

Aldine Aeschylus in Mosaic Binding for Robert Hoe:

This small volume packs an outsized bibliophilic punch: it is the Editio Princeps—that is, the first printed version—of the extant tragedies by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, issued by the legendary Aldine press, and in a splendid mosaic binding done for one of the greatest American bibliophiles. Bound in citron morocco and inlaid in a repeating mosaic design of red and black morocco with delicate gilt tooling, it also features morocco doublures with the monogram of collector Robert Hoe, and unusual highly burnished gold endleaves. Its original pull-off case has kept the binding in sparkling condition. Surprisingly, the binding is unsigned, but the quality of the workmanship and the materials confirm it as the work of a master artisan. Similar bindings have been produced by Trautz-Bauzonnet, Emile Mercier, and the Club Bindery. Previous owner Robert Hoe was one of the founders of this last workshop, and a mosaic "répétition" binding created for him by the Club Bindery, and with his monogram on the doublure (as here), was shown in the Grolier Club's exhibit of mosaic bindings in 1902.

Our Aldine Aeschylus contains six plays—"The Persians," "Seven against Thebes," "The Suppliants," "Agamemnon," "The Eumenides," and "Prometheus Bound"—rather than the seven known to survive from the estimated 70 to 90 dramas Aeschylus produced. This is due to one of the few failures of the famously meticulous editors employed by printer Aldus Manutius. A missing page in the source manuscript caused editor Franciscus Asulanus to combine "Agamemnon" and "The Libation Bearers" under the title "Agamemnon," a mistake not corrected for nearly 40 years.

The printing in the elegant Aldine type is lovely, and the extraordinarily beautiful binding is enough to make even a collector as fastidious as Robert Hoe forgive the editor's mistake—and the first appearance in print of works by someone recognized as the Father of Tragedy would still have been a significant addition even to his vast and wonderful library. A founding member and first president of the Grolier Club, Hoe had a collection that Beverly Chew said was "the finest [America] has ever contained." He acquired illuminated manuscripts, early printing, French and English literature, and extremely fine bindings; when his library was sold in 1911-12, it fetched nearly \$2 million, a record that held until the Streeter sale more than 50 years later.