

Bound for Luxury

On Display at UCLA Library Special Collections

Exhibit Information

Monday, August 10, 2026 – Friday, December 11, 2026

UCLA Library Special Collections, Charles E. Young Research Library
280 Charles E. Young Drive North, Los Angeles, CA 90095

Exhibit Description

This exhibit highlights the rise of the codex — or what we tend to think of as a “book” — at the beginning of the first millennia. Following this shift, portable information objects throughout Afro-Eurasia transitioned from scrolls and other rolled formats into the codex format: stacks of paper, often folded and bound along one edge with thread or glue. By the 10th century, the codex was common across Europe, Inner Asia, and East Asia.

Despite these structural similarities, book bindings continued to reflect the unique circumstances and cultural conditions in which books were produced and received well into the 20th century. The juxtaposition between practicality and aesthetics converged and diverged through cultural encounter, changes in the book market, and the arrival of new technologies.

These cases contain a selection of “luxury” bindings across 500 years of global book production. They exemplify an artifact’s ability to convey its own history through the lens of materiality. As you admire these items, think about how “luxury” was defined in different times and places. Use the QR code to learn more about the text inside. Do the contents match your expectations given the elevated decoration? Did the book surprise you? We hope you enjoy this opportunity to judge a book by its cover!

European Bindings

The rise of the Renaissance, along with the widespread adoption of paper and printing and increased contact with the near East, led to major transformations in European binding aesthetics. Bindings for both practical texts as well as scholarly books reflected their owners' tastes.

One of the most common binding types, a tacketed binding could easily accommodate the addition of new sections, so it was used frequently for account books [1]. This example, from the archives of the Medici family, exemplifies how even a serviceable binding can be aesthetically stylized.

While the majority of bindings were functional rather than fashionable, the sixteenth century gave rise to a number of decorative binding trends. Fanfare was an elaborate and luxurious decorative style developed in Paris around 1570 and popular until the mid-17th century. These bindings are characterized by ornate gold-tooling that formed geometric compartments of various sizes across the top and bottom covers. Each compartment was further embellished with interlaced geometric ribbons, leafy sprays, laurel branches, and floral tools, excepting a blank central compartment often reserved for a crest or a coat of arms [2] [3].

Some bindings connect a book directly to its previous owner. Jean Grolier de Servières, viscount d'Aguisy (c. 1489/90 – 1565) was the Treasurer-General of France and a famous bibliophile known for his love of elaborate bindings [4] [5]. Many volumes in his large library bear his motto IO GROLIERII ET AMICOVM [6] meaning "property of Jean Grolier and his friends."

Note: numbers correspond to individual items labeled in the exhibit cases.

[1] *Account book of Carlo de' Medici*. Tuscany, 1535-1536. Bound Manuscripts Collection. Mss 282.

[2] *Doctoral Diploma of the University of Padua in Latin*, Illuminated manuscript on parchment. Italy; Padua, dated July 15, 1647. Richard and Mary Rouse collection of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts and early printed books. Mss 156.

[3] *Breuiarium iuxta ritus ordinis Cisterciensium*. Uenetijs: Apud heredes Luceantioij Junte Florentini, 1542.

[4] *Souida : to men paron biblion, souida*. Hoi de syntaxamenoi touto, andres sophoi. Venetiis: In aedibvs Aldi, et Andreae soceri, 1514.

[5] *Vite de' prencipi di Vinegia di Pietro Marcello, tradotte in uolgare da Lodouico Domenichi*. Venetia: Per Plinio Pietrasanta, 1557

[6] *Astrolabium planum in tabulis ascendens*. Venetijs : Per Iohannē Emericū de Spira, 1494

[7] *Venerabilibus fratribus patriarchæ Antiocheno Græcorum Melchitarum & omnibus eiusdem ritus Catholicis episcopis eidem patriarchæ subjectis*. Rome: [publisher not identified], [1756]

[8] *L'anthropologia di Galeazzo Capella*, Venetia: [Paolo Manuzio], 1533.

