

Ignatz Wiemeler, modern bookbinder : [exhibition], October 2nd to October 24th, 1935

Author

Wiemeler, Ignatz, 1895-1952

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IGNATZ
WIEMELER
MODERN
BOOK
BINDER

THE
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MODERN ART
NEW YORK





T. Brown

Ignatz Wiemeler, Modern Bookbinder

October 2nd to October 24th, 1935

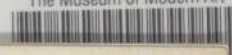
The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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Acknowledgments are due for the loan of bindings
from the Karl Klingspor Collection, Offenbach-am-Main,
and the Doetsch-Benziger Collection, Basel.

Introduction

Four years ago, in the *Petit Palais* in Paris—where, this summer, so many of the masterpieces and commonplaces of Italian painting were hung—an international exposition of the art of the book was assembled. The highest standards of art were by no means generally exemplified. One was bewildered by the wealth of well-meaning modernism and of ornamentation for ornamentation's sake; there was plenty of honest ambitious workmanship; very little of it was profoundly gratifying. Exceptionally, as in the series of richly illustrated volumes to which the publisher, Ambroise Vollard, has dedicated himself and his fortune for about thirty-five years, one found inspiration and execution combined to wondrous effect.

Another exception, the most original German exhibit, consisted of a dozen hand-bindings by Ignatz Wiemeler, before which, day after day, bibliophiles stood with due covetousness, and which rival binders studied in considerable confusion. Sometimes Dr. Steiner-Prag would unlock a case, and let an admirer inspect a volume—unfortunately the practical merits of a binding, and its likelihood of lasting for centuries, cannot be estimated by viewing the book in a glass case; its essential and subtle beauties cannot be seen at a glance. One should be able to test the working of the covers upon their secret hinges; to verify the thinned edges of the leather, the smoothness of the end-papers, at their difficult meeting-places; to run a keen eye and even a questioning forefinger over the ornamental inlay, which may be a snare and a delusion. All this was done, in skeptical Paris; and Ignatz Wiemeler grew more famous every hour. For four centuries binding has been predominantly a French institution; contemporary French masters and many foreign celebrities were represented in the *Petit Palais* at their best; so the homage that the blond young German received was of real significance. In his work the somewhat easy-going art of the book had indeed made advances: modernity of design, yet of the most dignified elegance, and bookish, as bookbinding should be; improved execution, according to new and cunning methods; luxury of leather and paper and gilt, all wrought with a minute perfection that no other binder today can match. Before the Paris exposition, Wiemeler, a great young man in Leipzig, was little known outside Germany; today there are few important collections of fine books which do not include an example of his skill.

Except for his two years in the army (until he was shot through the lung and discharged), his life has been serenely devoted to the study, practise, and teaching of bookbinding. His apprenticeship began at eighteen and was followed by several years of study at the Hanseatic School of Fine Arts in Hamburg. At twenty-six he taught at the Offenbach School of Arts and Crafts, in inspiring intimacy with the great type-designer, the late Rudolph Koch; and there also began to work for a great bibliophile, Dr. Karl Klingspor, now fortunate in the possession of more Wiemeler bindings than any other collector. For the last ten years he has directed the department of bookbinding in the renowned

Akademie für Graphische Kunst in Leipzig. As is natural in the case of so rare an art, so difficult a craft, his influence spread more rapidly than his personal fame. Two of his ablest pupils, Kathryn and Gerhard Gerlach, now conduct the bookbinding classes at Columbia University.

Professor Wiemeler, in the almost childlike or mediaeval statement of faith which he has written for the present catalogue, has made his purpose and idealism very clear, but in spite of his scarcely modern ideals of perfect handiwork, his designs have reflected our changing modern times almost year by year. Fortunately so: for nowhere more strikingly than in the applied arts does every sort of old fashion and academic imitativeness appear feeble and in bad taste.

Wiemeler's youthful work shows some English influence; but it is more in the nature of homage to Cobden-Sanderson, a reformer of the art, than repetition of his patterns. In the nineteen-twenties he turned to asymmetrical compositions, the startling lettering and stylized ornament to be found also in the typography and the graphic art of those years. It may be objected that his decoration then was somewhat too dramatic, and simple, and large. But a binder cannot be independent of the pages that are given him to bind; that was the day of large format, extravagant illustration, and big type. Certainly Wiemeler's latest designs are of a more satisfactory and subtler beauty. Perhaps they are too new to seem quite "modern" as that word is almost slangily employed. They are eminently, admirably, and exclusively designs for books; that is, they would never do for anything else, boxes or posters or screens. One is reminded, by severe divisions of space, by linear emphasis, by candid articulation of hinge and joint, of the best modern architecture. Then one realizes that this is because the decorative design has grown, unaffected, out of the structural design. Architecture is the fine art most wonderfully concerned with the problems by which this miniature art of binding is also strictly governed: problems of resistance of materials, of durability, and of proper functioning.

