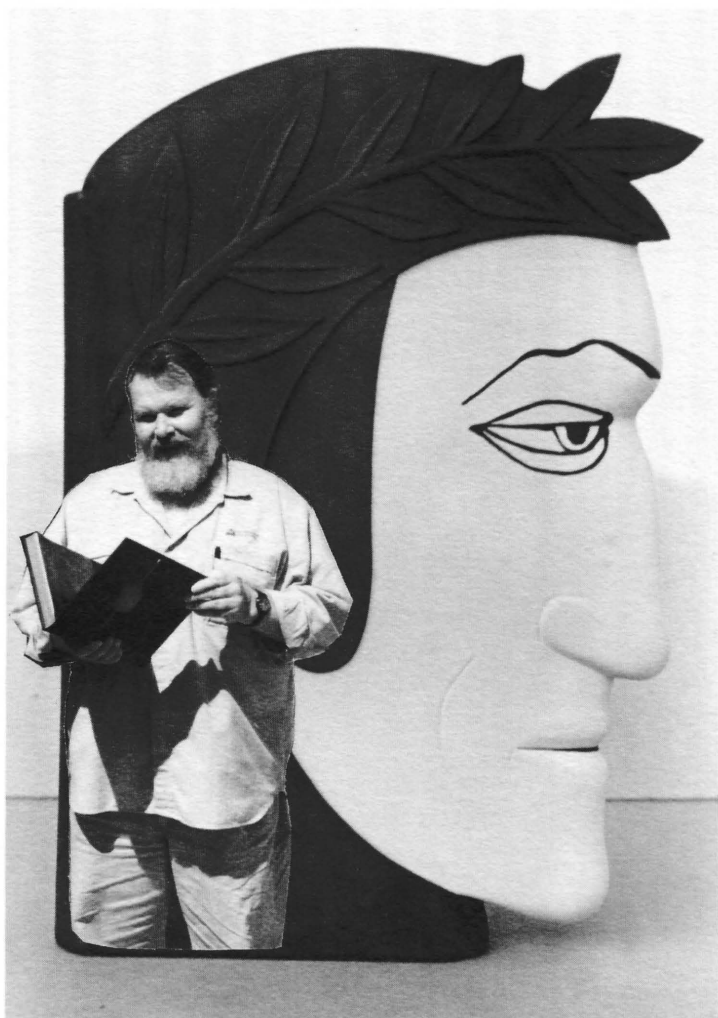


## GUILD OF BOOK WORKERS JOURNAL

VOLUME XXX

Number 2

FALL 1992





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BOX AND SCULPTURAL BINDINGS/Jan Sobota ..... 1

*A Lecture From the Guild of Book Workers 12th Annual Seminar on The Standards of Excellence, San Francisco, California 1992*

The Cover: Collage by Jan Sobota. "I made this collage—with my *Dante* binding large in the background and a small picture of me holding another bound book, *William Tell*—to show the significance of bookbinding in my life."

Editor for this issue: Kimberly A. LoDico

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## BOX AND SCULPTURAL BINDINGS

Jan Sobota

When I was asked to give a lecture and demonstration of my sculptural bindings at the Twelfth Annual Seminar on The Standards of Excellence, I realized that it is almost impossible to cover this art form in all its depth in only three hours. Nevertheless, I asked the organizer to extend this topic to cover box bindings also. That is because about one-third of my sculptures are box bindings and another third of my traditional bindings use a sculptural case as an integral part of the whole object. For all of the above mentioned works and for my other sculptural bindings, I also make externally flat boxes or slipcases so that they may be placed in a bookcase. These boxes are specially constructed within so that objects of various shapes are stored safely inside. In other words, without a broad knowledge of the making of boxes, cases, and tubes I would not be able to make my sculptural bindings.

In the first part of my presentation in San Francisco, I had a slide show in which I concentrated mainly on the technical side of my binding-objects, but also spent time discussing the artistic side and the philosophy of why I actually make them.

I have reason to suspect that the future of books and other printed materials will begin (and has actually begun) to lead in different directions from the present. With the constant expansion of information media (from radio, television, audio and video recorders, compact discs for visual and sound recording and display, to microfilm, computers, and micro-computers with their E-Mail, and whatever other technologies the future will bring), the traditional book begins to lose its prioritized and, until recently, irreplaceable informational position. One must also take into consideration the weight and the dimension of the traditional book, which cannot successfully be miniaturized in the same way that competitive technologies can. One needs also to consider the consequences of paper production and the felling of trees, which are becoming ever more scarce on a global scale. In short, the book's role as an informational mass medium is diminishing, but that doesn't mean that the book as such will completely disappear. It is more likely that in the future it will be printed in smaller numbers on better quality papers, and will move farther into the artistic sphere.

I expect a further renaissance in the creation of beautiful papers; limited editions with perfect print, typography, and illustrations; and beautiful bindings. People will want to compensate for the overtechnicalization of the new mass media by looking at a beautifully produced book or an individual manuscript. They will delight in the look and smell of the print and the leather. They will look

forward to the touch of the handmade paper, the warm leather, or the cool parchment while reading or browsing through a book. They will look for and appreciate high artistic standards and flawless craftsmanship.

Such books of course will be, as they are today, more expensive than regularly produced books, and few will be able to own them in large quantities. However, I believe that every cultured person can afford to have at least a few of his or her favorite books in beautiful bindings. I know from personal experience that if I own a beloved art object, I want to have it in full view and have the opportunity to derive pleasure from it often. That gave me the idea of making books and individual bindings that can be exhibited in a person's home in the same manner that statues and paintings are exhibited. I do not attempt through them to replace the classical form of the book, rather I want to expand the possibilities of the book and the bookbinder.

Here arises the question, "What is the classical form of the book?" The logical answer would be that it is a textblock of paper or parchment with manuscript or printed text, fastened together with protective covers so that the pages may easily be opened and read. All of my book objects and book sculptures fulfill these criteria. Furthermore, in most cases they protect the textblock of a book better than a traditional binding. That is because they are box bindings or bindings in which the box is an integral part of the total object. The edges of these books are much better protected not only from mechanical damage but mainly from dust and chemical harm resulting from an unclean atmosphere. I have come to this conclusion during my long forty years of bookbinding and restoration experience, during which time I have come in contact with hundreds of Gothic, Renaissance, baroque, and other historical books which included *dos-à-dos*, girdle, and box bindings. The textblocks in box bindings are in the best condition.

I made my first box binding in 1959; it was a loose replica of a Gothic binding. I employed the Gothic design mainly because it was a book about the history of bookbinding by Pavlina Hamanova. In the early 1980s the preservation librarian and author, Susan Swartzburg of New Jersey, acquired it for her collection while on an educational trip in Europe to visit with bookbinders and restorers. In 1991 I had the opportunity to see this book once again at my retrospective exhibition at Bridwell Library of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. Despite the fact that it was not printed on high quality paper the textblock was, due to the box binding, in perfect condition—even after thirty-two years.

I am often asked what type or what structure I use for my box and sculptural bindings. Because I am free-thinking and, like many Americans, am not bound by many traditions (as are many European bookbinders), I take from any style that which I find best and most appropriate for a particular binding. It is also

beforehand shaped through the diversity of my ideas. From my restoration work I am familiar with the shortcomings of various styles, and I attempt to avoid them with various adjustments or by using elements from another style.

