Bookbinding in Damascus.

One of the most interesting bazaars of the city of Damascus is the book bazaar, commonly called the "Silk el Miskiyeh," because it leads to the court of the great "Mosque el Amwy." It is a wide, lofty, and well-built, but not very long, arcade, and is approached by a broad flight of steps descending from the bustling bazaar of the linen and silk drapers. Here the Moslem booksellers and bookbinders of Damascus established themselves long ago, and they still cling there, close to their temple; it is the Paternoster-row of Damascus, but the place has not yet been robbed of any of its oriental characteristics by European influence.

The shops or stalls on each side of the arcade are merely deep recesses about five feet wide, and seven-and-a-half in height. They are ranged close together, and the floors are nearly three feet above the footway.

or a blossoming tree branch, on his bench. He wears a red turban with a heavy purple-black tassel, olive-green cloth jacket and trousers, a shawl girdle, and red shoes. On the floor by his side is one of the drawers of his chest. The picture on the wall opposite to him is a pen and ink drawing, in outline, of the Kaaba and other holy places at Mecca. Above the drawing appears the potent word Mashallalah, written in black letters, on a gilt ground, and framed in ebony. This word signifies, "O work of God!" or "What God wills," and is believed to be a protection against evil of every kind. By the side of this there is a printed almanac, including the Mohammedan and Syrian calendars.

Borders, Centre Pieces, and Families of Various Styles from the Shop of a Bookbinder in Damascus.

In these cozy-looking niches the booksellers, seated at their ease on mats or carpets, read in murmuring undertones, smoke a narghileh, the while fingering a rosary made of Mecca date-stones, and wait for customers; while the bookbinders, kneeling at their low benches, are busily at work.

The accompanying illustration represents the lower part of the shop of a bookbinder named "Et Tayyib ibn esh Sheikh el Embarak," which may be interpreted, "The good or agreeable one, son of the Sheikh, the blessed or fortunate one." He is kneeling, as usual, at the well-made walnut-tree chest, which serves him as a work-table, the top being formed of a slab of black basalt from the Hauran. In his hand he holds a smooth rubber made of the finest solid boxwood, and is embossing a piece of leather by rubbing it on a pattern cut in brass, which is beneath it. Before him is a glass filled with fragrant narcissi, for Et Tayyib always contrives to have flowers of some kind.

It is intended to be rolled up and carried in the pocket. Its chief use is to show the exact times for the daily prayers, which vary according to the hours of sunrise and sunset.

Beyond the book-shelves, which are backed with wooden lattice work, and reach to the raftered ceiling, there is a dark compartment in which are kept stores of leather and millboard, with tools and machines not actually in use, and a small step ladder. A jar of water is generally placed there. A towel hangs as a curtain before the low entrance to this little store place. There are only five rows of book-shelves, and the two uppermost extend over the top of the curtained doorway. The top shelf is carried along the three sides of the shop, and to reach it the ladder is used. In this little nook Et Tayyib executes all his work and transacts all his business, assisted occasionally by one or two little boys. The leaves of a book are sewn in a press, and the book is fixed in the screw press.
beyond and the back finished off. The edges of the leaves are filed with a coarse or fine instrument, according to the quality of the paper or the value of the book. The plough, as applied to paper cutting, is unknown in the Sūk el Miskiyeh. The books shown on the shelves, placed one on top of the other, as they almost always are in the East, were in parchment covers, enriched with gold borders; others were bound in crimson morocco leather, with purple or green embossed centre pieces and corners, fitted in like mosaic work, and so securely that the joinings could scarcely be felt.

The blocks used are usually cut in brass, but sometimes made of some composite elastic material, of which the accompanying illustrations will give a fair idea, and the following is the process of embossing and gilding the leather. A piece of leather of the required size and shape is laid upon the bench and covered, on the inside, with a stiff, yellowish, inodorous paste of great adhesive power, called sarras. Two pieces of millboard are then laid on to form the sides, and a narrower piece, obtusely pointed, for the flap—almost all oriental books have their front edges protected by a flap—leaving spaces between them corresponding with the thickness of the book. The leather is turned in and rubbed down with the boxwood rubber, the cover turned over, and the outside rubbed down till it is perfectly smooth and firmly set. The stamps or dies are then impressed on the leather by beating the leather in with a very heavy hammer, shaped something like the boxwood rubber. A leaf of gold, rather thicker than English leaf gold, is then taken, placed on the brass plate, and cut to the exact size by running a knife round the edge. The corresponding impression on the cover is covered with a thin, smooth coating of sarras, the gold-covered die placed upon and into it, the cover turned carefully over so that the die shall remain in its right place, and then hammered vigorously from the back till the pattern may be plainly seen through the millboard. This process is repeated till every impression on the sides and on the flap of the book-cover is sharply embossed and bright with gold. If the book be the Koran, an inscription is thus embossed on the front edge of the cover, “Let none touch it but the clean.”

The large centre ornament here engraved is a full-sized drawing of a design on the brown leather cover of a religious book of the Druses, written in 1566, containing their history of the creation of the world and of mankind. It is in an excellent state of preservation, and is one of the most interesting accounts of the Druse religion that has ever fallen into the hands of a non-Druse, for in times of war, the Druses frequently destroyed their sacred books if they could not conceal them.

At the lower edge of the drawing of Et Tayyib’s shop some rude hinges will be perceived. These are attached to a flap or drop-shutter, about two-and-a-half feet deep, which hangs down during the day and nearly reaches the footpath. A narrow ledge or bracket in the middle of it serves as a step by which to mount to the floor of the shop. At about an hour or more before sunset, the shutter is generally turned up and fastened by the two hooks shown in the drawing. Except on special occasions all the shops in the chief bazaars of Damascus are shut, more or less securely, and deserted before sunset, and soon after sunset the great wooden gates of the bazaars are also closed.

[Compiled from “Books and Bookbinding in Syria and Palestine” by Mary Eliza Rogers.—Art Journal.]

Still another is about to be added to the long list of cookery books. Mrs. Buck, of the North Midland School of Cookery, whose previous books are enjoying such an extended sale, is at work on a new shilling volume of “Home Cookery,” which will be issued early in the autumn from the De Montfort Press (London: 1 Imperial-buildings, E.C.) It will be adapted to those who have to suit their taste to their means, and will be of a thoroughly practical character.

THE INTERIOR OF A BOOKBINDER'S SHOP IN DAMASCUS.