Unfortunately decorative design is the obvious aspect of bookbinding. It is not easy, in an exhibit of borrowed treasures under necessary glass, for the layman to distinguish between good and bad in other respects. The work of this and that binder, justly famous for colour and design, may make the conscientious artisan shudder and the knowing bibliophile resign himself to a library of unbound texts. The layman sees only the colour and the abstract outline. It is one of the reasons that the art of binding has been in a pitiful decline. Small and secret, under the more or less ornate leather, hide the results of days of conscientious toil. Step by step: the sheets must first be collated and pressed, then sewn on to the bands (raised or flattened, as the case may be); the headbands sewn on; the back shaped; the edges gilded; the bands fastened to the cover boards; the leather thinned at the corners and glued to the covers with the greatest exactitude; the lining or end-papers applied—all this before there can be any tooling or gilding or inlay or other embellishment. The problem at each step varies according to the character of the leather,

the size of the page, the weight and quality of the paper; each combination requires a separate technique, each novelty a new procedure.

Professor Wiemeler has thought out, and perfected the method of, a number of important innovations, the most welcome perhaps in respect to what is called the open-back binding. In a tight-back binding, a heavy book or a small book printed on stiff paper will not lie open properly; furthermore, gilding on the back is damaged by the bending of the leather. Therefore the open-back binding was invented in the eighteenth century. Executed more and more carelessly and cheaply, it degenerated into the poor flimsy casing of the commercial editions of today. Even in the eighteenth century it did not make a very substantial volume. Wiemeler took up this problem where Bradel left it; and by improved lacing and ingenious reinforcements of the back and hinge has given the open-back binding all the strength of the old-fashioned binding that keeps closing in one's hands like a trap.

These are mechanical matters, difficult to write or read about. And the visitor to an exposition is often disdainful of the problems of technique; or he will go to the opposite extreme, and exalt the productions of machines themselves, disdainful of that mediaeval thing, handicraft. But a fine bookbinding cannot be made either by a machine or by an ordinary artisan; it entails the wondrous sort of drudgery that only a man of genius can and will do. Such a man is Wiemeler, and it is evident that many of his volumes will rank with the greatest bindings of centuries past, and will wear as well, and do our own epoch infinite credit.

Monroe Wheeler



Ideals in Bookbinding

The great and ancient craft of bookbinding, as we understand it, is not of general interest. Few men practise it with the devotion it requires, and only a few more know what a well-bound book is, or delight in its various excellences.

Genuine hand-craftsmanship, like non-utilitarian art, must be pursued for its own sake, first and foremost. The guild of commercial binders, having to meet ordinary requirements day by day, could not prevent the decline of the technique of book-binding. The men who reformed it at the turn of the century, returning to the sources of ancient skill, were not professional binders. They dedicated themselves to it simply in loving enthusiasm about the beauty of books. The strength of their inspiration came from the old craft, and they created the new.

We are their pupils. We work in their spirit and strive toward the same goal, ideal craftsmanship. They restored to us the great old laws, and showed us the way.

Yet nothing can endure by tradition alone. What is to remain alive must be renewed again and again by new methods. An untiring desire for perfection must constantly intensify our effort, and no economic consideration be allowed to hinder the most careful execution of every detail, the employment of the finest materials. We must not think either of cheapening our production or of making it more costly; the best possible handicraft is what matters. Even that by itself will not suffice from an aesthetic standpoint; but it is the basis of creative work, as the masters worked—and without it there can be no enduring accomplishment.

Ancient handicraft is perfectly expressive of its epoch. Its spirit is the same will-toward-form which animates the fine arts—painting, sculpture, and architecture—the style-building force by which an epoch may be said to outlast its time.

This aesthetic spirit, in bookbinding, does not manifest itself only in decoration; it must sustain the humblest effort in respect to the least detail, if the whole is to be convincing. Beauty satisfactory to both the intellect and the senses cannot be achieved either by preliminary design, or by skilful finish at the last minute; it must be there throughout the progress of the work. It results from thoughtful attentiveness and meticulous care at every step; it requires harmonization of one's treatment of all the details, one's handling of all the materials, with the form of the book as a whole—spirit or ideal constantly presiding over one's manual labor. Ornamentation and so-called artistic touches are unsatisfactory unless they build up with the binding itself an effect of indivisible unity. Good decoration must develop organically out of the whole work as it is carried forward. If it does not, there will be no essential enrichment of the binding, nor any step up from mere craftsmanship to the level of art.

Of the uniting of art with craftsmanship the masterpieces of the old binders are model examples; in them the old and everlasting laws are fulfilled. Each epoch must discover them anew, and enliven them with its own spirit. It is our concern, in and for our time, to give new meaning and renown to the making of beautiful books, as one of the finest occupations to which a man may devote himself.

