



PETER GERATY
LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

BY MARY P. WOOTTON

“**W**HERE PETER FINDS opportunities to learn more about the craft [of bookbinding]?—Spoiler alert: Everywhere!”

This is a description of an iBookBinding video featuring Peter and his work, one of several iBookBinding videos in which he's been featured. Peter has a great deal to share that others in the field want to hear. His contributions to the community range from his exquisitely executed binding work, to his exemplary work ethic, and to his outstanding ability to support learning in others.

I became a member of the Guild of Book Workers in 1982 at the urging of Peter, who was the foreman of the workshop in the Harcourt Bindery where I worked. I was new to the world and craft of bookbinding and, as it turned out, was tremendously fortunate to have stumbled into the orbit of such a dedicated (and slightly obsessed) craftsman as Peter, who was only a few years into his passion for bookbinding. Although Peter was accomplished at that time, he took every opportunity to learn about the craft and to hone his skills. Every aspect of bookbinding fascinated him. Conversations over breaks often involved how long it would take to skive a skin for a full leather binding (20 minutes?, an hour?). Who wouldn't love to have conversations like that on their coffee breaks?! Peter chose the name for his bindery, Praxis, to represent the exercising of a skill; as he says on his website, doing something “again and again, trying to do better. It is what drives me, and along with

appreciation of the finished book, it is the pleasure I receive from the craft.”

Peter is keenly interested in both the quality of his bookbinding structures, and in the materials that he uses. Having spent a year and a half working in the Library of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University, he was exposed to principles of conservation, which have informed his work ever since. He remains committed to conservation and has maintained a high standard for the archival quality of his work and materials. He has, however, also been adventurous in his work, exploring new and unusual materials and techniques.

While I worked under him, Peter provided me with guidance that has followed me throughout my life. As I work with students I often find myself echoing things he said to me. One significant takeaway for me, was to trust my eye, that I didn't need to always mark things out and measure everything. He proved to me, through exercises that he put me through, that I could trust my own eye. Perhaps it was a simple lesson passed on from a master, but it is such a significant lesson if one is to work with efficiency and confidence.

Another thing I learned, working under Peter, was that I need to be open to criticism of my work. Peter is the most honest critic imaginable. He has high standards, and he also expects that you want to live up to the same high standards he has for himself. This speaks to the respect that he affords anyone who comes to him for advice or



Photo of Peter Geraty by Bobby Lee, courtesy of AAB.

tutelage. Fortunately, Peter has made teaching a large part of his career and he has passed on these lessons to many, many bookbinding students. Peter has always been generous with his hard-earned knowledge and expertise, and his instruction style encourages students to freely ask questions, without fear of judgment. He has been a proponent of the fact that one learns a great deal from making mistakes.

Peter has dedicated himself so completely to the field of bookbinding, and to teaching, that he has become something of a guru. In a time when our field is extremely short of the kind of apprenticeship opportunities that were afforded craftsmen in the past, Peter has stepped up to offer training—from his experience of years of dedicated practice—to a new generations of craftspeople. Peter has always been generous with his knowledge and insight. In addition to having presented at several GBW Standards of Excellence Seminars in Hand Bookbinding, he has made his instructions for the workshops freely available on his website. His nurturing guidance presents itself in the number of bookbinders who count themselves as his students, who are exhibiting their work in Guild exhibitions and who are now teaching others.

In Peter's professional and creative work, he has always been committed to traditional craft, and has maintained a high level of craftsmanship. Recently, I was visiting Special Collections at Smith College to look at rare volumes for a project. One of the volumes I requested was a 1495 imprint

of Aldus Manutius, an extremely notable imprint as it exhibits the very first example of italic type. When I was presented with the volume, it had a magnificent goatskin binding with elaborate gold tooling in the style of a Grolier binding. Inside, it was noted that the binding had been done by Peter Geraty, and had been commissioned by Smith College Special Collections in honor of acquiring this volume, the one millionth volume in the collection. I couldn't help but smile and think, "of course they would go to a master to bind a volume such as this." How wonderful that we have dedicated artisans worthy of the task. And Peter is such an artisan.

Our field has been greatly enriched by his dedication to our craft, his efforts to maintain the high level of craftsmanship that we have inherited from previous generations, and for passing along what he has learned to a new generation. Hand bookbinders today and in the future remain indebted to Peter Geraty.

MARY WOOTTON has worked in the field of hand bookbinding and conservation for more than 40 years. She started her career at the Harcourt Bindery, in Boston, MA and at the Northeast Document Conservation Center. She spent 12 years as a Senior Rare Book Conservator in the Conservation Division of the Library of Congress. Currently, she is the Conservator for Special Collections and College Archives at Gettysburg College in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

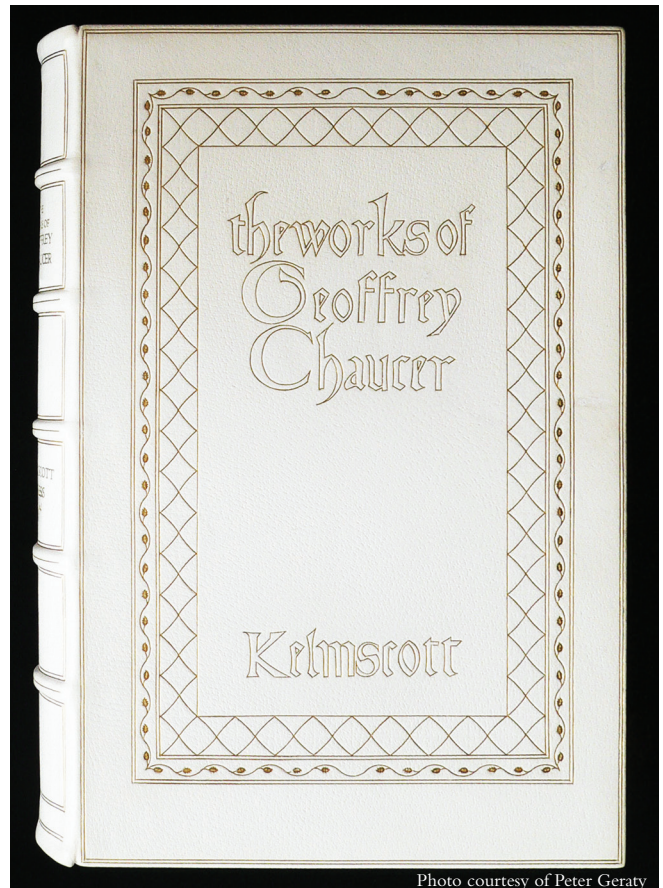


Photo courtesy of Peter Geraty