Roughly thirty-eight years ago I learned the German binding, which I still consider to be, technically, the best attached binding as far as durability is concerned. Even despite the momentary modern leaning of most German bookbinders to the French binding, the technique and philosophy of the German binding is still developing and improving thanks to a few individuals. Presently, Kurt Londenberg and several of his students deserve most of the credit for this. A good example in the United States is Londenberg's apprentice, Frank Mowery, who forms his design bindings in the German style and modifies them with knowledge from his own conservation experience. Thanks to his presentation in Washington, D.C. at the Guild of Book Workers Tenth Anniversary Seminar on the Standards of Excellence in November 1990, the German binding has regained its earlier level of importance in the United States.

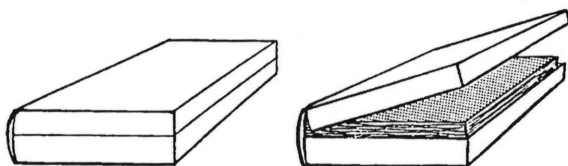
A number of other thoughtful bookbinders around the world also are improving the techniques of other types of bindings, thus increasing their vitality and balancing the standards of those individual styles. Because of seminars and courses such as this, important information gained by individuals can become a part of general bookbinding knowledge.

Over the past twenty years, thanks to the opening up to outside influences, the previously stunted American bookbinding scene has achieved a world-class standard. That, of course, does not mean that we can rest on our laurels. Just the opposite! We need to teach each other even more and work harder so that we can maintain this standard; there is always room for improvement. It seems to me that many of us bookbinders are still unsure of ourselves on the conceptual and, particularly, on the artistic side. That is why I will be devoting part of my second, practical portion of this article to it, just as I did at my demonstration in San Francisco.

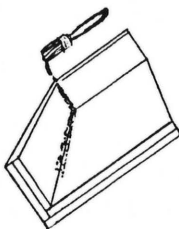
As I have already mentioned, each binding-object that I have ever made is, technically and through the design, somewhat different from those made previously. Therefore, I cannot show only one typical example, there must be several of them. For a clearer view I will try to divide the book objects into several categories. According to the main type they will be designated with capital letters, according to the technique and material used they will be designated with numbers, and according to ideological type with lowercase letters. Due to the fact that the main, technical, and ideological categories often intertwine, all illustrations in this article will be marked with the letters or numbers of the categories into which they fall.

## THE TWO MAIN TYPES OF WALL BOARD OR BOX BINDINGS

A. The textblock is covered with two boxes of the same size whose three sides are glued to the front and back boards of the binding; the book therefore opens in the middle of the edges. This type of box is appropriate for thicker books.

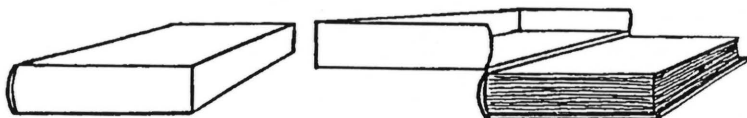


I make all the sides of the constructed boxes of box bindings with attached pieces of binder's board of two different sizes so that they fit together. After attaching the box, and the complete drying of the glue (PVA or hot glue), I pour the same glue (but more diluted) around the sides of the box, which fills even the smallest gap and makes the box even stronger.



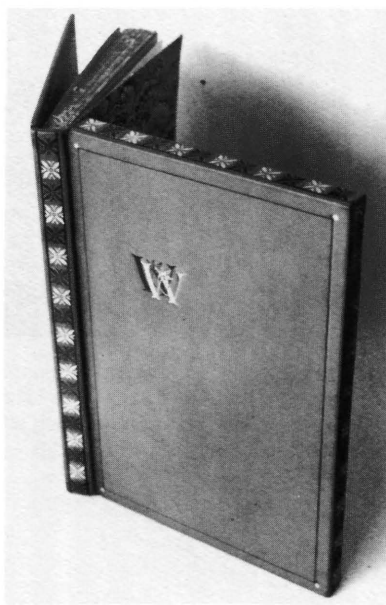
Thin bead of glue

B. The sides of this type of box are attached to only one board of the book; it must be the front board or it will make the reading of the book uncomfortable. A weak, thin book with a shallow box could be an exception. This method is appropriate for thinner books, or for those books whose design requires it.



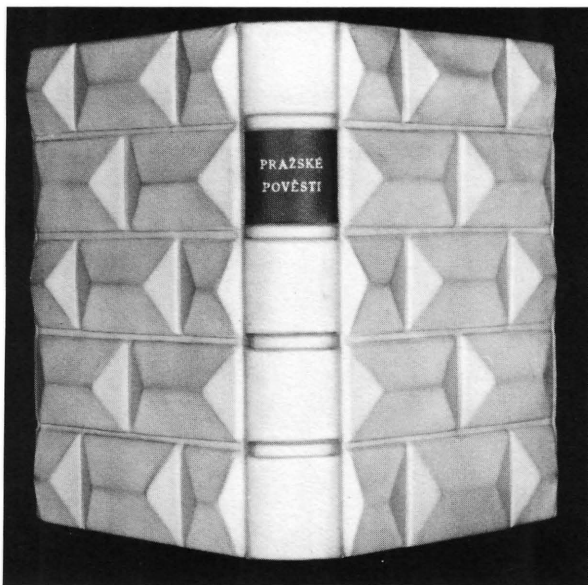


**Pavčina Hamanová:** *Z dějin knižní vazby* (From the History of Bookbinding). Full leather box binding sewn on five genuine bands. Natural calfskin, blind tooling, gold lettering on spine, stone corner bosses. 24.3 × 17.5 cm. / 1959.



**Robert Louis Stevenson:** *Walt Whitman*. Full leather box binding, flat spine. Natural calfskin, blind and gold tooling. 17 × 13 cm. / 1985.

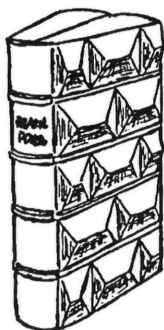
At this point, this type of box binding may be covered with leather, or continued with a relief or sculptural design. For this I often use binder's board, laminated paper, balsa wood, or various non-traditional materials.



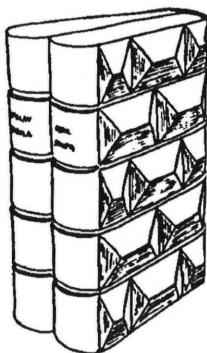
**Václav Cibula:** *Pražské Pověsti (Prague's Legend)*. The design is part of a Renaissance house in Prague. All of the sides around the box have hollow space inside; each relief is also hollow. The whole is covered with natural calf.  
24 × 18.5 × 12 cm. / 1972.

## DIVISIONS ACCORDING TO TECHNIQUE AND MATERIAL

1. BookSculpture—The object is created using binder's board, which is then covered with leather, parchment, or decorative paper.



A.a.1.



b.1.

2. BookSculpture—The object is created using binder's board and laminated paper, which is then covered with leather or decorative paper.



A.a.2.

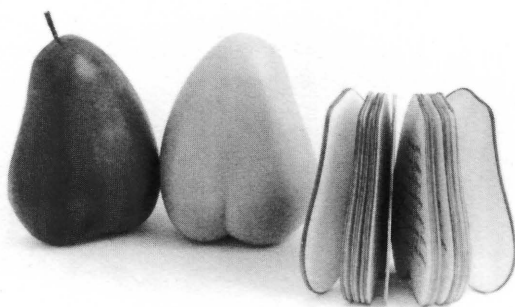


**Richard Neugebauer: *Čertův Kámen (Devil's Rock)*.** The entire object is hollow. In the middle is the slipcase for the textblock. The devil's head is collaged with pages from medieval texts which have been marbled and painted. The book's covers are opened flat. Natural sheepskin decorated with wood engraved impressions. 57 × 62 × 17 cm. / 1988.



