

Art of the Book; Bindings of the School of Herat

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Abstract

The research will be carried out on the art of book binding of the Timurid period and of the school of Herat. The creation of artistically presented manuscript was a long and laborious process which demanded great skill on the part of all those involved; from calligraphers to the binder himself. This research will focus on the techniques of book binding done, aiming on the techniques brought from the different artists of the world in the school of Herat under the sponsorship of Shah Rukh, occupying the worldwide golden age in Herat in the 15th century with works of art that were far ahead of others in all respects.

Keywords: Book Binding etc.

1. Introduction

The development of Islamic book binding and book art flourished to its peaks at the school of Herat. Books and book binding dates back to the prehistoric times, and have played a vital role in Islamic art. From the beginning, the Timurids used art and architecture to enhance personal and courtly life and develop urban infrastructure for the community and its constituencies. The founder of the Timurid dynasty, was Timur (b. c. 1336–d. 1405), who was a great patron of art. (Roxburgh 2014)

The city of Herat, the province of Khurasan, was at that time within the Timurid spheres of Iran. (S n.d.). From the beginning of the fifteenth century, Herat got its recognition not only because of its considerable size but because of its art, music trade started developing. (Soucek n.d.). The Herat school was formed when the finest artists from Tabriz, Baghdad and Sheraz gathered in the city. (Soucek n.d.), this marked the period that's called the golden age of the art of books of the Islamic era. Books were considered financial investment of that time and donated towards the endowment of charitable foundations, and status symbols, presented as gifts between heads of state. (Marika, Islamic art and architecture 2011).

The initial period of the school of Herat was laid with the foundations of manuscript workshop called the 'kitabkhana'.¹ The development of book binding (mujalit²) dates back to the Ujgur Turks from the VII century says

archeologist A. Von Le Cog (artedellibro 2009). Amongst other painters, Bihzad was praised by the early critics for his powers of draughtsman ship and composition. (Grey n.d.). There are five main elements of bindings that ought to be considered when discussing decoration of the art of book binding: the front and back covers, the flap, the fore-edge spine and the doublures (Ohta 2012). The process of book binding starts off with the production of handmade paper, organic colors were produced at the *kitabkhana*³, leather was used mainly for the exterior of the bindings, stamping was done to lay the impression of the design onto the leather.

According to The Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1979), book illumination, being in stylistic coherence with monumental painting and applied art, developed an unprecedented significance within the total organization of manuscript design. The books, the illuminations and the manuscript of all sorts were created in the school of Herat, thus creating the most brilliant period of this art, unsurpassed through the ages. (grey n.d.)

Books have long been an important source of preserving information in the Islamic world. Fifteenth century was the golden age of the art of book binding in Asia. The art of book binding and book art is as old as the writing itself. (artedellibro 2009). When we talk about book binding in Asia we immediately come across the school of Herat which is known to be the golden era for book binding art in fifteenth century, when the young religion and culture of Islam was penetrating and amalgamating its power, the codex⁴ form of book has

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¹ Manuscript workshop

² Mujalit comes from 'jild' which means leather; the person who binds this is a mujalit., DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14741/ijmcr/v.5.6.37>

³ Workshop, where different artists gather to work on handcrafted books.

⁴ Book form that predominates to the present day

passed through some five centuries of technical and structural evolution. (Gulnar Bosch n.d.). The type of technical skill involves and wealth of ornamental gilding displayed in the book bindings were the result of long continued development of the Timurid period. (aglou n.d.)

The Timurid period witnessed women as active patrons of art. (S n.d.). This period saw great achievements in other luxury arts, such as metalwork and jade carving. This cultural efflorescence found its ultimate expression at the court of Sultan Husain Baiqara (r. 1470–1506), the last effective Timurid ruler. Due to the flourishing of manuscript illumination and illustration, the Herat school is often regarded as the peak of Timurid book art. (S n.d.)

The school of Herat, 1452-1510 flourished in the Timurid period, when Timur himself brought in craftsmen to Herat. (grey n.d.), forming the school with the finest artists from Tabriz, Baghdad and Sheraz gather in that city. (Soucek n.d.). During this period were produced the most magnificent manuscripts, ornamental illuminations and miniature painting enclosed in magnificent binding. Painters, calligraphers, illuminators and book binders together worked under the surname of Baysunghuri, were executing masterpieces of book binding art (grey n.d.).

The city of Herat, which is now in Afghanistan, but at that time part of the province of Khurasan, within the Timurid spheres of Iran. (S n.d.). From the beginning of the fifteenth century Herat began to take the status of Timurid capital not only because of its considerable size but because of its art, music trade started developing. (Soucek n.d.) The city soon got its acknowledgement of manuscripts which were produced in *kitab khana*, of Baysunqur and Sultan Hussain Bayqara.

A famous saying by an author Sultan Ali of the seventeenth century stated,

'Writing is among other writings as the sun among the other planets'. (S n.d.).

