

COVERING THE TEXT: THE OBJECT OF BOOKBINDING

Binders have long contributed an important material dimension to any consideration of the polysemy of the book-as-object, and the heritage of the *livre de peintre*, or artist's book, has left its mark on the bookbinder's awareness of interpretive strategies for approaching the text. This article examines the practices of five contemporary French bookbinders whose diversity of creative styles only masks fundamental common preoccupations: the creation of decors that are harmonious and not competitive with the text, and the need to ally aesthetic pleasure in the finished decor with a structural integrity that preserves the book as an object of reading, not an object for viewing.

John Anzalone is associate professor of French at Skidmore College. His interests include literature and film, the visual arts and the book arts. His writing has appeared in such journals as *L'Esprit créateur*, *Word and Image* and the *Bulletin du Bibliophile*, among others. He is working on an article on typographic play in selected editions of the works of Raymond Queneau.

Ruth Copans is assistant professor in the Lucy Scribner Library at Skidmore College, where she is reference librarian with additional responsibilities for preservation and rare books. She is also an art bookbinder/book restorer who studied in Paris with Paule Ameline and Sun Evrard for forwarding, and Roger Arnoux and Camille Berthaux for finishing. She has lectured on binding and preservation, and is writing on the guild of Women Bookbinders.

Visible Language, 25:2/3

John Anzalone and Ruth Copans, pp. 257–269

© *Visible Language*, 1991

Rhode Island School of Design

Providence, Rhode Island 02903

Even a rapid survey of the history of French bookbinding in the twentieth century reveals a wide diversity of creative styles that mirror in varying degrees the major artistic developments of the modern era. From such practitioners as Marius Michel, Rose Adler and Pierre Legrain in the Art Nouveau/Art Deco period, to modernists like Bonet, Creuzevault and beyond, binders have contributed an important material dimension to any consideration of the book-as-object. That this is a recent development is underscored by Jean Toulet who, in his discussion of the bindings of Georges Leroux notes:

Il y a un siècle seulement que les reliures, par une fracture décisive, et par la grâce d'individualités fortes, sont devenues le substrat de créations spécifiques par lesquelles une technique vénérable, étonnamment constante en son principe, est dépassée par des projets artistiques individualisés.

(It has only been a century since bindings, thanks to a decisive break and strong personalities, have become the substratum of specific creations through which a venerable technique of remarkable consistency has been outstripped by individualized artistic projects.)¹

Any decisive break with tradition, such as the one to which Toulet refers, implies a reassessment in the form of a simultaneous recognition and questioning of that tradition. Such a reassessment, as well as a number of its ramifications, will be the subject of what follows, as we examine interpretive strategies involved in the binder's approach to the text. Part of an ongoing inquiry into the creations of several leading binders in France, our interviews and our work in the studios and classes of these artists have led us to investigate the threads that link French bookbinding to major developments in the graphic and plastic arts by way of the specific characteristics of art bookbinding; these include, but are not limited to, the problems presented by the decorative surface, the incidence of sculpted forms, and the exaltation of sheer materiality in the ongoing experiment in covering the text. For the book as fashioned by the bookbinder is an object with a voice, and part of our inquiry involves the ways which binders speak with that voice, and hear and understand it in the work of their colleagues.

In every book-lover there lurks somewhere, and to a greater or lesser degree, a book fetishist: the heft and feel of the book, its format, the smell of the paper, the

beauty of the printed characters, the various textures of the covers, from the humble papers and cloths to the luxurious, grainy skins—all these sensual, tactile pleasures rarely leave readers indifferent. But the history of art binding in this century—indeed, since the latter part of the nineteenth century—has tended increasingly to make of the decorated binding a rival of the text it covers, an *objet de spectacle*, something to be viewed, not touched.