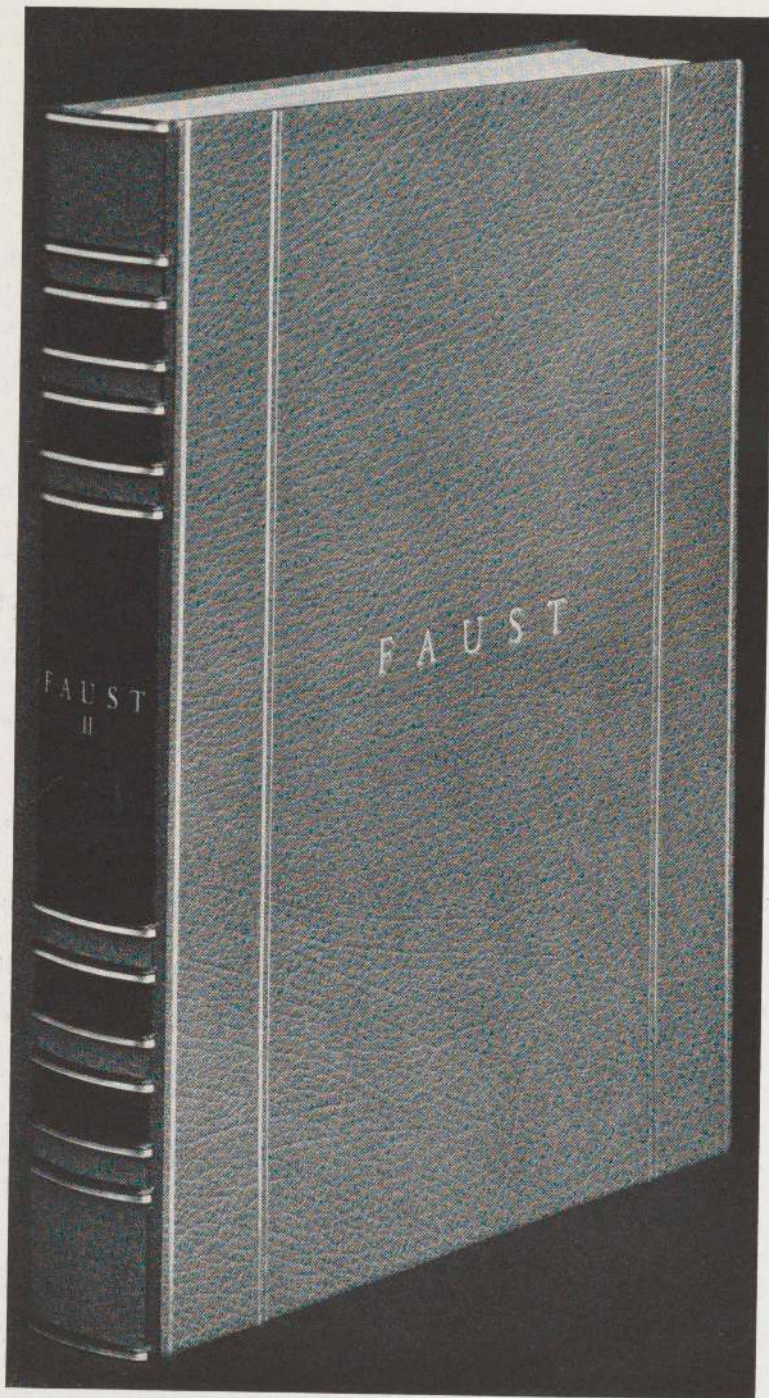
Ignatz Wiemeler

Catalog

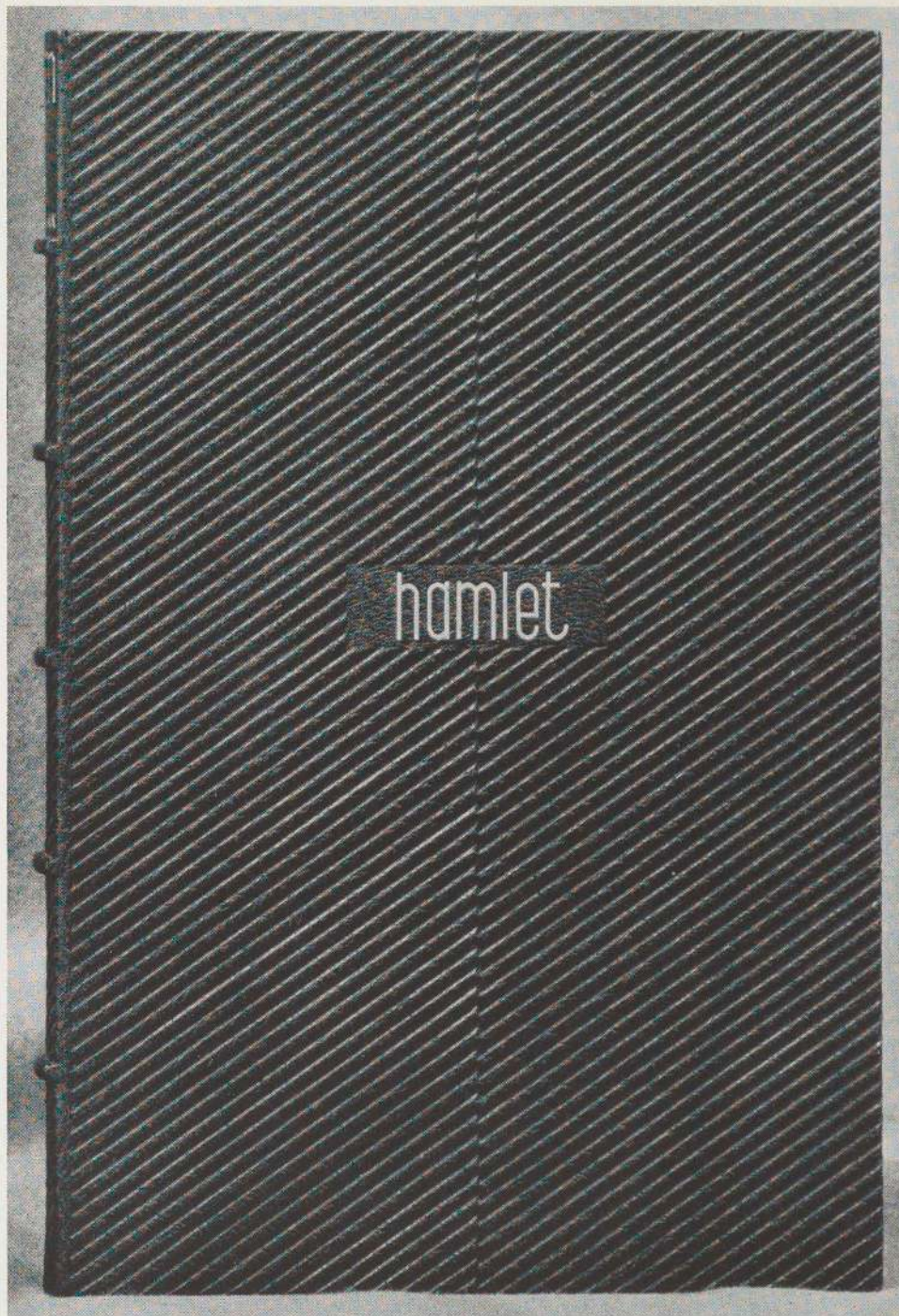
1. **Shakespeare: Hamlet.**
Black levant, blind-tooled lines, hand-gilding.
Height: 12 in.
2. **Meyer: Huttens Letzte Tage.**
Red-brown oasis-goat, black inlaid edges.
Height: 10½ in.
3. **Nietzsche: Zarathustra.**
Red oasis-goat, hand-gilding from type, press-gilding on spine. Height: 11 in.
4. **Ehmcke: Larisch-Festschrift.**
Black levant, roll blind-tooling, gouge * hand-gilding. Height: 12 in.
5. **Müller: Beobachtungen.**
Gray levant, orange label, oxydized-silver line-tooling, hand-gilding. Height: 10½ in.
6. **Goethe: Faust, II.**
Red and black levant, hand-gilding. Height: 18 in.
7. **Rilke: Gedichte; 3 vols.**
Gray and black levant, inlay, hand-gilding.
Height: 10½ in.
8. **Hebbel: Die Nibelungen.**
Red and black levant, gouge hand-tooling.
Height: 11 in.
9. **Holtei: Don Juan.**
Black oasis-goat, line and gouge hand-gilding.
Height: 10½ in.
10. **Goethe: Zuschriften und Erinnerungsblätter.**
Vermilion German goat, black spine-labels, blind-tooled lines and hand-gilding. Height: 6 in.
11. **Goethe: Tasso.**
Black and gray levant, inlay, blind-tooling, hand-gilding. Height: 9 in.
12. **Jahrbuch für Einbandkunst.**
Black levant spine, red onlay, hand-gilding, parchment covers. Height: 12½ in.
13. **Die Vier Evangelien and**
