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Textile and Embroidered Bookbindings of Medieval England and France

Robin E. Muller, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

I am a textiles artist who has become interested in book arts, as have many others. In looking for historic precedents, I was amazed to learn that there was a history of books bound in fine fabric dating back to medieval Europe. These are rich, elaborately crafted objects that required binders to collaborate with craft persons skilled in needlework. Beautifully woven fabrics were used, some of which were made for clothing. Other fabrics had been made for smaller, more durable objects like books or perhaps hats and handbags. There are records of milliners making some of the bindings. The appearance and ownership of the rich volumes I'm about to show you reflect the status and power associated with the ownership of silk, books and, thus knowledge, in earlier times.

Textile bindings exist in small numbers in relation to leather books. There are several reasons for this. The books are fragile and many have disintegrated. Some religious books were destroyed during the Reformation; others were dismantled at various times to reclaim precious gemstones and metals. Many books bound in cloth were rebound in earlier times for conservation reasons. Finally, tastes changed, and book historians did not consider the textiles bindings worthy of study. Perhaps the bindings were considered woman's work, and not as important as the popular Moroccan leather books that followed.

This paper begins by looking at books in British and French Collections of the Middle Ages and somewhat beyond. Each country's descriptions start with velvet bindings, and moves on to embroidered bindings. Some of the bindings feature abstract designs, similar to those seen on leather bindings, others are pictorial. Geometric designs and the tools that make them can be reused in different configurations on different titles. This is not always the case with pictorial representations, which also require more skill to execute.¹ However, many of the pictorial bindings feature portraits of the owner, or broad religious themes and are more interchangeable than one might think.

In the centuries before printing, the goldsmith or skilled embroiderer lavishly decorated most important books. One of the results of the invention of Printing and the rapid development of the book trade that followed in the latter 15th Century, was the search for new forms for the decoration of books. The major innovation was the use of gold tooling, mostly on durable Moroccan calf, popularized in Italy where the art was probably introduced through Venice by the work of Islamic craftsmen.²

From the early 14th Century onwards, rich textiles such as velvets, silk brocades, and cloth of gold was used in royal circles for covering important manuscripts. From the 15th century onward velvet covers were often adorned with embroidery. In Europe, this form yielded rather quickly to the more practical Moroccan calf, but in

¹ . Foot, Mirjam, *Pictorial Bookbindings*, The British Library, 1986, 5.

² Barber, Giles, *Textile and Embroidered Bindings*, Bodleian Library, Oxford, 1971, 3.

England textiles bindings remained popular until the mid 17th century, dying out only after the British Civil War.³

The earliest known English embroidered binding covers an early 14th Century manuscript, the Felbrigge Psalter, but the majority were made after 1500.⁴ Most velvet and embroidered bindings on printed books date from the 16th and 17th centuries. Those covered in velvet are usually decorated silver gilt bosses and other furniture for protection. These bindings are now best visualized from wills, such as that of Cecily, widow of Richard, Duke of York in 1495.

I geve and bequ (e) ath to the Quene...a sawter (psalter) with claspes of silver and guilte enamelled cover with grene clothe also I bequeath to my lady the Kinges moder (Lady Margaret Beaufort) a portuos (breviary) with claspes of gold covered with blacke cloth of gold... goes on to describe other velvet and a few leather covered books.

H.R. Plomber, "Books Mentioned in Wills", transactions of the Bibliographic Society, 7, 99-121, esp. 109-10.⁵

In addition to velvet being pasted directly on boards, it could also be made into a loose envelope or chemise into which the volume was tucked. Chemise covers were applied to already bound books as mantle against wear and tear, sometimes covering elaborately tooled leather. The material sometimes extended well beyond the boards of the book, the extra portion being wrapped around the edges to protect from dust. Chemise binding played an important part in the religious life of Medieval Europe. They are often included in the iconography of painting sculpture and manuscript illumination. After the invention of printing, libraries grew and owners began storing books on end as we do today. The chemise got in the way and was removed.⁶

The only surviving medieval embroidered English binding is the Felbrigge Psalter in the British Library. The 14th c. embroidered panels are now inlaid in an 18th C. leather cover. It was made by Anne Felbridge, the daughter of the standard bearer to Richard II, who was a nun in a convent in Suffolk. The upper cover depicts the Annunciation; the lower cover has a scene of the Crucifixion.

