

THE PERFUME OF BOOKS

A WALK THROUGH THE RARE BOOK STACK

Erika Mordek

In the European Summer of 2012 Erika Mordek left the bleak Canberra winter and travelled to the London Rare Book Summer School. She had been awarded the Kenneth Binns Travelling Fellowship by the National Library of Australia and as a book conservator in training attended Professor Nicholas Pickwood's course on European Bindings 1420-1830.

The course opened her eyes to a world previously unknown to her. She had rarely gone to the Rare Book stack and her skills were not as yet up to that level of conservation. Participants watched thousands of slides, visited libraries, peered at old wooden bound books and Erika returned to Canberra wanting to learn more and to use this new found knowledge.

Do books have a perfume? Think of that smell that emanates from a room full of books where perhaps no-one has stepped for some time. *Shuxiang* is the Chinese word for that particular odour. Erika Mordek's *The Perfume of Books* started quite by accident. She came upon the Chinese term while researching Asian thread bindings and fell in love with the idea that books have a life and perfume of their own.

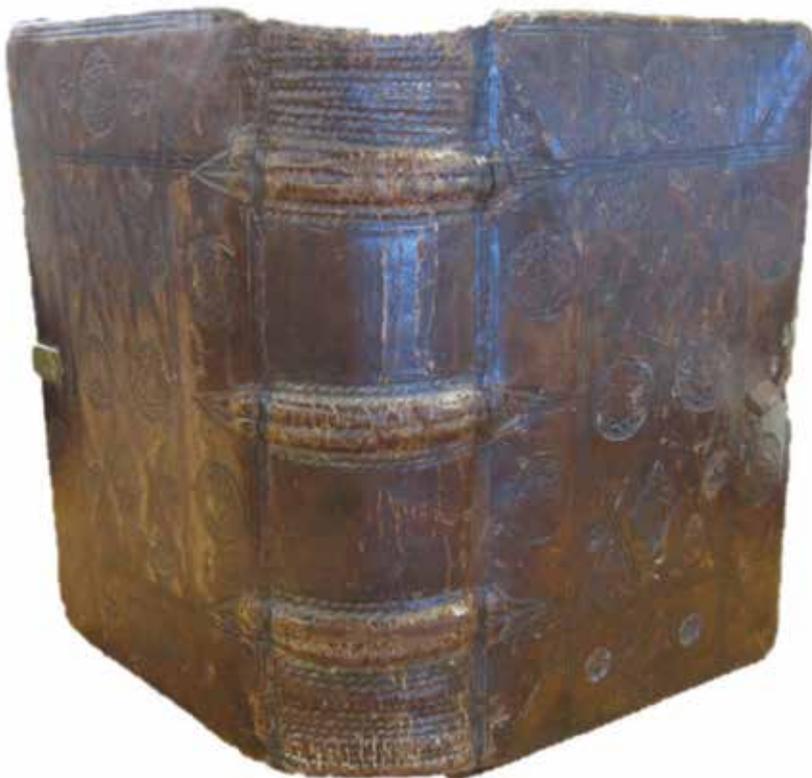


On her return from the London Summer School the opportunity arose for Erika to study books from the Rare Book stack at the National Library of Australia. Why study historical bindings you might wonder. Humans have the capability to learn from history; bookbinding has not really changed in 400 years. So Erika was curious to find out how book structures were made during the 16th to the 18th centuries in order not only to appreciate, but also to improve on her own bookmaking skills. We need to understand where we have come from in order to progress and become innovative.

Back in Canberra, the Preservation team at the Library was joined by Robin Tait who brought

Top: Clasp detail from book printed in Lyon in 1570 writing on foredge as well

Left: German full leather cover with blind tooling and typical kapitalbund as change over station and end band. Printed in Cologne 1492





Left: Recycled parchment guard - binder's waste? The book was printed in Basle 1559

successfully met its \$5,000 target, although more is needed to complete the books. Erika intends to print and bind 40 copies in time for the 2017 Australian Bookbinding Conference to be held in Canberra in March 2017, and hopes that her efforts will later be taken on by a publisher for further distribution worldwide.

The Perfume of Books is essentially a catalogue. It is not a lesson in bookbinding. It is designed to take the reader on a journey, to follow the journey Erika began in the Rare Book stack. *The Perfume of Books* is unique in that each book is described in words and

pictures. Thousands of photos of title pages, vignettes, endbands, pasteboards and covers were taken of over 200 books. For Erika, the most difficult part of the project has been the selection of the right photos and writing the captions. What began as a simple binding project has turned into a detailed examination of the book as object.

The Perfume of Books is in the final stages of design and will be going next to the indexer's before going to print in December. Erika is currently working on its companion volume, *The Secret Life of Watermarks*, also due out in March. Each of the two volumes will be printed in an edition limited to 100 numbered copies handbound, approximately 20 x 29 cm, at a cost of \$270 each. *The Perfume of Books* will have over 300 pages of colour photos and descriptive text of over 200 rare books from the 1470s to the 1840s, while *The Secret Life of Watermarks* will include photos of 450 watermarks, some never before seen.

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with her new expertise and heralded a turning point in Erika's career. One of Robin's initiatives was to start a weekly dusting program in the Rare Book stack. Twice a week for two years a member of Preservation and a volunteer would spend an hour dusting the edges and the first and last gutters of books that had not seen a human hand for many years. They dusted in a cardboard tray and vacuumed the dust with a hand held dust buster.

Erika: 'I loved that first step into the stack when their perfume would hit me. Finally I would be able to test the knowledge I had gained during the London Summer. Some of the books were in a terrible state. This, however, allowed me to make discoveries. I was so excited to find recycled parchment and old newspapers as spine linings. Here were examples of transverse and comb linings. Amongst books whose covers had fallen off were alum tawed double supports sewn packed straight, or single cord supports sewn straight. There were also expensive bindings, French bindings, with Morocco leather and extensive gold tooling on smooth spines; English bindings with no linings and many covers with Cambridge panels.'

Erika is not a printmaker, but through the online course '*The Book: Histories across time and space*' a new world of approbations, printing trickery and title pages opened up to her. During the 1950s The Hilversum Paper Society contacted libraries all over the world to begin a project called *Monumenta Chartae Papyraceae*. Over several years and with worldwide funding, they produced more than a dozen reference books on watermarks and paper.

Inspired by their experience Erika looked at the idea of crowd source funding the publication of two books—*The Perfume of Books* and a companion volume, *The Secret Life of Watermarks*. In August 2016, a Kickstarter project



Quarter binding with hair side on spine and recycled music manuscript sides. Printed in Venice 1477