Several historical factors conspired to create this tendency, which evolved rather rapidly around the end of the nineteenth century; all contributed in greater or lesser degree to the break to which Jean Toulet refers. Among the more significant must be counted:

- The gifted studio practitioners of pastiches of previous binding styles, who, by their manipulation of the history of binding practices and forms, brought to the fore a self-conscious awareness of their craft and, thereby, the beginnings of its legitimization as an independent art form. They also begin the validation, in artistic terms, of the distinction between the craftsman who executes a binding, and the *maquettiste*, or designer, who creates it.
- The nineteenth century illustrated, industrial cloth binding, known as the *cartonnage*, that made elaborate cover decors in mimetic harmony with the book's subject or theme a given (one thinks of the famous *cartonnage* bindings on the Hetzel editions of Jules Verne's *Voyages extraordinaires*). This problem of mimetic illustration or decor constitutes, of course, a defining point in the transition towards twentieth-century art generally. In the book arts, as Renée Hubert has shown, mimesis undergoes a decisive mutation thanks to the surrealists.²
- And finally, the development and subsequent success of the *livre de peintre*, which had the effect of unsettling and thus problematizing the heretofore hierarchical relationship of author to illustrator and text to image, at the same time as it promoted the idea that creative expression found in the book a privileged field of activity.

But one of the end results of the constantly growing importance of the decorated book surface, and the one that creates the most serious paradox, has been that art bindings become art objects, bearing on their decorated

surfaces fixed evocations of the world inside a book that will not be handled or read. As a case in point, we can cite a visit to the Bibliothèque Doucet in Paris, where research on book illustration required one of us to consult a rare edition (only 122 copies printed) of three tales by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, illustrated by J. E. Laboureur. The library's copy happened to arrive in one of the glorious, trendsetting bindings of Rose Adler. The book was presented with the infinite precautions that the safeguard of such a trea-

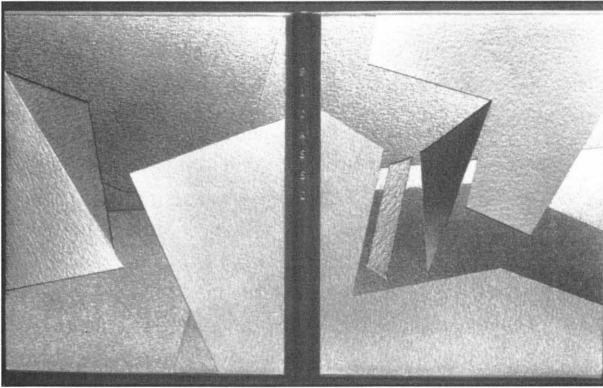


Figure 1

Paule Ameline, Picasso.

sure requires. One was, of course, advised not to touch the covers or the decorations, lest fingerprints or other traces remain. Further, and more ominously, it was forbidden to open the book more than half way, for fear of causing creases in the spine, or—something too dreadful even to contemplate—splitting the spine or the joints. (An additional problem contributing to the sequestering of books inside glass cases, and one to which we shall return, has been that French binding, while aesthetically satisfying, has the reputation, especially for the more functionalist English tradition, of being functionally fragile.) Such caveats are obviously appropriate, and quite comprehensible, but the fact is that the binding impeded research on the book.

Progressively, if unobtrusively, a sharp change in the attitudes of contemporary binders can be discerned. The binders under consideration in the next few pages are vastly different in taste and in style. All, however, are united by a common understanding of their craft that involves a constant *remise en question*, a questioning of the

bound book that is predicated on an awareness that the aesthetic and the functional are perhaps nowhere so dramatically interrelated as in the bound book, an object it is nearly impossible to approach without a host of preconceptions. As one binder noted in an interview, “*on se demande ce que cela peut bien être, un livre relié...*” (One wonders what “a bound book” could be...).

Paule Ameline describes herself as a contemporary in style, but “*traditionnelle dans le moderne*” (a modern traditionalist). Her evolution as a binder underwent a dramatic change several years ago in response to a technical, material problem: the increasing expense involved in the execution of standard gold and mosaic decors. It must be recalled that in the highly structured and specialized world of French art-binding, a forwarder does not usually execute decors. As a design binder, Paule Ameline’s desire to become as self-sufficient as possible in the creating and

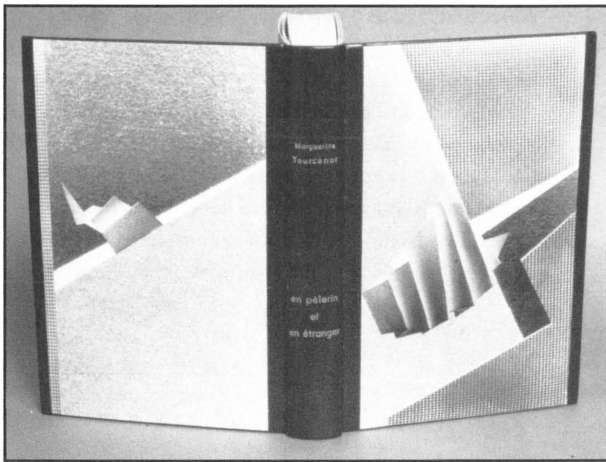


Figure 2
Paule Ameline,
M. Yourcenar's en pèlerin et en étranger.

