FACING
PAGES:

A Classical View
to the Art of the Book

by CLAIRE VAN VLIET

To read a book is an act of opening —
we open it and we are open to it.

All the physical components of a book can act as facilitators to the essence of the text. They can engage the senses and bring other dimensions of comprehension to the text.

Reading a book is a dialogue and the more the reader is encouraged to bring to the act of reading, the better it is for the author.

What the reader encounters first is the binding — this (usually) rectangular box with three open sides. What color(s) is it? Does it feel like what is inside? The hands will hold it and feel it — soft, hard, rough, smooth, heavy, light — during the time the book is being "read."

To read a book is an act of opening — we open it and we are open to what is inside. We expect to receive from a book. This is an unusually receptive atmosphere for a contemporary artist to work in. The reader is open and unthreatened, even wants what is inside the book. I think this is because the scale is intimate, and the act of reading is unself-conscious for those who like to do it.

The paper acts in much the same way as the binding — through the sense of touch and the suggestiveness of color relationships.

The typeface can act as a sensual as well as visual illustration of the text. To set a series of spare widow poems in a voluptuous type like Palatino might not serve the poems, unless by contrast.

The placement and spacing of the type along with the shape of the page itself, visually control the movements of the eye. What is the character of these movements — flowing, jerky, quiet, fast? What kind of shape is the unprinted part of the page — tall, narrow, wide, generous?

There are two approaches to images in books: a series of separate pictures and the image as an inseparable component of the page.

In the first approach the images can exist on their own. They are complete unto themselves as hand-held pictures. The text is likewise complete unto itself. They can be separated (unfortunately, this is often their fate). In these books, text and image stand side by side, separate and equal, illuminating each other.

In the second approach the image is integrated with the type to complete a page. The image may not even work without the text, either in comprehension or as composition.

My own work has moved from the parallel approach to more and more integration of the components. This has gone as far as incorporating the image into the paper making process. Since 1976, Twinrocker Handmade Paper Mill and the Janus Press have collaborated on five books, the most recent of which is Lilac Wind by W.R. Johnson. The sheet was made with the shape of the cloud forms on the top edge. The clouds and snow were laid on the pulp before pressing.

The moon was printed several times, twice with stencil and once in the etching press. The typeface originally planned was Diotima italic, but it was changed to Times New Roman italic. The box began as white cloth covered, but ended up in dark plum. Production at the Janus Press is on hand presses, and the binding is also done here by hand. This provides plenty of time for all the components of the book to adjust to each other or even change completely.

I have found that book ideas come from both the literary and visual worlds. Sometimes I have a sequence of images in search of an author, and sometimes a text creates visual ideas. I am no longer sure which does which — it has become a chicken and egg process. What happens is a sense that action can begin: Words, images, scale, and materials click, fall into place, and a book form emerges. Making books, like architecture, is a building process that involves collaboration with many co-workers — authors, artists, paper makers, typographers, printers, binders, and booksellers. The idea flows in organically that the confusion as to whose book it is, is perhaps best answered by Harry Duncan who said: "The book belongs to the buyer."