

MEUNIER & MARIUS MAGNIN - TRANSCRIPTION

I want to look at two books, French books, as part of the topic of modern binding decoration that's distinctive. This is a collection of poetry and ballads from the Medieval and Renaissance period, collected into a substantial volume and published at the end of the 19th century. Actually, 1902. But what's most interesting is the binding.

The binding is Charles Meunier, and it is absolutely typical, except slightly better than, his cuir ciselé bindings, a French term meaning basically incised or cut leather. You can see in the cover where the leather has been cut away to make intricate designs. Foliage here on the front, along with weaponry and shields and more of the same, battles axes and so on, on the back.

This is his trademark kind of binding. One thing about this, it's slightly bigger than what he normally does and he uses sharkskin. This is the black background on both the back cover and front cover, and it has been textured by stippling; by putting tiny little dots. It's an arresting binding, particularly because the leather has been painted as well as cut, and there's obviously three dimensions involved here.

There are illustrations throughout by a guy Rubida. And I don't particularly care for them, but there they are. The interesting thing is that, stuck in at the front is quite a nice original watercolor; pen and ink wash watercolor. I suspect that since this image is not used inside, it may very well have been a picture that was going to be turned into an illustration and for whatever reason it was decided that it wouldn't be used. In any case, it's an inserted addition and it's a very nice bonus to what is already a very handsome book.

Here is one other French binding, modern binding, turn of the century, turn of the 20th century, 1908, containing the works of . . . a work called Jardin De L'Infant by Albert Samain. It's a collection of symbolist poetry. The illustrations are of some interest. They're ethereal and somehow elusive, as would be appropriate for symbolist poetry, but it's the binding that really deserves the bulk of our attention.

It's got a nice elaborate scrolling gilt decoration on the covers and spine, but it really gets interesting when you open inside. You've got what I really love. Some people might think it's too garish. But I really love this brocaded free end paper, front and back. And then, the doublures are dark blue morocco with inlaid roses. The particular nature of these roses is part of what's so distinctive about the binding, because most inlays, even with the most elaborate and expensive bindings, are one color of morocco. These, I think, started out as one color of morocco, but then they've been painted so that they have varying colors of orange or salmon or butterscotch, and actually look more like flowers than morocco representations of them.

On the front doublure we have an image that, to me, is unprecedented in my experience. I've never seen anything quite like this. We have a censer here full of incense, which is emitting ribbons of smoke that are threading their way around the doublure, and the whole thing enclosed by the same sort of painted roses. And the threads of smoke are painted in the same way, so that instead of having one color of inlaid morocco, you have inlaid morocco that is light brown, dark brown, gray brown. Looks more real and much more interesting than it might otherwise be.

The image of the censer with what is a moon rising in the background is a pictorial representation or reinforcement of a line or a stanza from Edgar Allan Poe's poem Helen. And it's used as the dedication

for this volume, and it's obviously very appropriate and makes this binding, as I say, unprecedented in my experience.

The binder is Marius Magnin, who came from Lyon. His father was a binder before him. Neither he nor Meunier had an easy time of it. A binder named Marius Michel was getting all of the publicity and all of the jobs. And in fact, Meunier was so, what shall I say, intimidated and unhappy that his work was not more well received that he refused to participate in the 1900 Paris exhibition, because he said, "Everybody knows Marius Michel's going to get the prize, so why should I bother to participate?" And, in fact, Marius Michel did get the prize. Meanwhile, the stink that he caused brought about enough publicity that he ended up attracting as much attention as Marius Michel because he had his own show on the sidewalk somewhere.

This guy shows up from Lyon, from the provinces, with a very unusual kind of binding. He actually collaborated with a designer who provided these kinds of inlays that look like silk or upholstery. His is not a name that you see very much at all, but I think it's a sensational binding, just like this one.