

BOOKBINDING IN MEXICO

By Manuel ROMERO DE TERREROS



Parchment bookbinding with stamping and India Ink.
XVII Century.

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DURING the colonial period in Mexico, parchment was used in bookbinding for editions corresponding to our modern paper cover issues, and it was not until the end of the 18th century when Mexican printing shops started to release booklets with simple covers of speckled or painted paper. Parchment covers were either hard or soft, and many had leather or loops for tighter closing. The book title and author's name were usually typed on the back with india ink.

Most of the books brought from Spain during the first years of Viceroy Regime had sheepskin or calfskin covers, with cardboard linings for the quarto size, and thin cedar or oak sheeting for folio size. Many of these books had stamped bindings after the Moorish or monastic style and came originally from Barcelona, Alcalá, Córdoba, Sevilla, Toledo, and other cities famous for their high grade embossed and cordovan leathers. Undoubtedly, such bindings were adopted patterns by Mexican bookbinders of the 16th century. Indeed, our craftsmen had to rely on quite rudimentary tools for doing their work. An inventory of the Tlatelolco seminary, dated 1584, lists the following book-binding tools:

«One large knife; two wooden presses; one big iron pounding hammer; one iron shaver; one blow punch; one gouge; two small scissors; three stitching tools; one pair of callipers; one box of butcher's knives; one wood plane; one pair of shoemaker's shears; one small iron hammer; three irons for binding-designs; one saw; one beating stone.»

As is well known, the so-called «irons» used in bookbinding are tools generally not made of iron, but rather of cooper or brass, and are used to emboss decorations on covers. They include punches, rimmers, wheels, stencils, etc., and are always used hot although decoration is termed «cold» or «dry» when not gilt.

The «Libro General de la Contaduría del Rey Nuestro Señor» (General Audit Book of Our Lord the King) for the year 1588, now kept in the General Archives of the Nation, holds first place -for its beauty-, among the specimens of Mexican bookbinding handed down to us from the 16th century. It has the form of a leather case, since the lower cover laps over the upper cover. It is embellished with artistic gilt designs and embossed ribs stitched with colored silk ribbons after the Italian style. The first «Libros de Actas» (Records Books) of the ancient municipal council of Mexico City display bindings much alike.

We have no hint about the outstanding Mexican bookbinders of the 16th, as in nearly all crafts the first artisans were always anonymous.

Little progress was made by bookbinders in Mexico during the 17th century. Nearly all of them continue to produce books bound in calfskin or parchment, although in some cases such bindings were decorated sparingly with small gilt designs, or were stamped India ink. But that century looms prominent, above all for the bulky and artistic choir books produced for monasteries and cathedrals in

Portafolio shaped bookbinding with cold irons, gilding and superposed color threads . XVI Century

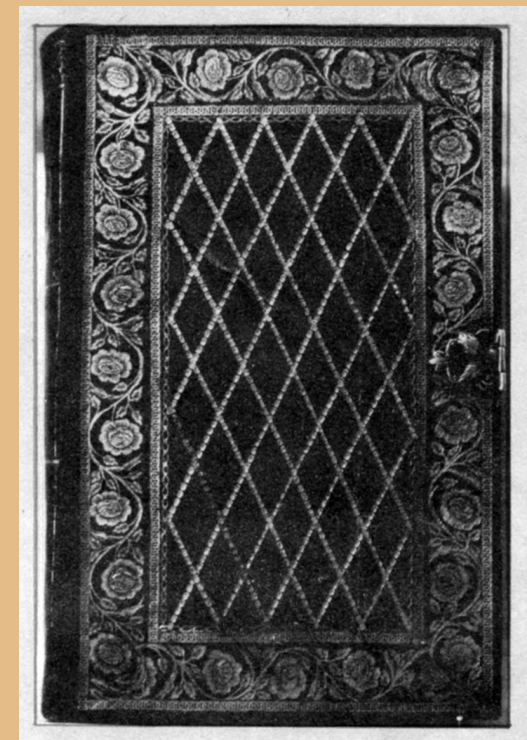
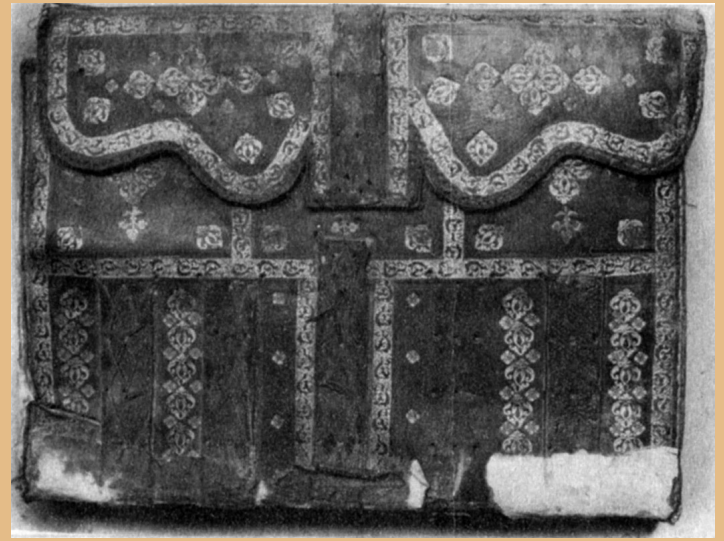
New Spain, many of which fortunately still remain. These were bound with thick oak or cedar board covered with calfskin or cowhide, and nearly always they were adorned with showy though coarse rivet heads and perforated brass, iron or bronze, corners.