The very first account of any script started with rolled up in tube form of manuscript which would worn off and tear off with times thus the reason to start the book was established which preserved the script for longer period of times. (Hadzimejlic 2009). The development of book binding (*mujalit*⁵) dates back to the Ujgur Turks from the VII century says archeologist A. Von Le Cog (*artedellibro* 2009). Amongst other painters, Bihzad was praised by the early critics for his powers of draughtsman ship and composition. (Grey n.d.)

Books were financial investments of that time period, donated toward the endowment of charitable foundations, and status symbols, presented as gifts between heads of state. (Marika, islamic art and

architecture 2011). Muslim literature was enriched with Sufism and Islamic mysticism⁶. (contribution of muslim to world civilization n.d.). The process of book binding starts with the leather being of the highest quality, which could be dyed and painted upon. The very first account of these includes iron and wood cover but later development showed leather and camel leather was highly esteemed for this purpose. New techniques were also being practiced by the artists of the school of Herat, in which covers were deigned from the single piece of moldings on which fine patterns of filigree⁷ designs were engraved. (grey n.d.)

The principal step in forming a book was to create the paper. In the Islamic world, paper was made from rags of linen and hemp rather than tree pulp. The rags were cut into strips and softened in limewater, then crushed into a pulp and drenched in a vat⁸. To form a sheet of paper, a rectangular mold was retained into the container and then left to dry. The water seeped out and the pages were left to be hardened in the mold. Then pasteboard⁹ was made up of small strips of new paper pasted over discarded manuscript material. It is probable that a variety of practices were common, because paper was an expensive commodity of that time period (Ohta 2012). Highly ornamental touches were frequently added: some were tinted, some were sprinkled with gold, and others were marbled. Marbled papers were created by dispensing drops of colorant onto the surface of a water bath and running combs through the drops to create a pattern; a sheet of paper was then rested on the surface of the bath to absorb the colors (Marika, islamic art and architecture 2011).

The colors used were mainly vegetal colors taken from saffron, turmeric, henna, and span wood, pomegranate bark and lac (Blair n.d.). After drying, the paper was prepared to receive ink and paint with the application of a starchy solution that rendered the surface smooth. (Marika, islamic art and architecture 2011)

Stamping was done to create design impression on the leather of the binding; more than 200 stamps known on the bindings were used for the borders of bindings and to fill the interstices of the design on the covers. These include small rosettes, almonds and hearts. Circular design were usually embossed on metal in the middle depicting the Sun, later periods shows variations to the designs with oval shape and identical designs on four corners.

Once the text was completed, it was then passed on to the artists, where all artist sit together to paint the manuscript. Each chosen to illustrate a particular scene; some artists, for instance, were known for their portraits, others for their battle scenes. A single page might be a collaborative effort, where junior artists were called upon

⁵ Mujalit comes from 'jild' which means leather; the person who binds this is a mujalit.

⁶ Religious practice that involves intense personal experience of God.
⁷ Ornamental work of fine (typically gold or silver) wire formed into delicate tracery.

⁸ A large tank or tub used to hold liquid, especially in industry.

⁹ A type of thin board made by pasting together sheets of paper.

to fill in backgrounds and landscapes. Some elements might be copied from preexisting sketches by means of a device called a pounce¹⁰. After this pigments were created mainly from natural resources. Mineral sources were gold, silver, ground cinnabar (for vermilion), orpiment (for yellow), and malachite (for green). These materials were expensive and substitutes were often used. (Marika, art of the book 2011)

There are five main elements of bindings that should be considered when discussing decoration: the front and back covers, the flap, the fore-edge spine and the doublures (Ohta 2012). The illumination of a manuscript consists of the embellishment of the first and last folios and also the artistic layout of the text and the borders. Blind tooling¹¹ with or without gilding¹² or silvering was also one of the earliest methods of decorating the book covers (chicago 1932). There is still much discussion on whether hot or cold tools were used. Marçais and Poinssot were of the opinion that heated tools had been used because impressions of tools were found on the wooden boards of the early bindings. At the centre of the first folio was a medallion in which the name of the manuscript's owner or the ruler was inscribed. (Soucek n.d.).

With much done, the Bookbinders at Herat introduced figural decoration, containing real and mythical animals, often of Far Eastern inspiration, reflecting the strong artistic connections that existed between China and the Timurid capital. Stamps of ovoid shape (*toronja* "citrus-shaped") became especially popular among Timurid craftsmen (iranica n.d.).