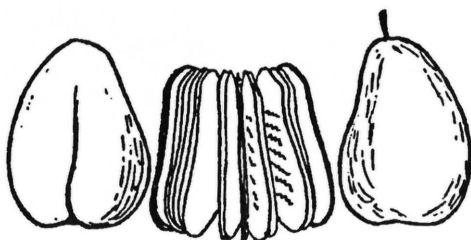


**Charles de Coster: *Tyl Eulenspiegel*.** Sculptural face made of laminated paper covered with white calfskin, onlays in ten colors, goatskin and blind tooling. 29 × 22.5 × 4.5 cm. / 1982.

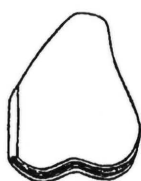


**Solomon: *Song of Songs*.** Unique manuscript, calligraphy by M. Sull. A sculptural box—pear/back torso covered with colored ochre-green and white buckskin. 12.5 × 8, 8 × 8, 8 cm. / 1990.

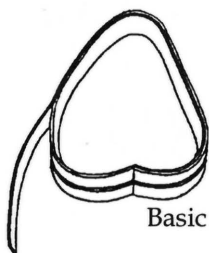
b.2.



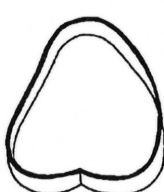
I shape the mold on top of the box using Plasticine. The basic sculpture has to be cone shaped because it will later be removed. When the shape I wish to achieve is finished,



Book

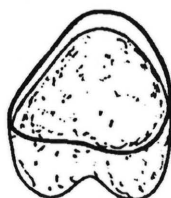
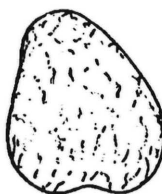


Basic box

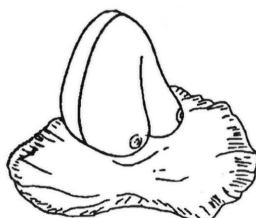


Plasticine mold

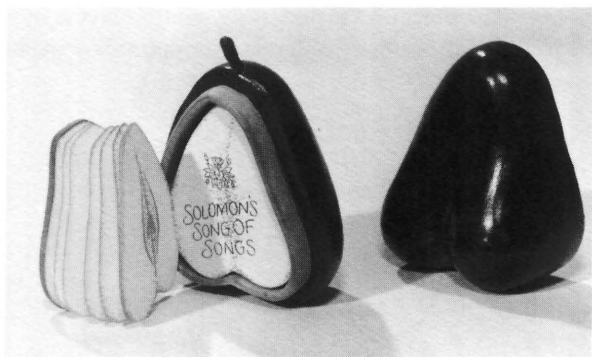
I place soft paper over it, usually Japanese paper. Next I start gluing to this mold small torn-off slips of a flexible paper. It is best to use wheat paste for gluing, but hot glue or other adhesives can also be used. When using wheat paste, glue down a few layers at a time, letting them dry before starting new ones. After the paper "wall" is thick enough, smooth it with sandpaper. If there is still some unevenness, glue more paper on it and sand it again. After this process is finished the sculpture is ready to be covered with leather.



Laminated Paper Sculpture



Remove from mold (left) before covering with leather (above).

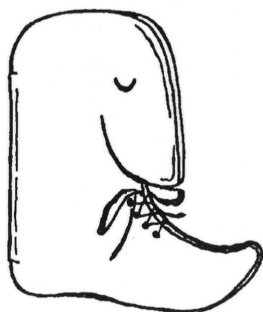


**Solomon: *Song of Songs*.** Book-printed miniature version (limited edition of 30) of the original manuscript illustrated above. A sculptural box—pear/front torso covered with colored brownish green and dark brown calfskin.  $8.5 \times 4 \times 4$  cm. / 1992.

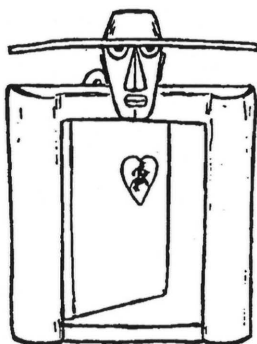


**François Rabelais: *Gargantua and Pantagruel*.** A shoe/face book cover of natural, specially dyed oasis goatskin with a shoelace closure.  $34 \times 32 \times 6$  cm. / 1984.

3. BookSculpture—The object is created using binder's board and balsa wood, which is then covered with leather, parchment, or decorative paper.



A.a.3.



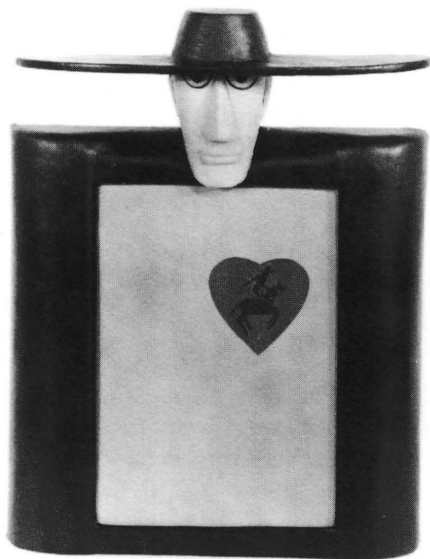
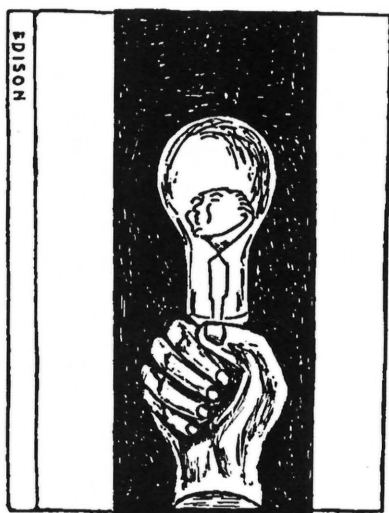
b.3.

I cut the needed length of balsa wood with a small saw and tape it to the main box with PVA or hot glue. I cut the appropriate shapes with a small saw, sharp knives, or carving tools. I do the more delicate work with sandpaper.

Before covering it with leather I spread a thin coating of glue on the wood, preferably warm gelatin, which I let dry thoroughly. This makes the top of the wood tougher and keeps it from warping later.

4. BookSculpture—The object is created using binder's board, leather, and non-traditional materials.

d.4.



**Jack Schaefer: *Muž se Srdcem Kovboje (Monte Walsh)*.** Book covered with beige cowhide with red heart inlay and cowboy onlay. Sculptural box of cowboy bust covered with black and natural calfskin. 20 × 13.5 × 3 cm. / 1982.



**Vítězslav Nezval: *Edison*.** Unique book object which I printed, illustrated, and bound. Binding of full goat parchment. Black pig suede onlay creates a background for the three-dimensional hand (natural calf) holding a light-bulb as though it were a torch. Light-bulb is of cast clear resin with gold leaf. Inside the bulb is an engraved caricature of Nezval. 30 × 22 × 7 cm. / 1990.

I use non-traditional bookbinding materials, mainly in cases where I need to make a relief on the binding that I want to cast from a previously prepared form. With the Edison binding it is the magnifier, in the form of a lightbulb, that is cast from the transparent material, "Technovit 7001," from Conservation Materials, Ltd. The hand holding the bulb is also cast, this time with a mixture of plaster, small wood chips, and PVA. The top is filled with epoxide. After drying, it is covered with leather and pressed with the form out of 3100 RTV silicon rubber, in which the hand was originally cast.

