

## FRENCH BINDINGS - TRANSCRIPT

It's probably an oversimplification, but if you asked me if I could describe in a few words what an Italian book looks like or a German book or an English book or an American book, I wouldn't be able to tell you. But if you asked me what a French book looked like, I would be able to tell you in a few words. A French book, no matter the period it comes from, no matter the subject it's on, is likely to be elegant, refined, attractive. One of the most attractive books I've ever had was a French book from the 18th century dealing with hydraulics. If you are dealing, as we are going to end this segment with 18th century French books, important for their illustrations, you can darn well bet that what you're going to see are going to be refined, elegant, and beautiful books, which in this particular case happened also to be in no surprise, beautiful bindings as well.

I feel slightly sheepish not wearing a tie and a suit because I think the book's deserve that, but it's dress down Saturday and the lights are hot, so I'm not going to do it anyway. This is a very handsome large format edition of Fénelon's *Adventures of Télémaque*. Fénelon was the tutor of one of the grandchildren of Louis XIV, and the book ostensibly was written as edification for the grandchild when in fact it was a subtle attack on the absolute monarchy of Louis XIV, something that didn't sit well with the monarch eventually, but in any case, it's a book that was popular and that was often reprinted. This is the edition that is illustrated by an artist named Monnet, M-O-N-N-E-T. He, like most of the other artists represented here, wanted to be a painter and settled for being a book illustrator. Despite the fact that this may have been second choice in his life, the illustrations that he's done for this edition are really quite striking.

They're large, they're beautifully composed. Light is used and in a clever and attractive way. The events, which basically are difficult to make, what shall I say, interesting, are made interesting, and this is no small achievement. The book was from the beginning, meant to be a major undertaking and something I'd never heard of before. The publishers conducted a survey and asked, and I'm not exactly sure, I guess you call it a sampling, and I'm not sure how they determined whom they asked, but they asked the right people, "Shall we use this typeface or shall we use that typeface?" The slender typeface got two votes, and the typeface that they use much more robust got 600, so apparently they all wanted what they got. A special press was used in order to give the printing more strength into strong paper. The engravings are richly impressed, and as you can tell in this particular binding, whoever bound it, it's not signed. Whoever bounded did a wonderful job. It's in the style of the Bozerians, early 19th century, flat back, lots of gild radiating from a central a circle, but it's not by them because they always sign at the bottom of the spine. In any case, whoever did it. It's a beautiful job, and it's a really, really beautiful set.

Here's another edition of the same work. This one illustrated by a man named Marillier, facing the same kind of problem that Monnet did, and again doing an admirable job of making the illustrations come alive. The book is bound. This set is bound by Thouvenin, generally considered to be one of the two or three best binders of the period. He bound for a guy named Nodier, and Thouvenin, and you can tell it's a much more restrained kind of binding. It has a kind of, what shall I say, simple elegance where this one is much more animated. The man that he bound for, Nodier, asked him to do a binding one time that replicated the work that had been done by Clovis Ève at the end of the 16th and beginning of the 17th century, a kind of binding style where you've got basically a blank center and then very intricate radiating elaborate gild work. The name of the book had in its title the word fanfare, and ever after that binding was executed for this guy, Nodier, bindings of that style, whenever executed and sort of retroactively back to Clovis Ève and his brother, were called fanfare bindings. Thouvenin was a very well established binding before that, but he became famous simply as a result of that one binding.

Of this group, this large format edition of La Fontaine's Tales or Contes is the most distinctive. To begin with, because whereas the illustrators in the other volumes by and large wanted to be painters and settled for being illustrators, this book is illustrated by Fragonard, who is generally considered to be the consummate master of the Rococo as a painter, and this is the only book that he illustrated. You can tell from the illustrations that you're dealing with a person who is at the top of his craft. He was asked to do 80 engravings for this work. It was not a good time, Reign of Terror, for example. The book ended up being produced with 20 engravings, 16 of which Fragonard was responsible for.

Later on in 1880, there was a suite of plates produced that are etchings based on the original 57 designs that Fragonard was supposed to provide for the original edition that never got done. We've got the 20 plus the 57, and then in addition we have 16 original sepia wash paintings that are from a selection of Fragonard's originals. In a number of places in these two volumes, we have three images: the original engraving, the etching that came later, 1880, and then the sepia wash painting, the artist of which we just don't know. The etchings are sometimes more appropriate as far as the subject matter goes. Fragonard was a man of the world. So was La Fontaine. Fragonard was the right person to communicate the essence of the illustrations for these tales. Then on top of that, you've got a wonderful binding by a guy named Henri Noulhac. He was a guy whose main patron was Henri Béraldi, who was the preeminent scholar for French binding history. They're lovely bindings to go along with what is this really a sensational extra illustrated edition of Fragonard's only book.

This is a perfect change of pace from this La Fontaine in that it's a smaller book, fewer illustrations, and it involves a collaboration among three libertines. A guy Dora, a guy named Pisa, and a guy named Isen. Isen, whose name is probably the most readily recognizable because he was involved in the production of most important illustrated books of the time he was working. It's a series of forgettable, dramatic and poetic works, but the illustrations are lovely. They're sensuous, they're voluptuous, which fits with the people who produced both the text and the illustrations, and it's in a nice, simple, elegant binding by [inaudible 00:10:03], one of the top binders at the end of the 19th century. Dora is interesting because he was one of these amazing self-promoters. He was a remarkably prolific and produced a very large number of works, none of which is worth reading. A lot of these works he produced where plays, and he bought lots and lots of tickets and gave them all to his friends to make sure that they would be successful. We're grateful that he did all of this because he had these works published, and in the publications he had almost all of them illustrated, and they were most almost always illustrated by persons whose works are pleasing and worth looking at now, as is the case with this pretty little volume.

This is a really beautiful book inside and out. I have never seen marbled calf, that's what this is, that has this kind of red and this kind of variation in color in it. Immediately, I loved this book before I even saw what was inside. What's inside is idyllic pastoral by a Swiss author named Gessner. It's called The Death of Abel, printed right during the time of the French revolution, and printed with color plates, plates that were done by a process called poupée, and poupée printing or printing a la poupée involves taking ink and squiggling it around with a rag on the end of your finger so that you can put more than one color on at the same time. Sounds kind of sloppy, but the effect is a distinctive. The plates are memorable as a result. Because the book was put out during a troubled time, you would not expect to find it in a binding that's attractive, and I have seen other copies of this one in original boards or rappers or whatever or in undistinctive bindings. This one is especially attractive in light of the time it was produced.

This is a book that I find immensely charming, and I am attracted to it because it comes at me from three different chronological directions. It's a book that was printed in the 18th century. It's another

book with works by Dora, the man who was so self-promoting that we've talked about a minute ago, with illustrations that are worth looking at, even if the text is not memorable. It's an 18th century book, but it's an a 19th century binding by an outfit called Gruel, which was at the time the most important bindery in France. It's in a style called dos-à-dos, which means essentially back to back, which was popular, at least in England, in the 17th century. You've got an 18th century book in a 19th century binding, which is in a 17th century style. The dos-à-dos binding in England was especially used for devotional works. You'd have the Book of Common Prayer here and the Bible there. You'd open up one here, then you open up one there. Oftentimes, it was an embroidered binding. Obviously, this is very different, and this is in the style of Derome, the most important 18th century French binder, even though it's a Gruel, what we call retrospective binding. Again, as all of these books really, it's in perfect condition, and it's a wonderful assemblage of sources of pleasure.