

Behind the Design:

Planning Surface Design & Decoration for Fine Binding.

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INTRODUCTION

While preparing for a recent workshop on cover design techniques for fine binding, I turned to a 1980-81 notebook from my bookbinding studies at the London College of Printing. Part of the course included education on the history of decorative binding styles, which was taught by my finishing instructor, John Mitchell. His outline on contemporary binding design had been passed down from modern binder Edgar Mansfield, originally from New Zealand, who was instructor for the course many years before. Mansfield's guiding words were an inspiration to me then, and still hold true for me today.

My notes dated February 9, 1981, attributed to Edgar Mansfield:

- 1) Book design up to 50 years ago [now more than 75 years ago] was based on geometric pattern (structure). Bookbinding designs acquired a new scope through introduction of asymmetry, relation between content and design, and expressive design.
- 2) Asymmetrical design has extended the scope of expression to include: "uncertainty, constant change & variety, random chance & conflict, ideas which symmetry and repetition would neutralize or contradict."
- 3) Asymmetry allows greater variety of invention, movement & energy, and contrast of space & form.
- 4) Modern design in bookbinding invariably revolves around expressive design, ie., a design intention related to the content of the book. The design could take the form of a symbol, or an emotion, or idea, in an abstract form.
- 5) To obtain a successful design on the cover of a book, it is necessary to take the following factors into consideration:
a) LINE b) TEXTURE c) AREA d) COLOR e) TONE

LINE: Pallets, spine lines; Gouges, curved lines; Fillets, straight lines; Onlays; Inlays, etc.

TEXTURE: Can be created out of the covering material used, like grained leather. Accentuate the grain deeper, grain [roll] or shape within the grain. The texture can be formed by the use of small finishing tools, ie., dots, lines, small squares or triangles.

AREA: Not only created from the design shape itself, it can be formed from the area surrounding the design shape. Areas may be more interesting by recessing that particular area, or raising an area.

COLOR: Limited to the color of bookbinding leather from manufacturers. If design is purely decorative, choice of color is free, but association with content is desirable. Once design is related to contents, the same relationship must extend to the color.

TONE: To make bindings as a whole acceptable, considerations must be taken from the beginning of the plan to bind the book---endpapers, headbands, edge decoration, color & type of leather, and finally, design. Colors, like the forms, must integrate into an organization which becomes interesting in both color & tone. The relationship between color & content can be solved in several ways by using local or descriptive colors.

PLANNING THE DESIGN, A Practical Guide.

In 1987, six years after my initial study in London, I was fortunate to take part in a master class on fine binding with British binder James Brockman, held at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. The refinements I learned from Brockman at that time are the basis of how I forward my fine bindings today. When designing my binding covers, I still begin my work with thumbnail sketches in pencil, much as his instruction guided us to do.

The tips presented here have developed out of my own teaching experience as an attempt to help students overcome the intimidating prospect of decorating a blank leather binding. They are oriented to the tradition of executing a design binding for an existing text.

In recent years, however, more fine binders are becoming holistic in their approach by first creating their own text to bind, in which case the cover design becomes a natural extension of their text both in content and design.

First Approach: Looking for Inspiration. Use the book text as a point of departure. Study the text and illustration (if any) of book to be bound and decorated.

- Trust your gut feeling and note first impressions and ideas for a cover design.
- Jot down key words or the names of objects/images that come to mind.
- If you visualize expressive shapes or textures, quickly sketch the patterns inside thumbnail outlines made in proportion to the open book cover.
- Make note of the dominant color schemes suggested by the text illustration or printing. Or, do you associate a particular color with the book's subject or mood?
- Look at the materials available for binding: leather, cloth, paper. Select leather color and narrow down colors for the endpapers, or for a decorative paper, based on your study of the text content and printing.

Two: Research for Your Design.

