

## FRENCH BOOKBINDING IN THE ROSSI DI MONTELERA COLLECTION (LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> – EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY)

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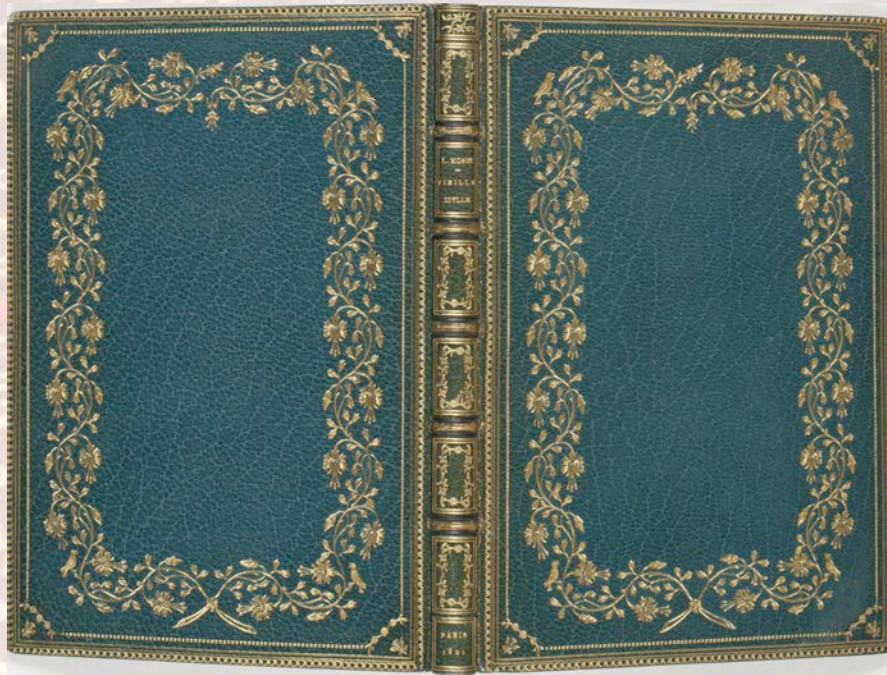
### A BRIEF HISTORY OF BOOKBINDING FROM ITS ORIGINS TO THE PRESENT DAY

The history of bookbinding is inextricably linked to that of books, their use and their dissemination over the centuries.

The art of bookbinding arose with the desire to draw attention to a work of literature: the pages or signatures are bound by a **bookbinder** employed to bind the pages between two leather covers. A bookbinder can join forces with a **gold tooler** responsible for etching decorations and ornamental designs on the leather cover and spine. However, in the nineteenth century, almost all bookbinders became gold toolers as well.

While a bookbinder's primary aim is to protect a book, making it beautiful is no less of a priority, heightening its value as a precious or unique object. This is when a book's binding becomes a work of art, part of an artistic tradition that is many centuries old.

The history of bookbinding dates back to, roughly, the second century AD and coincides with the disappearance of papyrus scrolls and the first methods used to collect pages. The art of bookbinding spent the entire Middle Ages locked away in monasteries and continued during the Renaissance till it reached its golden age in the eighteenth century, when the fortunate bibliophiles of European courts ordered many bound volumes to decorate their libraries.



Morin, Louis, *Vielle Idylle*, Paris, 1891

Late eighteenth-century France was marked by a sudden setback in the production of bound books, caused in part by new restrictions imposed by the French Revolution, by the exile of many high-profile figures (a bookbinder's main customers) beyond French borders and by the progressive industrialisation of book manufacturing processes to meet the growing needs of readers (books were now mass produced), and all these conditions encouraged the disappearance of the fine craft of handmade bookbinding.

However, this didn't make allowances for the artistic revival of the years between 1815 and 1830, partly linked to the return of bibliophiles and collectors to Paris, which encouraged the flourishing of a new generation of master bookbinders, thanks to the passing on of this craft's techniques. They were succeeded by their children and grandchildren, who constituted a second and third generation of gold tooling bookbinders and who began work in the second half of the nineteenth century.

