

Bookbinding in France.

A GENTLEMAN residing in Paris some ten years ago, sent home an interesting record under the above heading. He wrote :

The considerable prices realized by a class of books which seem to have nothing but their exterior to recommend them, must have often puzzled students who have not yet learned that bookbinding takes a high rank among the Fine Arts ; and that ancient bindings have as many admirers as old china, or any other of those attractive guides among the bye-ways of history which charm the leisure of wealth and taste.

Bookbinding, in this sense, is essentially French ; and perhaps it might be safe to add, almost exclusively Parisian. Ever since calf skin and morocco leather have been substituted for wooden boards and velvet as a covering for precious volumes, which may date from the close of the fifteenth century, the decoration of the envelopes of books has engaged the patient attention of a very remarkable class of workmen, few in number, but of surprising excellence in their craft. The ornamental bindings which they executed in the sixteenth century are especially sought, both in France and in England. The richness and beauty of these compositions, the harmony of their tones, make them figure advantageously beside the enamels of Limoges, and the finest ivories of the Renaissance. They belong, indeed, to the curiosities of the country which produced them, and count among the gems of great libraries.

It was M. Bauzonnet, the successor of Purgold, who revived the old traditions of French bookbinding, and continued the famous series of masterpieces which had been interrupted by the death of Derome. His son-in-law and pupil, M. Trautz, acquired, possibly, a still higher reputation ; but since 1840, their names, Trautz-Bauzonnet, are always found together on some of the most beautiful work of the present day. They seem to have taken Derome, Padeloup, and Boyet, as their models in design, though they are not servile imitators of their famous predecessors. In gilding, they have closely followed the manner of Le Gascon, who was master gilder to Louis the Fourteenth.

The mosaic bindings of Padeloup and of Derome are much valued ; and it is difficult to distinguish them apart. These names both belong to a family of engravers, moreover, who flourished during the whole of the last century. The number of the mosaic bindings is small, for the book-lovers of the time had sober tastes, and preferred a less magnificent sort of covering. Still, a few rare specimens are to be found. Gaignat and Girardot de Prefond had some done. La Vallière and Brancas-Lauraguais possessed one or two ; the best, perhaps, belonged to the collection of Mr. MacCarthy Reagh, which was formed during the Reign of Terror, when the artistic treasures of many great houses, hoarded up for generations, were dispersed.

The binding of a book can only be justly considered a work of art when it is ornamented by a learned or ingenious composition, which is the work of a skilful hand. That sort of binding which is known as "Janseniste," bears no artistic value whatever ; and, however admirably it may be executed, it ranks merely with the produce of an ordinary handicraft, even though it may boast the signature of some celebrated binder. The highest quality which the outward decoration of a book can possess is that its ornaments should be appropriate to its size, its date, its character, and to the nature of its contents. When a valuable old book is rebound, its proper adornment is a binding of the period when it was

printed. When the book to be bound is a reprint, as sometimes happens, it should have a binding such as was in the fashion when the author lived. The common fault of collectors and of bookbinders in the present day, until they are reasoned out of the anachronism, is to conceive a fanatical reverence for Le Gascon, or Du Seuil, Padeloup, or Derome, and to cover their books indiscriminately in the manner of their favourite master. Scholars then see, with amazement, 'Roy Arthur,' or 'Tristan de Léonnois,' masquerading in the doublet and hose of Louis XIV.; while 'Rabelais' and 'Ronsard' are arrayed in the flowered petticoats of Madame Deshoulières. To Baron James de Rothschild belongs the honour of having led a successful revolt against these errors of taste; and it is to his fine appreciation of the becoming, and his delicate sense of true beauty in art, that a school of bookbinding, characteristic of the nineteenth century, has been gradually formed.

Perhaps no kind of industry has ever produced such pleasing effects from its first creation, or has developed more rapidly into an art, than bookbinding. It can hardly be said to have existed before the invention of printing. Celebrated manuscripts, indeed, were held together by covers of the precious metals, or of ivory and rare wood, enriched with precious stones; and many gorgeous specimens of such handiwork are to be seen in famous libraries; but they belong, rather, to the art of the jeweller, the goldsmith, and the engraver, than to that of the bookbinder. Among the finest of the early bindings in France are those done under the direction of Geoffroy Tory, the celebrated printer. They may be distinguished by the mark of the "broken pitcher," which is affixed to them. They are not very scarce. All the early French bookbindings show the influence of the printing-press, and their ornaments consist principally of those best known to the typographers of the time. The Aldine anchor frequently recurs on them. The interior illustrations used to embellish the text were also often reproduced on the binding of these volumes.

It was not till the Renaissance had brought about a general revival of art, that bookbinding began to break loose from the servitude of the printing-press; but the period which immediately followed must be called the Golden Age of bookbinding. The most renowned artists in France were employed to execute those splendid designs which grace the bindings of Diana de Poitiers and Henri II. They are quite masterpieces of skill and elegance. It is, moreover, from this period that France, which had, during the first half of the sixteenth century, been but the rival of Italy, claims an undisputed superiority, which she has maintained from the reign of Henri II. until now. It is curious to note, however, that the Diana bindings, though occasionally equalled in beauty of design and execution, have never been surpassed. Possibly, art is not progressive; and commonly depends for the higher order of excellence, upon individual genius, which is not taught to be great, but born admirable in itself. It is also to be remembered, that an art which was so carefully fostered, and so magnificently recompensed by a King's favourite, was sure to be cultivated with success by the gifted and ambitious.

A species of bookbinding, which still attracts much attention in France, is called "Reliures à la Fanfare." It derives the name from a volume belonging to Charles Nodier, entitled, 'Fanfare,' upon which Thouvenin designed some charming ornaments. The decoration of the lily was much employed in the reign of Henry IV.; but it is also characteristic of some more ancient bindings, and it is still one of the most favourite embellishments in use. Under Louis XI., the beautiful open flower of the Valois was conspicuous; under