Under the reign of Edward IV, we have records of velvet being delivered to cover his books, but none of the actual bindings have survived. Henry VII is the first monarch in

³ Barber, 5.

⁴ Foote, 53.

⁵ 5 Nixon, H. and Foot, M., *The History of Decorated Bookbinding in England*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 24.

⁶ . Bearman, Frederick, *The Origins and Significance of Two Late Medieval Textiles Chemise Bindings in the Walters Art Gallery*, *The New Bookbinder*, Volume 18, 1998, p.27

England to leave his mark on literary collections. The oldest surviving velvet book cover is from his collection. It is the Indentures between Henry VII and John Islip, Abbot of Westminster, concerning the foundation of Henry VII's chapel, dated July 16, 1504. The beautifully preserved chemise is red velvet lined with pink damask. The edges of the chemise hide examples of the Great Seal in gilt metal boxes. It has round silver and gold enamelled ornaments, called bosses, in a pattern on both covers and the royal arms in the center. Such bosses were common, especially on velvet bindings, before 1500. The bosses raised the book up to limit contact between the fabric and the lectern style shelving common at the time. The book is held together by band of gold braid and fastened by clasps of richly chased silver gilt, with enamelled red roses.⁷

His "Privy Purse Expenses" from 1541-3 include payments for vellum and velvet for Thomas Berthelett, royal printer and binder, who bound books in the Italian or Venetian fashion. Berthelett was the first British binder to use gold stamping on leather.⁸

Among Henry VIII's best-preserved books are copies of *The Description of the Holy Lands*, in French, by Martin de Brion. It is covered with purple velvet richly embroidered in gold with the royal coat of arms of England and France, combined in quartered sections. The cover motif is couched with gold on silk background, including a large royal crown in gold thread adorned with pearls, cross, and fleur de lis. A wreath, with the Order of the Blue Garter motto is in gold. The King's initials once had pearls, but now have only threads. Roses of Lancaster are appliquéd in the corners.⁹

Another interesting piece in the collection of Henry VIII, was made by his daughter Elizabeth. The princess wrote out *The Miroir or Glasse of the Synneful Soule* at age 11 as a New Year's gift for her step mother Katherine Parr in 1544. The fabric is silver purl, featuring a plaited braid stitch on blue silk couched ground. Elizabeth did the embroidery and calligraphy, but probably did not bind the book herself.¹⁰

Only one volume remains that belonged to Margaret Tudor. It is a manuscript of prayers, with miniatures, of the French work, *Le Chappellet de Ihesus et de la Vierge Marie*. It is covered with green velvet, and has silver clasps with the religious inscription HIS. The silver bosses have single letters centered on Tudor roses spelling Margverite in a pattern on the front and back covers.

Queen Mary left a beautiful book known as the Queen Mary Psalter, with Psalms and hymns in Latin and French, now in the British Museum. It is crimson velvet with gilt

⁷ Davenport, Cyril, *Royal English Bookbindings*, Seeley and Co. Limited, London, 1896, 10.

⁸ Davenport, 12.

⁹ Davenport, 17.

¹⁰ Barber, 5.

clasps and corners, and a large embroidery appliqué on each cover. The partly worn away appliqué features a pomegranate, a symbol to which her mother had rights. It was presented to her in 1553.¹¹

Elizabeth I had three categories of bindings in her library: those ornamented with gold, velvet with and without embroidery, and leather. Velvet was clearly her favourite. Embroidered covers remained popular in England, longer than in Europe due to her influence. Her velvet and embroidered books and many other volumes presented to her, or bearing her crest, remain in their original covers, while other royal books were rebound.¹²

In 1598, Paul Hentzner of Brandenburg visited the Library at Whitehall and wrote that it was well stocked with books in various languages “all...bound in velvet of different colours, though chiefly red, with clasps of gold and silver; some have pearls, and precious stones, set in their bindings. His book, *Itinerarium Germaniae*, published in Nuremberg in 1612, was translated into English by Richard Bentley and published as *A Journey into England in the year 1598*, by Horace Walpole in 1757.¹³

The Folger Library owns one of these red velvet volumes. It has crimson velvet over oak boards with engraved silver clasps and bosses. This metal furniture is the only decoration. It has elaborately engraved corner plates with hatched floral arabesque design and round raised bosses with bevelled edges engraved with Tudor rose. A raised lozenge in the centre plate bears the Royal Arms and crown flanked with EL and RE.

