

The Islamic Art of Bookbinding

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Book art and bookbinding (mujelit) is old as the writing itself. The first letters and documents, written on paper and rolled in tubes, were kept in special boxes and linens. During the opening and reading of the documents, their edges were worn out, broken and torn. The damaged parts would be lost with time so contents of documents would lose their meanings. It is assumed that the first reason for the starting of book binding was to avoid the physical wearing of such documents stored in tubes, preserving them and making practical their use.

Information on the look of first bindings, way of making them and used materials are scarce. After researches carried out in East Turkmenistan in Karahoc, archaeologist A. Von Le Cog found a jilit (book boards) that belongs to Ujgur Turks from VII century. From this source we can see that this kind of art was very developed. After accepting Islam, Turks developed this art further and made the finest book bindings, especially the Koran. The development of book binding (mujelit) like art among the Turks had a large and strong influence on Europe, and on development of European book binding.

The word MUJELID comes from Arabian word JILD, which means leather. The person who binds is a mujelid. To be used in binding, leather needs to be of

high quality and easy to be painted and dyed. Together with leather, as basic material for binding which gives at one time esthetical-beauty and the required strength, craftsmen used cardboard, which substituted wood previously used. Because cardboard is much easier and simpler to handle, binders could decorate without great effort. Cardboard (murakka) was made from papers of given strength and thickness that were stuck together until the required thickness. Glue was mixed with poison, so the binding couldn't be eaten by worms.

On the bindings made of wood the decorations are not easy to be seen, thus when they were drawn the motives were simple and the motives just discernible.

On books bound in leather decoration and motives were clearly visible, thus after their introduction it was impossible to see book frame without decoration. Besides the decorations of book covers, there were inner decorations too. In some periods the book inside was even more decorated then the outside covers, with thin precise parts of leather and different colours. Covers were decorated with good marked motives, without great decoration and without colours and gold.

Decorative drawings on the covers were set on a circle shape, which symbolized the sun. We can see such decoration on covers made in Seljuk, Memluk and Ottoman period all over to the period of Suleyman the Magnificent. In time this circle took an oval shape, also in the four corners of the cover were put decoration a quarter of the size of such "solar" circle. The motives drawn within the circle were identical and symmetrical with those in the corners. The space between the central "sun" and corner motives was usually left empty, however in some cases it would also be decorated, as we can see in few findings.

The use of models made of hard leather, wood and iron, plaid a pivotal role in the development of book binding. Models made of leather and wood had to be substituted frequently because the motives would soon be worn out, thus iron models become increasingly more demanded.

During the centuries the binding craft or art of mujelit evolved different styles depending on the development of the economy and of the passion for fine books. Islamic book-craft, with the linked art of decoration and of binding reached the highest level of excellence under the Memluk's and Seljuk's rulers which competed to patronage art beauty, the very same occurred with the mujelit art. However it was the famous mujelit school of Herat, where were brought together the greatest mujelid of the time from different places, with their numerous precious products, which will have big importance in the following development of mujelit art. The advent of Ottoman Turks, gave birth to new art of book decoration, which in some characteristics remind the Seljuk's era of which they were direct successor, however with its own peculiarity and independent high artist value.

The several techniques of binding, which depended on the wishes of the buyer and on the subjects of the book, were the main reason of the different binding styles in mujelit art. The decorative works on the binding or the material of the binding gave the name to the style.

Some of them were

- Dry impression
- Golden impression around the motive
- Golden impression on the motives
- Decor with precious stones
- Decor with leather colours
- Golden blossoms....

With such styles it is very important what kind of leather is employed in working the binding. More commonly goat leather was used because such leather is stronger than others, and is easier to handle. In all hand works on bindings, the materials, the styles and types of bindings have their own specific meaning; however I won't detail them here.

Cardboard, gold, gelatine, paint colours, silken thread of different thickness and colours and a lot of tools such as, presses, knives, brushes, models, are essential items without them you cannot even think to carry out any work on binding or in a mujelit studio.

All classic books are bound by hand with silken thread and long sewing-needles. Silk thread is strong and tough, thus there is no interruption during the turning of the book page and resistance to rottenness is greater than with other threads. The binding (sewing) of forms (the book was made from forms putted one on the others) was done with a thread and needle passing through each new form binding it to those previously sewed together. Covers were made to fit the book size and then place it on the book, after cutting it on three sides.

