Bound to Be Modern: Publishers' Cloth Bindings and the Material Culture of the Book, 1840-1914

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Abstract
Bound to Be Modern is the most comprehensive study to date on the emergence and function of publishers' cloth bindings. It brings together issues of aesthetics, technique, economy, and social change in order to explain why publishers in the 19th century began to have their books bound, and why decorated clothbindings were so successful as the Western world transitioned into modernity.

This study traces the history of publishers' bindings in a Swedish context--giving the first English-language account of the history of the Swedish 19th century book market--but also makes clear that edition binding was an international affair, with machines, designs, and ideas crossing borders as much as the literary works themselves did.... (More)
By the 1840s, however, cloth had become a widely accepted binding material, and case binding allowed binders to begin to use arming presses and later steam presses to emboss covers with engraved metal dies. Few books from the 1840s through 1880s were left undecorated; nearly all received some level of design consideration. At their simplest, cover designs were made up from routine borders and ornaments impressed in
blind or gilt. More elaborate designs used dies created uniquely for the text in conjunction with stock borders and ornaments. The highest level of book design used overall designs created specifically for the book at hand. W. Haslam. "Full Salvation" as seen in Bunyan’s Pilgrim’s Progress. London: Morgan and Scott, c. 1880. Today, modern bookbinding is divided between hand binding by individual craftsmen working in a shop and commercial bindings mass-produced by high-speed machines in a factory. There is a broad grey area between the two divisions. A working knowledge of the materials involved is required. A book craftsman needs a minimum set of hand tools but with experience will find an extensive collection of secondary hand tools and even items of heavy equipment that are valuable for greater speed, accuracy, and efficiency. Bookbinding is an artistic craft of great antiquity, and at the same time, a highly mechanized industry. Most cloth-bound books are now half-and-half covers with cloth covering only the spine. In that case, the cover has a paper overlap. By the 1840s, cloth bindings had gained public acceptance and binders had gained technical control of the materials. Early on, binders continued to design using a stock set of frames and ornamental dies—lyres, flowers, urns—which they had purchased from engravers. On American books of the late 1830s-40s, the binder’s name, and perhaps the city in which he worked, can sometimes be found inside one of the stamped frames. Binders’ advertisements often mentioned the quantity and variety of dies they possessed along with the styles of binding they could produce. Stylistically, the designs