

# **BOOKBINDING IN FRANCE**

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Bookbinding in France by W. Y. Fletcher

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**W. Y. FLETCHER**

**BOOKBINDING  
IN FRANCE**



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# FRENCH BOOKBINDING

## CHAPTER I

*Early bindings—Blind stamped ornamental work—First gilt bindings—Guild of St. Jean—Grolier—Geoffroy Tory—Francis I.—Henry II.—Diana of Poitiers—Catherine de' Medici, etc.*

IN early times the French bindings, like those of other countries, were the work of the goldsmith and the carver rather than that of the bookbinder as understood by us. Rare and beautiful volumes, the joint production of the scribe and the artist, were incased in befitting covers of the precious metals, enamel, or ivory, which were often enriched with gems or crystals. They formed part of the treasures of a king, a church, or a monastery. Later on, when princes and nobles began to take an interest in literature and the fine arts as well as in the profession of arms, manuscripts became more common, and these costly bindings were to a very great extent superseded by those of cloth of gold, velvet, and satin; leather being employed for books of lesser value. With the invention of printing another change took place: books were produced in such large numbers that it became necessary to find less expensive materials for their covers, and leather of various kinds, more or less decorated with blind stamped ornamental work, came into general use. Many of these impressed leather bindings are of great beauty; those of Jehan Norins, Louis Bloc, André Boule, and R. Macé being especially good.

Charles VIII., Louis XII., and Anne of Brittany, successively the wife of both these kings, were the great collectors of books, printed as

well as manuscript, of this time. Hardly any of these precious volumes retain their original bindings, but one bearing the arms of France and Brittany, together with the hedgehog, the badge of Louis, is exhibited in the French National Library.

The glories of French binding, however, really date from the introduction of the art of tooling in gold into Europe. Although this craft was first practised in Italy, it was quickly imitated by the French binders, who soon excelled all others in the beauty and quality of their work; and from the beginning of the sixteenth to the middle of the eighteenth century the binder's art in France, fostered by the kings and queens and the great collectors of that country, reached and maintained a degree of excellence which has never been surpassed. The superiority of French binding may be also attributed to some extent to the influence of the Guild of St. Jean, a community which appears to have been established in Paris as early as the year 1401, and did not cease to exist until the time of the Revolution, when it was suppressed by a decree of the Assembly. It embraced and controlled all persons who took part in the production and sale of books, and included binders as well as scribes, illuminators, printers, and booksellers.

It is difficult to determine whether the French binders learnt the art of tooling in gold from Italian craftsmen who took up their abode in France while Grolier was in Italy, or from the workmen whom he is said to have brought with him on his return to his native land; but there is no doubt that the development of the art in France was mainly due to the inspiration and patronage of this famous collector. Jean Grolier, Vicomte d'Aguisy, was born at Lyons in 1479. In 1510, at the age of thirty-one, he succeeded his father, Etienne, in the office of Treasurer of the Duchy of Milan, and he resided in Italy, with some interruptions, until 1529, when the French troops were withdrawn from that country. During his stay there he made the acquaintance of Aldus Manutius, the "scholar printer" of Venice, and assisted both him and his successors with money in the production of the beautiful volumes which issued from their press. In recognition of his kindness special copies of these books, several of which were dedicated to him, were printed for his library, and were also probably bound in their workshops.

In 1524 Grolier was sent by Francis I. on an embassy to Pope

Clement VII., and in 1545 he obtained the reversion of the post of Treasurer-General of France, to which he succeeded some two years later, and held until his death, which occurred on the 22nd of October 1565, in the midst of his books, at the Hôtel de Lyon, near the Buci Gate in Paris.

Grolier's library, which was one of the finest of the time, consisted of 3,000 volumes, about 350 of which are known now to exist. Sixty-four are in the Bibliothèque Nationale, about thirty in the British Museum, principally in the library bequeathed by the Rev. C. M. Cracherode, fifteen in the Bibliothèque St. Geneviève, left to the library by Archbishop Le Tellier, and seven in the Bibliothèque de l' Arsenal. Many are also to be found in the private libraries of this and other countries. His books, as far as the bindings are concerned, may be divided into two classes—those bound for him, and those which were already in that condition when he acquired them. On all those in the first class his liberal and well-known motto, *IO. GROLIERII ET AMICORUM*, will, with very rare exceptions, be found, and he also placed it on those in the second when he could do so without damaging or disfiguring the binding. He also wrote it with numerous slight variations—as many as thirteen are known—in the interior of his volumes. This inscription is almost always stamped on the upper cover, while a part of the fifth verse of the one hundred and forty-second Psalm, *PORTIO MEA DOMINE SIT IN TERRA VIVENTIUM*, generally occurs on the lower. He did not, however, confine himself to this motto. *TANQUAM VENTUS EST VITA MEA*, from the seventh verse of the seventh chapter of Job, and *CUSTODIT DOMINUS OMNES DILIGENTES SE, ET OMNES IMPIOS DISPERDET*, a portion of verse twenty of the one hundred and forty-fifth Psalm, were occasionally used. The arms adopted by him when a bachelor were three bezants or surmounted by three stars *argent* on a field *azure*. After his marriage in 1516 he impaled those of his wife Anne Briçonnet. On a few of his volumes is found an emblem of a hand, entwined with a scroll bearing the words *ÆQUE DIFFICULTER*, issuing from a cloud and striving to pull an iron bar from the ground on the top of the highest of a number of mountains, probably the Alps. This only occurs on his earlier books, and is believed to refer to some special event of his life