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Beautiful Bookbindings: A Thousand Years of the Bookbinder's Art

P. J. M. Marks

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#1295188 in Books Oak Knoll Press 2011-05-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 11.00 x 8.75 x 1.00L, 2.75 #File Name: 1584562935192 pages | File size: 22.Mb

P. J. M. Marks : Beautiful Bookbindings: A Thousand Years of the Bookbinder's Art before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Beautiful Bookbindings: A Thousand Years of the Bookbinder's Art:

1 of 2 people found the following review helpful. This is the best book on the subject!By Charles M. MarstellerIf you are looking for a beautiful book on the history of bookbinding, this is THE book for your library.This book truly traces the Bookbinder's art, but for well over 1,000 years as it starts in the Anglo Saxon era.One page each is devoted to a famous cover--and all the photographs are in color.This book also makes for a wonderful coffee table type of book as all will enjoy the art herein!17 of 17 people found the following review helpful. Fine Introduction to the SubjectBy Loaf Life to the FullI was pleasantly surprised by this book, which is more lavish and appealing than its modest price tag had led me to expect. Drawing on the British Library's permanent collections, the book is a chronological, pictorial survey of bookbindings from around the world, starting over a thousand years ago and finishing with bindings from the present day. Since it is a relatively slim volume and aims for breadth rather than depth, any reader with a special interest in one particular style or period of binding will be tantalised rather than satisfied by the content; this is not a fault with the book, merely a consequence of its author's intentions: namely to write an introductory work aimed at the general reader.All of the illustrations of bindings are in colour, and generally of very high quality. The occasional close-ups are a welcome feature. A twelve page introduction on the history of bookbinding gives a very balanced and wide-ranging overview of the subject, and is written in a commendably lucid style.The text which accompanies the

binding images is, with one or two exceptions, authoritative and informative. The few exceptions are where the author has tried to enhance our appreciation of certain bindings by directly quoting the words of the binders or other scholars. Here the text occasionally becomes less authoritative, or, worse, lapses into vacuity. An example of the first sort is where she quotes a typically uncompromising utterance from the binding historian Cyril Davenport, a man who took his own opinions for facts, and scarcely understood the meaning of the word scholarship. An example of the second is the binder Daniel E. Kelm's comments on page 181, where he tells us bewilderingly that the "deep...qualities of a binding are to be found not just on its surface" and goes on to talk about the "synergistic effect" of his work, in a way that leaves me unenlightened. I did find a few errors in the text, such as a page reference to page 00, and the misnaming of Philip Smith's book *New Directions in Bookbinding*. Also foreign words and names seemed to cause problems, e.g. the misspelling of the French word for "fan", and both the misspelling of the Latinised name Rosicrusius and the failure to put it in the genitive case when this was called for. But these are trivial errors, and forgivable in the first edition of a book. I have said that this book features bindings from around the world, and no particular prejudice is shown by the author for any one nationality. However, my own puny patriotism does bridle at one aspect of the arrangement of images in the book, and that is the fact that the images chosen for the front and back of the dustjacket are of French bindings. Yes, these bindings are dazzling examples of the bookbinder's art and arguably more deserving of prominence than any of the other bindings in the book, but if the *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* were to publish a similar work to the present one, can we seriously imagine them putting British bindings on the covers? The writer is clearly at ease when discussing bookbinding from a historical perspective, and shows a masterly understanding of her subject. She is occasionally less sure of herself when discussing bookbinding technique. An example is her analysis on page 43 of certain aspects of gold-tooling and the relative difficulties faced by the worker in applying different kinds of tools. This passage is rather muddled and suggests perhaps insufficient first-hand acquaintance with the niceties of the techniques in question. In a similar vein, when, on page 125, she compares two bindings very similar in their tooling, one from the 16th century and the other a 19th century reincarnation of essentially the same design, she refers to the later binding as "bland" without saying how or why it is so. It is unashamedly a copy of the earlier design and falls far below the original in merit on this count alone, but to talk about it being bland does not help me to understand the qualitative or aesthetic differences between the two. Possibly another piece of evidence for the author's unfamiliarity with the technical refinements of her subject is the prominence she has chosen to give to the "Great Omar" binding on pages 154-157. This, again, is a reincarnation of an earlier binding (which went down with the *Titanic* and is not pictured), but the workmanship on this later one is clearly of a very low standard. In essence the impact of this book depends upon the extreme elaboration of its gold-tooled design, which, though in questionable taste, could have been magnificent if well executed. As it is, the standard of tooling is at best inept, making the book both an eyesore and a monument to human folly, because the craftsman who made it, however noble his intentions, did not have sufficient self-knowledge to recognise that he was utterly unfitted for the task before him. Admittedly the binder was 82 years old when he completed it and can be forgiven if his powers had waned somewhat, but it is a uniformly poor piece of work all the same, and the fact that the author chose to include it and even show part of it in extreme close-up does suggest a slightly worrying lack of discernment in someone you would expect to be a more fastidious arbiter. The problem, I think, is almost certainly not that the author lacks this kind of discernment at all, but that she has tried to please too many different people with her book. Firstly she has allowed colleagues to choose bindings for inclusion when some of these colleagues may not have been the best judges of a binding's merits, and secondly in spite of her diplomatic assertion that the basic criterion for inclusion in the book is that the bindings should "please the eye", it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that at least a few of the bindings have been chosen chiefly out of gratitude to the benefactors (or their families) who generously donated their bindings to the library. Then she has tried to please living bookbinders and fellow scholars by occasionally allowing them to speak for themselves, when their comments have sometimes failed to enhance the work. And finally she has tried to please the general reader by accommodating all these other considerations whilst still making the whole package as attractive as possible. In spite of my apparent multitude of objections I believe the author has succeeded in pleasing all of these people, and my only real regrets are that the book was not longer, and that the author had not been weighed down by such a burden of obligation to others. Perhaps a series of follow-up volumes, covering different nations or periods, might be forthcoming, for readers who want a more in-depth coverage of the subject. There will always be a steady, if modest, demand for these sorts of books - a demand that the present author has shown herself to be well qualified to satisfy.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Beautiful Bookbindings is a truly a work of art By Isabel V Parker This is a book that everyone who loves art books should get. It covers a thousand years of beautiful books from ancient times up until the present day. The information is presented in a clear and thoughtful manner and the photographs are stunning. The author, PJM Marks, obviously knows and loves her subject. I highly recommend this book.

Over 100 of the most beautiful bookbindings from the last 1000 years are showcased in this highly illustrated book that provides a world view of the development of the bookbinding craft. Arranged chronologically, these beautiful and often surprising works of art present a clear visual record of the progression of the craft through the ages. By

juxtaposing bindings from different countries from the same period, differences and similarities, and the transfer of styles and ideas, are highlighted.

About the Author Philippa Marks is Curator of Western Bookbindings at The British Library. She has written two other books, both published by the British Library: *Treasures in Focus: Decorated Papers* (2007) and *The British Library Guide to Bookbinding* (1998).