Middle Eastern Bindings

During the Renaissance, Islamic binding aesthetics heavily influenced European binding decoration. Traditional middle-eastern embellishments like blind-stamped rosette centerpieces surrounded by matching cornerpieces [11] likely inspired Grolier's binding tastes, but Islamic bindings often differed from European bindings in both structure and decorative craft. In an envelope binding, the rear cover extends into a triangular or pentagonal flap that wraps around the outer edge of the book, further protecting the text [11,12]. More significantly, the adoption of lacquerwork in the Persian speaking world, and later in other parts of the near East, significantly advanced decorative bookbinding techniques to both the east and west of the Islamic world.

Persian lacquerwork is an intricate decorative art that emerged in Iran during the late 15th century and features hand-painted miniature designs sealed under clear shellac or varnish. Its application in book bindings reached its height of popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To produce a lacquer binding, artisans prepared a pasteboard cover with gesso and varnish before adding an ornate, painted design featuring lush floral arrangements, birds, rosettes, or mandalas. Some early examples incorporated decorated leather with the painted lacquerwork. The painted covers are shellacked with several additional layers of varnish and polished smooth, sometimes with precious inlays like powdered mother-of-pearl and gold particles to heighten the level of decoration. The result is a brilliant sheen that gives Persian lacquer bindings their distinctive character. Many of the items in this case [10,13,14] are exquisite examples of Persianate lacquer bindings (or their detached boards [9,15]), spanning from approximately 1600 until the 19th century.

In West Africa, books could be bound as codices, but they could also be gathered as unbound sheets and wrapped in decorated leather. The owner of this manuscript — the only Sub-Saharan African binding featured in this exhibit — carried their sacred text in a bespoke leather satchel [14].

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[1] Lacquered book cover, verso. Possible illustration from Jami's romance of Yisuf and Zulaykha (see ms. 1656/3), where Zulaykha and other women were so awestruck by Yisuf's beauty that they peel the skin of their hands instead of the fruits they are holding. Exhibit Collection of Near Eastern Manuscripts. Mss 43.

[2] *Tuhfat al-mulik / The kings' gift*, by Kashfi, Ja'far ibn Abi Ishaq. 1822. Exhibit Collection of Near Eastern Manuscripts. Mss 7.

[3] *Saqf al-zand*, by Abū al-'Alā' al-Ma'arrī, 973-1057. Place not identified. Between 1740 and 1744. Sami Assaad collection of Arabic manuscripts. Mss 3.

[4] *Tuḥfat al-zā'ir / The pilgrim's gift*, by Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir ibn Muḥammad Taqī. 1830. Exhibit Collection of Near Eastern Manuscripts. Mss 11.

[5] Qur'an (complete) with Persian interlinear translations. Minasian collection of Near Eastern manuscripts. Mss 1538.

[6] Mushaf containing Qu'aranic selections. Maghribi script. North Africa. 19th c. Bound Manuscripts Collection. Mss 59.

[7] Lacquered book cover with decorative floral ornamentation and leather spine. No Date. Exhibit Collection of Near Eastern Manuscripts. Mss 44.

East Asian Bindings

The East Asian codex differs significantly from its counterparts in Europe and the Near East due to the Chinese invention of paper (100 BCE). Compared to the heavy boards, leather, and glue used in historic Western bindings, the earliest East Asian codices were constructed from paper and thread and very little else. The first "paperback" books in world history were Chinese, bound by stab-stitching thread through the spine. This binding format opened fully due to the specific qualities of Chinese paper which was thin yet durable [20], and continued in popularity until the 20th century.

Despite its early adoption, the codex format in East Asia did not fully supersede other binding structures. Scrolls — such as this illustrated chapter from the Lotus Sutra [16] — constitute a major form of East Asian religious art and continue to be produced today. This particularly lavish example from the 1650's features gold calligraphy on indigo paper and a frontispiece with intricately cut gold leaf on handwoven silk brocade. A silk fabric binding, often backed with

strong paper to form protective covers, was a mark of luxury and status. This 18th century Chinese concertina binding [22] and this imperial print from 1760s Beijing [18] are both bound in fine silks.

This copy of the canonical Confucian text, *Dà Xué* or The Great Learning, boasts a quality paper binding as well as detachable printed wrappers that were sold along with the text - similar to a dust jacket [17]. The Japanese binding on this multi-volume set obscures the fact it was printed in China in the 1320s, demonstrating the global nature of the printed book trade prior to the advent of the printing press in Europe [19].

