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Cuir-Ciselé (Cut Leather)

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Early in the history of bookbinding — from the time of the Roman Empire through the Gothic era — some important books were covered with gold and silver and richly decorated with engravings and chiseling. This particular technique probably inspired craftsmen and artisans who worked with leather; leather was used to decorate articles of clothing as well as to embellish other utilitarian objects.

The technique of *cuir-ciselé* was invented in Asia. From there, probably some time during the 5th century, it came to Spain and Portugal and then spread to all of Europe and the Americas. Cut Leather was often used for the decoration — sheaths for swords, shields, belts, helmets, boxes, and other containers that needed to be durable. A very rare example is this box from Northern Italy made for a book.

For the decoration of bookbindings this technique was used from about 1350–1500, but only in Central Europe — Bohemia, Austria, and southern and middle Germany — resulting in beautiful bindings that reflected the book's content.

Pope Gregory IX. *Decretales*. Mainz: Peter Schoeffer, 23 November 1473. Printed on vellum. From the collections of Bridwell Library, SMU. Central panel of binding's front cover. The 15th-century Viennese binder, Matthias, executed this cut-leather depiction of Pope Gregory IX. It reproduces the illumination of Pope Gregory IX from the text. This is interesting because, today, many binders like to do bindings which illustrate something from the text; but, in the long history of bookbinding this is very rare. The vast majority of all bindings in different countries (and also with later middle-European binding) were decorated with stamps, rolls, and blind and gold tooling that was not directly related to the text or content of the books being bound. The decorations on these bindings are for all practical purposes abstract. Renaissance bindings often have stamped central panels that show the owner of the book. It rarely has any connection with the text or content of the book.

Many German scholars of bookbinding attribute the invention of the cut leather technique to German bookbinders, but it is more probable that cut leather for bookbinding was first used in the Czech Kingdom. A

leather box for the Crown of St. Wenceslaus was made in Prague in 1347. From the style of the work it is clear that the same bookbinder also made the box for the crown of the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. It is possible that the Prague binder who made those boxes collaborated/studied with an itinerant artist of the cut leather technique. The technique is not very complicated and you need only a few tools to work. The binder was probably influenced by the itinerant artist's technique and, as it is so simple, decided to start using the cut leather technique on bindings — something that had never been done before. This became the example for other binders in the area. My thinking on this is based on the fact that the artistic level of 14th-century cut leather bindings is very different. Some of them are almost primitive and others artistically advanced. It is my theory that the primitive binding were made by the binders just learning the technique while the more artistically advanced work was being performed by the itinerant leather artists. Naturally, as time went on the binders who were beginning to use the cut leather technique for their bookbinding progressed — their bindings improved technically and artistically.

My theory is supported by the fact that, in the Czech Kingdom, very often those bindings decorated with cut leather technique were made in the workshops of Jewish binders. Jews at that time were prohibited from moving freely and were not allowed to do many types of work or craft — they were only allowed to do “dirty work.” Because binders during that time worked mostly with wood and leather — which do not smell good to everyone — Jews were allowed to do this work as well. The rise of cut leather technique gave these Jewish binders not only more wealth but increased their social status because — not only were they excelling at the craft of bookbinding with cut leather — they were elevating the cut leather technique to a higher level of artistry and thereby elevating themselves from doing mere “dirty work” to becoming artisans.

We don't know why, after 1500, the cut leather technique for bookbinding died out. The last Czech bookbinding from the 16th century is from 1521. (This is also the only 16th-century Czech binding known to exist). The technique probably died out because of the increased use of printing made it necessary to make binding faster and less expensive. Or because of the rise in popularity of the then-new technique of gold tooling on bookbinding that started to be used often in middle Europe in 16th century. These are possible reasons the cut leather technique died out.

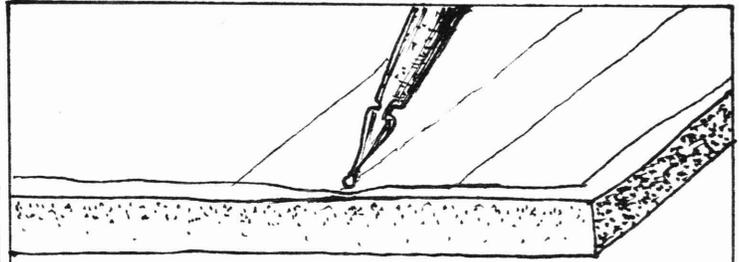
Cut leather binding in middle Europe began to be used again toward the end of the nineteenth century, especially in Germany — but these German binders still used the cut leather technique to decorate the binding in an abstract manner. In France, Art Nouveau binders took cut leather technique to a new artistic level and renamed it *cuir-ciselé*. From France this type of decoration for bookbinding spread very quickly to other European countries. The Art Nouveau bookbinders started using new techniques and more and different tools and sometimes were able to achieve new and unusual artistic effects. These French binders also began to reflect the text and content of the book in their bindings. In Czechoslovakia both the German and French styles were influencing my master Karel Silinger (1881-1963). Silinger was able to decorate in an abstract manner but still communicate the context of the book's content. I also have here two samples of work done by a Dutch binder, originally a physician, Janos Scirmay. One is a perfect facsimile of the *Codex Manesse*, and the second is his Henri Michaux's *Saisir* [to seize] where Scirmay uses the natural folds in the nape of the neck of the calfskin, and allows the folds and creases in the skin to guide his design for this binding.

