

Objects in focus

Manuscripts and Printed Books

Sybil Pye and the Art of Bookbinding

Sybil Pye (1879-1958) was a pioneering female bookbinder whose designs broke new ground in the decoration of bindings.

In this handout we will look at:

- The 19th-century bookbinding trade and how Pye broke away from its traditions
- her distinctive style and where that came from
- how she went about creating her extraordinary designs by following the process she used.



Section of the book cover for ***Poems from Wordsworth*** designed and bound by Sybil Pye c1902 – 1937

Bookbinding in the nineteenth century

By the nineteenth century, bookbinding was a large and busy trade, based on a production-line model of working.

Increasing mechanisation of the printing process led to greater speed in producing books; but the binding trade was still heavily reliant on manual workers.

Women and men's work

The workforce was strictly divided between 'women's work' and 'men's work' – the women folded the printed sheets and sewed them together, after which the men took over to shape the spines with hammers, attach the boards, and cover the books with leather. They also added titles and decoration with gold leaf.

Bookbinding manuals

To make the production line efficient, standard techniques, patterns and levels of finish were set out in bookbinding manuals, and as a result bookbinding styles became standardised.

Bookbinding process



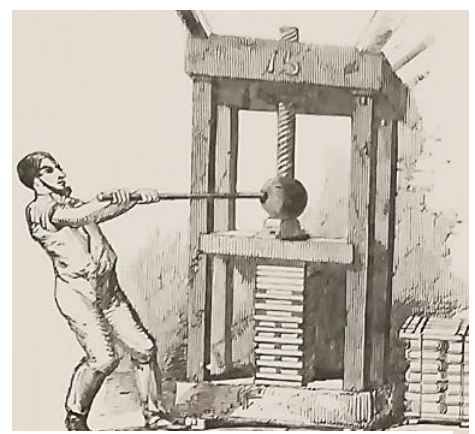
1. Folding - women



2. Sewing - women



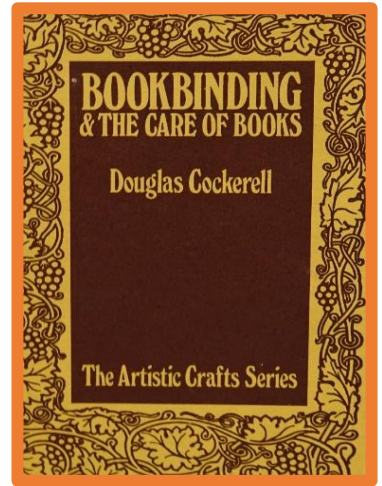
3. Cutting board - men



4. Pressing - men

Sybil Pye's bookbinding revolution

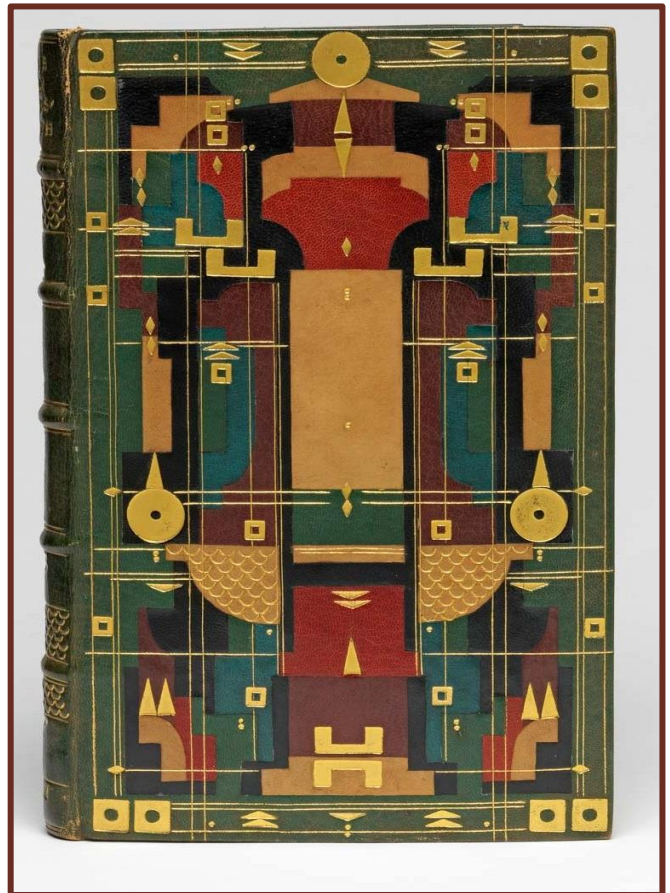
Sybil Pye taught herself bookbinding using Douglas Cockerell's *Bookbinding & the care of books* (1901), a book which remains one of the standard works on the subject to this day.