executing of her decors led her to experiment with different materials not usually associated with art-binding, and specifically airbrush treated papers and collage, as in her bindings for works by Picasso and Marguerite Yourcenar (see figures 1 and 2). Using a variation of a commonplace structural design known as an *encadrement*, where the external covers are edged in leather, thus serving as a frame to the decor, she has used collage or folded papers painted with an airbrush to play with three-dimensional perspective.

The use of the airbrush allows for a soft, sensual juxtaposition to the smooth, almost textureless surface of the box calf. In this way, the binder's ingenuity has allowed her to employ calf for structural strength, but to compensate for its lack of grain in the layered surfaces of the papers. As we shall see in the work of other binders, the interpretive strategies deployed in creating a decor for a specific text are often accompanied by reflections of a practical order. Paule Ameline has not lost sight of the fact that the book is the object.

Claude Honnelaitre emphasizes her sense that the book has a material presence that she does her best to preserve when she talks about having "*un décor dans mes doigts*" (finding a decor at her fingertips). Hers is a *travail de recherche* that seeks to integrate the book and its history into modernist techniques like collage and technology through play and attention to random elements. To this end, she has used abstract photography, torn or shredded papers, collage and xerox imagery. Indeed, when the drum of her copier became scratched, she created a new decor from the regularity of the irregular copies the machine was producing. For the *Edit du Roy pour le règlement des relieurs et doreurs* of 1686 (see figure 3), she has used an encadrement binding to set off a decor attained by the multiple passage of the cover sheets through a typewriter. The resulting patterns are entirely produced by the strike of letters and/or blanks; they externalize the

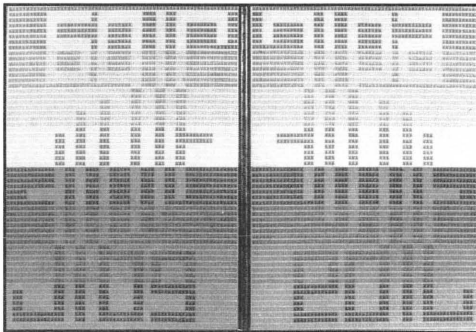


Figure 3

Claude Honnelaitre, *Edit du roi*.

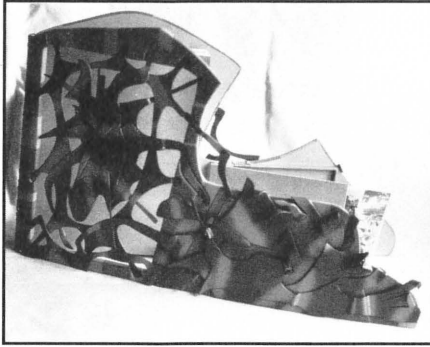


Figure 4

Daniel Knoderer, *L'araignée d'eau*.

problem of page setting so as to recall the typographical enterprise in which the binder comes to participate. Fittingly, the book contains the statutes governing the binder's craft in the seventeenth century, even as its covers, in their passage from lighter to darker impressions and from illegibility to legibility, celebrate the printer's magic. Like Paule Ameline, and in a reverse alchemy typical of modern binding, Claude Honnelaitre has sought to confer a textural richness to her designs in the absence of the gold tooling that has so dominated binding tradition.

Daniel Knoderer's work can at first glance seem the exception that proves the rule. It presents at once a defiant extreme and a logical conclusion of a common feature of binding, that is, binding as sculpture. With its mosaics and layered, carved surfaces, binding frequently involves the relief and texture that we commonly associate with the sculpted object. Knoderer picks up the force line that relates binding to sculpture and follows it through exclusively. He thus arrives at a sculptural object that in its self-conscious mimicry displays the humor of the post-modern object. To see one of these bindings is not to identify it immediately with bookbinding or even with a book, but with the book-object, or the object as book. For the surrealist tale *L'araignée d'eau* (see figure 4), he has externalized the baroque creepiness of the narrative by a manipulation of a falsely mimetic design. The green and gold plastic and box calf of the covers are a material illustration of the text, but one that reveals first and foremost in its materiality, not its referentiality.

