

(Vaguely) 15th Century Gothic Bound Books

A first foray into the medieval and renaissance art of
Bookbinding



Lady Marguerite Honoree d'Cheneau
Barony of Storvik

mdcheneau@gmail.com | [@atelierdcheneau](https://twitter.com/atelierdcheneau) | www.atelierdcheneau.com

15th-Century Gothic Bound Books	3
Materials & Tools	3
Construction Process	4
Deviations from History	6
Lessons Learned	7
Future Plans	8
References	10

15th-Century Gothic Bound Books



These two Gothic style bound books - one completed, one still in progress - are the artist's first exploration of medieval/renaissance bookbinding. They are inspired by, but not replicas of, extant books held in the collections of the Morgan Library in New York, NY as well as items in the collection of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC, both observed first-hand by the artist.

They represent a first step in a journey towards being able to more closely recreate those inspiration pieces. While some historical practices were observed, the goal was to explore the multiple new skills involved in the art rather than adhere strictly to purely historical practices.

Bookbinding is still practiced today and many techniques draw from medieval and renaissance methods. As this was the artist's first exploration of the craft, she drew heavily on widely available videos and other online material produced by reputable bookbinders and artisans. She also consulted several texts, both published and made available from SCA sources.

Materials & Tools

- Canson XL Drawing Paper, 18x24 in, 70lb
- Bone Folder
- Paper Knife
- Book Press
- Awl
- Punching Cradle
- Sewing Frame
- Jute Cord
- Waxed Linen Thread
- Bookbinder's Needle
- PVA Glue
- Leather cord as headband core
- Colored silk thread (to wrap headbands)
- Medium-weight linen fabric (to reinforce spine)
- Davey's board (Large book) or Baltic Birch Plywood (Small book)
- Undyed Veg-tanned leather, ~0.8mm thick
- Swivel Knife and other leather working tools
- Modern leather stain & dye: Neatsfoot oil, Fiebing's Pro Dye in Oxblood, etc
- Brass Book Corners

Construction Process

Build Signatures: Pieces of 18x24 Canson XL Drawing paper (70lb) were folded, creased with a bone folder, and partially sliced with the paper knife to form signatures. In the larger book, 1 sheet became one signature, while in the smaller book each sheet was split in two to form two signatures. Once all signatures were complete, they were left in the book press overnight.

Punch Signatures: Using an awl and a sewing cradle, I punched holes in the signatures to correspond to where I would sew them together.

Sew Signatures into Text Block: I set up my sewing frame with jute cords and sewed the signatures to the cord with waxed linen thread, wrapping the thread around the cord before passing it into and out of the holes punched into the signatures. Once the sewing is complete, I cut the text block off of the sewing frame.

Press and Glue Spine: I placed the text block into the book press with the spine sticking out slightly and added the first layer of glue to the spine, to begin reinforcing it. I tried to avoid getting glue on the cords/sewing in this step, as I want a little movement to be possible when rounding. The spine was left to dry overnight.

Glue Endpapers: I cut and folded two endpapers in a heavier red paper. For the smaller book I burnished them, but the larger book's endpapers are not burnished. These were glued to the text block with a thin strip of PVA and left to dry in the press overnight.



Sew Headbands: I cut a strip of material for the core of the headband (a leather cord for the larger book, additional lengths of jute for the smaller one). I then wrapped these with alternating colors of silk thread using a simple example of a headband stitch.

Round Edges: Using a small hammer I attempted to round the spine of the book slightly. The result was subtle.

Reinforce Spine: To reinforce the spine, I glued a strip of medium-weight linen fabric to the spine, then left them in the press to dry overnight. At this point the text

block is complete.

Constructing & Attaching Boards: I measured the size of my text block and cut the boards to be slightly larger than the block. For the larger book, I cut the boards out of Davy's Board/ Binder's Board by hand. The smaller book is a first attempt at using wood for the boards, in



this case laser cut to the correct shape. I drilled holes at an angle in the boards and threaded the cords from the text block through the holes. The cords were then trimmed down and combed out so they could lay flat on the book cover. After the application of significant amounts of glue and parchment paper to protect the text block, the book was put into the book press to dry overnight/for 24 hours.

