THE "ALHAMBRA" ATLAS FOLIO.

Bound by Wm. Matthews, New York.

In Light Brown Russia, inlaid with Blue and Red Morocco, for the Exhibition of 1853.

Printed on Grosvenor, Chater & Co.'s "Acme" Printing Paper.
First in the order of merit amongst American binders stands Mr. Wm. Matthews, whose sumptuous and artistic productions have earned for him a world-wide reputation not second to that of any living representative of the craft. This high position has, however, only been won by sheer hard work, for, fifty years ago, before Mr. Matthews went out to the land of his adoption, fine binding was a branch of art which had not then taken root in the United States. Bibliophilism was almost unknown; the utilitarian predilections even of the rich favoured only such plain or neat forms of binding as served for book preservation; the few choice works or fine editions which found their way into the country were imported with a garb enriched by European workmanship, or were sent over to Europe to be decently clothed by the very few who appreciated a reliure de luxe. There was, however, just the opportunity for a good binder, though the field was not a large one; but it remained for whoever should step into the situation to cultivate, nay, rather create, a taste for this particular form of art workmanship, and into this situation Mr. Matthews stepped.

He was born in Aberdeen, Scotland, on March 29th, 1822, and at the early age of nine months he had the terrible misfortune to lose his father. At seven years of age he was sent to London, where he was educated and subsequently apprenticed to the firm of Messrs. Remnant & Edmonds, of Lovell’s-court, Paternoster-row. At that time this was the largest and most important bookbinding establishment in Great Britain and the greatest variety of work was turned out in large quantities, so that every opportunity was afforded a boy to learn the various branches of the business, and the firm did their best to make the greatest use of any boy shewing the inclination and ability for good work. Young Matthews excelled as a finisher and blocker, but so slavish and intolerable were the conditions under which he worked that he sought and welcomed a means of escape even at the price of isolation from all his friends, by obtaining an engagement to go to New York, where he landed on December 5th, 1843. He was not long in perceiving that his proficiency in the art was at least equal, if not superior, to that of any of the men by whom he was surrounded, and that an opportunity existed for a very much better class of work than that which was being generally executed. This conviction was strengthened during the two years he passed as a journeyman, until at last he had the courage, though backed by exceedingly slender means, to start in business for himself in January, 1846, at 74 Fulton-street, N.Y. While still struggling on with great difficulty, the great exhibition of 1851 was held in London, and Mr. Matthews was surprised and nettled to think that America had sent no exhibit, so that when the New York Exhibition of 1853 was announced, he determined to lead the way with some good work, and prepared an exhibit far beyond what his limited means properly allowed for. The case contained specimens of almost every style of fine library binding, setting forth flexibility of opening, firmness and trueness of forwarding, and accuracy of tooling and lettering. The principal exhibit was a copy of Owen Jones’ “Alhambra,” a large folio filled with plates of the gorgeous Moorish decorations of that famous building. Its contents gave full scope of fancy in the designs for the cover, while the three colours—yellow, blue, and red—used in the decoration of the palace were obtained by covering the volume with yellow russet and inlaying the design thereon with blue and red morocco. The designs were wholly composed of
direction, and a “fine binding by Matthews” is almost as eagerly sought after as those by any modern master. It has always been a strong point with him that instead of the binder ring in changes with the ornaments furnished by the engraver and the common property of all, having been in use for centuries, he should show his independence of them and simply use straight and curved lines, circles, and dots, or such tools as may be necessary to execute his own designs. Therefore whenever a design was demanded for exhibition or binding without limit of cost, his finishers had to act on this principle. At the Centennial Exhibition, Philadelphia, 1876, two volumes of “Picturesque America” — then being published—were exhibited in leather mosaic on which no engraved tool was used, even the inlaid lettering being all worked up from bits of line and gouges, and they were the finest books exhibited, although the collection was very large and fairly representative. At the Paris Exposition in 1889, “Picturesque America” and “Picturesque Palestine” were exhibited, and though of less pretentious style than the Philadelphia exhibit, they were of pure hand work, and magnificent specimens of tooling; with these there was a large collection of library work, which, after careful examination, were pronounced the best in the Exposition for solidity and accuracy of workmanship.

Among the wealthy book lovers of America Mr. Matthews is a high authority, and in 1885 he was invited by the Grolier Club of New York to deliver a lecture on “Modern Bookbinding Practically Considered,” which was deemed of such importance that it was published by the club in 1886.

In 1890 he retired from business, grateful that he had been able to accomplish that which he had set his hand to, but still regretful that he had not been able to advance the interests of the craft more. The chief aim and object of his business life has been to promote bookbinding in America to a place among the art handicrafts; and with a deep devotion to his task, he has often sacrificed pecuniary advantages that his example should be in accord with his teaching. He began business where fine bindings were unknown, but he has the satisfaction of seeing specimens of his own and others’ work in the libraries of collectors—examples of the American school of binding which has arisen largely through his own efforts—that will stand fair comparison with any of the later productions of Europe.

He is living now quietly on Brooklyn Heights, at the ripe age of seventy, and his interest in all that pertains to the intelligent and artistic processes of bookbinding and decoration is as keen as ever, while his judgment has been ripened and matured by his long practical experience.

Tommaso Finiguerra, who discovered the art of copper-plate engraving in 1460, was a Florentine goldsmith. It is believed that he accidentally hit upon his invention. Having engraved a piece of metal ornament with a design, he filled the sunk lines, as was the custom of the time, with a black composition; he chanced to lay it down on a piece of damp cloth, which took off the impression, and suggested the new art.
INSIDE DESIGN FOR "ALHAMBRA."

Bound by Wm. Matthews, New York.

White Vellum in centre, with Yellow Lozenge.

Printed on Grosvenor, Chater & Co.'s "Acme" Printing Paper.

DE MONTFORT PRESS.