Illustrated Publishers Binding Designs in the WVU Rare Books Collection

Editor’s note:
The old adage “you can't tell a book by its cover” is sage advice when it comes to evaluating the vast preponderance of volumes published since the first book rolled off Johannes Gutenberg’s press in the mid-fifteenth century. During one remarkable era in the history of publishing, however, book covers not only reflected the content within but were arguably of greater intrinsic value than the literary content they adorned. In the following article about the heyday of the “illustrated publishers binding,” History Center Rare Books Librarian Stewart Plein discusses the era during which one was well advised not to judge the cover by the book!

The book, as we know it today, is the result of a long history of technological advancements made over not just centuries but millennia. The most significant advancement in the development of the modern book, Gutenberg’s invention of moveable type in 1439, is well known today. As it represented a watershed moment in history. Less well known is the fact that the early years of the nineteenth century witnessed another sweeping advancement that also simplified book production and made books more affordable for the masses -- a shift in book cover material from leather to cloth.

Leather had served as the standard binding covering material for centuries. Whether unadorned or elaborately tooled and custom decorated for wealthy patrons, a tremendous amount of time and expense was required to process animal skin to prepare them for use. As hides came in all shapes and sizes, unlike a bolt of cloth, there was a good deal of waste when the leather was trimmed for each book. As modern methods of manufacture, such as assembly line practices, in cutting, trimming and sewing could not be utilized or even conceived, the creation of books remained a one at a time proposition.

The introduction of cloth book covering transformed the industry, simplifying production and dramatically reducing costs. The innovation proved to be a tremendous boon to book manufacturers struggling to meet the demand required by a new audience, a growing reading public with money to purchase books and the leisure time to read them. The cloth bound book enabled publishers to issue books in large quantities, ready-made and affordably priced for the reading public.

The use of cloth changed not only the way books were made but also the way they looked. For the first time, covers could be mass produced bearing colors, textures and patterns that could be designed to fit aesthetically with the content of a book. Beginning with simple decorations and thematic motifs, embossed and stamped in gold, a new
group of book designers emerged whose works increased in artistic merit with each passing decade. During the height of the “publishers book binding,” as the covers of this era are now called, some binding designs were so exquisite that they literally made the books they graced objects of art.

The earliest book bound in cloth in History Center’s Rare Books collection is a British printing of Samuel Butler’s epic poem, Hudibras. Published in 1828, only five years after the first use of cloth, this book has two very important features -- the watered or moiré pattern applied to the cloth, and the leather label on the spine with a title stamped in gold.

Published a decade later, the cloth used to bind the drama, Velasco; In Five Acts, by Epes Sargent, (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1839) is covered in a ribbon embossed cloth. The cloth was decorated by tradesmen called ribbon embossers who stamped the pattern onto plain cloth with the use of a ribbon embossing machine. The cloth was fed between two cylinders, or rollers, a plain one to feed the cloth and an embossed cylinder to press the design into the cloth by heavy pressure. Although quite attractive and available in an endless array of patterns, ribbon embossed cloth was expensive to produce and therefore its lifespan as a binding material was short lived. Books bound in ribbon embossed cloth are a rarity today.

Another short-lived fashion in the binding of books was the use of striped cloth. This proved to be as expensive as the ribbon embossed cloth of a decade earlier, and as a result, few were printed and even fewer survive. Books clad in striped cloth were also sumptuously stamped in gold with the rococo-esque patterns that were popular at the time. A single example of a book bound in striped cloth, Advice to Young Men on their Duties and Conduct in Life by T.S. Arthur (Boston: N.C. Barton in 1848) survives in the Rare Books Collection.

The decade of the 1850’s was defined by two elements in book design. The first of these was the placement of a vignette, or scene, crafted by a die sinker, and specifically designed to correspond to the book’s subject matter, in the center of the book cover. A fine example is found on the cover of History of the Early Settlement and Indian Wars of Western Virginia by Wills De Hass (Wheeling: Hoblitzell, 1851). This image depicts life on the frontier of Western Virginia. An Indian brave holds aloft a scalp freshly cut from a dead settler at his feet. The image blatantly confirms the violence of this era and provides more than a hint of the tales the reader will find inside. This design is extremely well crafted and rich in detail. The
face of the warrior is not triumphant, but weary. This scene is evocative of the many battles the warrior has faced as settlers encroach upon his lands, and the many battles he will continue to face.