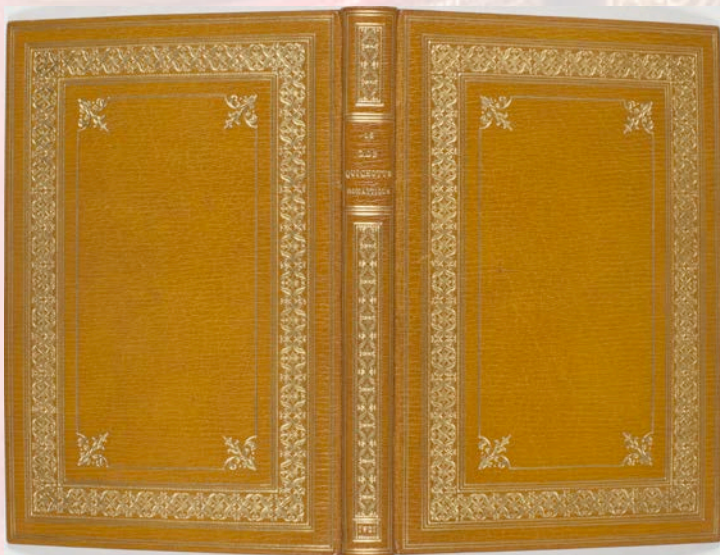
## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF FRENCH BOOKBINDING FROM THE SECOND HALF OF THE 19TH CENTURY TO THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20TH CENTURY

In the early nineteenth century, a bookbinder's work mainly consisted of reproducing and copying decorative designs from previous centuries (Jansenist, classical, rocaille styles...) and contemporary designs (Empire style, Second Empire style, neo-Gothic...). There was little room for innovation: all that counted was the mechanical repetition of movements and the copying of well-established designs (multiple panel outlines, corners featuring flower motifs, *à la cathédrale* covers... etc.). This technique did not stop bookbinders from excelling in their art and creating true decorative masterpieces, as is the case of Emile MERCIER, and the Rossi di Montelera collection boasts some splendid examples of his work.



*Plein maroquin bleu-paon. Plats décorés de multiples filets d'encadrement et de coins fleuronnés, dans le style Louis XV. Dos à nerfs et à caissons décorés aux multiples entrefilets d'encadrement. Pièce d'auteur et de titre unifiée, dorée sur fond bleu. Contre-plats ornés de panneaux décoratifs maroquin bleu dans le gout rocaille du 18ème siècle, avec compartiments de mosaïque de maroquin bleu de deux tons différents, bandes rocailles, coins remplis de quadrillés, couronnes de fleurs. Gardes de soie bleu. Tranches et champs dorés.*

MARIVAUX  
*Le jeu de l'amour et du hasard*  
Paris, 1874



*Plein maroquin citrouille, aux plats ornés d'un décor élaboré dans le style Second Empire. Multiples entrefilets d'encadrement rehaussés d'une frise florale à volutes symétriques dorée. Dos lisse avec motif répété du décor floral à volutes symétriques et pièce de titre dorée sur fond citrouille. Pièce de date en tête de queue. Champs dorés. Intérieur et gardes doublées par un encadrement maroquin citrouille aux filets multiples et coins fleuronnés sur pièce de soie rose incarnadin.*

COMBES (William)  
*Le Don Quichotte romantique ou voyage du Docteur Syntaxe*  
Paris, 1821

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the emergence of the first bibliophile societies in Paris (such as *Les Amis du Livre* in 1874).

A new kind of bibliophilia appeared on the scene, interested in limited editions of contemporary works of literature, known as 'livres de peintre', which combined classic texts, as well as modern poetry, with the work of contemporary artists. The latter had a decisive influence on the evolution of original forms of bookbinding, lending it its own particular kind of independence. These limited edition 'livres de peintres', with their fine covers, are the core of the Rossi di Montelera collection.