In the late years of the 17th century, some manuscripts to which their owners attached special importance, as Letters Patent of Nobility, Dowry Charters, Pious Foundations, and the like, were bound in bright colored velvet, brocade or damask.

The 18th century witnessed in Mexico a slight reflection of the glories of Dêrome and Padeloup, within relative limits -of course-. Small size decorations became widely used and skins of different colors found application, red being the most popular.

Artificially speckled chamois covers were also plentiful, further adorned either with simple fringes or with complicated framings bearing rosettes in the center of the cover, all in gold, as seldom these ornaments were «dry» cast, that is to say, without gilding. But it is surprising that unlike the French, Spanish and English standard practices, the use of the coat-of-arms was not introduced in our country as an important artistic attachment for bindings.

Some bindings of the so-called «Jansenist» style were also made of lusterless skin with a simple fringe ornament, but these austere bookbindings soon gave way to those known as Spanish bindings, whose backs were adorned with frets of different colors on which the book title, author's name and volume number were engraved in gold. Later, case bindings with straps of kid or silk strings -by way of locks-, continued to be in use for account books and other manuscripts, public and private.

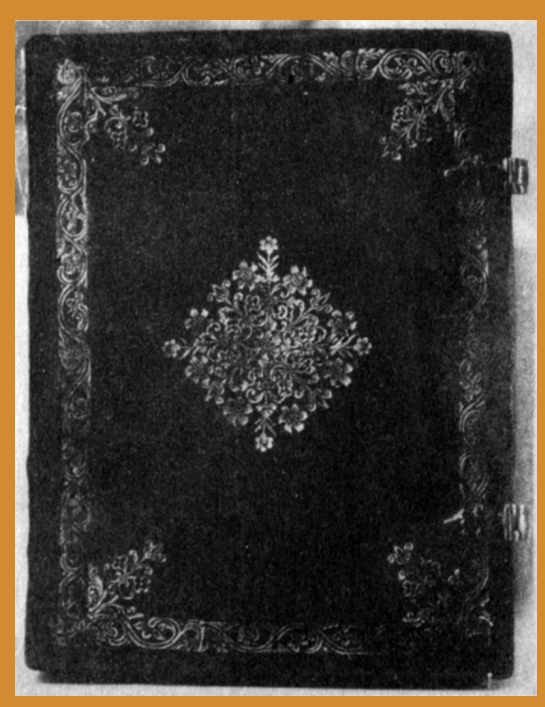


Green morocco leather with gilt irons . XIX Century.

Dressed sheep-skin with gilt irons . XVII Century

Spanish binding ornamented with stenciled silhouette

Red morocco leather binding with hot iron gilding . XVIII Century





Red morocco leather binding with cold irons and gilding . XIX Century

Black morocco leather binding with hot iron gilding.



It is not all surprising to find nuns interested in those days in binding breviaries and devotion books in general during their spare time, a task with they performed handsomely and thoroughly-as everything they did. These bindings that the nuns turned out were embroidered with gold or silver threads on satin or velvet -or colored silks on linen- and were provided with silk or leather clasps. The covers they used were of bone, ivory, glass beads and in some cases, even of pearls.

As was to be expected, the early years of the 19th century were far from encouraging for the development of Mexican bookbinding. Bindings then produced were like the ones described, with more or less elaborate ornaments, or with pattern-reproduced silhouettes on covers; but when romanticism set foot in our country, this craft boomed to no small heights, chiefly due to the numerous publications received from London and Paris, nearly always showing a beautiful outward appearance -the essence of that period.