I started to use cut leather technique very early in my studies because I didn't have the money to buy a lot of tools and I like the Gothic style — which I studied extensively. I went back to the early Gothic style with its minimum of tools, but I try to give the ancient form a modern outlook or flavor. Similarly, this technique is used by my wife Jarmila Sobotova who was my student and for many years my assistant. I was able to take some pictures when Jarmila was making a design and executing one of her bindings, and I will show in those pictures the process of the work.

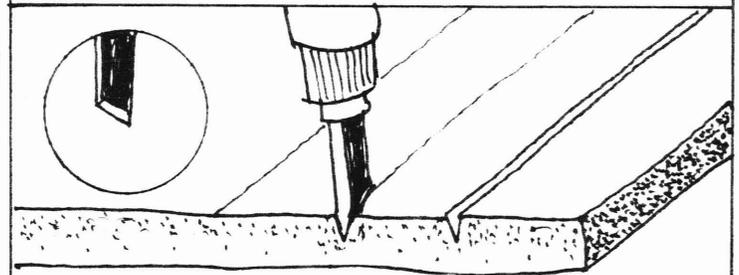
STEPS OF THE CUT LEATHER TECHNIQUE

(All of this is done on dampened leather.)

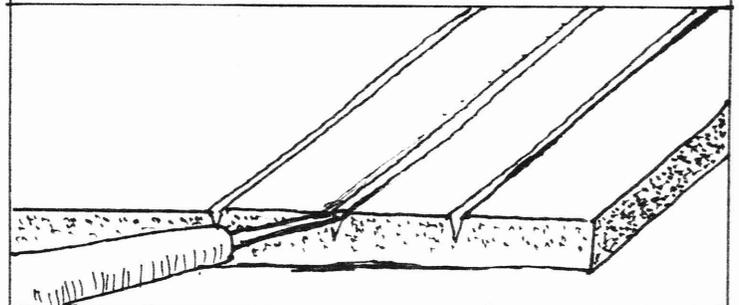
a. Transferring design through tracing paper with blunt needle.



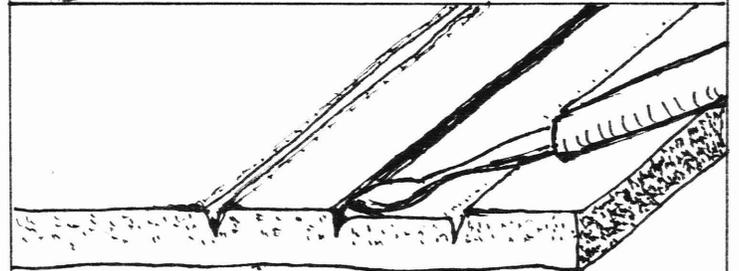
b. Incising outlines in the leather.



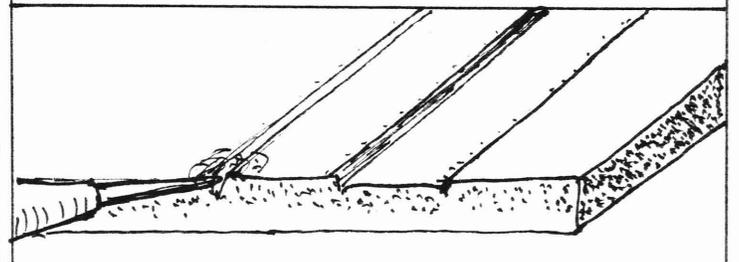
c. Widening incision with blunt needle.



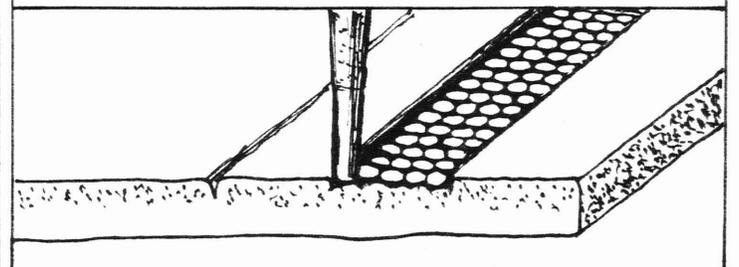
d. Depressing background with modelling tool (or with beveler and hammer).



e. Removing thin wheat paste after applying.



f. Texturing background with pearl-punch and hammer.



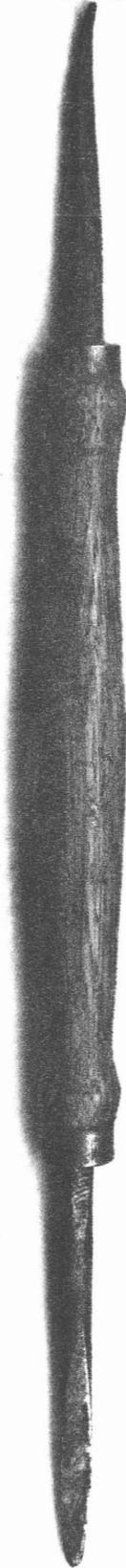
HISTORICAL TOOLS



Blunt
Needle



Knife



Modelling
Tool



Pearl
Punch

Tandy

