

COSWAY BINDINGS - TRANSCRIPT

This segment talks about the so-called Cosway binding. In 1909, the bookseller Sotheran in London, still in business, remaindered a book about the English miniature painter named Cosway. When someone remaindered a book, in my understanding, it means we've got extra copies, and we want to move them.

Somebody at the Sotheran firm got the idea that wouldn't it be clever and maybe commercially advantageous to take copies of this book on this miniature guy Cosway and do a painting on, let's say, ivory and inset that painting into the cover of the book, particularly since it would be appropriate for the content, Cosway being a miniature painter, the binding having a miniature in it, like this.

This was well-received, and afterwards books were decorated in similar fashion, sometimes inside the front cover, sometimes on the front cover, sometimes both, and books that were decorated in that way were called Cosway bindings, even though they had nothing to do with Cosway, the miniature who started the whole fad.

Here is a beautiful book by C.S. Forester, a name that you'll recognize from another context, about Josephine, Napoleon's wife. Fell in love with her and married her even though, and this is shocking for the time, she was six years older than he was, it's a lovely portrait. She's got jewels on, looks like an empress. She'd love to have a book like this with all the inlays on it. But there's a certain sadness in her eyes. It's a painting that's very well done. Although it's not what we would say a legitimate Cosway binding, it certainly is a Cosway-style binding, and there's absolutely no reason at all why you should not buy it. It just says buy me, I'm beautiful, and I have a Cosway binding, or a Cosway portrait.

This one is similar, and there's a portrait of Dickens inside the front cover with pearls around the portrait on a nice morocco doublure, and this is distinctive in that it's a Cosway binding on an important book. A lot of Cosway bindings, just like a lot of fore-edge paintings, were done for books that weren't moving, that needed some push to get them into people's libraries. But this is the first edition of "Pickwick Papers," one of the great novels or great books of 19th century English literature. It's Dickens's funniest book, and it's a very nice copy that has a special bonus in that it's in a lovely red morocco binding with inlays and a lovely painting of Dickens. We don't know who did it, but it certainly is very high-quality in terms of expressiveness and verisimilitude.

The two examples we've just looked at are Cosway-style bindings. This is the real thing. This is a Cosway binding without a hyphen for the style to come after it. What makes this the real thing is that it involves the four players who started the whole thing: Sotheran, the bookseller; Stonehouse, who was the designer of the portraits and the bindings; a woman named C.B. Currie, who was the artist who did the portrait; and then Riviere, the guys who actually produced the binding, actually executed the binding.

We know that Miss Currie is involved because on the paste down inside front cover it says so, and later on there's a registration page that says the same thing, that this is number 891 of the Cosway bindings invented by J.H. Stonehouse with miniatures on ivory by Miss Currie, and it's signed by Stonehouse and Currie. So this is a registered, pedigree Cosway binding.

The book is interesting. It's Shelley's "Adonais." It's his eulogy of Keats, and, not surprisingly, it has a picture, a portrait on ivory, of Shelley on the front cover and of Keats on the back cover. These are

portraits that are beautifully done The brushwork is deft and delicate. The emotions in the faces are clear and appropriate, and it's a book that would be wonderful to own.

It's a facsimile of the first printing of 1821 that was done in Pisa, which is rare and extraordinarily expensive, but this has the added advantage, even if it's not the first printing, of being a genuine Cosway binding. It even says so along the four edges of the boards, even if you've missed the two other testimonials.

There are Cosway bindings or Cosway-style bindings, and then there are Cosway bindings or Cosway-style bindings. This is, I would think, the most visually-impressive available Cosway-style binding. I am sure that somewhere in some private collection or institution there's something as grand, at least as grand, but this is the kind of impressiveness that you're not going to see on the market anytime soon.

It's Longfellow's "Evangeline." It's a book printed on vellum and illuminated by hand on every page. But most important, it's got 14 oval portraits, Longfellow in the middle and then scenes from the narrative, scenes from the story. It's a very large book, and that's why there's room for these miniatures. They are all done with great skill.

There's a man named Steven Ratcliffe whose special interest is Cosway bindings, and he, to my knowledge, knows more about them than anyone else. The book is not signed by Currie like this one is, but I asked him who he thought was the artist, and he said that he had no doubt at all that these are Currie portraits.

The book comes from the collection of Phoebe Boyle sold in 1923 in New York; big sale, amazing material. She collected fine bindings and vellum printings. As I was mentioning in another segment on the guild of women binders, Phoebe Boyle is like Estelle Doheny in a series of half a dozen eminent women collectors, Edith Rockefeller McCormick with the Doves bindings, and a number of others. Anything that comes from the Phoebe Boyle collection has a kind of distinctive appeal apart from the book itself. But this doesn't really need anything special beyond one's visual appreciation. The outside is more special probably than the inside, but it's a beautifully-printed and beautifully-illuminated book as well, one of 26 copies printed in 1903, and a book that would be a feature, a featured item in anybody's collection.