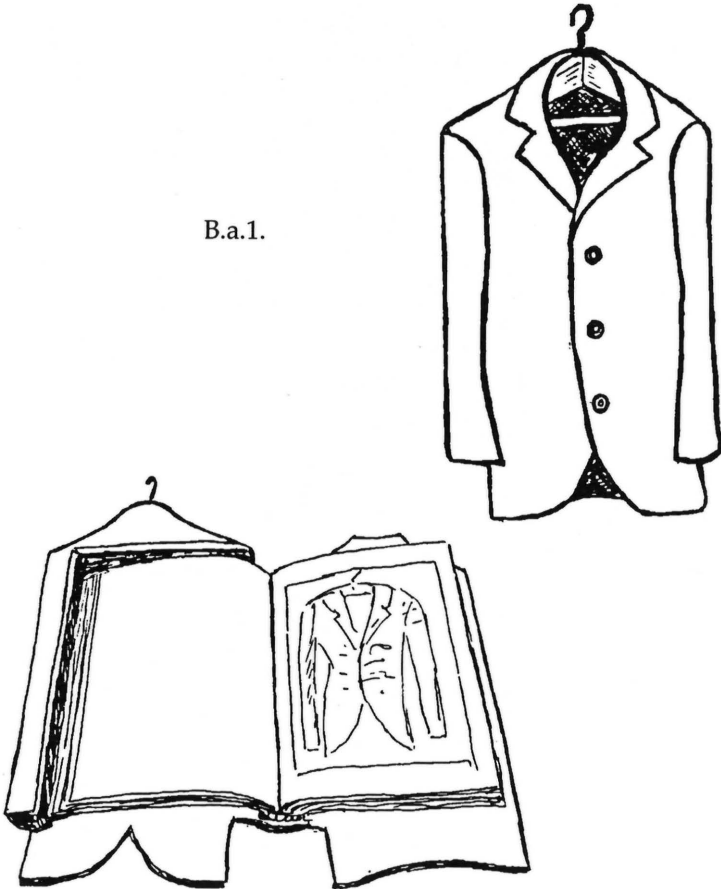
Of course, I first had to make the hand and adjust the light bulb. For this I used Plasticine from England. I then placed the model into an already prepared wooden or cardboard form, and filled it in with a silicon rubber liquid mixture.

## IDEOLOGICAL DIVISIONS

a. Book objects whose foundation is a box binding. Usually all three edges are covered.

Due to the design it may sometimes be only two of the edges and sometimes only the top side of the book, but the top edge must be covered.

B.a.1.



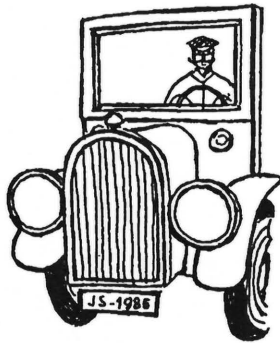


***Poems of W. B. Yeats.*** Relief design on front and back boards depicts an old coat on a hanger (page 15). Coat cover is bound in olive-black calfskin with pig suede doublures. Entire book sculpture hangs on wooden frame. The book box is left open under coat tails (page 15). 44 × 23 × 6 cm. / 1990.



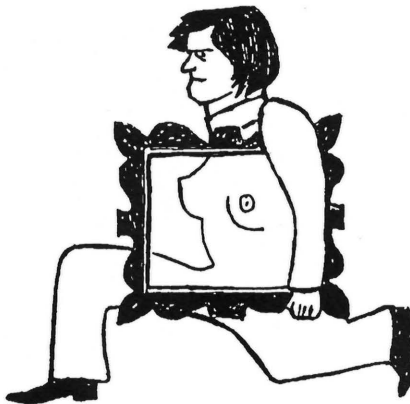
b. Books that have a flat binding, but whose decorative or sculptural box is an integral part of the design.

This box sometimes covers the entire binding, sometimes only a part of it. It always (at least) covers the top, and usually all sides of the edges of the book. Some of these objects may also be hung on a wall.



b.3.

b.3.



c. Books with a flat binding, placed in a decorative frame that also serves as a case, covering the edges and spine of a book.

At least one cover of the binding is either supplemented or continued on the case, which is sometimes the mount and the frame, while at other times serves



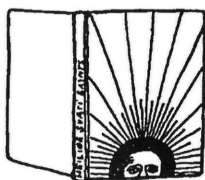
**Ferdinand Hediger: *The Oldtimer*.** Sculptural car box (right) encloses grey calfskin bound book with black onlays (left). Driver (on book) is seen through Plexiglass windshield. Car box is covered with purple, gold, and silver goatskin. Engine of car is lifted up to remove book.  
22.5 × 15.5 × 12 cm. / 1985.



**Ota Janeček: *Žena [Woman]*.** Hollow picture frame of brown calfskin encases the book of nude drawings bound in vellum with gold tooling. The sculptural caricature of the artist is covered in calfskin and grey calf suede; face is of balsa, body of foamcore. The caricature's arm swings when book is removed from frame.  
68.5 × 68.5 × 6.5 cm. / 1989.

only as the frame for a book. These objects are usually meant to be hung on a wall.

My friend, the Czech bookbinder Ladislav Hodný, Jr. (the middle one in a family bookbinding dynasty) brought a new element into this category by painting and gold-tooling his abstract designs on the bottom part of a protective plexiglass. Such a painting, with a color base at the bottom in a box is, of course,



c.4.





**Rainer Maria Rilke: *Saints/Svatí/Heilige*.** Book (upper left) in full-vellum case binding with gold stamping. Volume fits into wall-hung picture of dyed vellum with ink drawing and gold lettering, brown suede frame and glass panel. Book is removed from the back side of frame. Picture: 35 × 29 cm. / Book: 10.5 × 7.5 cm / 1987.

a work of art in itself. After the binding is added though, a new, even more striking image is created.

Jarmila Jelena Sobotová, my wife, brought another dimension into this category. She creates acrylic or oil paintings (without glass), whose foundation is a closed box, with an opening for the book on the front side. The box is made out of bookbinding board and usually has a leather frame around the painting and



**Bookbinder, Ladislav Hodný, Jr.: *Kožený Střevíc (The Leather Shoe)*.** Book: Full leather binding, brown calfskin onlays, blind and gold tooling. 21 × 26 cm. Framed picture: With light color mat, includes front open box in center, covered with dark colored paper. Painting and gilding on Plexiglass from opposite side. Frame: 35 × 28 cm. / 1990.

around the binding. Her paintings illustrate characters and scenes from the stories. The bound books are disguised as a part of the painting and are removable from the two dimensional plane.