14. **Die Apostolischen Schriften.**
Black oasis-goat, press and hand gilding.
Height: 7 in.
15. **Shakespeare: Hamlet.**
Black and red levant, inlay, hand-gilding.
Height: 14 in.
16. **Arène: La Chevre d'Or.**
Natural and black calf, line and gouge blind-tooling. Height: 10½ in.
17. **Merimée: Colomba.**
Blue levant, yellow onlay, gouge hand-gilding.
Height: 13 in.
18. **Arène: Jean des Figues.**
Yellow and red levant, colored spine-labels, line and gouge hand-gilding. Height: 10 in.
19. **Duhamel: Deux Hommes.**
Black levant, red onlay, blind-tooling, gouge hand-gilding. Height: 9½ in.
20. **Hauptmann: Der Ketzer von Soana.**
Red-brown oasis-goat, black edges, line and gouge blind-tooling. Height: 10 in.
21. **Eurydike.**
Black levant, hand-gilding from type. Height: 15½ in.
22. **Lebensbeschreibung des Herrn Gözens von Berlichingen.**
Natural pigskin, blind-tooling. Height: 11½ in.
23. **Shakespeare: König Heinrich der Achte.**
Yellow oasis-goat, line hand-gilding. Height: 11½ in.
24. **Schröder: Widmungen und Opfer.**
Crushed gray levant, line and gouge hand-gilding. Height: 11 in.
25. **Hauptmann: Die Blaue Blume.**
Crushed blue levant, black onlay, line hand-gilding. Height: 11 in.
26. **Mörke: Die Hand der Jezerte.**
Red levant, yellow onlay, gouge hand-gilding.
Height: 7½ in.

*gouge: a concave-bladed tool, used to form letters.

