



HAND TOOLING ON PIGSKIN, BY MISS S. T. PRIDEAUX.

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❖ Blind Tooling. ❖

**I**t sometimes seems a pity that it should be thought necessary at the present time that the decoration of our bindings should always be in gold. There was a time, before the introduction of gold, when the blind tooling impressed upon a black or brown covered book constituted its only ornament, and such books are even now much sought after from the beauty of the blocks that were cut and engraved for the purpose.

Visitors to the Exhibition of Bindings held at the Burlington Fine Art Club in the summer of this year, had an opportunity of seeing some of the best of this work, the French panel stamps being of especial delicacy and beauty. Nor was it immediately discontinued on the introduction of gold. All through the 16th century we find occasional specimens of blind tooled ornament, not only as hitherto effected by the use of blocks, but done by hand as the gold tooling was done. I have in my mind a very fine specimen of this on a book shown in the Exhibition by Mr. R. Holford, whose library is well known, and which will, if I mistake not, be reproduced in the illustrated edition of the catalogue which the club is about to issue. It is a small quarto entitled "*Cento Giuochi Liberali et d' Ingegno*," by Ringhieri, and published at Bologna in 1551. It is bound in white vellum, and the design—a very free one, of arabesque, covering the sides—is carried out in black. The book formerly belonged to Cardinal Hippolyto d' Este, whose name is stamped upon the covers. There was also exhibited a French binding of the 16th century, lent by Mr. Quaritch, "*De Prædestinatione dialogi tres*," by Camerarius, published at Paris in 1556; likewise a quarto, though of larger size than the last-mentioned. This book, covered in white morocco, has the sides blind-tooled in brown, with the various emblems of Diana of Poitiers, and the initial of Henry II., King of France, surmounted by a crown. Two plates are devoted to it in Mr. Quaritch's *Facsimiles of Bindings*.

Of course where the cover is of a light colour such as vellum, white or cream morocco, or natural coloured pig skin, a very considerable amount of contrast may be obtained by using the tools either with a colour or smoked for vellum, or in the case of leathers by working them hot after thoroughly moistening the cover. There are some who like this excessive contrast, others again find that quite sufficient opposition is got on darker coloured leathers that do not alter much in tone by the application of the hot tool, merely through the relief or different levels of the surface caused by the impress of the tools.

In my opinion natural coloured pigskin is the most suitable for designs worked in blind; the grain, or more strictly speaking the small pits and markings where the bristles have been, do not interfere with the effect even when the work is very fine, the skin turns very easily to any tone from a very delicate brown to

almost a black, according to the dampness and relative heat of the tools, and lastly—a matter to be desired in these days of fogs and their attendant dirt—the skin can at any moment be cleaned by a sponge and water without injuring the design.

It seems strange that now, when in so many matters of decoration, a matt surface is preferred to a shiny one and considered much more artistic, people should still continue to like their books polished so that they can see their faces in them. To such no doubt the dull surface of pigskin may be a drawback, though to those who think differently it will be an added attraction.

The four books here represented show different styles of blind work, though for the better purpose of illustration they all belong to the class in which contrast is achieved by tools worked hot on a light ground. "*Letters on Literature*," by Andrew Lang, is carried out in cream coloured morocco of a large hard grain which is left intact and not crushed. The tools taken not very hot have turned the design a greenish brown, not at all strong in colour, but rather the reverse. Both "*Underwoods*," by L. R. Stevenson, and "*A London Plane Tree*," by Amy Levy, are in the same morocco crushed and polished, and the designs appear in considerable contrast to the cover. Kingsley's "*Waterbabies*" is in pigskin, the natural colour but rather dark of its kind, for there is a certain range of colour in undyed pigskins. The border, both inside and out, is done with finishing tools in the ordinary way, but the fishes, side lettering, and panels on the back, are etched straight on to the leather with a hot point. This, I consider, breaks rather new ground in the matter of decoration, as it allows much more freedom of design, and consequently of appropriateness in the ornament, so difficult to get at small cost when stamps have to be cut for every fresh idea. If the whole of a design were thus executed, the effect might be somewhat amateurish, but with a part carried out by the ordinary tools of the finisher, the contrast between the formal part of the design thus executed and the other and freer part, is distinctly pleasing without being too unprofessional. In this case, the idea occurred through inability to get the fishes worked out in a short time by the ordinary methods; a full stop tool was rubbed down very fine, the leather kept well moistened, and the design worked in like a pen and ink drawing. The operation is more tedious than difficult, as the English tool cutter has a way of putting as little material as he can into his stamps, and they consequently retain their heat for the shortest possible time. It might be well if in this matter he imitated the French tool cutter, who cuts the smallest tool on a body of metal that holds the heat six times as long.

I have made these few remarks with regard to blind work in the hope that they may stimulate some members of the trade to introduce more variety into the binding and decoration of books.—S. T. PRIDEAUX.