Outstanding Mexican printers like Ignacio Cumpido, Mariano Galván Rivera, Mariano Lara, and Rafael Rafael, were thrilled by the beautiful covers that came from overseas and soon they ordered tools in large quantities from France and England for the purpose of making imitations. Rollers, frets, mouldings, rosettes, rimmers, initials, corner pieces, and whole plates were imported in so large quantities indeed, that it was not uncommon, a few years later, to find them on sale even at far country fairs. Among these tools were some reproducing Gothic windows of the pointed arch type known as «Cathedral style» in the days of Louis Philip. Typical covers of the middle 19th century displayed giltframe work with simple fringes or with elaborate wheelwork interspersed with «cold» or «dry» stamped designs on red, green, blue, black, and brown plain or grained morocco leather.

In some cases the whole cover was stamped with a single plate and in a few other instances satin or velvet was used instead of skin. Some mosaic bookbindings with overcrowded fancy, gold brimmed designs were also produced in that period, the covers being lined with skins differing in color from the cover background.

The back of the books was oftentimes embellished with gilt ribs and different colored frets between, and this was not possible due to insufficient thickness of the book, the book title and its author's name were stamped on the cover front on a different colored fret, within a frame formed by gilt designs.

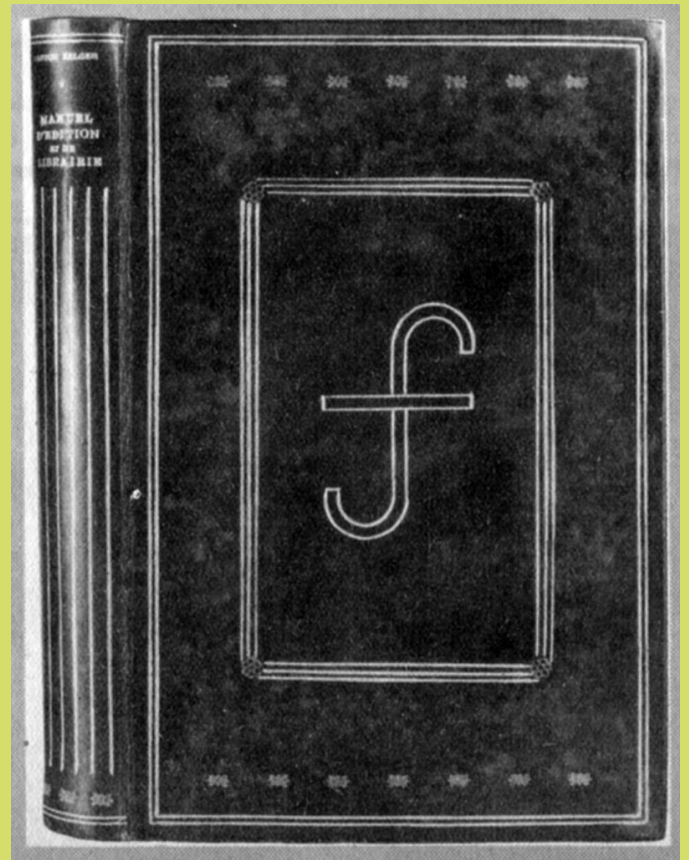
In quite a few instances the book was also adorned on the inside with guards of silk or painted paper, either gilded or stamped «dry», and some books appeared with silk wards showing the three colors of the banner, by which the bookbinder boasted of his patriotism.

In the last quarter of the 19th century most of books with luxurious bindings were official publications such as Cabinet Records, Governors' Reports, Statistics, etc., whose dry literary content was in marked contrast with their sumptuous vesture.

Though in the beginning printers looking after their own bindings, about the middle of the century the demand for artistic covers grew so large that many shops were set up exclusively for handling that end of the business. Juan and Jesús Vargas Machuca, Andrés and José del Castillo, A. Delanoé, Celso Jara, Alejandro Freyre, J. Díaz de León, José María Ibarrán, A. Antúnez and Ignacio Vargas, should be mentioned among the many leading craftsmen whose skill won renown for them in Mexico City, Puebla and other cities of the interior.

During short-lived empire of Maximilian official bookbindings showed the artistic coat-of-arms of the empire stamped in gold on red or black morocco, but in later years under Juárez, González, and don Porfirio Díaz, book-binding dwindled in Mexico almost to naught, when production reached a point of real denial of the splendid art of Grolier and Maioli

In recent years bookbinding in our country has shown a high degree of development and today bindings are made here that can compete advantageously with those of Europe, which, by the way, are the models followed.



Modern binding by Alfonso Tovar

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