We know the names of several of Elizabeth's binders. De Planche introduced European styles of binding, known in France and Geneva to London. He and John Bateman are the best known of Elizabeth I's binders. George Heriot is thought to have done binding for her as well. Among printers, Christopher Barker produced a folio Bible in 1584, considered one of the finest English Embroidered binding of Elizabeth I's Reign, now in the Bodleian. Daniel Boyse did 2 copies of the Book of Common Prayer 1629. One version with gold tooling on blue velvet is now in the British Library.¹⁴

Calligrapher Esther Inglis (b. 1571-1624) is responsible for many fine bindings of this period. Over 40 signed manuscripts of her's survive, most given as gifts to nobility. Several are dedicated to Henry Prince of Wales in her hand. Many are elaborately

¹¹ Davenport, 32.

¹² Nixon and Foote, 41.

¹³ Davenport 38.

¹⁴ Nixon and Foote, 41-2.

embroidered with gold thread, beads and pearls. The embroidery may have done by a professional or she may have done it herself, considering her uncertain financial status.¹⁵

Gold tooling on velvet was also very popular during the same time period. A green velvet binding in the Folger collection has the owners initials, CS, as part of the panel design on the cover. He may have been Charles Somerset 1588-1665 the 6th son of Edward 4th Earl of Oxford. This framed border with corner decorations is similar to the Cambridge style of binding.¹⁶ Cambridge had distinctive style and tools, though the Cambridge crafts persons didn't have much influence on styles in London. Many gold-tooled velvet books were bound by members of the Anglican Community founded by Nicolas Ferrar and his nieces at Little Gidding in Huntingdonshire in 1626. They created many styles of binding, but were best known for using purple velvet gold tooled in Cambridge style. Ferrar died in 1636, but the community continued. Charles I and Prince Rupert collected work from Little Giddings. Charles showed great interest in the bindery, which started and ended with his reign. He visited several times and had them bind books for him and his sons.¹⁷

Some of the best-documented embroidered books are Frances Bacon's *Essays*, published in 1625. There are 2 presentation copies of the book in British collections. One is dedicated to George Villiers, Duke of Buckingham whose portrait is worked on both covers (after engraving by S. de Passé), wearing doublet, collar, blue ribbon of order of the garter. It is covered with purple velvet, with the embroidered border crown and portrait in darning and satin stitch on white satin over fine white canvas, and is in the Bodleian Collection at Oxford. The second, almost identical copy is dedicated to Charles I and is in the Durham University Collection. Bacon's *Opera*, published 2 years earlier is bound in velvet with gold embroidery and spangles in a geometric pattern very like those on tooled book covers.¹⁸

An English embroidered silver wire binding 1613, in the Folger Collection, covers Francois de Sales, Bishop of Geneva's, *An Introduction to a Devout Life*. The fabric is woven silver wire that covers millboards with silk embroidery. The style and materials make the author think of reports of milliners working in the production of books. De Sales name also comes up several times in the history of French textile bindings.

A manuscript petition in the Bodleian Collection addressed to Archbishop Laud in 1638 by the milliners and shopkeepers of the Royal Exchange speaks of the custom of providing "rare and curious covers of imbrothery and needleworke...wherein Bibles

¹⁵ Bearman, Frederick Fine and *Historic Bookbindings from the Folger Shakespeare Library*, Folger Library Publications, 1992, p.132.

¹⁶ Bearman, 134.

¹⁷ Nixon and Foote, 53.

¹⁸ Barber, 6.

Testaments and Psalm Bookes of the best sort and the neatest print have been richly bound up for ye Nobility and gentry of this kingdome and not for common persons they were indeed more fitt.”¹⁹ The milliners and shopkeepers are protesting against a Star Chamber decree limiting the sale of Bibles, Testaments, and Psalm Books to stationers. The milliners said that both they and the embroiderers would suffer severely from this new regulation. Their petition was successful, as we have a bill from 1640, two years later, showing that a royal embroiderer was selling bibles. We also know from pricing lists that bibles, prayer books and psalms were available “in hardboards” so presumably these could have been ordered and taken to the embroiderer, milliner, or other specialized binder.²⁰

Embroidered bindings of the 16th and 17th Century are well known and were usually made of velvet, canvas, or silk. Most of these cover Bibles and Prayer Books. Floral decorations are most popular, as well as symbolic figures such as Peace and Plenty, Faith and Hope, or even portraits. Biblical scenes were also popular such as Adam and Eve, Moses and Aaron, Solomon and Queen of Sheba, Elijah in the desert, Jacob wrestling with the angel or ascending his ladder.²¹ Many pattern books were available with designs for lace and embroidery. John Taylor’s, *The Needle’s Excellency*, 12th ed. was published in 1640 and seems a likely source for popular floral designs.²²

In the 1620’s and 30’s many binders bound two books together in the dos a dos style. This consisted of a pair of books bound opposite ways round while sharing the dividing cover, thus remaining one volume. Prayer books and psalms, or similar pairs of books were often joined in this way. Pictorial embroidered bindings were most popular in this later phase, but made velvet covers with metal furniture did not die out.