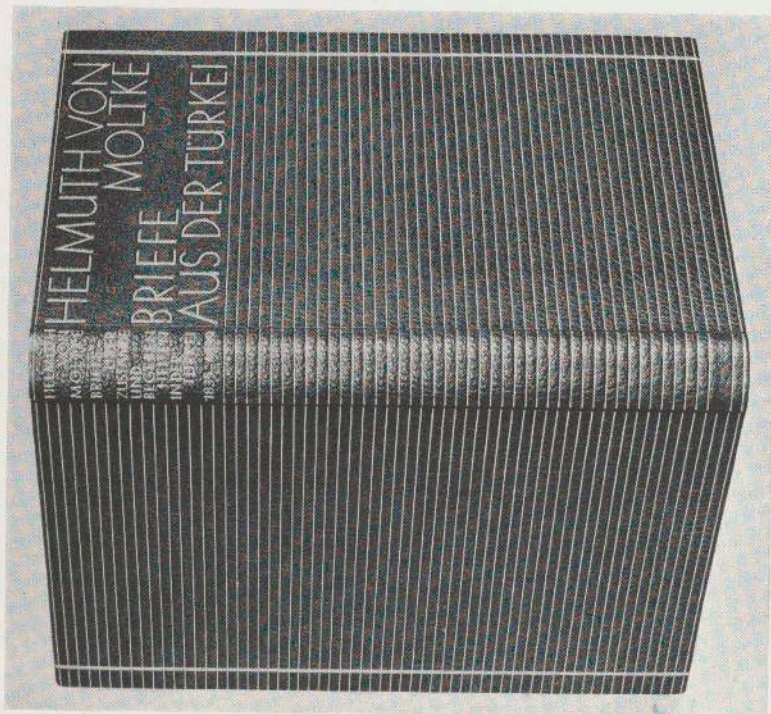
27. **Rilke: Duineser Elegien.**
Black levant, blind-tooling, hand-gilding.
Height: 11½ in.
28. **Moltke: Briefe aus der Türkei.**
Brown levant, hand-gilding. Height: 11½ in.
29. **Cervantes: Der Eifersüchtige Extremadurer.**
Blue levant, line-gilding. Height: 13 in.
30. **Nietzsche: Sprueche.**
Red oasis-goat, hand-gilding from type with lines. Height: 11 in.
31. **Goethe: Urfaust.**
White and red levant, inlay, hand-gilding.
Height: 11 in.
32. **Kleist: Michael Kohlhaas.**
Natural brown levant, gouge and line blind-tooling. Height: 11 in.
33. **Arcos: Le Bien Commun.**
Black and gray levant, oxydized-silver hand-tooling. Height: 6½ in.
34. **Kleist: Penthesilea.**
Natural calf, black edges, black spine-label.
Height: 10 in.
35. **France: Le Lys Rouge.**
Red and black levant, hand-gilding, inlay.
Height: 8½ in.
36. **Carco: L'Equipe.**
Black and yellow levant, hand-gilding. Height: 9½ in.
37. **Jouhandeau: Marie Laurencin.**
Gray-white levant, blue spine-label, hand-gilding. Height: 10½ in.
38. **Schiller: Die Räuber.**
Red-brown oasis-goat, blind-tooling. Height: 10 in.
39. **Kleukens: S.O.S.**
Black and gray levant, oxydized-silver hand-tooling. Height: 9 in.
40. **Goethe: Faust, II.**
Red and black levant, inlay, hand-gilding.
Height: 9 in.
41. **Fort: Florilège des Ballades Françaises.**
Black and red levant, hand-gilding, inlay.
Height: 9 in.
42. **Goethe: Die Natur.**
Natural Niger, brown spine-label, blind-tooling, hand-gilding. Height: 8 in.
43. **Plato: Das Gastmahl.**
Black levant, gray spine-label, roll blind-tooling, hand-gilding. Height: 10½ in.
44. **Hamsun: Drei Novellen.**
Red-brown oasis-goat, blind-tooling. Height: 12 in.
45. **Pirmez: Essai.**
Natural Niger, gouge blind-tooling. Height: 11 in.
46. **Tzara: Mouchoir de Nuages.**
Orange German goat, roll and gouge hand-gilding. Height: 8 in.
47. **Ashford: Les Jeunes Visiteurs.**
Black levant, blind-tooling, gouge hand-gilding. Height: 10 in.
48. **Beck: Der Flurscheutz.**
Brown and natural levant, blind-tooling.
Height: 10 in.
49. **Cervantes: Der Eifersüchtige Extremadurer.**
Yellow levant, hand-gilding. Height: 13½ in.
50. **Gotthelf: Wie Joggeli Eine Frau Suchte.**
Rust-red oasis-goat, hand-gilding. Height: 9 in.
51. **Burte: Apollon und Cassandra.**
White pigskin, gouge and roll blind-tooling.
Height: 10½ in.
52. **Schopenhauer: Aphorismen.**
Brown levant, line hand-gilding.
53. **Hoffmannsthal: Der Tod des Tizian.**
Red oasis-goat, black inlaid edges, gouge hand-gilding. Height: 10 in.
54. **Plutarch: Erotikos.**
Orange levant, yellow edges, roll and gouge hand-gilding. Height: 10½ in.