Cockerell broke with the nineteenth-century production-line technique and advocated instead one of individual attention to each book. Using Cockerell's lessons, Pye developed a revolutionary style of decoration of her own.

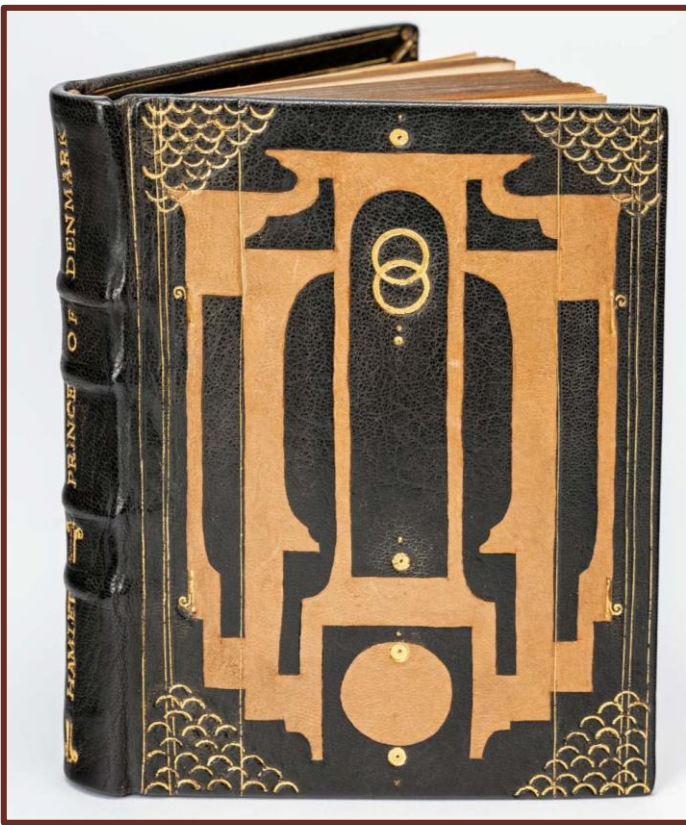
Coloured leathers had been used for many centuries to make multi-coloured patterns and labels on books; the leather used was very thin and then cut into shapes and applied onto the surface with glue (onlay). This process results in the leathers losing much of their beautiful natural grain.

Pye's novel technique was to 'inlay' her design. To do this she cut shapes through the whole thickness of the covering leather to create windows. She then inserted coloured leather in the same shape into the windows. This technique allowed her to exploit the full beauty of the leather.



Front cover for *Poems from Wordsworth* by Sybil Pye – crop shown on the front page of handout

Pye's work is considered some of the most innovative design binding of the twentieth century, as fresh today as it was when the books were first bound!



Books designed and bound by Sybil Pye in the Fitzwilliam collection

Behind the scenes at the Museum

Meet Edward Cheese, Conservator manuscripts and Printed Books

Edward is a specialist in the conservation of bindings and has research interests in the history of bookbinding.

Edwards is a Queen Elizabeth Craft Scholar and Accredited Conservator-Restorer. He trained at West Dean College, West Sussex, before coming to Cambridge to work at the Cambridge Colleges' Conservation Consortium. He ran the workshop for three years before taking up the position of Conservator of Manuscripts and Printed Books at the Fitzwilliam Museum in 2015.