- Some bookbinders read the text before designing a book cover to obtain total familiarity with the content of the book. This may seem like the obvious thing to do, but it is not always possible to read every book that you are to bind, word for word. Often a trade version is read to avoid any damage to the original text to be bound.
- Refer to your list of key words and look for other books for reference that may have the images you noted, or that relate to the subject. Go to the library (or online) and collect imagery or picture books. Look at magazines to gather pictures to play with. Or, go out and sketch from life and nature if that relates to the key elements on your list.
- Look at binding exhibit catalogs and study the design bindings that inspire you the most. What is it about the design that you like? Is it the combination of colors, the composition, surface textures, or the tooling that excites you about the binding? If you are binding an older text, look at the historic styles of binding for ideas for a more traditional pattern for tooling or a design that you can modify and make your own.

Three: Making the Key Drawing or Maquette.

My first major was in printmaking at the California College of Arts & Crafts, with an emphasis on stone lithography. The key drawing was critical for making accurate tracings for color separations. With bookbinding, this drawing becomes the blueprint or mockup for your design, often referred to as the "maquette" due to the French influence on modern design binding.

The steps presented here are for a design process executed by hand, but they can be easily modified or enhanced through the use of computer graphics if desired.

THINK OVERALL DESIGN. Your binding cover is your canvas! There are actually four parts of a binding to consider: the front board, the back board, the spine, and finally, the overall or open book. One could go further to consider the board edges and turn-ins. Keep in mind that most design bindings are exhibited or photographed standing, with both boards open, to view the whole piece.

- First, do a series of quick thumbnail sketches of the overall cover design or concept.
- Begin laying out the key drawing or maquette on a piece of white, cover weight paper large enough to make a life size layout of your book cover, plus generous margins for notes. Measure out and draw a blank rectangle comprised of your front board, back board and estimated spine width. Then add vertical lines to designate the spine area.
- Separately, sketch from or trace over images from your gathered visual sources and begin to combine elements. If you have not fully developed a particular image yet, do a rough sketch to symbolize the object.

- Try using a copy machine to blow up pictures or sketches. Areas can be cropped using a cutout paper window that has been trimmed in proportion to your estimated cover area. This is an excellent way to establish asymmetrical or abstract design and structure to build upon.
- Or, use photo copies to repeat certain images. A copier can also be used to enlarge an thumbnail sketch to begin laying out your key drawing or blueprint.
- SIMPLIFY! Use tracing paper and pencil to draw over the sketched or copied images to begin refining your design. Form clean lines and shapes. The design should be easily translated and appropriate for the tools and materials used for leather decor.
- Make cutouts of sketched images to desired size so they can be arranged and moved around the surface of the key drawing framework. When the final placement of images or forms is established, transfer them to the actual key drawing simply by rubbing the back of the cutout with soft pencil and retracing over the lines on front. Refine them further on the key drawing with a sharp pencil and fine eraser.
- Once the key drawing or maquette is finalized, always keep it as your reference while you decorate your leather binding. If you wish to cut patterns for onlay forms, make tracings from this key drawing to maintain accurate placement of all parts, particularly if you plan to tool the design afterwards.

Overall Design Considerations.

- Think about the placement of focal points or objects and of how multiple focal points can create movement across the spine from board to board.
- As the design develops, crop down each key drawing component: back board, front board, and spine, to see if individually they are interesting areas, as well as the whole.
- After selecting type and size for title lettering (if desired), decide on placement of the title and any other lettering you might have. Will it run up the spine or across the spine? Will it be worked into the design or placed in a more traditional location?
- Above all, technical consideration is critical. Do not complicate designs, whether realistic or abstract. Work with manageable sizes of images. Avoid complexity.

Four: *Translating the Design to the Materials and Tooling.*

It is a good idea to test techniques you wish to incorporate on your binding design. Make small leather plaquettes (leather pasted to board and counter lined to keep flat) for this purpose. It is good practice and if saved, they can be used for future designs.

- Work with leathers in the color scheme you have chosen to see how they interact and change in relationship to each another, especially when making onlays or inlays on your primary cover leather. Your color choices make a statement, whether they are monochromatic or contrasting, dark or light, bright or subdued.