The flexibility of East Asian bindings meant they could be stored flat, and lacked the protection provided by a more rigid binding. Collectors and publishers stored multi-volume works in various types of boxes to keep them together and protect them from damage, making them the “hardbacks” of East Asian books. Most Chinese and Japanese books had simple cases [23], but luxury objects often received customized enclosures [21].

East Asian book aesthetics underwent a revolution in the late 19th century due to rapid modernization and external influence. This traditional woodblock book was bound to resemble a European export [24].

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[16] *Myōhō renga kyō Kenpōtō bon daijuichi*. Bound Manuscripts Collection. Mss 213.

[17] *Daigaku : Ei-Kan taiyaku* by Seki Yoshitaka. Edo : Yamatoya Kihē, Meiji 5 [1872].

[18] *Xi Qing gu jian : si shi juan, fu Qian lu shi liu juan* / bian zuan Liang Shizheng [and others]. Peking: [Wu ying dian], [1755].

[19] *Hiiron / Tōen Rōjin Ri Kō sen. Genpan*, by Li, Gao. From the East Asian Library collection.

[20 & 21] *Shiqu baoji*. Shanghai: Hanfenlou, 1918. Unprocessed Cahill Collection.

[22] *Jin gang bo re bo luo mi jing / Jiumoluoshi yi ; Kangxi yu bi lin Dong Qichang shu*. Tuo ben. Peking: [Nei fu], [Kangxi i.e. between 1693 and 1722].

[23] *Tang dai cong shu : liu ji, [164 zhong]* / Wang wen gao, Shao Xizeng ji. Bian shan lou cang ban. Zhongguo: Bian shan lou, 1806.

[24] *Kaika Manu Kagami* : [a mirror of women's behavior through countless generations].

Pre-fabricated Bindings in a Post-Industrial World

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, European and American consumers purchased their books from a publisher or a bookseller without bindings, usually as a stack of stitched folded sheets inside a protective paper wrapper [25]. As illustrated across this exhibit, book buyers and (less often) shop owners paid bookbinders to craft custom bindings for their books with varying levels of decoration.

Industrial manufacturing technology paved the way for mass-produced, or edition bindings. London bookbinder Archibald Leighton is credited with inventing book cloth in the 1820's. This starched calico fabric could withstand adhesives without disintegrating, making it a durable yet inexpensive alternative to leather bindings. Publishers hired craftsman to emboss, block, and stamp decoration into bookcloth-covered board using metal die. This technology produced consistent case bindings with interesting textures, patterns, and other eye-catching decoration at scale.

The gilded age of Publishers' Bindings reached its peak in the last decades of the nineteenth century when publishers hired professional artists to design visually arresting compositions to advertise the text inside. These artisans, primarily women, used the font and the overall book structure as part of the larger design aesthetic in new and interesting ways [26–33].

Later in the 19th century, Yellowbacks provided an even more affordable option for an increasingly middle-class and literate populace. These bindings featured dramatic, multi-colored woodblock illustrations, printed often on glazed yellow paper and glued over cheap boards. The bright design and lurid imagery helped draw people's attention while they rushed through poorly-lit rail stations. Considered early precursors to today's mass-market paperbacks, Yellowbacks were often stereotyped reprints of popular novels originally published as pricier cloth editions. Publishers kept these editions affordable by printing advertisements directly on the back covers [35-39].

Note: numbers correspond to individual items labeled in the exhibit cases.

[25] *Sybil, or, The two nations*, by B. Disraeli, M.P. London: Henry Colburn, Publisher, Great Marlborough Street, 1845.

[26] *The Lion's Cub: With Other Verse*, by Richard Henry Stoddard. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890.