Concerning the art of book binding and book decoration in Bosnia and Herzegovina, their development started during the Ottoman Empery, therefore it is correct to say that the technology, work and book craft are inherited from Ottoman Turks, with small variations due to the peculiarity of the culture of such area and its Mujelids.

While Turks were coming into Bosnia and Herzegovina, Islam and its culture, education, science and literature were spreading in the region. Schools, medresses, tekkes and mosques were built in the Muslim areas, they were the seeds for arts and crafts. Linked to those cultural and educational institutions, also large or small collections of oriental books were organised, and some of them later became independent institutions.

The presence of a large number of libraries seems to have been an important factor. Bosnian Muslims often used to go to be educated in Istanbul, Cairo and Baghdad and returning they brought back with them a lot of decorated manuscripts. Going to pilgrimage to Mecca became a further opportunity to bring from East manuscripts, also governmental officers and merchants were taking whit them manuscripts from different parts of Ottoman Empery.

The time, the use or the hardship of long transfer trips often torn such manuscripts, mostly decorated with embroidery and one or both of their covers were lost, otherwise there were the owners that demanded prettier and finer cover frames. Such occurrences generated a lot a work for the Bosnian Mujelids and induced the spread presence of large number of manuscripts all over Bosnia and Herzegovina, not just in big culture centres, but also

in the smaller settlements. As calligraphers and writers produced new works the mujelid decorated them.

The Mujelids formed an influential guild of craftsman as witnessed from the names of two streets in Sarajevo, Velikih i Malih Mudzelita (Big and Small Mujelids) that existed until XIX Century. First Mujelids appeared in our regions together with all other craftsmen brought by Turks in XV Century from different parts of Empery.

As in other areas, also in Bosnia, information about work of mujelit were rarely known, information about their works and workshops as well about the towns in which they worked or the areas from which they were from are hard to be found. Just in some documents' archive, among lists of citizens or in craftsmen documents some information about names of mujelids or places where they worked in can be acquired. It is a pity that we lack of any information about their production.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, like in all other cultural centres of the Ottoman Empery, there were mujelids that belong to other confessions. We can list Mujelids that were Jews from Spain.

Bosnia and Herzegovina never felt scarcity of leather that is very important factor in all the crafts linked to book binding. Thus Bosnia took a very important place the manufacturing and in the export of cured and uncured leather, which was used in book binding and other crafts. Mujelids which worked on our areas did decoration of books, fixed frames (jild), and sold manuscripts from different regions.

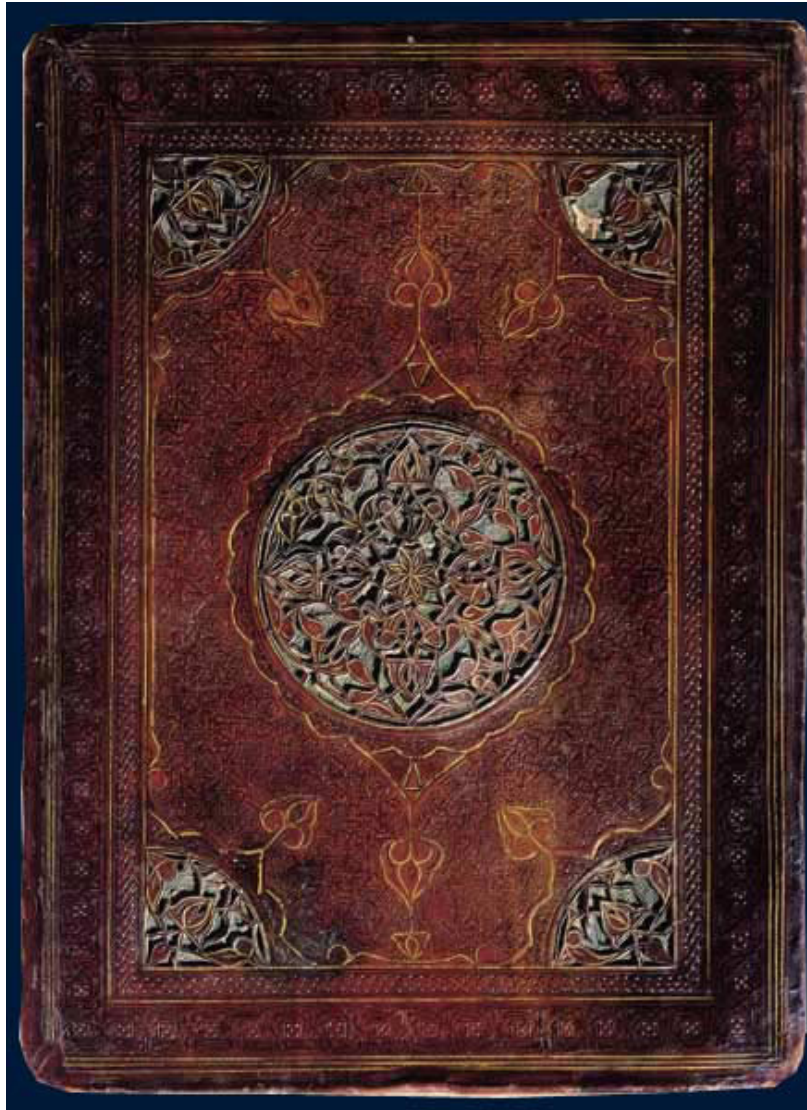
Mujelids' workshops were mostly located in central Bosnia. According to the records Mujelids were active in Sarajevo, Mostar, Foca, Zenica, Banja Luka, and Tuzla, Zvornik, Zepce, Gradacac and other towns.