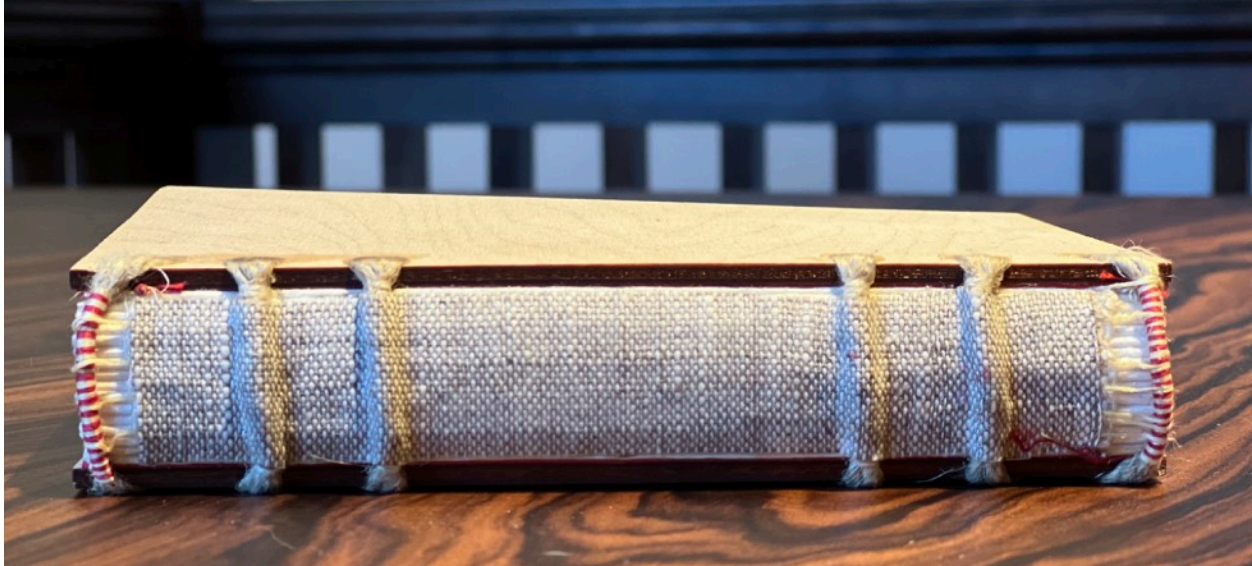
This is the current state of the smaller book. For the larger, finished example:

Attaching Leather to the Spine: I cut a rectangle larger than the book's cover in leather. After wetting and adding glue to the part of the leather that will cover the spine, I stretched the leather onto the spine, using my bone folder to push it around the ridges of the cords. Once it was in place, I wrapped a fairly thin twine around the ridges and the entire press to keep the leather in place while it dried.

Attaching Leather to the Book Boards: Once the leather was dry on the spine, I took the book out of the press and skived the edges, as well as trimming the corners to make them fold neatly. I then glued the covers to the book board, using water to make sure the leather was pliable before stretching it over the boards and folding it into place. This was once again placed in the book press to dry.

Leather Tooling, Dying, and Decorating: I tooled a simple rectangular design into the cover on both sides, then hit the leather with neatsfoot oil, oxblood dye, and a finishing compound. I then added metal corner protectors to the cover.

Gluing Endpapers: In this final step, I glued the endpapers to the covers. Once again, these sat in the press overnight, and once the glue dried the book was complete.



Deviations from History

These examples are historically inspired but were built with several deviations from historical exemplars.

Signatures: The material for the signatures is a modern 70lb weight drawing paper. Historically some form of rag paper or vellum would have been used. This substitution was made due to the expense of historical materials as well as the accessibility of the modern substitute.

Punching Cradle: While a punching cradle is a logical tool for this process, mine is a decidedly modern item with an adjustable punching guide. While sewing/punching cradles would be well within the abilities of a historical woodworker to produce, I did not see evidence of them in my (minimal) research. Nevertheless I chose to use one as it was a great time saver and made the signature holes for sewing more accurate.

Jute Cord: While the jute cord I used in sewing the signatures is reasonably period, another common option would be a split leather thong. I chose jute for my first projects for expense, accessibility of materials, and to avoid the complication of splitting and twisting the thong.

Boards: For the larger book, I used modern Davey's Board (aka Bookbinder's Board) to form the covers. For the smaller book, I opted for laser cut pieces of Baltic Birch plywood. In both cases this was a choice of accessibility of materials and craft. For the larger book, bookbinder's board is readily available but I decided I wanted something sturdier and closer to historical accuracy for my second attempt. As I do not have woodworking skills or tools, I

turned to my laser cutter to make wooden covers out of wood I had on hand. Historically these would have been hand finished wooden boards of beech or poplar.

Glue: Bookbinding requires prodigious amounts of glue. I chose to use a modern, bookbinding-specific PVA glue for these projects, which is easily obtained from art supply stores or specialty bookbinding shops. Medieval and renaissance books would have used a hide or starch glue. Both are reasonably available today, but I chose to minimize complications on these first projects and stuck to the modern equivalents.