- [27] *The Strollers*, by Frederic S. Isham; with illustrations by Harrison Fisher. Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Publishers, [1904].
- [28] *The jungle book*, by Rudyard Kipling. New York: The Century Co., 1894.
- [29] *In Arcady*, by Hamilton Wright Mabie; illustrated by Will H. Low, with decorations by Charles L. Hinton. New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903
- [30] *Epithalamion*, by Edmund Spenser; with Certain Imaginative Drawings by George Wharton Edwards. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1895.
- [31] *Among the meadow people*, by Clara Dillingham Pierson ; illustrated by F.C. Gordon. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1901.
- [32] *A Checked Love Affair, and "The Cortelyou Feud,"* by Paul Leicester Ford . New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903.
- [33] *Nature's Serial Story*, by Edward P. Roe. New York: Harper & Bros., 1885.
- [34] *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, by Frances Hodgson Burnett; illustrated by Reginald B. Birch. London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1886.
- [35] *Whom to marry and how to get married!* edited by the brothers Mayhew, and illus. by George Cruikshank. London, New York: G. Routledge, [1872].
- [36] *"Bones and I"; or, The Skeleton at Home*, by Whyte Melville, G. J. London: Ward, Lock and Co. [188-?]
- [37] *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*, by Jules Verne. London, New York: G. Routledge [18--]
- [38] *Mount Sorel, or, The Heiress of the De Veres*, by Mrs. Marsh [Anne Marsh-Caldwell]. London: Ward, Lock & Co., [1882]
- [39] *The Princess Casamassima* : a novel, by Henry James. London; New York: Macmillan and Co., 1889.

Fine Binding in the Nineteenth Century

The late eighteenth century saw a renewed interest in antiquarian book collecting and fine binding. Binders like Roger Payne defined new aesthetics by reviving previous styles and popularizing the use of new materials like this lavish, red moroccan leather [49,50]. UCLA has only one book bound by Payne — this 18th-century brown calfskin binding likely prepared for a client with more

sober taste [43]. The spine indicates it was repaired, but not fully rebound, at some point in the 20th century.

Payne was followed by a generation of celebrity binders happy to demonstrate their talent through splendidly elaborate custom bindings into the 19th century. Englishman Francis Bedford (1799-1883) was one of the most well respected bookbinders of this time. He decorated this binding for *Le terze rime di Dante* (the first Dante edition printed in portable octavo format) in French renaissance style, likely imitating earlier Grolier bindings [45]. Even more luxurious, the design for this 12th century manuscript of the New Testament in Greek features gold-tooled strapwork ornamentation and blind-tooled borders [44] .

The fine binding revival, and many of the artisans associated with fine printing and binding during this time, invested heavily in the importance of hand-craft as a reaction to industrial manufacturing processes and products. Simultaneously, new economic opportunities and steam-powered printing meant books were more available and more affordable to wider audiences interested in collecting new genres. The author gifted this triple decker (or 3-volume) Victorian Gothic mystery-thriller novel to J. T. Delane, then editor of the *London Times*. Delane discarded the industrially printed covers and had each volume rebound in vellum with marbled endpapers. During this technological and economic transitional period, even cheap, contemporary literature could be dressed up to convey luxury [46].

The bindings for sacred devotional texts often continued older traditions of luxury due to their significance. The detailed silver ornamentation and velvet binding for this sizeable Armenian manuscript matches the lavish level of decoration throughout the text [41]. See this manuscript's brilliant full-page illustrations on the [UCLA Digital Library](#).

Embroidered bindings were produced by both amateur and professional needleworkers beginning in the 13th century. Crafted mostly for bibles, prayer books, and other devotional texts, they reached their popularity peak in 17th century England [40]. Even the latter examples, fabricated industrially, could easily be unstitched from their texts and reused for a similar sized text using only a needle and thread [42].

Binding decoration isn't relegated to a book's external covers. New York Based binders J.M. Bradstreet and Son produced deluxe fine bindings known for their signature gold-tooled leather doublures — the elaborate ornamental linings on the inside of the book cover [47].

These three copies of *Juvenal* printed by Aldus Manutius in 1501 exemplify how a relatively affordable text became a unique luxury item through the addition of a custom binding. Bound in velvet [48], gold-stamped with the printer's mark [49], or dressed in the finest red morocco with a gilt filigree centerpiece [50], these books were designed to communicate aspects of the owner's interests and status.

Note: numbers correspond to individual items labeled in the exhibit cases.

[40] *The Holy Bible : containing the Olde Testament and the New.* London: Printed by Robert Barker, 1638.

[41] *Manuscript No. 170/766: Gospel of the Myrruhbearer, 19th c.* Bound Manuscripts Collection.