In contrast to the increasing sophistication of the previous decades, book designs were subdued in the 1860's reflecting the nation's sober mood during the Civil War. Along with a preference for darker cloths, ornamentation was largely limited to simple decorative elements with a smattering of gold. *Our Village in War-Time*, by Sarah Towne Martyn (American Tract Society, 1864) serves as an example of this plainer binding marked only by deep stampings.

Despite the return to simplicity, several technological advancements occurred during the 1860s. Perhaps the most significant was the development of successful methods for printing the color black on cloth covers. Black was first attempted in the 1830's but proved unsatisfactory as the process for creating a substantive black ink had yet to be perfected. By the 1870's this deficiency had been overcome. The new deep, rich black proved to be a particular boon to cover artists employing the Eastlake style designs that were then in vogue.

The decade of the 1880's epitomized the ideals of the high Victorian period, an era marked by an excess of ornament, much like a “bulletin board” style. *The Kings of Capital and Knights of Labor* by John McDowell Leavitt, 1886, is an excellent example of this helter-skelter style of overused decoration.

Three recognizable motifs are distinct and common to this high Victorian style: the overlapping of design elements, the circle or “bull’s eye” motif, (seen on the spine and under the word “Kings” in the title) and the use of banners or curling ribbons. All three of these motifs are in abundance here.

The final decade of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth century can be enjoyed as a time of great achievement regarding the use of color and design. The rise of the binding designer as book artist in the late 1880's through the 1890's and continuing through the early years of the twentieth century brought a completely new approach to the book as a canvas for decoration and advertisement. All the accomplishments of the nineteenth century,
both technologically and artistically, were available for the binding designer trained in art to utilize. The publisher was responsible for employing this artist-designer to create decorative covers as a form of advertising, specifically designed to attract customers.

The role of the binding designer was a new field, and one that was open to women as well as men. Some of the earliest and best known designers were women. Among the most accomplished were Sarah Wyman Whitman, Margaret Armstrong, Bertha Stuart and Alice C. Morse.

Due to the vision of the new designers, book bindings began to be viewed as a single canvas with all surfaces considered in creating a unified design. Vibrant colors were added to books previously seen only in gold and black with a strong use of classical lettering styles.

The art nouveau cover design by Margaret Armstrong for Henry Van Dyke’s Days Off (1907) is an excellent example of the heights achieved in book binding design in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. This book was one of a series of twelve books Armstrong designed for Van Dyke evoking stained glass windows, utilizing dark blue cloth as background and “leading” for the multicolored design. The flowers on each side of the design are a shading of colors to delicate effect. These colors are applied with a split fountain technique that allowed the colors to blend into each other as the ink flowed from the fountain applicator.

The turn of the twentieth century was the advent of a new era in the book arts -- the Age of the Illustrator. As costs rose for designer bindings, a new method was introduced which proved to be more cost effective and just as popular with consumers. Artworks by illustrators like Harrison Fisher, whose artwork had routinely appeared in the interior of books with cover designs by Margaret Armstrong, were now featured on the covers. The illustrations were applied by pasting printed paper labels onto the covers. With this turn of events, the binding designers artistic moment in the history of the book gradually came to an end. Dust jacket soon afterwards replaced binding designs, serving as both advertising and decoration for the book.
Today, academic libraries serve as the primary repositories for surviving examples of publishers’ bindings from the golden age of bookbinding illustration. The entire range of designs from the earliest cloth covers with leather and paper labels, to the first attempts at gold stamping and titling, to the glorious and intricate designs of the late Victorian period, can all be found on the library shelf. The volumes displayed in this article are all preserved in the History Center’s Rare Book Room where fine publishers bindings are carefully preserved for teaching and research purposes, now and in the future. This is important work as we are at a perilous moment today in assuring the survival of this remarkable art form due to the rapidly declining appreciation of old books. We must remain ever cognizant of the fact that while the literary value of many volumes from a century ago has lost its importance, one should never judge a cover by its book!

In Memoriam Francisco Javier Tovar (1955-2018)

It is with sadness and a profound sense of loss that we announce the passing of Francisco J. Tovar, the History Center’s multitalented reprography Program Coordinator, on November 17, 2018 after a short but hard fought battle with cancer. Though he worked primarily behind the scenes, Frank was an integral part of the staff and key contributor to almost every application, endeavor, event and outcome at the Center over the past quarter century.

