A Million Years of Bookbinding

The invention of the wheel was a great step forward. — Ellen McCrady

Bookbinding has tried all the disguises of the visual arts without finding its genre. Its role in the industry of book production does not make it particularly glamorous or distinctive. It has a diminishing consequence in library preservation. Has bookbinding lost its zing?

The real importance of bookbinding is seldom guessed. Bookbinding enables hand-to-mind communication. This handling-and-understanding connection is out of our past. Perhaps it is no accident that the bookbinder uses the oldest tool, the bone folder. From a remote origin bookbinding derives its own aesthetic, its own purpose, and a peculiar future.

The aesthetic of bookbinding, though, is not what everyone says it is. Color, composition, texture, the aesthetics of the visual arts, are not enough to evaluate bookbinding. Action, choreography, structure, elements of dance and theater, must be added, because bookbinding is a mechanism for communication. Book artists have converted the underlying structure into visual art. This is closer to the aesthetic challenge of the craft, but the result is still static, exhibition art. What is needed is an appreciation of the action of use, an aesthetic of performance.

Such performance of bookbinding does not occur in display cases; it occurs during reading, in the use and disuse of books. This is why a phone book in a bus station is more interesting than an exhibition binding. And it is why a used binding can hold our attention. I saw one in an old pickup with a battered cover and edges worn away from constant use. It was thrown in with fence wire and ranch tools to be close at hand. It should not be interesting, yet it was fascinating. Watch a book opened for the first time or flipped down onto a photocopier, and you can see the strange manipulations of reading.

We should experience binding as performance. Instead of a jewel box, finished and closed, we should appreciate bookbinding as the anatomy of the actions of reading. Each binding can then be judged on the evidence of its use, on its role among readers across time. Beyond ornamental, the binding should be graceful and pliant with a lively response. New or old, it must invite handling and promise discovery.
It is the purpose of bookbinding to link hands and mind in the action of reading. It is not surprising that the co-evolution of hands and mind, so important to the emergence of culture, should be expressed in the codex bookbinding. It is surprising when we forget that bookbinding is tied to these origins.

The first stone tools were selected from shattered rocks of quartz. The precision grip of fossil hominid species enabled careful selection from the scattered fragments. Before we were human, we found a cutting edge among the promising crystals. This behavior, hands prompting the mind, is our earliest heritage.

In Neolithic society in the Middle East counting tokens were used to symbolize and tally the contents of baskets and granary. These ceramic tokens are everywhere in the archeology of the region across thousands of years. Manipulating these small wedges, beads, and cylinders made virtual the sorting and management of tons of produce. Clay envelopes enclosing tokens reveal stylus marks that provided a table of contents before there was writing, before there were books and before there were readers.

These finger tokens assembled the mind. Later, when words were gathered into books, the same handling strategy was used. Fingering of pages managed the containment of ideas. The printer’s pointing hand, the pointing glove annotation in manuscripts, and the silver hand to follow the reading from Hebrew scripture reflect the beginning of reading when hands and words worked together. Then the reading revolution that enabled content to float free from page to mind obscured the role of hands in the connection between medium and message. Now readers are surprised to realize that their hands spend so many hours in books.

In bookbinding fingering and reading are still dancing partners. As each leaf is lifted a subtle play of handling leads on through the text. But the role of hands in reading continues to recede, and now the connection of a physical medium as the transmitter may be slipping away. Is handling part of the reading of electronic text? Does keyboard fingering manipulate text? The software for the use of traditional books is embedded deep in culture, and thereby in the individual. Software for the use and reading of electronic text is installed in a computer. Does electronic text break a bond between the reader and the book? Does it break the binding?

Perhaps we should give electronic communication, hypertext, and CD-ROMs an opportunity to achieve their space in human culture. Meanwhile, bookbinding has its own peculiar future to consider. Maybe bookbinding is the only activity in the universe that cannot be transformed by digital communication. Exchanging ideas is not the point. The challenge is to exchange ideas in a graceful structure. Electronic book arts journals will follow this last issue of Bookways and miss that point.
Bookbindings of the new millennium will have the clean, uniform look of cases for CDs or videocassettes. The flush covers will be in keeping with the postmodern idea of compact, stackable media. These bindings will be standardized to size and structure, while they are also unique, produced for an individual, on demand. The durable video corners on the fore edge will echo the image of an early television set. Waterless technology, the same transfer-tape films that bond airplanes and gas stations, will keep covers to text. Structural innovations to produce docile, flat openings, suited to scanning devices, will be revived from the earliest codex structure. The sewn boards binding, with covers attached as if they were outermost sections, was the mechanism of books before the advent of printing. Now it returns in time for the post-print era.

These bindings of the future will be equally face-up and face-down readable. Face-down handling, suddenly imposed by photocopiers, has demonstrated the adaptability of a structure evolved for manipulation by hands. But we have not paused to consider this somersault in the use of bindings, and beneath this change another is lurking.

The important shift is from eye reading to machine reading of books. Like the change to face-down reading, this momentous revolution will probably go unnoticed. Now copying or machine imaging precedes eye reading. Computer reading from paper sources is assisted by optical character recognition and associated grammar and logic software. Strangely, the paper book is both eye and machine readable, unlike its digital counterparts. Soon computer systems may take an avid interest in reading. Why not? Then what?

The book evolved with us, a strange and lucky convergence that has moved us on down the road, or is the road. Now we are zooming along, steering to follow. The twelfth-century leap from recitation to silent reading sent us to electronic virtuality. There is no time left for craft revivals. There is no time to ask why conceptual works are transmitted by physical media. Wasn’t it all a paradox, upside-down and backwards?

Gathering and sewing, building the text, lacing the boards, covering and finishing. Opening the book, fingerling the pages, shelving and unshelving, searching through a book bound by someone in a different time. Returning to the illustration, entering and withdrawing from a familiar or new thought, finding the story, manipulating ideas. Hands and words.

Bookbinding is a pageant of the invention of the book. The combination of dexterity and imagination, each prompting the other, is a remote human talent that will follow us into the future.