Charles I continued the tradition of ordering textiles bindings for important books. There are records of occasional embroidered bindings ordered during the first few years of Charles II reign. James VI of Scotland also commissioned velvet bindings, for his own writings and for presentation books.

After the Civil War there were very few textiles bindings made in England. For the most part, leather bindings became the norm. The Romantic era brought back some interest in textile bindings. A few remain covered in imported Italian silks. A Book of Common Prayer and Psalms bound in 1785 is covered with velvet, perhaps to achieve an old-fashioned look. Embroidery, after that date is done by amateurs.

The history of textile bindings in France is very similar to that in England. Textile bindings in French collections never received the attention they were due prior to an

¹⁹ Barber, 7.

²⁰ Nixon and Foot, 54.

²¹ Nixon and Foot, 53.

²² Barber 7.

extensive exhibition in 1996. The previous major show and accompanying publications were in the 1950's and barely mentions the category. The reasons are similar to those in Britain.

As in Britain, it is difficult to know who embroidered the books. All presentation pieces for royalty were most likely done by professionals, as were many others. Nuns worked other embroideries; members of aristocratic families could have done covers with family crests.

Ornamental designs reflect trends of the era. Metallic threads and coloured silks were a popular combination, as in England. Religious books often have appropriate images on covers: Christ and the virgin, the passion, pictures of the saints, religious inscriptions and symbols.

Medieval times mark the start of royal libraries in France. Charles V and VI began the first collections. During Medieval times, all of the books are religious volumes: bibles, Psalters, Breviaries, Books of Hours, prayer books, are all mentioned in the inventories of Charles V & VI. The materials are taffeta, velvet, and samit, ornamented with flowers, initials of the owners, and coats of arms of owner, historic scenes.

Documentation of the prevalence of textile bindings is available in the detailed inventory made when the royal library at Blois, begun by Francois I moved to Fontainebleau. Of 1,859 volumes, 758 are fabric, of which 10 decorated with embroidery. Records from the 1300's also show payments to cloth merchants, bookbinders and embroiderers. In 1370, the librarian to Charles V writes about the pleasures of imported silks. In 1399, Isabeau de Baviere, associated with Charles VI, ordered a black velvet chemise embroidered with 140 stems of emblematic plants for one of her books.²³

Working in the library of Charles V before 1380, Leopold Deslisle notes quantities of rich, fabric covered books, with elaborate embroideries, on ornamented manuscripts. He notes many with painted embellishments, on personal family books, and chapel books for clergy to use. These are listed along with the inventory of furniture and decorative art objects. Unfortunately most of these were rebound once they became part of the royal library at Blois in 1500. Royal and church inventories in 1498 by Charlemagne after death of Charles VIII show that leather was preferred in monasteries and universities, while royal collections had luxurious textile book coverings, as did churches. Charles VIII own books were covered with velvets and satins embroidered with gold threads to depict flowers and fleur de lis. By the Renaissance, most embroidered books were for presentation.²⁴

Moroccan leathers were imported into France, via Italy beginning in the 16th century. Cloth continued to be used for binding of some religious and presentation books for

²³ Coron, Sabine and Lefevre, Martine, ed., *Livres en broderie, Reliures francaises du Moyen age a nos jours*, Bibliotheque nationale de France/DMC, Paris, 1995, 24.

²⁴ Coron, and Lefevre, 24.

dignitaries into the 18th Century. Royal armes continue to be embroidered into reign of leather: Marie de Medici, Louis 13th, Cardinal Richelieu, Anne d'Autriche, and the duc de Bourgogne all left elaborate bindings that have been well preserved.

Eventually the styles of embroidered decoration evolved into painted medallion surrounded by embroidery. As printed fabrics became more available, along with printed books, individual motives from the prints, portraits or figures were used for mass produced books such as almanacs. This style continued until the French revolution. After that some commemorative books still had embroidery or printing and painting.