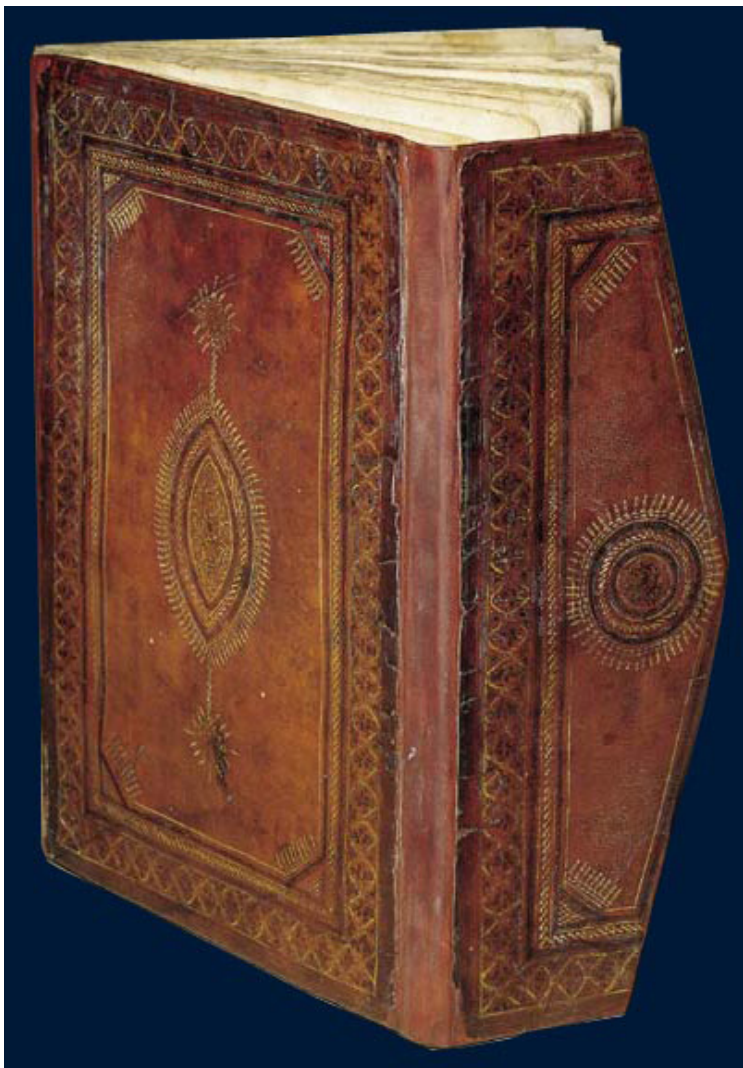
All Islamic manuscripts, no matter from where, had five parts, which are ridge, two covers – left and right, tuck (mikleb) that is always on the left side and sertap, connected to the mikleb.

