Duncan & de Bartha. Art Nouveau and Art Deco Bookbinding

Sidney F. Huttner

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/shuttner/31/
Like a Napolitain, *Art Nouveau and Art Deco Bookbinding* is carefully layered. Placed between twenty-four preliminary pages of introduction (set in 10 point and generously leaded) and sixteen final pages of notes, biographies, bibliographies, and index (set in 7 point), are 238 rather sumptuous plates, 202 in color, arranged alphabetically by the artist. This block is glazed with black endsheets and a black cloth case, the top board stamped in gold with an exuberant fireworks-burst courageously *not* based on one of the plates. The whole is topped with a sturdy dust jacket whose design, based on a 1929 binding by René Assourd, features the naked backside of a woman astride a sphinx.

The plates are the point of this book. The alphabetical arrangement, however, allows the images to float like bits of goose and sausage amid a soup of beans as we are offered now one style, now another. The introduction flows chronologically and invites attention to change and development, but separating nouveau from deco, say, requires much flipping back and forth. The fact that no information is given on the size of the book represented discourages investigation, because it is impossible in the end to visualize the object adequately.

The impression of a book elegantly but thoughtlessly assembled is strengthened by an introduction that ends abruptly in a full-page plate—as though an editor had said, “Okay boys, enough hors d’oeuvres; on to the entrée.” Each of the forty-eight “bookbinders” (two are pairs and some are designers, not binders) is introduced by a few words that recall the introduction or comment on the artist’s contribution. These captions are expanded in the brief biographies that follow the footnotes.

The biographies leave one curious: no information apparently could be found for eleven of the forty-eight bookbinders whose work is shown; there are biographical notes for two binders who are otherwise not mentioned at all (if we can trust the index). There are no notes for at least two designers given prominence in the introduction (Jules Chadel and Adolphe Giraldon—Giraldon is represented by two small black-and-white plates, Chaudel by none). The brief bibliographies appended to each note are useful starting points for further investigation.

Twenty-six binders are represented by a single plate (including six unidentified bindings); fourteen, by two to five plates; and only six are represented by more than ten plates: Henri Creuzevault (11), Rose Adler (12), Pierre Legrain (17), Georges Cretté (18), François-Louis Schmied (18) and Paul Bonet (44). A large percentage of the plates are credited either to the
Henry Vever collection, now owned by the Sutton Place Foundation, or to Christie’s Geneva. While it adds to the feast to have in one place, for example, the forty-four Bonet bindings, *Art Nouveau and Art Deco Bookbinding* does linger at well-known châteaux.

Duncan is a decorative-arts consultant at Christie’s New York; de Bartha, a director at Hapsburg Feldman Fine Art Auctioneers in Geneva. Neither claims expert knowledge of the mechanics of bookbinding, which perhaps explains their odd, in not misleading, terminology. *Leather,* for example, seems to mean goatskin, because other skins are identified as calf, shark, snake, or whatever. Footnote 2 mentions binders’ preference for Morocco goatskin, but the text uses the ambiguous *leather* throughout. Raised bands are called *ribs; punches or stamping wheels* (described as “fillets”) seems to mean hand tools and rolls, rather than the straight and curved tools of varying width required for the spectacular tooling designed, for example, by Bonet. A *gilder* might more naturally be called a finisher (as mentioned in footnote 1) and *gilded,* tooled.

The traditional French distinction between *relieur* and *doreur,* a distinction strongly challenged during the period with which this book is concerned, is left in the end rather murky. The customer provided the book, chose the kind of covering, and indicated the style of decoration desired; the relieur forwarded (sewed) the book, attached boards, and covered them with leather); and the doreur finished (tooled the book). One person might, of course, be competent in both processes. Binding shops were more concerned with the steady flow of commissions than with the occasional challenge of a complex and expensive binding.

The great innovation of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the introduction of a designer who might or might not have either forwarding or finishing skills, but who could direct the skills of varied craftsmen in the creation of elaborate bindings, which included exotic skins, metal and lacquer work, jewels, watercolors, and many other materials. Thus, a binding for Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes* (1932) is described as “bound by Ferdinand Giraldon, gilded by André Jeanne, metalwork by Pierre Boit” and credited to Paul Bonet. Sorting out whose work is which for these bindings is often far from easy, but Duncan and de Bartha seem to throw in the towel rather quickly” while the occasional caption mentions collaborators, many do not. Pierre Legrain, for example, designed as many as 1,300 bindings but had few, if any, binding skills. Yet only one of the bindings credited to him is described as bound by another person. The Schmied bindings are also lightly described.

If what I have written is at all convincing, it must be clear that to take this book seriously is to be disappointed. It is unfortunate that it cannot be taken seriously, but that does not mean it can or should be ignored. It is a first attempt at a survey of this important area, and anyone interested in modern arts will find it of interest; contemporary bookbinders will find inspiration in the variety and quality of the bindings shown.

The preface by Priscilla Juvelis, a Boston bookseller who deals in this kind of book, leaves no doubt that the book is aimed at the “uninitiated” who might be persuaded to collect *livres de*
peintre and designer bindings: she focuses entirely on books sold and prices realized, with emphasis on the rising market. Her suggestion, “should the Japanese collectors decide to enter this rarified market…, one can only guess at the result” (p. 7), prompts a cynical rear-brain query: how much of the edition, printed and bound in Japan, remained there?

Can we be pardoned for mixed feelings in wishing this book success? Many of the books described and depicted in Art Nouveau and Art Deco Bookbinding were created originally to develop or exploit just such a market. Thus, they were created and we are permitted this feast. This book might lead to recognition and reward for talented designer bookbinders working today; that would be good. A market driven by speculation, however, encourages gourmands, not gourmets.

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