

The Art of Publishers' Bookbindings 1815-1915 by Ellen K. Morris and Edward S. Levin. Los Angeles, Calif.: William Dailey Rare Books Ltd., 2000. 127 pp. \$75.00 (cloth); ISBN 0-915148-21-8. \$37.50 (paper); ISBN 0-915148-22-6.

This full-color extravaganza chronicles an exhibition of nineteenth and early twentieth century publishers' bookbindings held at the Grolier Club from May 17th through July 29th, 2000, and is a sophisticated and satisfying accomplishment. The catalog, comprising 254 images of bindings drawn from the Morris/Levin collection of more than 2,300 publishers' bindings assembled over the past three decades, more closely resembles an extraordinary visual pastry than a bibliophilic treatise. Granted, these masterpieces of technological savoir faire may not appeal to every palate, but this one-hundred year survey of commercial, decorative bookbindings—from the trim moiré and ribbon-embossed calicoes created during the genre's incunabular period to the elaborately stamped metal-foil and colored-ink composites produced in fin de siècle style—is sure to dazzle even the uninitiated in its assertion that functional craft is art.

Limited to an edition of 1,500 copies, *The Art of Publishers' Bookbindings 1815-1915* explores a dynamic cross section of American and English exemplars, intermixed with less common but no less beautiful German, Italian, Russian, and Spanish pieces, all presented in pristine condition as they would have first been received by the customer. Each entry includes an erudite bibliographic description accentuating the physical details of the binding, including a thoughtful cross reference when an item appeared previously in another publication.

Contributing appreciably to the history publishers' bindings, this catalog treats its topic in three complementary approaches. The first section is organized chronologically, relying on the evolution of stylistic traits to help establish a date of manufacture conforming to the methodology first described by Sue Allen in *Victorian Bookbindings a Pictorial Survey* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), and subsequently in her folding chart, *American Book Covers, 1830-1900* (Washington: Library of Congress, Binding & Collection Care Division, Preservation Directorate, 1998).

The second section treats the phenomena of binding variants, an intriguing yet little discussed aspect of Victorian publishing, and one never before illustrated so comprehensively. This comparison of cover variations occurring in some nineteenth century editions is a virtual feast documenting what can only be understood with access to a selection of bookbindings as comprehensive as the Morris/Levin collection.

Finally, the third section celebrates some of these bindings' most spectacular design and technological achievements, bringing into convergence objects of rare beauty amassed from an assortment of nations. The juxtaposition of international styles acquaints the reader with the uniquely nationalistic flavor expressed in the epitome of this work, extending the survey of English and American motifs first assayed by Ruari McLean in 1936 in *Victorian Book Design and Colour Printing* (London: Faber & Faber),

and later advanced with his *Victorian Publishers' Book-bindings in Cloth and Leather*, and *Victorian Publishers' Book-bindings in Paper* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973, and 1983, respectively), all of which helped kindle an interest in collecting and preserving this endangered material.

For the scholarly reader, the catalog indexes each entry five ways (by author, title, publisher, designer, and binder), provides a substantial bibliography of essential publications related to the topic, and, with a nod to its own place in the literature, includes a forward by Ruari McLean and an afterward by Sue Allen, both luminaries in advancing publishers' binding research.

Sumptuously designed, photographed, and typeset by Edward S. Levin, the production values employed on this book are superb. Elegantly printed on a heavily calendered, alkaline sheet in Hong Kong at Pacific Rim International, and machine-sewn through the fold to afford the reader comfort in perusal, the American Library Association deservedly recognized *The Art of Publishers' Bookbindings 1815-1915* by presenting it a Katharine Kyes Leab and Daniel J. Leab American Book Prices Current Exhibition Award in 2001, deeming it "a useful reference for librarians and collectors."

In short, this catalog is a noble testament to the ingenuity and originality employed in the applied arts during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I only hope those with their nose pressed against this industrial-period patisserie window, visually brimming with designs evocative of raspberry-apricot tarts, caramelized sugar lace, and marzipan camouflaged as a cornucopia of tropical jewels, can pull in the belt—subsist for a while on that diet of hardtack and treacle—and give in to this gilt-aged extravagance. You deserve the experience.

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