ICOM
COMMITTEE FOR CONSERVATION

Working Group n° 10

Conservation of Leathercraft and Related Objects

Interim Meeting

on the Treatment of and Research into Leather, in Particular of Ethnographic Objects

at the Central Research Laboratory for Objects of Art and Science
Amsterdam
5 - 8 April 1995

Postprints of the fourth Interim Meeting of the ICOM Committee for Conservation Working Group 10, Conservation of Leathercraft and Related Objects, 5-8 April 1995 in Amsterdam.

Editors: P.B. Hallebeek, J.A. Mosk
DTP: J.A. Mosk
Word processing: S.F. Fontijn

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The illustrations were provided by the authors.
Digital scans of photographs were made through the kind co-operation of Bas van Velzen, Amsterdam.

Bookbindings and Folders Made of Gilt Leather

Eloy Koldewij
Valeriustraat 213-11
NL-1075 EX Amsterdam

In 1719 the second volume of the book ‘De Groote schouwburg der Nederlandsche Konstschilders en Schilderesse’ [‘The big theatre of the Dutch painters and paintresses’] by the painter Arnold Houbraken was published. In one of the chapters Houbraken relates about the political troubles in the year 1672, when the Dutch were amongst others at war with the French. At that time Houbraken was an eighteen year old boy and one day he was watching the plundering of the house of the mayor of the city of Dordrecht. The interior and the furnishings of this house were vandalized and torn. All the wall-hangings were tattered and parts of the gilt leather hangings were dragged on the street. One of the plunderers, who had his arms full with gilt leather dropped a fragment when he passed the young Houbraken. He on his turn, could not resist in picking it up and thought that it would be nice to make a folder out of this for his drawings and sketches. However, when he came home, his father spotted the fragment of gilt leather and ordered his son immediately to bring it back to the place where he found it. Although the young Arnold Houbraken tried to persuade his father so that he could keep this gilt leather, his father was unconvincible and the young Arnold Houbraken had to return this fragment (1).

Gilt leather is mainly known as a material which was used for wall-hangings, but because of its nice decorated surface and its plianeness it was used for many other purposes too: as curtains, for screens, chairs and chests, as independent pictures, for table-coverings, frames for paintings, mirror- and comb-boxes, altar frontals, chasubles and pillows.

Also bookbindings and folders belong to this list and although they were not a prime use of this material, quite a few examples can be found. It is however important to realize that all these gilt leather bookbindings and folders are unique and singles. With only one single exception they were all made of gilt leather that was re-used in the same way as the young Houbraken wanted to use ‘his’ fragment.

Three different types of bookbindings and folders made of gilt leather can be discerned:
A. Those which have been made of used gilt leather, and have been cut out of a big panel. This is by far the largest group, which includes almost ninety per cent of all the known examples.
B. Those which have been made of used gilt leather which has not been cut or changed for this purpose. Just three examples are known of this type.
C. Those which have been made specifically for this use. Only one example is known which belongs to this type.

It cannot be said that one of these types is more important than the others: they all have their own value. Although it is not easy to say when a specific book got its binding, quite a few bindings of type A and B provide a date ‘ante quem’ for the leather. Type B adds three objects to the rather small group of so-called gilt leather mirror-boxes. Type C, the uniqueness of this single gilt leather binding which has been made as such speaks for itself.

Type A: Gilt Leather Bookbindings and Folders which have been made of Re-used Material

The earliest known bookbinding with a decorated surface is a monument in itself. This binding (190 x 137 x 40 mm.), which is in the library of the St. Gallen Abbey (Switzerland), contains an eleventh-century manuscript. The binding itself has been dated in the twelfth century and is obviously a fragment of a larger panel (2). The size of its pattern however is much too big for the manuscript, and most likely it was once part of a wall-hanging. Both for leather and gilt leather wall-hangings this is extremely early: although a few records of such wall-hangings from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries are known (3), all the surviving fragments date from the fifteenth century onwards. The only piece of leather which can stylistically be compared to the St. Gallen binding is the altar frontal in the village of Oreilla near Perpignan in Southern France, which is attributed to the Valltarga master and dates from the thirteenth century (4).
In the collection of the University Library in Hamburg is a bookbinding (300 x 210 mm) which covers a theological manuscript by Johannes Herolt from 1443 and shows amongst others birds, lions, dogs and lilies (5). Like the previous binding, this pattern has been printed with a black ink on the leather without any silvering or gilding. This binding fits into a group of bookbindings with similar patterns, made of both leather and textile, and all dating from the fifteenth century. Similar bindings can be found amongst other places in the University Library of Uppsala (Sweden) and the convent library in Melk, Germany (6).

Quite different is the bookbinding (ca. 350 x 230 mm) which covers a Grecian Lexicon from 1562 (7). There cannot be any doubt that this binding originally was part of a wall-hanging: a series of this design with the coat of arms of the Spanish Cardinal Pedro Salazar (1630-1706) has been preserved and the same pattern can also be distinguished on a painting by the Antwerp painter Gonzales Coques, dated 1640 (8). These leather panels have a very traditional pattern, which closely resemble Spanish and Italian silk-brocades from the mid-sixteenth century. A similar binding in the collection of the Bodleian Library in Oxford covers an Italian breviary of the fifteenth century (9). Its pattern suggests a Spanish or Italian origin dating from the fifteenth or sixteenth century, a complete panel with this pattern however has not yet been traced. Very much alike are two folders (355 x 220 mm and ca 330 x 200 mm) in the Episcopal Museum in Vic (Spain). According to their inscription they originally contained documents of 1646-1651 and 1661-1709 from the Parish of Susqueda, Les Guilleries near Barcelona (10). Most likely the gilt leather of which they are made will be Spanish or might even be from Barcelona.