## Ornamental bookbinding

Henri Marius-Michel (1846-1925), the son of another famous Parisian bookbinder, encouraged the modernisation of the bookbinding profession. Having noted that bookbinders had always created objects that were limited by their use of leather and an old-fashioned style and that did not match the content of the books inside, he made efforts to establish a repertoire of ornamental styles that would allow him to adapt the decorative style of the cover to a book's subject matter. He chose plants as his main subject, which were represented in all their various parts – flowers, petals, leaves, stems and roots – and he perfected a style he dubbed '**flore ornementale**', where plants were depicted in a manner that was both stylised and naturalistic. Thus, Marius-Michel brought the use of **curved lines** to the bookbinding of the late nineteenth century, characterised by large **mosaic, geometric shapes**, while at the same time remaining faithful to leather as the traditional basic material and subsequently influencing many artist/bookbinders (Art Nouveau and emblematic bookbinding).

*Reliure 19ème siècle signée Marius-Michel. Plein maroquin bleu vert aux plats ornés de branches de roses dorées et mosaïquées de cuir rouge dans un encadrement de filets dorés et au pointillé. Triple entrefilet d'encadrement. Dos à nerfs et à caissons ornés de fers dorés et de roses dorées, rouges et mosaïquées. Pièce d'auteur et de titre dorée sur fond vert. Tranches dorées.*

NERVAL (Gérard de)  
*Sylvie: souvenirs du Valois*  
Paris, 1886



*Reliure 19ème signée Chambolle-Duru et Marius Michel, doreur. Pleine reliure maroquin bleu-marine. La reliure est rehaussée de deux magnifiques contre-plats dorés par Marius-Michel où s'alternent, dans un ensemble parfaitement géométrique, des paniers fleuris, des faunes et des cœurs percés, dans un style "grottesque".*

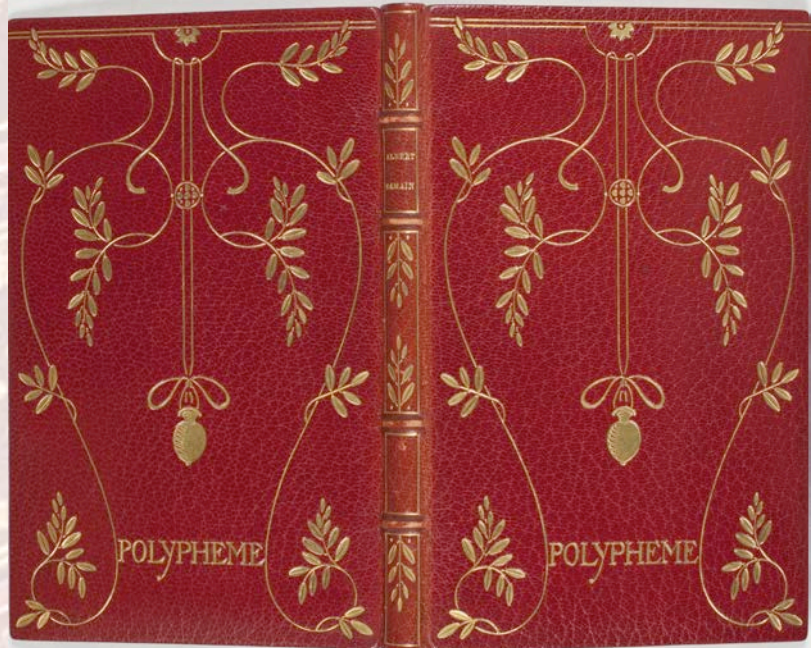
CHEVIGNÉ (Louis)  
*Les contes rémois*  
Paris, 1858

## Art Nouveau bookbinding

Marius Michel's new creations were greeted with such enthusiasm that they were imitated and copied, mostly by his apprentices and/or contemporaries. The revival of floral motifs was particularly welcomed given that, during that time, France was seeing the emergence of a particular artistic movement known as **Art Nouveau**. Springing from a reaction against the consequences of the industrialisation process, this artistic movement was based on the aesthetic appreciation of curved lines, rhythms and colours inspired by trees and flowers. Hence, with the close of the nineteenth century, bookbinding trends increasingly developed in line with contemporary art.