- These experiments may help you select the type of tooling most suitable for your design, such as blind tooling, or tooling with gold or colored foils.
- If you plan to apply curved tooling with gouges, do a tracing of the design from key drawing. Select gouges that precisely match the curves and make an inkpad or carbon impression of them over traced lines, carefully noting the number of the gouge used.
- Will you choose to translate the design through traditional onlay or inlay leather work, or through inlay leather lines? If so, pare thin leather and practice on plaques.
- Other decorative techniques such as painting with acrylic on leather or coloring with dyes should always be tested before applying them to the leather cover. It is especially important to practice on plaquettes if planning to attach any unusual materials.
- Experiment with surface textures such as sanding leather, as well as manipulating or sculpting leather over raised areas or into recesses in the board.

Transferring the Design to the Leather Binding.

- The design can be transferred from the key drawing by first making a clean traced copy on strong tracing paper or a thin (40# text weight), smooth paper. Carefully wrap the traced paper around the bound book and lightly tape over turn-ins. Another way to secure the pattern to the book is to tape over random small holes in the paper.
- Once secured, a semi-sharp tool can be cautiously used over paper design to mark or outline areas for onlay placement or for other design areas. If using gouges or tooled lines, wrap and secure tooling pattern around book and tool through paper with warm tools. The lines can be cleaned up and retooled after paper pattern is removed. The same process can be used for any title lettering.
- If you are working with geometric pattern or line, it is possible to use dividers or to mark points directly on the cover leather. Score the pattern with a thin bonefolder before tooling, painting lines, or setting in leather line.

*Now, you are ready to put your design into action.
Your key drawing or maquette is your guide.*

Five: Letting Go.

Really! During the actual process of applying the design elements, the design binding begins to take on a life of its own. Here, the transformation from design to art takes shape. No matter how carefully you aim to stick with your key drawing design, its colors and decorative techniques, there is always an element of chance and change that may occur. Try to be flexible and allow for such changes in your design if possible.

- Often the creative process of working with different materials may suggest new ideas and directions to go. Some of the best and most exciting work may happen when a little spontaneity is allowed.

- Sometimes, you may not have a choice but to make a change when a certain material does not cooperate or tooling becomes problematic. This is an opportunity to be inventive, to overcome a problem by coming up with a solution or alternative method.
- After all this work preparing a design, just remember that it is intended to be your blueprint or key or framework from which to begin on what might have been an otherwise daunting task. Hopefully, it has helped you overcome the fear of making that first step towards decorating a blank bound leather binding. Enjoy the process and it will show!

Homage to a Pioneer in Modern Design Binding.

Edgar Mansfield, in his introduction to Philip Smith's 1974 publication, *New Directions in Bookbinding*, acknowledges that Smith's book had arrived on the scene at the right time. Up until this publication, the only manuals on bookbinding dealt with more traditional or standard application of decoration to a binding cover as a functional object. Philip Smith broke ground in establishing bookbinding as a new medium in art.

Here are some words from Philip Smith's preface:

"It is only when the content of the book, especially the thematic idea of the creative writer, is sought out as the vital and peculiar springboard of this medium that it can be justified as an art medium, for it is the hidden essence which informs the whole point --if not the only reason--- of using a book and not a canvas or panel on which to display visual images."

On Surface Design, Smith notes:

"Surface Design composition is the visual ordering of the elements, lines, colours, forms, and the spaces between; which may be described by using such terms as direction, weight, emphasis or stress, movement, perspective, proportion and the rest... In learning how to design, the binder must master all these elements, but bear in mind that each arrangement, each relationship of parts, is creating 'meaning', that is, it contains all the above factors. His sensibility alone will tell him whether he is projecting the 'design meaning' which will communicate the intended experience. For the bookbinder, the relevant composition is not an arrangement of masses of colours designed for visual comfort (symmetry, balance, tastefulness), but is determined by the inner necessity of the original insight, idea or purpose aroused by the book he is binding."