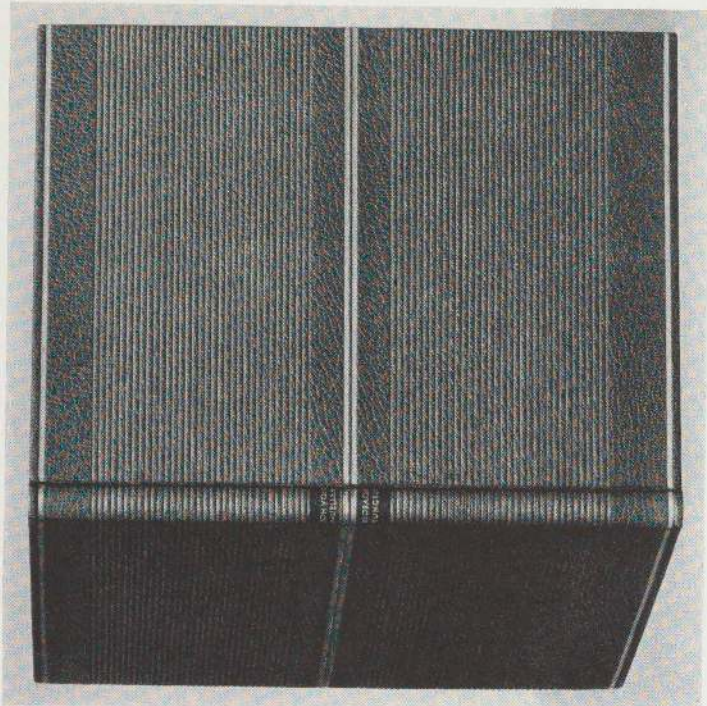
6. Goethe: Faust II



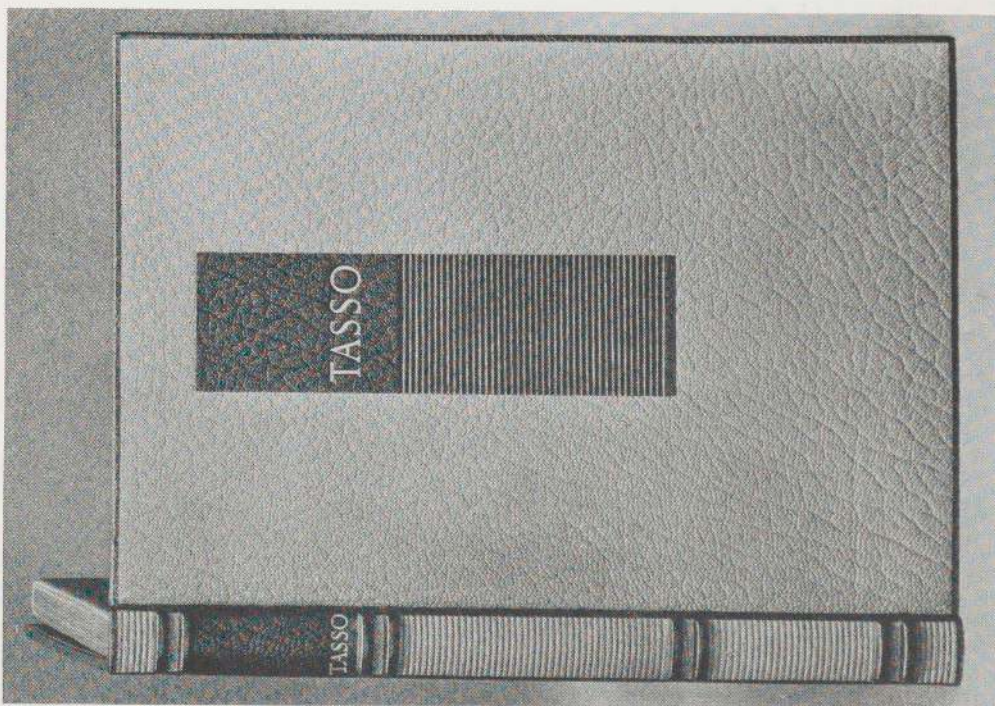
1. Shakespeare: Hamlet.



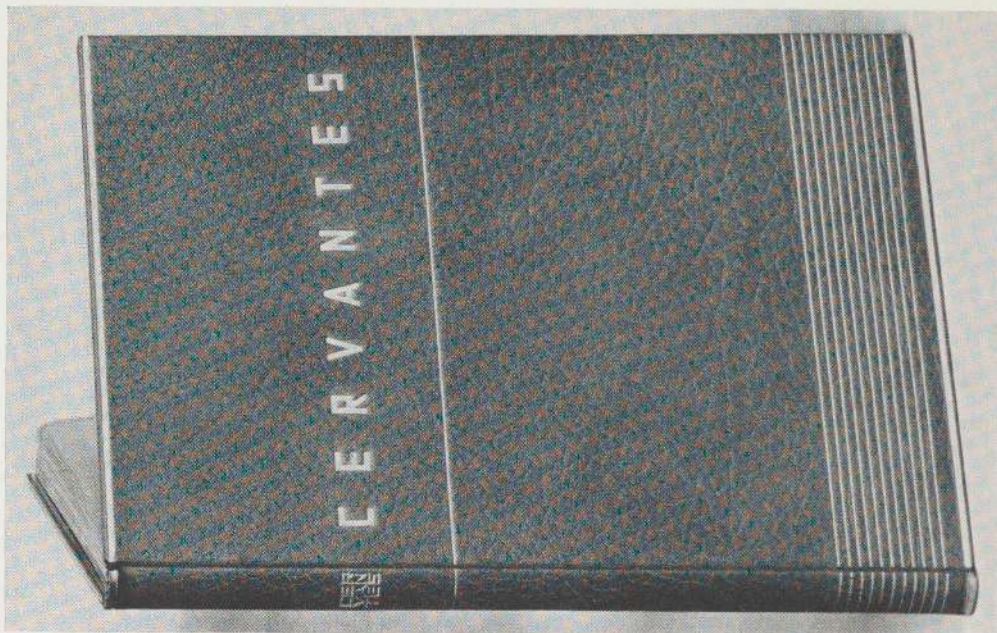
28. Moltke: Briefe aus der Türkei.



