

AN ESSAY ON THE DEVELOPMENT & USAGE OF BRASS PLATE DIES – Including a Catalogue Raisone from The Harcourt Bindery by Samuel B Ellenport. The Harcourt Bindery, Boston, Mass. 1980. ISBN 0-936794-00-3.

The essay, which introduces the examples of the brass plates, provides an historic context for their use, both in the wider sense of decorated bindings through time, and in the narrower one of their employment in the Harcourt Bindery. Sam Ellenport cites authority for the use of large central stamps on boards as early as the 13th century in Antwerp, although they did not reach the height of their popularity until the late 15th/early 16th century. They fell out of favour only to benefit from a revival in the 19th century, having both advantages of speed and design. Open patterns

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allowed the incorporation of onlays, using matching punches or 'dinks', which could be used perhaps to demonstrate a higher level of competence than was actually required to carry out the work.

The book dovetails very neatly with the Techniques disc – where the gas powered 'arming' presses are shown, with the set-up required to achieve these blocks. Sam Ellenport demonstrates how pre-stamped spine designs could, with care, be worked on to the book.

The Harcourt Bindery has several hundred dies of various types and sizes- some with open sides to allow them to be used on books of different sizes, as well as corners, spine pieces and monograms. Sam Ellenport argues that innovation of this kind did not necessarily need to result in a sacrifice of quality and that the later use of the plate die was a 'legitimate extension of the finishers craft'

The illustrations of the dies give an indication of the variety of finish that could be achieved using this method, from earlier period styles, such as the Grolier, to the more creative Art Nouveau. The versatility and economy in use of the plates combine to achieve books that are both striking in their finish, yet efficiently produced in terms of bench time –hallmarks of the Harcourt bindery itself.

The book is very handsomely produced – Sam Ellenport's knowledge and experience are as visible on the printed page as they are evident in his narration. The book includes two full page colour plates as well as countless large scale examples of blocks from the Harcourt collection. This book represents an important addition to the literature on the history of binding styles.