Very different on the other hand is the binding in the Royal Library in The Hague which contains a Dutch medical manuscript from 1577 (11). Quite remarkable is that the gilt leather has been the wrong side out and it is obvious that the binding has not been made by a professional binder. This is nevertheless an important piece because the gilt leather dates from the early seventeenth century, and belongs as such to the earliest surviving pieces of gilt leather which have been made in The Netherlands (12).

A manuscript (316 x 216 mm) with genealogical notes of a Utrecht family from circa 1684 has been bound in gilt leather which can be dated around 1650 (13). The same pattern can be found on two panels in the collections of the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Dresden and the Grassimuseum in Leipzig, and the pattern has also been used for one of the chasubles of the Dutch priest Volquerus Herkinge who died in 1662 (14).

A gilt leather folder (370 x 550 mm) in the collection of the ‘Museum van Sierkunst’ in Gent dates from about 1720-1740 (15). The same pattern can be found on quite a few panels, amongst others in the Deutsches Ledermuseum in Offenbach am Main, but a complete wall-hanging of this design has not yet been traced. The last binding of this type dates from almost 200 years later, and covers a book which was published in 1912 to commemorate the Russian campaign of Napoleon in 1812 (16). The gilt leather dates without any doubt from the same time, and is a good example of the revival of gilt leather ca. 1900.

**Type B: Gilt Leather Bookbindings and Folders Made of Gilt Leather which has not been Cut or Changed for this Purpose**

The most important piece of this group is without any doubt the binding in the Jagiellonian Library in Cracow (217 x 143 mm) which contains a Polish manuscript from the mid seventeenth century (17). The binding is signed ‘J.F.’, the initials of the Amsterdam gilt leather maker Jacob Frijberger (*1606-1666), and the pattern is a splendid example of the so-characteristic Dutch auricular style of the mid-seventeenth century. The manuscript fits quite remarkably into the gilt leather cover. The second binding of this group (143 x 117 mm), in the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh, contains an Icelandic manuscript of theological tracts dated 1765 (18). The gilt leather, which lost almost all its colour, dates from the mid seventeenth century and which doubtlessly was made in The Netherlands.

The third binding, which is in the possession of the University Library in Amsterdam, has no contents anymore (19). It dates from the seventeenth century, but where it has been made is not clear at all.
From a stylistic point of view it might have been made in The Netherlands, but technically speaking it differs too much from the Dutch gilt leather so it will have been made elsewhere. These three bindings in Cracow, Edinburgh and Amsterdam were originally so-called mirror-boxes. The mirror-box which has been found in the shipwreck of the Swedish Royal Warship the 'Kronan', which sank in 1676 on the east-coast of Sweden, is indeed very similar (20), and so are the two mirror-boxes which are being preserved in Japan (21). Although they both lost their contents we know that they were originally mirror-boxes, because a detail of a similar one is illustrated in volume 6 of the Sokenkishu, written in 1781 by Inaba Tsuryu and has been described by him as such.

**Type C: Gilt Leather Bookbindings which have been made Specifically for this Use**

Of this type only one bookbinding is known at this moment. It is a pity that nothing is known about it because of its uniqueness. This binding has never been used and can only be dated and located on stylistic grounds (22). Most likely it has been made in France and will date from the second half of the eighteenth century.

**Conclusion**

Up till this moment hardly anybody knew about the existence of gilt leather bookbindings and folders. Quite a few examples have been located and these are mentioned in this short survey, but hopefully many more will appear. In conclusion we can say that these gilt leather bookbindings and folders are an exceptional and important group, both for the study of gilt leather and bookbindings.

* This article would not have been possible without the help and kindly supplied information by Maarten Jan Bok (Utrecht), Maria Cubrzynska-Leonsrezyk (Biblioteka Uniwersyteca, Warsaw), Marijke Detremmerie (Museum voor Sierkunst, Gent), Lars Einrasson (Kalmar County Museum), Richard Gerecke (Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Hamburg), John Morris (National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh), Paul W. Nash (Bodleian Library, Oxford), Andreas Schulze, Dresden, Henk van Soest (The Hague), Prof. dr. J.A. Szirmai (Oosterbeek) and Jan Storm van Leeuwen, Ad Stijnman and Rens Top (Koninklijke Bibliotheek, The Hague).

**References**


10. Inv. nrs. 17157 & 17158


12. Its pattern can closely be compared to the gilt leather wall-hanging signed by Hans le Maire, gilt leather maker in The Hague and Amsterdam, which is in the Swedish Royal Collection


15. Inv. nr. 5095


19. Pressmark: Hs. 1 G 8

20. Kalmar County Museum, Kalmar (Sw.), Inv.nr. Kronan F. 2015


22. This binding came up at auction in Paris in 1990, and was part of a large collection of gilt leather panels which was sold. Etude Néret-Minet - Coutau-Bégaira, Toiles Imprimées, Cuirs Repoussés, Papiers Peints, Paris 22/09/1990 (Auction Catalogue), nr. 148