Differently from the Western craftsmen that worked in wood, peculiarity of the mujelit art was gluing leather on cardboard. A bosnian book cover was realised thin or large depending on to the size of the book, and accordingly the decorations were made with leather, linen or marmoreal paper. Technology, material, as well style and crafts used in the East were similarly used in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mujelit masters and book binders in the region had eastern origin. All Mujelids had complete freedom to do what they prefer in decorating and in the design of the compositions. Motives realised on leather, which was later put on cardboard, would be rimmed with different colours and usually golden. Gold was mostly employed jointly with yellow, green or red.

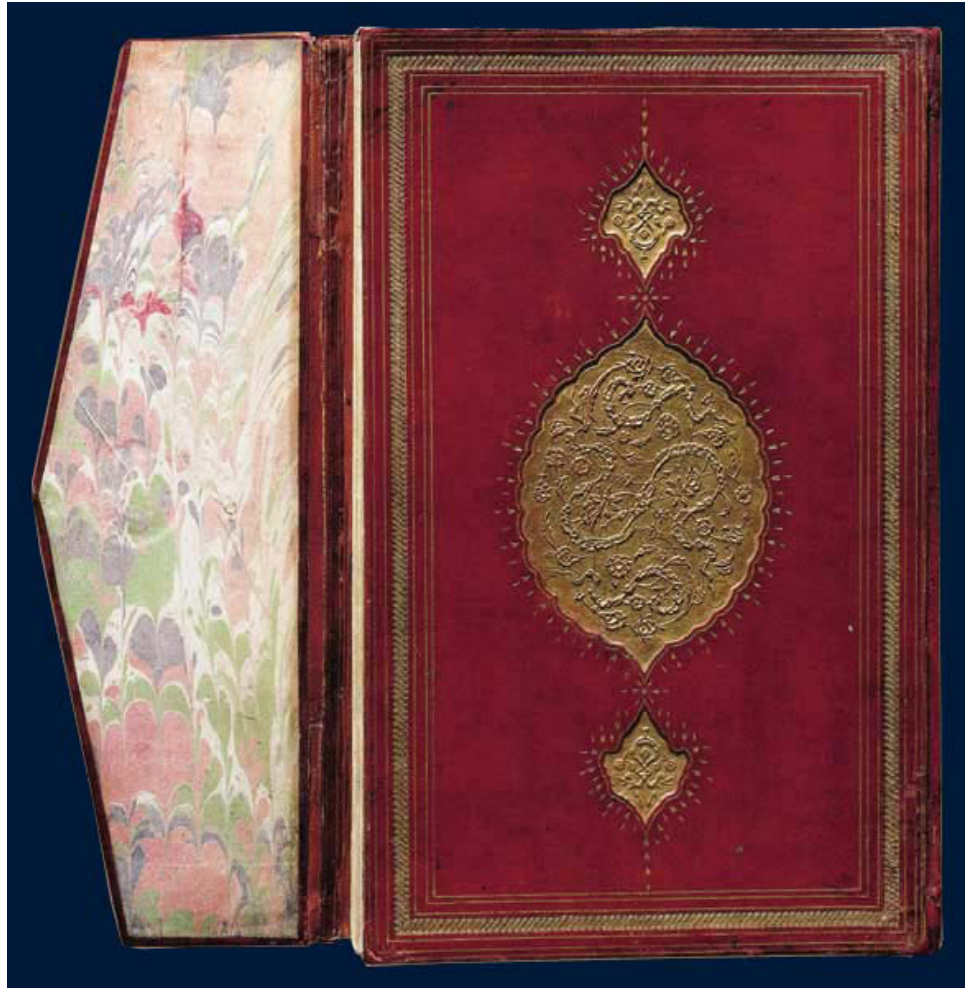
The introduction of printing reduced the interest for manuscripts and book binding, Hamdija Kresevljakovic reports that in year 1876 (miladi), due to the start of modern binding workshop, last traditional mujelid, Sulejman Herba, had to close his workshop. After the closure of the last mujelit workshop this craft became a private hobby in many private houses for keeping books.

Today in Bosnia and Herzegovina large collections of Islamic manuscripts are still kept in the Gazi Husref Beg's library, the Town Museum of Sarajevo, The National library, The Institute of Bosnaks, The Museum of Musa Cazim, and private libraries.











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