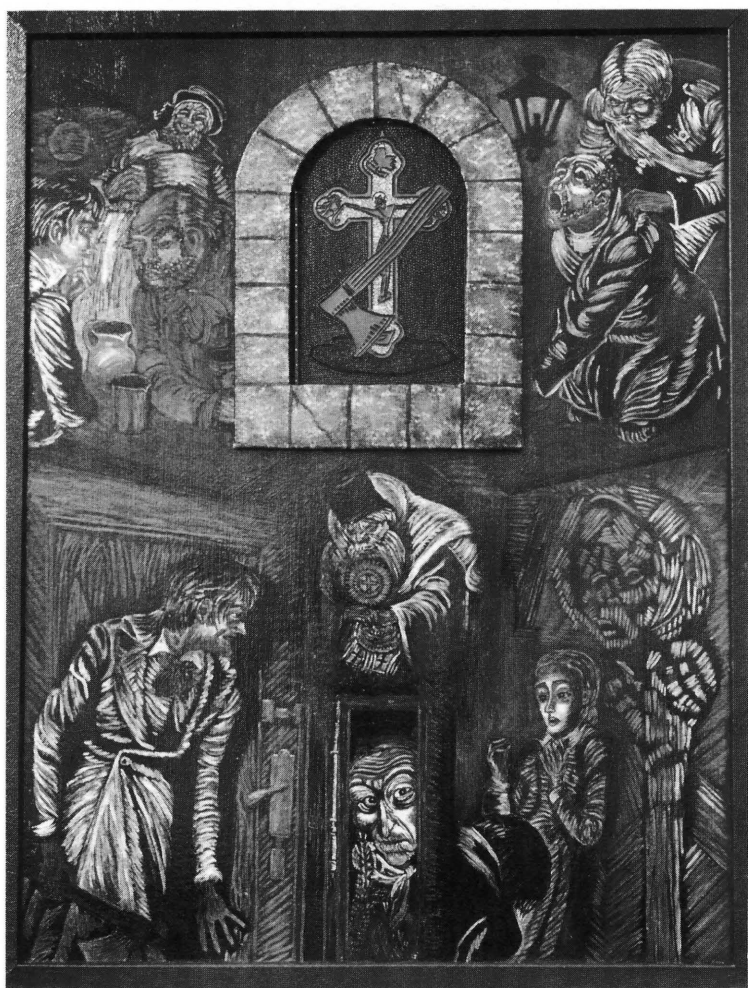
d. Book object or sculpture whose main emphasis is on the design, without regard to the covering of the edges.



**Bookbinder, Jarmila Jelena Sobotová. Leo Tolstoy: *Resurrection*.** Acrylic painting shows characters from the book painted in the style of Fritz Eichenberg, the illustrator. Iridescent colors on black background resemble a Russian icon. In the upper half portion of the painting is an opening the exact dimensions of the book and a leather frame. A portrait of Leo Tolstoy is painted on the back wall of the opening. 74 × 60 × 7 cm.

**Design Binding:** A French binding in full calfskin, painted with black leather dye. A portrait of Leo Tolstoy, the same as in the opening, is carved on the front cover.

26.5 × 21 × 5 cm. / 1993.



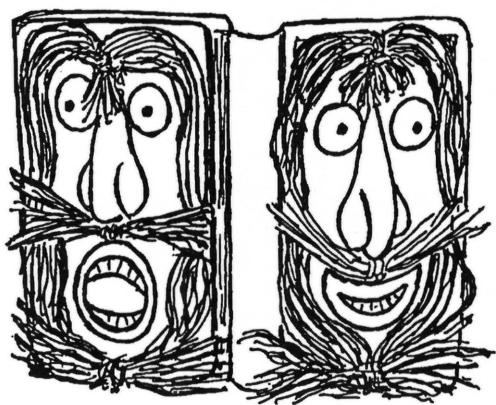
**Fyodor Doštoyevsky: *Crime and Punishment***, Acrylic painting shows characters from the book painted in the style of Fritz Eichenberg, the illustrator. Iridescent colors on black background resemble a Russian icon. In the upper portion of the painting is an opening the exact dimensions of the book and a "stone marbled" door. On the back wall of the opening is painted the last scene from the story. 89 × 67 × 7 cm.





Design Binding: A French binding in full calf-skin, painted with ochre and brown leather dyes. The "Byzantine" design on the front cover was done with old Gothic carving and punching (cuir-ciselé) techniques. The edges are black with gold tooling, illustrating the "thorn path" to redemption. 27 × 18 × 4.5 cm. / 1993.

These objects are sometimes independent or have a decorative base that is part of the design.



d.3.



d.3.

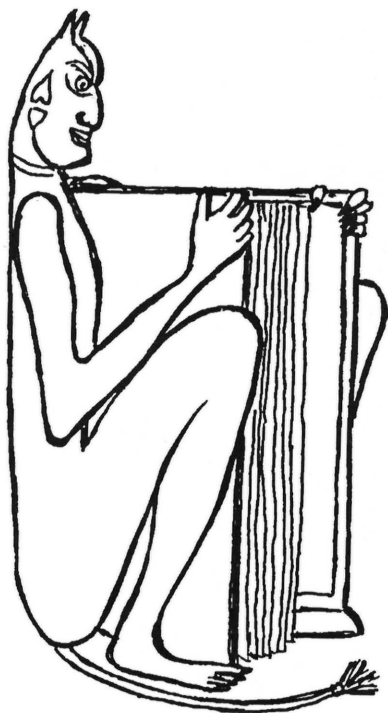


**F. G. Bentsson: Zrzavý Orm [Red-Haired Orm].** This dos-à-dos binding is covered with orange pig suede. Facial relief covered in natural pigskin with orange pig suede hair and beard. Nose and eyes of balsa, mouths of binders board. 19 × 13 × 10 cm. / 1992.



**Římská Lyrika [Lyrics of Ancient Rome].** Book covered with natural calfskin with lace impression. Bookstand of binders board and balsa covered with natural goatskin and dark red onlays. 27 × 27 × 7 cm. / 1987.

Lately I have been making bindings, objects, and sculptures with movable parts.



The head bends down  
when you pull the tail.

d.1.

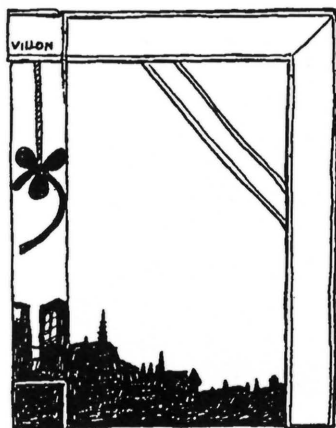
The head is on a metal spring attached to the devil's spine. The tail is made of a heavy fishing line covered with leather (only the exposed portion of the tail). The tail attaches to the devil's jaw through the hollow part of the book spine. In the hollow part of the book spine are placed two pieces of sandpaper, with their rough sides facing, which act as a pressure clamp to hold the fishing line stationary, thus keeping the devil's head down when the book is closed. Pulling the devil's tail bends his head as if to take a nap; when the book is opened, the devil's head slowly rises, as if awakening.



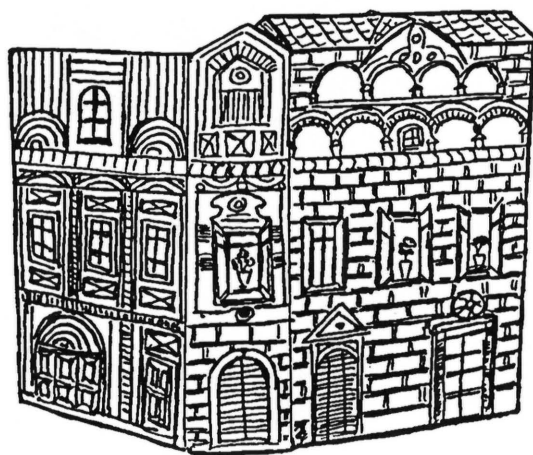
**Honoré de Balzac: *L'Heritier du Diable*.** Binding of blue and dark blue calfskin. The head is movable, with red and yellow calfskin onlays. 36.5 × 22 × 3 cm. / 1990.