Headband Core: Headband cores vary greatly and appear to have often used scraps of items left over from other elements of the bookbinding process. In the larger book, I used a leather cord, while the smaller book uses the same jute cord as I used in sewing the signatures. Both are wrapped with silk thread which is keeping with the period.

Leather, Tooling, and Dye: I chose to use modern leather dye for this project. While there are many historical options to color leather, that seemed to be outside the scope of this initial dip into bookbinding. I also used modern leather working tools (IE a swivel knife) as this was my first attempt at hand tooling and I wanted to understand the current state of the process before looking at historical practices. The leather itself is a vegetable-tanned calfskin - entirely appropriate historically, though goatskin is generally considered a superior option.

Lessons Learned

These projects, especially the larger/first book, were very much a learning process. Some takeaways and issues I noticed:

Leather Skiving and Trimming: I'm not particularly happy with my skiving and trimming of the leather for the book covers. Next time, I'll likely try skiving the leather before it is attached to the book, and gluing a smaller area to the spine before I fold it over by the headbands. Similarly, I need to work on my trimming of the corners. I trimmed too much at first, leading to exposed bookboard on the inside cover.



Endpapers: I opted to glue my endpapers on to the signatures. Some of my research indicated that endpapers may have been more extensively glued together than in these examples and then sewn onto the signatures. I'll need to do more research and experiment with different methods of constructing & attaching endpapers.

Protect the Text Block: I tried to protect the text block, but there is still some waviness where it took up moisture from the glue at various points in the process, so I need to work on isolating the text block from the portions being glued.

Neat Gluing of the Endpapers: In the larger book, the endpaper glue-up is rather rough. This is a technique issue that I'll need to work on moving forward. This may also be helped by using hide glue, which is more forgiving and easier to separate and reposition in case of error.

Metal Book Corners: I'm not particularly happy with the metal corner protectors I used on these books. They are modern, and covering up some less than stellar craftsmanship in trimming the leather at the corners. I hope to avoid them in my second book as my research indicates they are not particularly period. I'd also love to look at additional options for metal fittings, which appear to be historically correct.

Future Plans

I intend to continue to explore bookbinding beyond these two pieces. Specific projects I hope to tackle include a girdle book, rebinding modern texts into historical bindings, and as working with facsimiles of extant period books to print and construct historical replicas. My long-term (but perhaps achievable) goal is to create a facsimile of the Complete Works of Shakespeare based on copies from the Folger Shakespeare Library (I know it is *slightly* out of period, but Shakespeare is near and dear to the artist's heart). A first step might be to work with a quarto edition of one of the plays. Another intriguing target for a facsimile is Anne Boleyn's Book of Hours. I might partner with a scribe to get proper illumination for some of these projects, especially the Book of Hours, rather than modernly printing the page contents.

While the above are lofty goals for the future, some specific changes I'll make in my upcoming projects include:

Improve Ragged Edges: While I acquired several tools for this project, I did not get a louet, to cut the edges of the book to a flat, finished surface. Medieval books often had these trimmed edges and it makes folding signatures simpler - the bookbinder can leave the signatures

connected (or partially connected) at the folds and then trim them away once the signatures are sewn. If I end up doing enough bookbinding I will need to investigate and possibly invest in some method of trimming the book edges for a neat finish. This also lends itself to treatments of the trimmed edges including burnishing, staining, and gilding.

Sew on doubled cords: I was researching while constructing these items, and while my initial research - focusing more on the 'how' than looking at period examples - only showed a single cord in sewn signatures, deeper investigation after I'd already sewn my signatures revealed that often doubled cords (or a split thong) were used to support the signatures. My next binding project will likely use two cords or a split thong.

Switch to Period-Accurate Glue: PVA is a perfectly acceptable mundane bookbinding material, but I'd like to experiment with period glues on future projects - especially the way they can be reversed if something is positioned incorrectly. Like wavy endpapers.

More Accurate Boards: While I do not have the woodworking skills to produce period-correct boards, I would like to investigate how I might get closer to the historical item using the tools I have on hand: my laser cutter and other simple hand tools. This starts with sourcing laser-friendly hardwood, which is available from my vendor in Poplar (among other varieties). I will likely then work to shape it with mundane tools I have on-hand to give it a more hand-worked appearance.

Refine trimming and skiving of leather: The bookbinder's art includes many disciplines and one of those is leatherworking - another first for me to explore. I have a lot to learn and refine in my handling of the leatherwork, including getting better at skiving the edges and trimming the corners so they meet where I intend without unsightly gaps or other strangeness.

Additional Decoration and Embellishment: I chose to keep the first book simple in its decoration, and the second will likely be similar. Eventually I'd like to play with gilt work on books - stamped or painted - and other decorations or tooling that might have been done to highlight the wealth and status of the owners of a book.



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