

A visual feast in both its text and its covers, this elegant manuscript interpretation of the perennially popular Persian poem is a beautiful example of two traditional book arts revived by the Arts & Crafts movement of the late 19th century: illuminated manuscripts inspired by those done in Medieval times, and bookbindings of embroidered silk, a popular style in the 17th century.

Our embroidered binding is unsigned, but the detail, the deft stitching, and the outstanding use of color mark it as the product of a skilled artisan.

Embroidered bindings rose to popularity as part of the Arts & Crafts movement of the late 19th century. William Morris' wife Jane and younger daughter May were primary players in this needlework renaissance, as was Jane's sister, Elizabeth (Bessie) Burden, who for a time was the chief technical instructor at the Royal School of Art Needlework. Needlework historian Dr. Lynn Hulse told us of the design's similarity in pose, garb, and physical features to a stained glass panel, dating from 1872-1874, donated to the Victoria & Albert Museum by May Morris. In the opinion of Dr. Hulse, the composition of our binding could very well be by May Morris, but the stitching is less refined than her work, as can be seen in a minstrel with cymbals panel (from around 1890) in the William Morris Society collection.

If May Morris designed this binding, who executed it? One clue may be in the provenance: We know that this manuscript was once owned by the Australian philanthropists and collectors Robert and Joanna Barr Smith, who were important clients of William Morris' London shop, and whose daughter Mabel was a school friend of May Morris. This provenance leads Dr. Hulse to suggest that the embroidery of our binding may have been executed either by Joanna Barr Smith, her daughter Erlistoun Mitchell, or her daughter-in-law Mary Barr Smith, all of whom were accomplished needlewomen and are known to have purchased several embroideries from Morris & Co.

The manuscript inside, which was written out in 1904, is the work of Calligrapher Percy Smith, who was just 22 years old at the time. Smith studied at Camberwell and at the Central School of Art, and became an instructor at Camberwell shortly after this manuscript was produced. After serving in World War I, he pursued a career as an artist, printmaker, book designer, and typographer, most notably designing the letterforms used to engrave the names of the fallen on Great War memorials, and producing a haunting series of engravings, "Dance of Death, 1914-18," based on his battlefield sketches.

Relying entirely on lettering rather than on illustration for its beauty, the manuscript inside is lovely in its purity and simplicity, like the austere Doves Press books of Cobden-Sanderson, rather than the gloriously illustrated Kelmscott Press books of William Morris.

It is rare to find either a modern illuminated manuscript or an embroidered binding of folio size, and to find them combined is an extraordinary occurrence and opportunity. This wonderful creation has clearly always been treasured as the special work of art that it is, its prior owners carefully preserving it from any traces of use or age.