## BOOK OBJECTS WITH FLAT SPINES

When the design demands it, I make box bindings and book objects with flat spines.

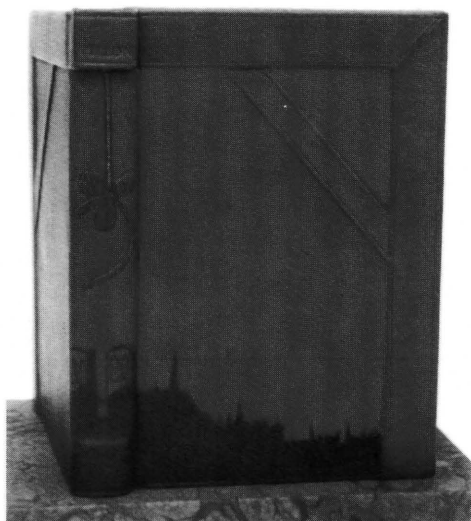


B.a.1.

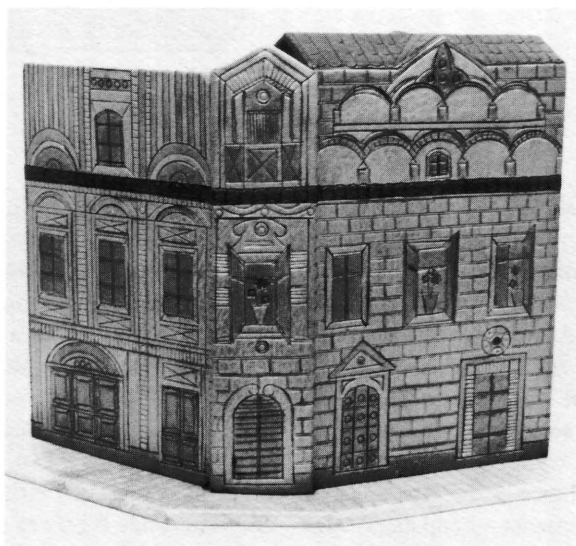


B.a.1.

I make an attached binding with a flat spine by rounding the book in a concave direction, using my fingers. The next step is to back with backing boards; this straightens the spine back up. After it dries in this position, I take the book out of the press and work with it as I would any other attached binding.

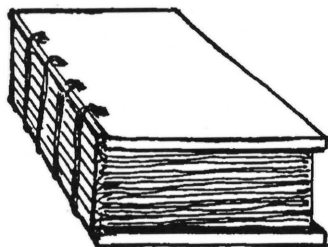
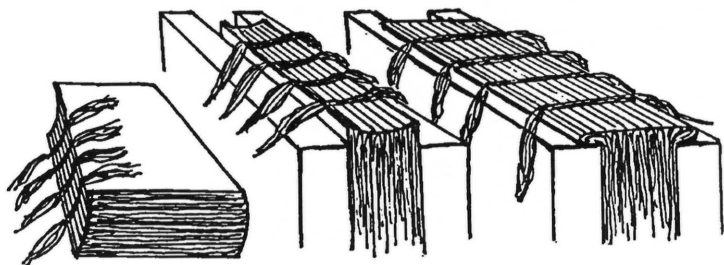


**Villon: *Poetry*.** "Luck on the Gallows." Binders board relief, blue and light brown calfskin, onlays of green and black. 16 × 12 × 3 cm. / 1990.



**Jan Neruda: *Povídky Malostranské*.** A house in Prague executed in yellow oasis goatskin, onlays, blind and black tooling. 17.9 × 11.9 × 4 cm. / 1979.

If the book is made of handmade paper with uneven sides, you cannot see a minor roundness, otherwise I have to even out the front edge by cutting.



## DESIGN

I do not attempt to create my bindings solely on ideas or on the element of surprise, as some of my critics falsely believe. The idea always stems from the text (with illustrated books I also consider the illustrations), and other factors of the book: format, typography, and often even the kind of paper used.

After several days, weeks, or even months of thinking about a book I have read, I call to mind the most important, interesting, and sometimes humorous moments in the story. Often there are several, so I try to choose one symbol or symbolic character from the narrative, which I imagine graphically or three-dimensionally, which then becomes a crucial artistic element of the binding. Through my choice of the type and color of the leather and my artistic treatment of other supplements—endpapers, edges, and headbands—I try to add a little of the essence of the rest of the plot to the binding.

I usually make the first sketch after I already have the finished binding in



mind. Actually, I only copy what I have already envisioned. Then I make a full-scale drawing for the binding, and sometimes I make small adjustments due to details that were not thoroughly thought out before. Nothing is left to chance with my bindings; I am not happy with the binding until it resembles my original ideas and sketch as closely as possible.

I cannot always do the design for a binding in this way. If I want to create a specific form I have to draw it on the spot or find a visual documentation (photograph, drawing, or engraving) which I use as a basis for a drawing of a design for a book. It is similar when I want to make a book with a specific character or the image of a person. I will use two recent examples.

### FREDERICK FORSYTH'S *THE DAY OF THE JACKAL*

The entire plot of this book is a fictional story about the preparations for an unsuccessful assassination of a real person, the French president and general, Charles de Gaulle. Therefore, I decided that the box binding-sculpture would be in the form of the general's head, which will also be the target for an assassin. This idea was once suggested to me by my friend, Czech artist Jiří Vančura.

All that I remembered about de Gaulle was that he had a large head, a large nose, and that he always wore his general's cap. Therefore, my first sketch was strictly for orientational purposes. In books and magazines I found likenesses of the general from various time periods. I also borrowed the film version of the story, to determine the color of the uniform. I also watched the moment of the failed assassination attempt several times. That convinced me that the head has to be without details, simply as a silhouette, on which you can only see the main colors.



First sketch

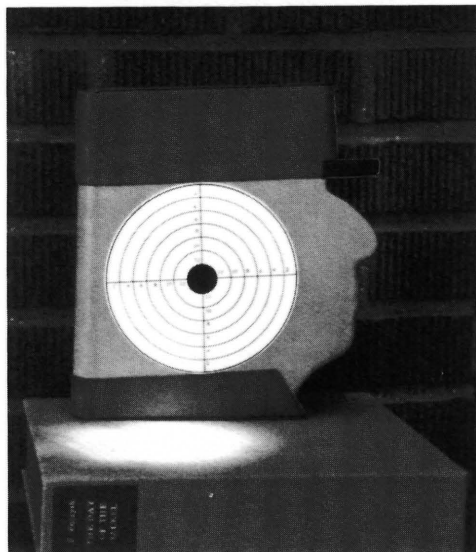


Silhouette

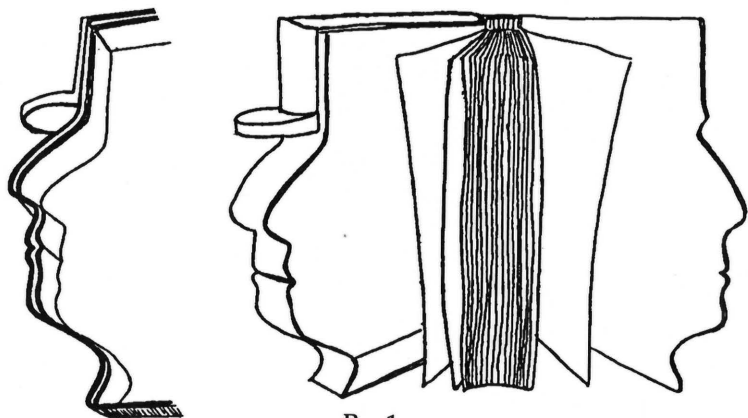


Real design

Technically, it is a binding made merely out of bookbinding board covered with khaki, beige, and black calfskin. The target is made out of white parchment. I made the front side of the box, with the face in profile, out of thin sections of cardboard.



