private hands and not available to see, but Weitz has an extensive set of slides which display past and current triumphs, and he often uses these when he lectures on bookbinding. "Most bookbinders are shy and retiring types," he says. "They have no time to talk. They tend to manual dexterity and a certain fussiness. They also have to practice eight hours a day for a long time to be good at it. They rarely go at it in any entrepreneurial way. That's where I come in. Our background is in
rare books, but we want to work with anybody who wants to own a beautiful book. Half of what we're doing here is based on sentiment, not equity. The books brought to us mean a lot to their owners. And some come out of our basement with an aesthetic that is far beyond considerations of time and material."

John Updike was honored with a copy of his first published novel in royal purple morocco.

H. Weitz works exclusively in imported morocco and calf, and any additional enhancements are of first quality. One striking jewel of their production is The Book of the Pearl, which was cased for a pearl wedding anniversary. The cover is designed with inlaid ovals of mother-of-pearl surrounded by sprays of gold. ("It lives at the Pierre now," Weitz remarked.) He sold the book inside for $250 and the binding for $1,000.

Weitz calculates the price of a basic leather binding by taking length and width times ten, plus $20 (up to 20 inches). This is, of course, just for starters, depending on such variables as whether certain sewing procedures or other special techniques will be called for, and on whether

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the client wants specific and elaborate decoration. Texan Clint Murchison, for example, had five sets of the Encyclopedia Britannica done in worked leather in 1981 at a cost of $50,000, and Weitz recently delivered a complete collection of the works of Rudyard Kipling — each volume bearing on its front cover an elephant in inlaid leather, with ivory tusks fashioned from piano keys — for $20,000.

Everywhere are family Bibles and albums, all books infused with sentiment over generations.

Among Weitz's clients are several publishers who compliment their authors by presenting them with handsomely bound copies of their works. These include Ballantine Books, who gave Jim Davis a leather-bound, gold-stamped copy of each of his Garfield editions; William Morrow, who have had bound the works of Joseph Wambaugh; and New York Times Books, which has so far placed more than 100 orders for bound presentation volumes with Weitz. Recently Knopf honored John Updike with a copy of his first published novel, The Carpentered Hen, in royal purple morocco with gold-stamped decoration, as a 50th birthday present. Weitz has also bound scores and scripts for Emmy-winning Alvin Cooperman, and has many other clients in and out of show business who prefer not to be named.

As in George Shattuck's shop in Princeton, the basement workrooms of Weitz are stacked with projects awaiting attention. A set of old dictionaries sits side-by-side with the Baptismal Records of the Church of the Heavenly Rest on Fifth Avenue. The records of the Field Foundation sit massively alongside a first edition of Bellini's score for I Puritani. And everywhere are family Bibles and family albums, all books much loved and cherished, infused with sentiment over generations. The work on some of these will be relatively straightforward repairs and restorations or original bindings costing not more than a few hundred dollars; other projects will cost in the thousands.

"It is all a matter of what you want," says Weitz. "It costs a lot of money, it's true. But this kind of binding was never done for poor people."

Richard Atcheson is an editorial consultant and freelance writer based in Princeton, New Jersey.

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SKY January 1984