The techniques were based on the wishes of the buyer and on the subjects of the book, Closed ties with china resulted in lacquer finished look which were first introduced by the artists of the school of Herat. Techniques like relied embossing, giving the exterior a plastic feeling in the medallions and corner pieces through the use of such relief. (Aga-Oglu 1935). Designs were engraved on single metal plates, which were then pressed onto the leather; symmetrical designs, which were most often floral, were engraved on dies half the size of the binding surface. They were then impressed twice to form the complete designs, leaving a perceptible join across the middle of the cover (iranica n.d.). The decorative impressions of the book binding resulted in their names, few of them are:

- Dry impression
- Gold impression around the motif
- Décor with precious stones

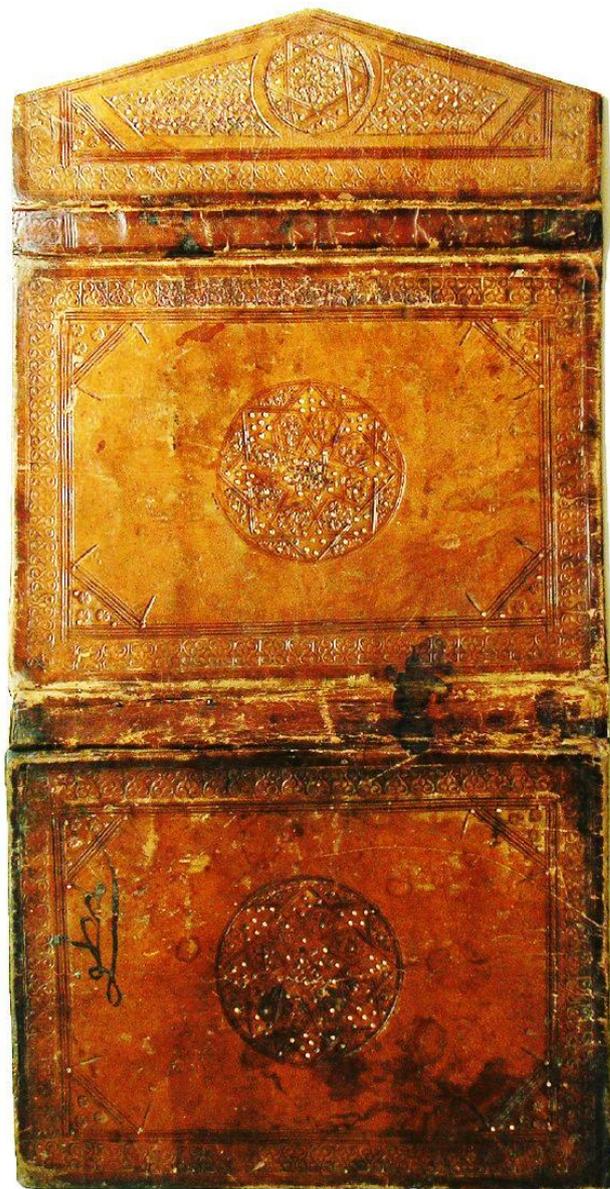
¹⁰ A piece of transparent paper or animal skin over the sketch to be copied and pricked holes into the top sheet around the outlines of the image below.

¹¹ Blind tooling is the bookbinding term for what leatherworkers would simply call tooling. It's the process of using a heated device to impress a shape into a surface, usually of leather.

¹² The term gilding covers a number of decorative techniques for applying fine gold leaf or powder to solid surfaces such as wood, stone, or metal to give a thin coating of gold.

- Décor with leather colors
- Golden blossoms

The entire classical books were sewed by hand with silk thread and long sewing needles. Silk being strong gives no interruption during the turning of the pages of the book. (artedellibro 2009). Once the covers had been attached to the textbook and the leather glued on to them, they were ready for decoration. (Ohta 2012) Some scholars agree to the fact that book covers were decorated first and joined later but others say contrary to this.



(desvergnés 2014)

After the completion, illuminators and gilders added flourishes to the text, such as chapter headings, colored frames, and rulings. They also created frontispieces and end pages. Finally, each sheet was burnished with a hard stone or glass.

They illuminated the bindings and paged with designs in gold as well as with miniature paintings. In Herat,

Muslim made over 100 bookshops. They made copies of Qur'an and sold many of them. Arabs wrote poems, stories, events, traditions, etc. (Islamic Empire n.d.). The style of book soon spread to India and Turkey. Through the sixteenth century, designs became more elaborate, with the addition of double lines¹³, which also came to be decorated. (Marika, Islamic Art and Architecture 2011)

The introduction of printing press, reduced the interest for manuscripts and book binding, Hamdija Kresevlja-kovic reports that in year 1876 (miladi), due to the start of modern binding workshop, last traditional *Mujalid*, Sulejman Herba, had to close his workshop. After the closure of the last *Mujalid* workshop this craft became a private hobby in many private houses for keeping books. (Islamic Book Binding n.d.)

The academy of Herat, continued for a century with all its glories was broken in 1507, when the city was taken by Shaybanids. The elegance of the line, mastery of composition and the decorative effect showcases the masters of the school of Herat. (Aga-Oglu 1935). Due to the flourishing of manuscript illumination and illustration, the Herat school is often regarded as the apogee of Persian painting and book binding. (Heilbrunn n.d.) The books, the illuminations and the manuscript of all sorts and kinds, were produced in the school of Herat manufacturing the utmost brilliance of this art, consummate over the eternities. (Grey n.d.)

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¹³ Interior covers