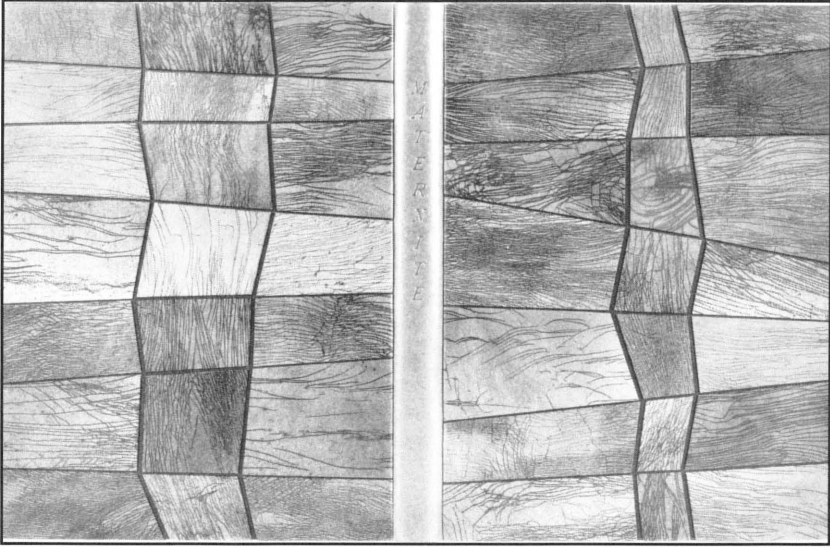


Figure 5

Sün Evarad, Maternité. By permission of Didier Foubert, Paris.



Figure 6

Sün Evarad, Proust/Alechinsky. By permission of Didier Foubert, Paris.

Sün Evrard sees the book as a support to a creative meditation that results in a material poem. This binder is strongly committed to conservation and preservation techniques, outspoken in her conviction that the book must be functionally strong and solid enough in its structure to retain its initial purpose—to be read and savored for the text it contains. She, too, is constantly open to chance and to random possibility, particularly in her use of exotic skins (kangaroo, crocodile, ostrich) and her unorthodox treatment of more traditional skins. She has moroccan and oasis leathers skived or shaved so that the commonly used finished surface, or *fleur*, is feathered off, thus revealing the veins and intrinsic patterns in the skins. Once blow-dyed, these become the fundamental basis for a decor that may later be embellished in ways that tend to accentuate differences of texture.

But Sün Evrard is committed not just to the creative aesthetics of her bindings. She works tirelessly on the strength and durability of their structure. To this end, she often uses what she calls a simplified binding (*see figures 5 and 6*), a seemingly delicate, but surprisingly sound construction that allows for maximum flexibility and the complete opening of the text. This binding is a direct response to the centuries-long practices when binding deferred to finishing, when the book's construction evolved to facilitate the work of the gold tooler who created the lavish and luxurious out of the drab. But this frequently resulted in a book whose joints were fragile, in part because the skins were skived too thin, and whose text could not easily be accessed because the stiff spine could not give. The cover boards in a simplified binding, on the other hand, are connected by a flap directly to the opening joint: the book can be opened flat without doing damage to the text or the covering material.

Sün Evrard's serendipitous use of natural texture can also be seen in the illustrations presented here. Unfortunately, what one cannot see is her simultaneous play with color, used to accentuate and highlight the natural tones of the more muted skins. The spine on *Maternité* (*figure 5*), for example, is in bright red box calf, and the third block down on the center panel has been dyed a similar color, giving an unexpected highlight to the subtle, muted greys of the other blocks. She, too, strives to create a binding which is a truly integrated part of the whole, which