[42] *French prayerbook.* Uncatalogued 20th c embroidered binding.

[43] *Simplikiou ypomnēmata eis ta oktō...* Simplicius, et al. Venetiis: In aedibus Aldi (1526)

[44] *Peckover-Foot Codex* [Manuscript of the New Testament in Greek], c 1200, Bound Manuscripts Collection.

[45] *Le terze rime di Dante.* Dante Alighieri, Venetiis: In aedib. Aldi, 1502.

[46] *Uncle Silas : a tale of Bartram-Haugh,* by J.S. Le Fanu. London : R. Bentley, 1864.

[47] *Missale monasticum s[e]c[un]d[u]m morem [et] ritum.* Venice, 1506

[48] *Iuuenalis ; Persius. Juvenal. et al.* Venetiis: In aedibvs Aldi, et Andreae soceri, 1501.

[49 & 50] *Iuuenalis ; Persius.* Juvenal. et al. Venetiis: in aedibus Aldi, et Andreae Soceri, 1501. c. 2, and c.1.

Tablet Contents

[1] Administrative text for the sale of land, Period: Early Dynastic III (c. 2600-2350 BCE). 201.

[2] Beginner's exercise practicing KA (mouth) sign. Signed by its scribe, Ur-Ninsun. Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). PARS 32

[3] Literary exercise, lines 32-33 from the Praise Poems of Lipit-Ishtar (King of Isin, C. 1934-1924 BCE). Period: Early Old Babylonian (c. 1900 BCE) SC-III-22

[4] Exercise for practicing sign formation from Syllable Alphabet A. Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). PARS 136.

- [5] Lexical exercise of personal names beginning with "lu2". Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). PARS 47.
- [6] Legal exercise of a contract for the sale of an orchard. Period: Old Akkadian (c. 2340-2200). SC-II-9.
- [7] Literary exercise. Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). 94.
- [8] Lexical exercise from Lu A. Period: Uruk III (c. 3200-3000 BCE). SC-II-4b.
- [9] Mathematical exercise – using coefficients to calculate the volume of a solid. Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). SC-III-9.
- [10] Mathematical exercise of metrology - writing and understanding range of silver units and weights: grains, shekels, minas and talents. Ur III (c. 2100-1800 BCE). SC-I-38.
- [11] Lexical exercise from Lu A., Uruk III (c. 3200-3000 BCE). SC-II-4a.
- [12] Unfinished practice tablet, lexical exercise of personal names. Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). SC-I-16.
- [13] Basic lexical exercise of personal names beginning with "a". Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). SC-III-34a.
- [14] Student's vocabulary practice in writing descriptions of humans and human conditions (both mental and physical). Period: Old Babylonian (c. 1900-1600 BCE). SC-III-11

Written in Stone

UCLA Library's Oldest "Books"

The oldest recorded information objects in Library Special Collections are these 4,000+ year old cuneiform tablets. Cuneiform is the earliest known writing system, developed by the Sumerians in ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) around 3200 BCE. The word cuneiform comes from the Latin word *cuneus* (meaning wedge) after the wedge-shaped marks formed by pressing a reed stylus into wet clay. This pictographic, and later logo-syllabic, script was adapted to represent at least a dozen ancient middle-eastern languages over three millennia before it was largely replaced by alphabetic scripts in the 1st century AD.

The Lloyd E. Cotsen cuneiform collection (LSC 1883) contains 215 tablets created by students in their daily practice within an Eduba. Roughly translated

to house of tablets, an Eduba was an early institution for training and educating young scribes in ancient Mesopotamia. The tablets in the Cotsen collection contain exercises in Sumerian and Akkadian on the subjects of writing composition and language, mathematics, science, law, and religion.

Lloyd E. Cotsen (1929-2017) was CEO and chairman of the Neutrogena Corporation board and a prolific collector of archaeological artifacts. He donated a large portion of his collection to various institutions over his lifetime, and was instrumental in supporting the creation, dissemination, and conservation of archaeological knowledge and heritage. In recognition of Mr. Cotsen's contributions, UCLA named the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology in his honor.

See high-resolution images of all 215 Cotsen tablets, as well as thousands of similar collections at the [Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative \(CDLI\) website](#).

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