THE BOOK AS A SPINATE

By Hedi Kyle

We can pursue several paths of inquiry to study all aspects of a unique artifact, tool, and information package—otherwise known as the book.

For this article I chose the spine as my topic, following an impulse that had vaguely begun to take shape upon my first encounter with the bare back of a book. I still regard that experience as a landmark of revelation and a turning point in my career, which led to my profession as a book conservator.

To strip the façade and reveal the skeleton of the essential structure can be as exciting as participating in an archaeological dig.

To investigate the researchers of others inspires and motivates personal observations and we soon realize how the book itself becomes instructive about its own subject.

Once I focused on the spine, I realized how complex a subject it is. At present I can only scrape the surface with this personal illustrated view of the book as a spine.

In book terminology, *inner spine* or *backbone* refers to the area where the combined sections are mutually connected, either through sewing or gluing. The *outer spine*, or shelf-back further sustains and protects the text block and usually bears information that identifies the volume.

Ideally, both the inner and outer spines are anchored to the boards at the joints with sewing supports, linings, and covering materials. This crucial junction perpetuates openability and function.

Why have such terms as spine, back, or backbone suggested themselves for use in connection with this particular body? It seems that there is a visual & imagined association with the spinal functions among certain species of (in)vertebrates.

It is also true that the spine of the book, like our own, is the axis, the chief support, the center for carrying out and coordinating action and movement.

Not all books, however, have internally constructed spines. Hypothetically there is also a category of invertebrates with less-developed devices to maintain single sheets in a sequential order.

A most simple temporary support can be demonstrated with the hand alone. By grasping a naked stack of paper firmly, we make it flex and flow, and create the illusion of a book in action.

Even more dangerous and brutalizing, yet extremely handy to keep track of receipts and other ephemera, is the spindle file.

It may be argued that this is not a book. I mention it only because this crude and minimal diversion reminds me of a far relative, namely the palm leaf book found in East
Asia. Both examples counter the otherwise existing method of unifying leaves or sections at one edge.

Other booklike organizers include the ring and post binders and the spiral book.

In the computer age, the growing request for fast and effective modes of book making leads to numerous modifications of these already well-established prototypes.

Mechanical features such as can be observed in the concertina, for instance, have led to unusual binding structures with expandable spines and a range of performing possibilities.

The width of the folded sections is entirely flexible, and many applications can be invented, often in combination with sewing, slotting, and lacing.

All kinds of hinges also serve as inspiration for experiments with different methods of innovative spine construction and cover attachments.

We notice that most of these holding devices that confine the pages and prevent them from being scattered around are made from wire, metal, or plastic. In other words, from materials that are inflexible, even rigid.

The performance of these utility books is accordingly often awkward and unsympa-

All these innovative attempts are a positive response, and by celebrating the book, they counteract the pessimistic foreboding of its extinction.

It is inconceivable that humanity would let go of such a venerable information carrier in favor of more recently developed electronic systems. News of the mortality of the book is hopefully nothing more than an overreaction.

Nothing can replace the intimate affiliation we have established with the codex — the ancestor of all later-evolving binding styles.

Who can deny the seductive quality of certain books and the sensual delight they evoke in us? We fondle them and stroke their backs. We inhale their intoxicating sweet and musty fragrance, and they
A very unusual type of book evolved during the middle ages. Subordinate to the codex format, this group of books surprises with the highly original concept of sewing sections directly to flexible or midspine supports. These are usually made from leather, vellum, wood, horn, or combinations thereof. Nowhere else do we find such imaginative and ornate sewing patterns.

In regard to the sewing, ancient secrets come to light again and may confirm assumed theories by providing the missing link.

This of course leads to an unequalled source of discovery, a true reward to those entrusted with the conservation and restoration of historical volumes. As outer spines, linings, & adhesives are carefully removed, until the sewing is exposed, the characteristics of distinct periods as well as choices and resolutions of individual binders in the past are revealed.

It is often the case that the inlays in the outer spine and the linings of the inner spine are cut from materials which had previously been used for other purposes. Frugality and economic concern may have contributed to this practice rather than a conscious attempt at recycling as is our concern today.

But this location, hidden from view, is also like a dump where one could dispose of accumulating waste. Hundreds of years later it converts into a fascinating site and occasionally even into a treasure hoard where fragments of early manuscripts, printed books, maps, newspapers, and other ephemera can be recovered.

Fortunately, the mysteries of the inner spine are no longer as obscure as they once were. They are in fact quite accessible through the literature on the subject of book construction and through numerous demonstration models that perform and propagate book action.

Until recently these so-called longstitch bindings or Kopien have been given little attention in the literature on the history of books, let alone in the instruction manuals. The rediscovery of their potential now, when bookmakers begin to accept structure as decoration, is not at all surprising. Their rather informal character and their simple beauty make them a perfect prototype for our time, and experimental adaptations are well on their way.
With the increasing production of books, they began to stand upright. Strangely enough, though, their backs faced the backs of the shelves. It could be that the paradoxical concept of back facing front and front facing back had to be overcome first, in order to realize that the spine provided an ideal surface to display the author’s name and the title of the work. The spine could also bridge the design from the front to the back cover or become a decorated showpiece in itself.

The gleam of gold has always been extremely attractive. The desire to possess books whose titles and ornaments are stamped with the precious metal prevails to this day.

There is a hierarchy among the spines. The golden ones still represent the richest treasures, and often rightfully so.

On the other hand, such books, far from being instruments of study, sometimes take the highest rank among ornaments in living rooms. Mass-produced now beyond any authentic quality or integrity, their fate is often that of inanimate dust collectors. Who would be fooled or enticed by a row of standard titles, even if they are classics, with fake leather spines and