**Frederick Forsyth: *The Day of the Jackal*.**  
 25 × 23 × 4.5 cm / 1992.



**B.a.1.**

Around the sharp angles of the drawing I scored the cardboard strip halfway through with a knife and bent the cuts into the needed angles. I shaped the strip with my fingers and spread glue (PVA or hot glue) only on the edge of the cardboard strip, which I then attached to the front cover. Step by step I shaped it, applying glue to the entire inside part of this strip and adding three more thin strips in the same manner. I repeated this same process on the outside part of the strip, using as many of these strips as needed until this "profile" strip was as thick as the top and bottom binder's boards.

While gluing, I use various clamps to hold my work together (until it dries). However, I like surgery tape the best because it is easy to remove and reuse.

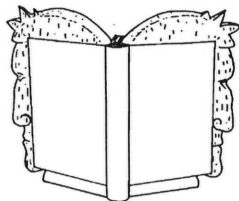
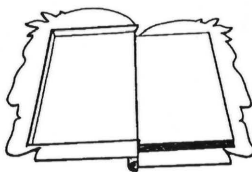
### DANTE ALIGHIERI'S *DIVINE COMEDY*

The work on each of my objects or sculptures requires many hours of work, and it is therefore impossible to show all of the work procedures in any workshop. For this reason I prepared and bound at home (up to the hollow back) Dante's *Divine Comedy*. At a seminar in San Francisco I worked on this binding for four sessions. I had it unfinished also for the Biennial Conference of The Society of Bookbinders, Bristol, England and The Book & Paper Intensive, Texas so that I could use it to show and explain the work procedure. (This binding has since been completed.)

Whenever I look at the *Divine Comedy* I picture the strict face of Dante that I remember from school pictures. Thus, I decided to make this binding a sculptural box binding of Dante's head. I looked up several portraits, but that old strict, unsympathetic man stared at me from all of them. I also found in a magazine a drawing of Dante's head by a contemporary American painter that showed a young man who looked like a 1960s hippie. Therefore, I drew Dante according to my own imagination, as a serious man in his thirties.



A.a.3.





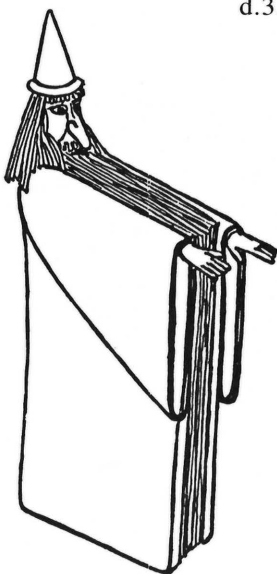
**Dante Alighieri:** *La Divina Commedia*. Face of natural calfskin over balsa; head of brown calfskin; leaves of green goatskin. 43 × 30 × 6.5 cm. / 1992–93.

In this case there is a binding constructed of two complementary boxes, making the book capable of being opened in the middle of the book-edges. I had to cut two side faces of Dante from binder's board for this reason. Those boards are the interior, closing sides of the book-box, with balsa wood applied. I used balsa wood for the sculptural part of the face.

### LEATHER

I use only wheat paste for the gluing of leather. Also, I don't like to use a leather which is pared too much, therefore the bookbinding leather that I use for my book sculptures must be very soft. A high degree of softness in a leather makes it possible to cover even very complicated shapes.

d.3.



I have been lucky because I have a tanner-friend, Jan Skoch. While still living in Czechoslovakia I had the opportunity to buy any kind of leather from him that I needed for my work. He was able to make custom-made skins for all kinds of bookbinding work. Today he is teaching his art in numerous tanneries across the world. I am still able to obtain skins made by him and have them sent from Venezuela, Mexico, etc.



**J. R. R. Tolkien: *Hobbit*** (Czech edition). Pulpboard and balsa wood covered in black and natural calfskin and white pigskin. 34 × 20 × 6 cm / 1980–81.

Finally, I would like to emphasize that, in my opinion, it is very important to use materials of good quality for good quality bookbinding work, and that it is not at all wise to save money on poor quality materials, because doing so can, in the long run, create a very expensive loss.

### **PROPER ATTIRE, OR MORE ABOUT ONE PARTICULAR BINDING**

There is an old saying in Czechoslovakia that states that “clothes make the man;” in the same way, a cover can design the book. “You can’t judge a book by its cover” is another saying that is often used. It is true that not every person or

book deserves their outfit. When it comes to design bindings our goal is to make sure that every book gets the proper attire. The cover doesn't always have to be made out of leather and parchment; cloth and paper are also very good but seldom-used materials. Expensive leather is often used with beautiful, rare, limited editions or with first editions. Of course, we cannot forget the great sentimental value that certain books have for their owners.

One book might call for a plain but elegant cover in which the architecture of the book binding is the only decoration. Another book may cry out for an exquisite covering with rich decorations. Yet another book needs a classical flat binding and with still another, sculpture is the answer. There are also books whose text allows the use of any type of binding and decoration. The bookbinder must determine the best possible method of binding to use for each particular book. Sometimes it is necessary to persuade the owner of the book who, because of a lack of knowledge, asks for a design that is not appropriate or does not flatter the book.

The easiest design for me to create is for a book that I have already read and became familiar with, and especially for one of which I have grown fond. Therefore, I am happiest when I can choose a book for binding that I have read a while ago, and have had time to develop a fuller comprehension of its contents. I feel more freedom to work on a book that does not contain illustrations and I have only the text and typography to consider.

In this article I would like to feature a book that I read and bound several times with different editions, giving each one a new design. It is a novel entitled *Comedy Full of Love* written by the Czech author, František Rachlík. In it the author gives a beautiful recollection of the life of a famous nineteenth-century Czech actor, Jindřich Mošna.

The book was published in Prague by Czechoslovakian Authors Publishing Company, 1983. Although it was not a limited edition and had been published many times, I chose a very complicated design for it. I had several reasons for this. It was, undoubtedly, one of the best biographical novels written by František Rachlík and the best novel about the life of an actor that I had ever read. I have liked books by Rachlík ever since I was a boy and I still like them today. My personal admiration for this talented writer was an important reason for me to give one of his best novels a binding of good quality.

When you consider that there are many magnificent illustrations in the book by Cyril Bouda, a well-known painter and illustrator in Czechoslovakia who had enormous influence on my artistic development both by setting an example and in giving me advice, it is obvious that I had to try to make the best possible binding for this book. Perfect typography by Oldřich Hlavsa, good paper, and print consummated my decision to make this binding really special. This was a

personal decision of mine because as I mentioned above, it lacks the attributes of collective aesthetics that would usually give it such a privilege. Nobody can deny this book its beauty and elegance, but it is missing uniqueness. With reverence and admiration for the work of Rachlík, Bouda, and Hlavsa, I decided to take one book of many and, in a harmonious way, top off their work with an original binding. I am thankful to the publisher for selecting such a wonderful combination of author, illustrator, and typographer “for me,” and giving me an opportunity to give this book its one missing piece—individuality.