A native of the Dominican Republic, Frank came to WVU in the mid-1980s to pursue graduate work in physics. In 1987 he worked briefly in the WVU Libraries Serials Department before joining the History Center’s microphotography unit of which he became the head in 1992. Due to his breadth of knowledge and ingenuity, his contributions soon spread to assisting with technical, artistic and practical needs throughout the Center.

In addition to spearheading the transition from analog to digital copy services, he served as the Center’s technical wizard in regard to all manner of hardware and software issues. “Frank was a real life MacGyver,” according to History Center director John Cuthbert, “with a rubber band, a gum wrapper and a few other odds and ends he could probably figure out how to repair a 747. He was also one of the most generous and selfless people I have ever known,” Cuthbert notes. “He was always ready, willing and able to lend a hand whenever and wherever he was needed. His own needs came second.” Donations in his memory are being gratefully accepted by his family and may be addressed to Mercedes Tovar, 714 Timberline, Morgantown, WV 26505.

The Poet, Miss Kate and I by Margaret P. Montague, NY: Baker & Taylor, 1905.
Selected Recent Accessions

Includes reels of audio, correspondence, publications, printed material, and more. Subjects include botany and other aspects of nature.

Papers and artifacts belonging to Dr. Edward J. Van Liere, the first dean of the West Virginia University School of Medicine and professor of physiology. Includes daily diaries from his years at the University of Wisconsin, photographs, reprints, a scrapbook from a trip to Europe, and many diplomas and certificates. Also contains numerous artifacts, including antique surgical tools and fly fishing equipment.

Perry Family Papers. 1930s-2011, 1 ft. 3 in., Gift in 2018. A&M 4314
Materials pertaining to the Perry (Perri) family of Star City, West Virginia, an immigrant family originally from Italy. Also includes material about the Marra family, another Italian family that married into the Perry family. Formats include clippings, photographs, memorabilia, books, cassette tapes (including two tapes of oral histories with Joseph Perry, and with Uncle Louie regarding the "51st"), correspondence, and more.

Records of the West Virginia Philosophical Society dating from its founding, including correspondence, programs, treasury and membership materials, meeting minutes, papers read at meetings, an early constitution, and more.

Historical research material collected by William Rice from ca. 1975-2015, mostly relating to the history of western Virginia and southeastern West Virginia, the Upper Potomac River basin, and particularly Elkins and Randolph County. There are three record series including subject files (boxes 1-4), miscellaneous research files (boxes 4-5), and family histories (boxes 5-16).

Fifty pieces Imperial Cathay Crystal glassware (clear, pink, green) designed by West Virginia artist Virginia B. Evans (1894-1983) and produced by Imperial Glass Corporation of Bellaire, Ohio. Includes well-known dragon and butterfly motifs in ashtrays, bookends, vases, and other pieces.

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Wool jacket and hat comprising the cadet band uniform of Ross H. Tuckwiller, Class of 1917 and sergeant of the cadet band at WVU. Ross Tuckwiller was also a member of the Chapel Choir, the Agricultural Judging Team, the reserve football team, the Glee Club, and the University Choir, was captain of the track team, and briefly held the state record in high jump. Collection also includes a letter from Frances Tuckwiller Simmons (daughter of Ross) documenting the items and a photograph of the Cadet Band, in which Ross is the last man on the right in the front row, holding a clarinet.

Letters and letter copy book belonging to the superintendents of the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum. The letters copied into the book were written by Dr. R. Hills, the superintendent of the asylum when it first opened to patients in 1864. These letters relate to the conditions of various patients in the asylum. There are also loose letters interleaved in the pages of the book written by or addressed to later superintendents, including William A. Pratt and William Bland. These later letters mostly relate to purchases of food and other supplies for the hospital.

Prints, correspondence, research notes, and graphic design projects of Clifford A. Harvey, professor of art and founder of the graphic design program at West Virginia University. The majority of the material pertains to Harvey’s involvement with the GramLee Collection of Early American Commercial Wood Engravings made up of wood blocks originally used by the S. George Company of Wellsburg,
George Yoho stumps for votes in a country store.

W. Va., and the book that he published as a result of his research titled "Before Rosebud Was a Sled." Other material is connected to Permutation Press, a private printing press operated by Harvey. A substantial number of exemplars of Harvey's professional work can be found in boxes 10-12.