The definitive source of information on French textiles bindings is a beautifully illustrated book/exhibition catalogue, *Livres en broderie*, published by Bibliotheque National and DMC in 1996. It documents embroidered bindings as publications, bindings, and as formats for imagery. It is both poetic and factual and served as an exhibition catalogue. There are a variety of beautiful examples in the French exhibit that point out the similarities and the differences between the French and English bindings.

The Psalter of St Louis, 1377, is the oldest book in the exhibition. It is covered with a chemise of blue satin embroidered with a field of regularly spaced fleur de lis. These all over designs or repeat patterns were not seen in British collections. A repeat pattern of scales, a common motif in architecture cover two later religious books in the exhibition (1664 and 1701): one catholic, one protestant. This unique geometric design may be a reference to the fish as a symbol of Christianity.

Several Books of Hours are covered with cranberry velvet. One is embroidered with gold spirals and a stylized flower, made in Paris in 1550 has designs from a Venetian pattern book by Tagliente. This pattern book showed many examples of designs for book covers. A slightly later Book of Hours, 1560, used bobbin lace for the gold scroll and floral designs.

Maria de Medici and Louis XIII both had monogrammed books similar to those of Henry VIII. They were covered with velvet embroidered with coats of armes and wreathes of various orders (Louis St Michel and St Esprit). Maria de Medici had several in house embroiderers to make her books. She also placed orders with workshops in Greece and Turkey for some of her book covers.

Several books use needlepoint, rather than free hand embroidery, to make detailed scenes and images. Two are covered with linen canvas embroidered with polychrome silk threads, probably made in France. A fragment of a Book of Hours has tapestry representing the scenes of the passion in a folk style using five colors. The petit point or "Point Grek" was an Islamic technique introduced to Spain in 1300, later to the rest of Europe. The second book has a more realistic, painterly composition. It is a bible from about 1567 showing figures of Memory and Patience. It is interesting to find secular, allegorical images on this religious text. Another petit point binding, about 1665, covers a book on the life of St. Francois de Sales, a French saint who once served as Bishop of Geneva. It has the monogram SFDS, and images taken from engravings in one of

DeSales books that catalogues and illustrates of 52 religious symbols. The front cover shows a candlestick in holder, silver and polychrome silk. The back cover shows an image of the holy heart.²⁵

De Sales is represented again in a Portfolio of white silk satin embroidered with the inscription, St. Francois de Sales, L'Amour de Dieu. It was made in France between, 1644-89. The folder containing original manuscripts of some of de Sales writings, belonged to a woman who became a nun, and could have been her family's gift to the convent.

There are several books with portraits framed with high relief embroidery using gold cords, in the exhibition. This material and style of embroidery was uncommon in British examples. A municipal book from 1664 is covered with taffeta embroidered with gold and silver cord that frames a portrait of Saint Catherine who is associated with convent in the area. It is similar to a pink satin Book of Hours with portraits of Christ and Virgin Mary, 1695, which also has a pattern of gold cords surrounding the portraits.

The French produced several styles of beaded chemises for books. These were often used on almanacs; readers saved the covers and reused them on other books. Almanacs were a calendar of the court events with additional information on sunrise and set times, phases of the moon, etc. Examples include two floral pieces made in Paris in 1763 and 1786.

A large group of books in the exhibition, from the 1780's include almanacs, plays, and comedies. These show the tradition of using an embroidered frame around portrait, still life, and other scenes. In the earliest examples, the framed scene is embroidered. Later paint is added and eventually these were replaced with printed fabrics, sometimes hand coloured afterwards. The British Library has a 19th century printed and coloured satin binding by Le Fuel on *Almanache dedie aux dames Pour l'an 1815*. White satin covers are both printed with the same design and coloured by hand. These were collectable in Paris in the 18th, and 19th Centuries and provided le Fuel with a thriving trade from 1804 to 1828.²⁶

Textile covered books continued in a limited way during the 20th Century and may be undergoing a revival today. Sonia Delaunay covered books in fabric in the 1920's. Several British bookbinders, including Angela James and Faith Shannon are well known for their work beginning in the 1970's. Stephanie Dean Moore, in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and myself are covering books with jacquard woven, knitted and embroidered fabrics. I hope to report on these contemporary binders at future TSA meetings.

²⁵ Coron, and Lefevre, plate 41.

²⁶ Foot, Mirjam, 53.

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