The right of individuality usually belongs only to the publisher, and sometimes to the printer (today they are often one and the same person) by way of limited edition. Here the chance is given to the binder for his fine and design binding. I am glad that as a bookbinder I have the privilege of choice and “the last word” because not all limited editions deserve a beautiful binding. Sometimes an insignificant book comes out as a lovely edition because a bad, but wealthy, author can afford to publish it himself although he doesn’t have the proper artistic ability for it. Some books lack a good format or type. Some books are printed by hand, but poorly. It has been my experience that one-third of limited editions don’t deserve a good binding. Another third are good, but for some reason I can’t bring myself to read them. About one-half of the remainder, I’ll read happily, but won’t feel like binding. Therefore, I sometimes give preference to a non-limited, but beautiful edition of a book, or try to publish, rewrite calligraphically, or print a favorite book myself. I realize that in referring to publishing problems I am getting into fields other than bookbinding and getting off of the subject, which is Rachlík’s *Comedy Full of Love*.

For this book I decided to create a complicated binding without placing any limits on my time or restricting the quality of materials used. Next, I had to decide what the binding would actually look like. From a professional standpoint, I decided to do an original design. Whether we are aware of it or not, even the most original and daring ideas are affected by a previous experience with something we saw, heard of, or actually lived through, which we in some way put together.

Some of the ideas I had when I last bound this book in 1967 came back to me. At the time, I was working on a design with my friend and painter, Václav Hák. We had many unused ideas left over and some I thought of after the completion of the binding. I decided not to use any of them because I was using a different edition this time. They were both published by the same firm, but the one I worked on before came out in the year 1955. The typography was done by F. Muller, with illustrations by František Tichý, who put more emphasis on the comedic side of Mošna, while Bouda paid attention to Mošna’s human side.

The author of the book himself gave me the idea to use a costume of an actor for my design for this binding. In one of his philosophical and humorous trilogies entitled *Balty*, he gave an old, worn-out, dirty coat a soul, memory, intelligence,





**Bookbinder, Jindřich Svoboda,**  
**Petronius: *Satirikon*.** Full leather binding, red oasis goatskin. Change No. 6, green morocco, blind and gold tooling. Decorated with brass blocking dies. 1981.  
 16 × 12 × 5 cm. / 1986.

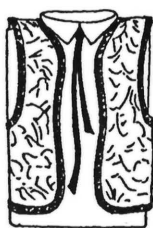
and the ability to move about, all of which remained from its former owner. Rachlík used a coat as a symbol of human intelligence. Therefore, I decided to use an actor's costume as a symbol of the works of a person who dedicated his entire life to acting. Now it came down to which costume would be the most appropriate because Mošna portrayed so many significant characters throughout his acting career. A logical answer would be to use several costumes, especially since a bookbinder can also utilize the slipcase and box. I rejoiced at my original idea, but then I remembered that it wasn't all that original after all. In 1982 I had to organize an international exhibition in Fracesbad, "Books as Artistic Objects in an Interior" and I invited famous bookbinders from all over the world, whom I knew at that time, as appropriate contributors to that exhibition, to participate. An important Czech bookbinder, Jindřich Svoboda, submitted four books, among others, with different outfits. For example, he used "changes of clothing" for a simple but beautiful binding of Petronius' *Satirikon*. In the Czech language, the word 'book' is feminine, and since a woman generally changes her clothing often, Jindřich gave his favorite book six different costumes to change into. Some are made out of leather, others out of parchment, decorated with blind tooling,

gilding, relief and metal accessories. All are easily put on the book. That was the basis for my idea.

My final decision was to use three costumes. The binding itself is the costume/vest of the ringmaster in *The Bartered Bride* by Bedřich Smetana. This was probably the most famous of Mošna's roles. The slipcase is the costume of an officer, his first significant role. The third costume, an intellectual's coat, is his civilian outfit.

Artistically, I couldn't venture too far from Bouda's illustrations. Technically, I made the book partly as a box binding where the upper and front part of the fore edge are covered. The slipcase then covers the remainder of the fore edge and the box covers all, including the lower section of the book.

B.a.b.1.



Design for  
Book



Slipcase



Box

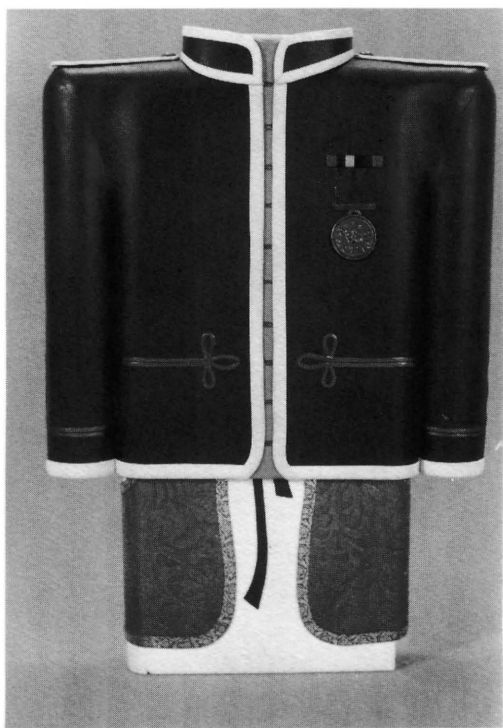
For all three parts of the book, I used bookbinder's board covered with leather. The binding's "shirt" is covered with white goatskin. The "vest" that is glued on top of the shirt is made of pressed cowhide given to me by Werner Kiessig, an excellent German bookbinder from Berlin, which I had been saving for a long time for an important binding. For the "tie" I used card stock covered with red, so-called Russian leather. The border is made of thin board covered with red goatskin, gilded with a roll before being used. The slipcase is covered with smooth blue goatskin. White calfskin is the material used for the borders. The ornaments for the "coat" and "medal" are covered with bronze leather and decorated with blind tooling. The band is made out of several colored pieces of goatskin that were glued together.

The box is covered with lightly dyed New Zealand sheepskin, and blind tooling is used for the border. The buttons are made out of strong cowhide. The material for the scarf is dark green suede. There is a copy of an historical newspaper in the right pocket as a finishing touch. Natural suede is glued to the end-papers and the interior of the boxes.

This binding/object required as much work to complete as doing three design bindings, but in the end all the work and effort I put into the book truly paid off. Not only was it very popular with everyone, but it also received first prize for craft at "The May Show," an art exhibit held in 1986 at the Cleveland Museum of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, under its given name "Costumes of Actor Mošna."



**František Rachlik:** *Komedie plná lásky* (*Comedy Full of Love*). Binding.



**František Rachlik:** *Komedie plná lásky* (*Comedy Full of Love*). Slipcase.



**František Rachlik: *Komedie plná lásky* (Comedy Full of Love).** Box. 30 × 30 × 6 cm. / 1986.



Portrait of Jan Sobota by Dorothy Smith, 1988.

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*Jan Sobota* graduated from The School of Applied Arts in Prague (prof. Emil Perták) and finished his apprentice program with Karel Šilinger in Plzeň, Czechoslovakia, 1957. He received a Master's Degree of Applied Arts, majoring in Bookbinding in 1969. In 1979, he was accepted into the MDE (International Guide of Masters of Artistic Bookbinding with its headquarters in Germany) and at the same time was honorably given the title *Meister der Einbandkunst*. Since 1990 he has been director of the Conservation Laboratory at Bridwell Library of Southern Methodist University in Dallas (Texas, U.S.A.). Since 1969 he has exhibited in 17 one-man exhibitions in Czechoslovakia, Switzerland, and the USA. He has participated in more than 100 collective book art exhibitions in the cities of four continents, receiving four Best of Show awards, four First Places, two Second Places, one Third Place and four Special Mentions.

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