Papers related to the YoHo and Whipkey families, including photographs, genealogical information, clippings, vital documents, certificates, and other material. There are papers and photographs related to West Virginia Senator George N. YoHo.


Correspondence between WVU professor John H. Johnston and British World War I poets, including David Jones, Herbert Read, and Siegfried Sassoon. There are fourteen letters authored by David Jones, a British World War I poet widely regarded as one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century by his contemporaries. The letters include a "discussion" between Johnston and Jones, mostly regarding Johnston's critique and analysis of the World War I poets, and also the thoughts and philosophies that influenced Jones's work (especially "In Parenthesis"). There are also two letters authored by Siegfried Sassoon and one authored by Sassoon's son, George, upon his father's death. Siegfried Sassoon was a British World War I poet best known for his critical view of the war following his service. Also includes publications by and about David Jones, and one piece of published greeting card artwork by David Jones with signature and note.


Ledger of church records of the Great Crossings Baptist Church of Frazee Ridge, Maryland. Includes order and rules, minutes, membership lists, and other information (1864-1912). There is also an 18 page survey document regarding this church prepared by the Maryland Historical Trust; it includes photographs of the church (1982), and identifies Asher Glade, Maryland as the location of the church. In addition, there are folded miscellaneous items that had been found inserted into the ledger (1882-1912), and genealogy information regarding the Blystone, Jolliffe, Frazee, and Lint families (undated).


Civil War diary and other material of Joshua Rice of Greene County, Pennsylvania, documenting his experiences as a member of Company F of the 7th West Virginia Infantry. He joined the unit on 21 September 1861 and was discharged on 8 July 1865.


Papers belonging to Frank C. Shrodes, an agent for the Wheeling & Lake Erie Railroad and a resident of Yorkville and Martins Ferry, Ohio. Collection includes political memorabilia, personal business papers (real estate tax receipts, insurance policy, automobile registration, etc.), and personal correspondence between Frank in Ohio and relatives in Sanoma, West Virginia. The letters discuss everyday topics such as family health, the height of the river, the price of chicks, hunting dogs, some gardening, and packages being sent to Sanoma.


Eleven tintype portrait photographs of men and women from Pendleton County, West Virginia. According to the collector, they are thought to be of people who were near Riverton who could be related to the Bland, Bennett, Burns, Cunningham, Eye, Hinkle, Lambert, or Warner families.


Personal diaries of Festus P. Summers, a historian who served on the faculty of West Virginia University from 1932 to 1965 and as chairman of the history department from 1946 to 1962. The diaries are in 19 volumes covering the period 1953-1971. They document in a thorough manner his experiences in the communities of West Virginia University and Morgantown. He comments on local and national events, including for example a visit of Harry Truman to Morgantown in 1956.
A voter's affidavit signed by M.W. Haymond of Fairmont, West Virginia in October of 1865. The affidavit is subscribed and stamped by John J. Moore, Justice of the Peace. While the document is titled “Voter's Affidavit”, such a document may also be referred to as an “oath of allegiance” or “loyalty oath”. These were used by the Federal Government to certify that the signer was loyal to the Union and had not fought for or otherwise aided the Confederacy. This particular version of the document was signed roughly six months after the end of the Civil War and includes additional language obligating loyalty to the constitution of the State of West Virginia.

Collection of items belonging to Hazel Johnson, an esteemed military nurse originally from Morgantown, including awards, certificates, ephemera, and photographs of her travels.

Twenty "carte de visite" portrait photographs of prominent nineteenth-century West Virginia politicians, many of whom played a part in the statehood movement. The logo of the photography studio, Partridge and Critcherson Photographic Artists of Wheeling, is printed on the reverse side of the photographs. Each politician depicted is identified in pencil on the reverse side. Politicians depicted are Isaac H. Duvall; William B. Zinn; Reuben Martin; Andrew Wilson; John Burdett; James Burley; Joseph T. Hoke; Charles A. Thatcher; Samuel Young; Emmett J. O'Brien; Daniel Haymond; A. C. Werninger; Greenbury Slack; D. H. K. Dix; Edward D. Wright; Robert Hagar; James Carskadon; Abijah Dolly; Ellery R. Hall; and E. W. S. Moore.

Memorabilia related to entertainer Elsie Janis, who entertained Allied troops in France during World War I. Includes photographs, clippings, notes with her signature, etc.

Records of Great Oak Farm, a youth camp in Lincoln County, WV. Includes correspondence, financial material, publicity and program material.