5. Müller: Beobachtungen.

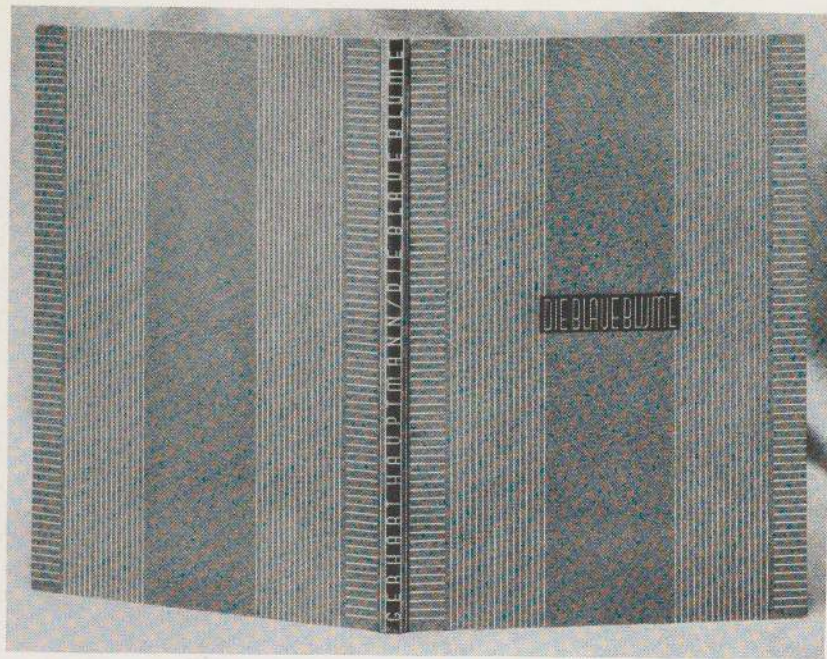


11. Goethe: Tasso.

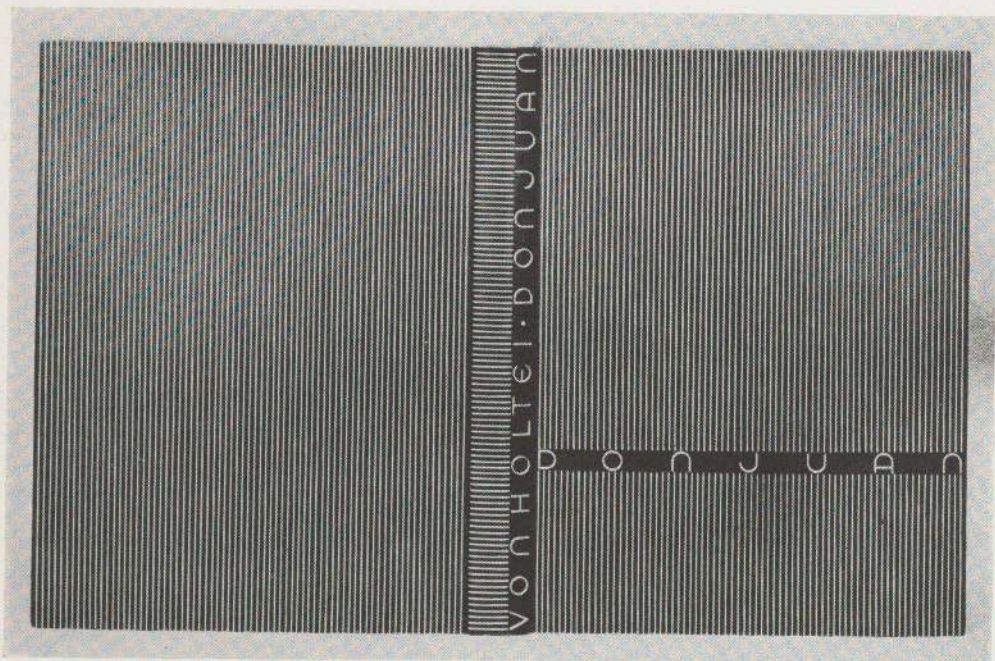


29. Cervantes: Der Eifersüchtige Extremador.

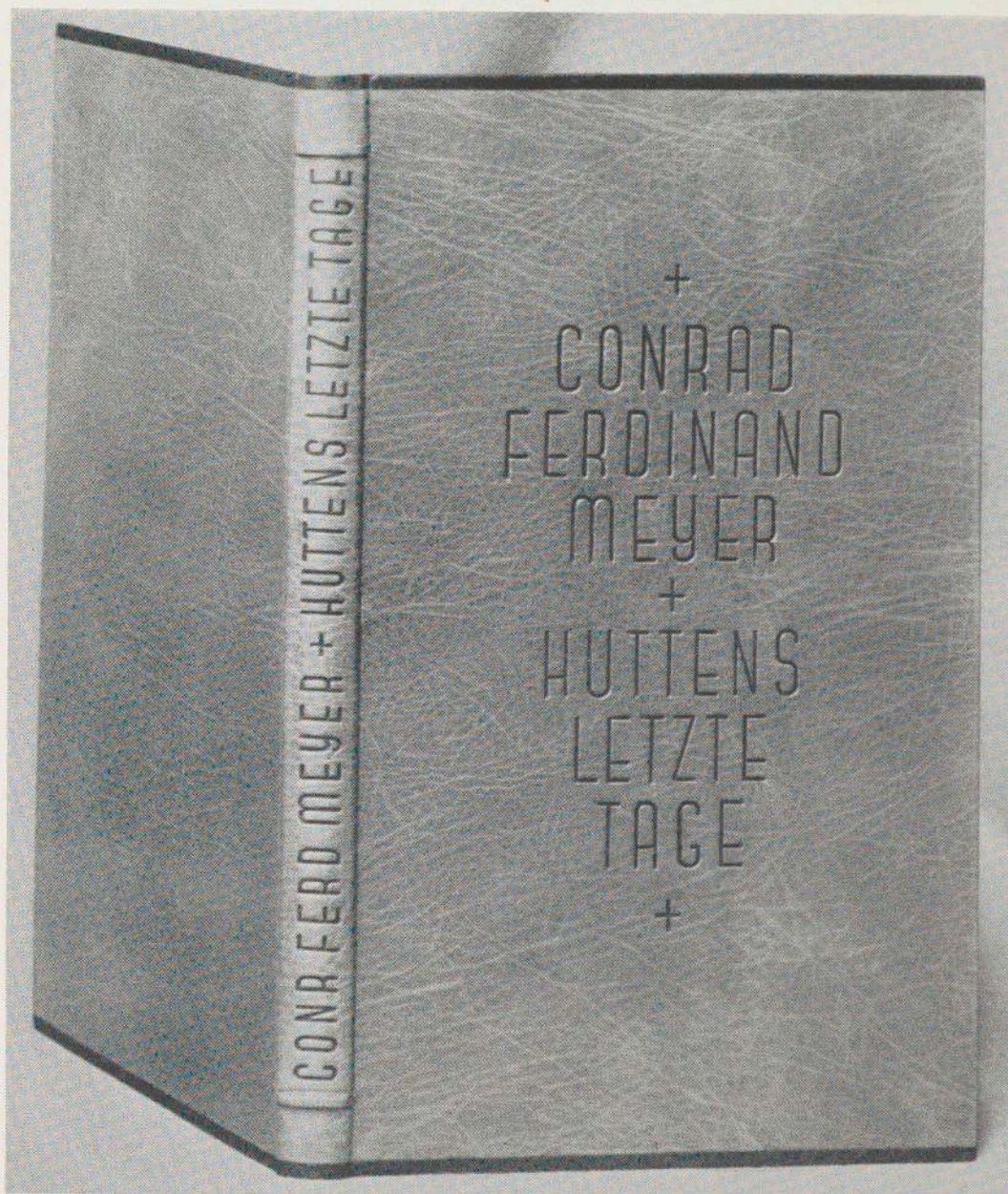




25. Hauptmann: Die Blaue Blume.



9. Holtei: Don Juan.



2. Meyer: Huttens Letzte Tage.

A Selected List of Books About Bookbinding

- Ignatz Wiemeler:** "Bookbinding, Old and New."
New York: The Dolphin, No. 1, Limited Editions Club. 1933.
- Douglas Cockerell:** "Bookbinding, and The Care of Books."
London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, Ltd. 1920.
- Douglas Cockerell:** "Some Notes on Bookbinding."
London: Oxford University Press. 1929.
- Marius Michel:** "La Reliure Française Depuis l'Invention de l'Imprimerie
Jusqu'à la Fin du XVIII Siècle."
Paris: Morgand & Fatout. 1880.
- Herbert P. Horne:** "The Binding of Books." An Essay in the History of Gold-tooled
Bindings.
London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., Ltd. 1916.
- Leon Gruel:** "Manuel Historique et Bibliographique de l'Amateur de Reliures."
Paris: Gruel & Engleman. 1887.
- Geoffrey D. Hobson:** "Maioli, Canevari and Others."
Boston: Little, Brown & Co. 1926.
- K. Marjorie Forsyth:** "Bookbinding for Teachers, Students, and Amateurs."
London: A. & C. Black. 1932.
- J. S. Hewitt-Bates:** "Bookbinding for Schools." A Textbook for Teachers and
Students in Elementary and Secondary Schools.
Peoria, Illinois: The Manual Arts Press. 1929.

Sixteen hundred copies of this catalog have been printed for the Trustees of the Museum of Modern Art by William E. Rudge's Sons, New York, in September, Nineteen thirty-five.

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