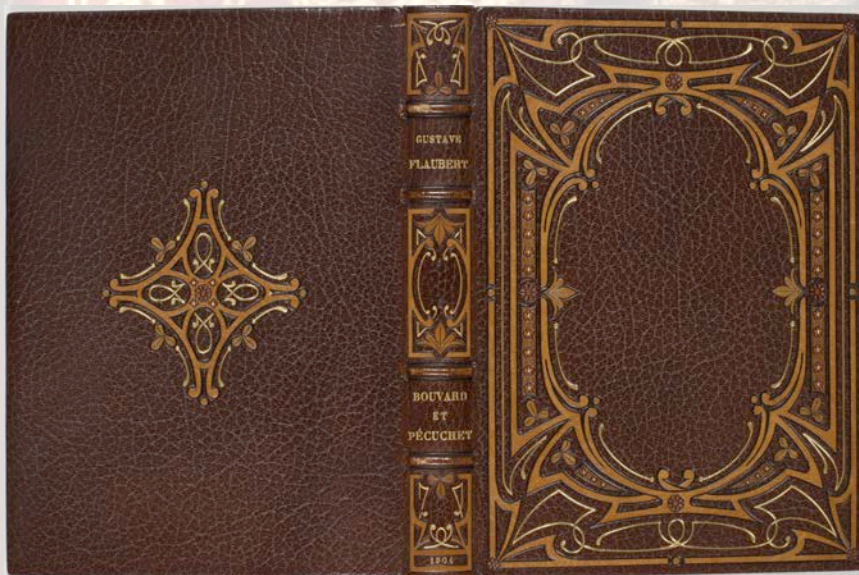
*Reliure du 20ème siècle signée et datée J. Chadel, del. (Dessinateur), et Joly, Rel. (relieur), 1919. Plein maroquin rouge. Les plats sont décorée d'après un dessin de Jules Chadel et dans le style Art nouveau : superposition de branches de lauriers symétriques en arabesque encadrant un vase pendant, retenu par un médaillon. Le titre de l'ouvrage, POLYPHEME, est gravé sur les deux plats en lettres d'or dans leurs parties inférieures. Dos à nerfs et à caissons décorés, pour trois d'entre eux, de feuilles de lauriers gravées à l'or avec simple entrefilet d'encadrement. Pièce d'auteur en lettres dorées sur fond rouge.*

SAMAIN (Albert)  
*Polyphème : deux actes en vers*  
Paris, 1906



*Reliure du 20ème siècle signée Ch. Lanoë. Del. R. D. Plein maroquin La Vallière aux dos ornés et mosaïqués, dans le style Art Nouveau. Le premier plat est recouvert d'une très importante décoration stylisée mosaïquée en maroquin de différents tons avec filets dorés droits et courbes. Motif mosaïqué au centre du second plat. Dos à nerfs et à caissons décorés avec les mêmes motifs stylisés que sur les plats. Pièces d'auteur et de titre dorées sur fond La Vallière. Pièce de date en tête de queue.*

FLAUBERT (Gustave)  
*Bouvard et Pécuchet*  
Paris, 1904



### Emblematic bookbinding

Charles Meunier (1866-1948) pushed the boundaries of the ornamental theories of Marius-Michel, his mentor and instructor, even further. Having already established himself by the time he was 20 years old, he quickly expanded his profession, becoming the creator of what came to be known as **emblematic** and mosaic bookbinding. From that time on, ornamental and floral decorative designs in gold were replaced with mosaics of leather, 'emblems' and symbols reflecting the subject matter of the text inside. Charles Meunier had a prolific career (estimated to include 500-600 items). He was also a publisher, reserving luxury editions for his clients, editions he usually bound using a decorative motif that was specially designed for each book.



*Reliure 19ème siècle signée Ch. Meunier. Plein maroquin auburn. Les deux doublures sont en plein marocco orange au décor floral gravé aux fers d'or. Papillons d'argent. Tranches dorées.*

ROBIDA (Albert)  
*Voyage de fiançailles au XXème siècle*  
Paris, 1892

*Reliure du 20ème siècle signée Paul Affolter et J. Augoyat. Intérieur des deux plats avec doublures parlantes mosaïquées cuir (brun, vert et marron) avec au centre deux représentations diverses de logis romantiques.*

ESCOLIER (Raymond, dit Escholier)  
*Logis romantiques*  
Paris, 1930