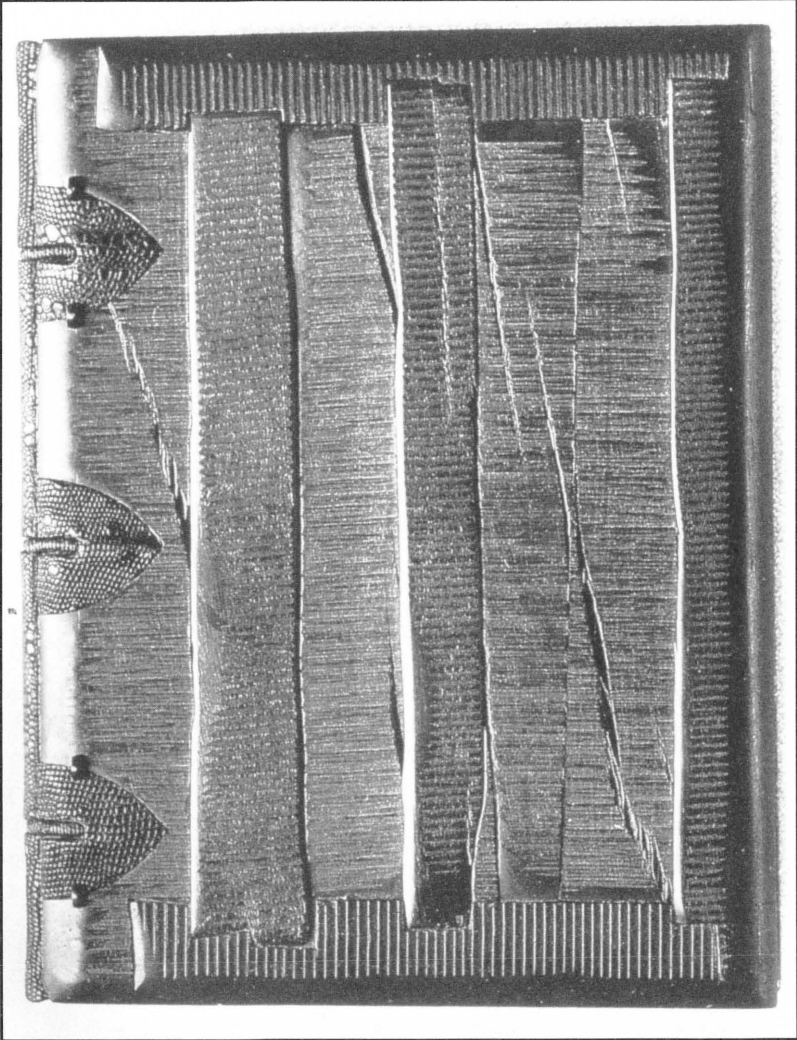


Figure 7

Jean de Gonet, Michaux's Peintures.

embraces the text and is ultimately at its service, but with great refinement and art.

Jean de Gonet is commonly recognized as one of the most important binders working today.³ Regarded as an unparalleled innovator, he is self-taught in the profession and, thus, brings to his craft little baggage regarding past orthodoxies. His style begins, and indeed ends, with the architecture of the book. In reverting to the type of solid skeletal structure found in books of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, he emphasizes perhaps more visibly than any other practitioner the profound relationship between structural and aesthetic integrity. He also restores to the object its mystery, the newness the book had when so very few people had books. For his binding of Henri Michaux's *Peintures* (figure 7), he has combined exotic materials like cut scraps of wood (ebony) and lizard skins with a spine of exposed cords. His bindings open a broad realm of possibilities, shedding the more traditional shackles of gold and mosaic decors, shedding even the titles that personalize the book.

His style is especially open to whim and humor so that, like Daniel Knoderer, he can be seen as a postmodernist in his sense of formal play with givens, and in his insistence on surfaces and recyclings. The binding he created for Octavio Paz's *Hommages et Profanations*, illustrated by Zammartu (see figure 8), is a case in point. Using traditional calf, but *oxydé et ciré* (burnished and polished), he has produced a pastiche of the so-called *du seuil* bindings of the seventeenth century. The characteristic decorative pattern of the *du seuil* binding has, however, been manipulated by sculpted relief and unexpected touches of color, resulting in an emblematic binding, an ahistorical creation that announces the history of binding by placing it in a decidedly self-conscious twentieth-century context.

As the examples of the five binders discussed above demonstrate, there are many different solutions to the problem of covering the text without smothering it. In their emphasis, for the most part, on textures and functional form, these practitioners of an ancient craft display an abiding concern for the harmonious wedding of binding to text. Indeed, to describe what they attempt, we may borrow from the jargon of the musician, who is said to "cover" when he performs a tune written by someone else, and in so doing, announces his interpretation even as he

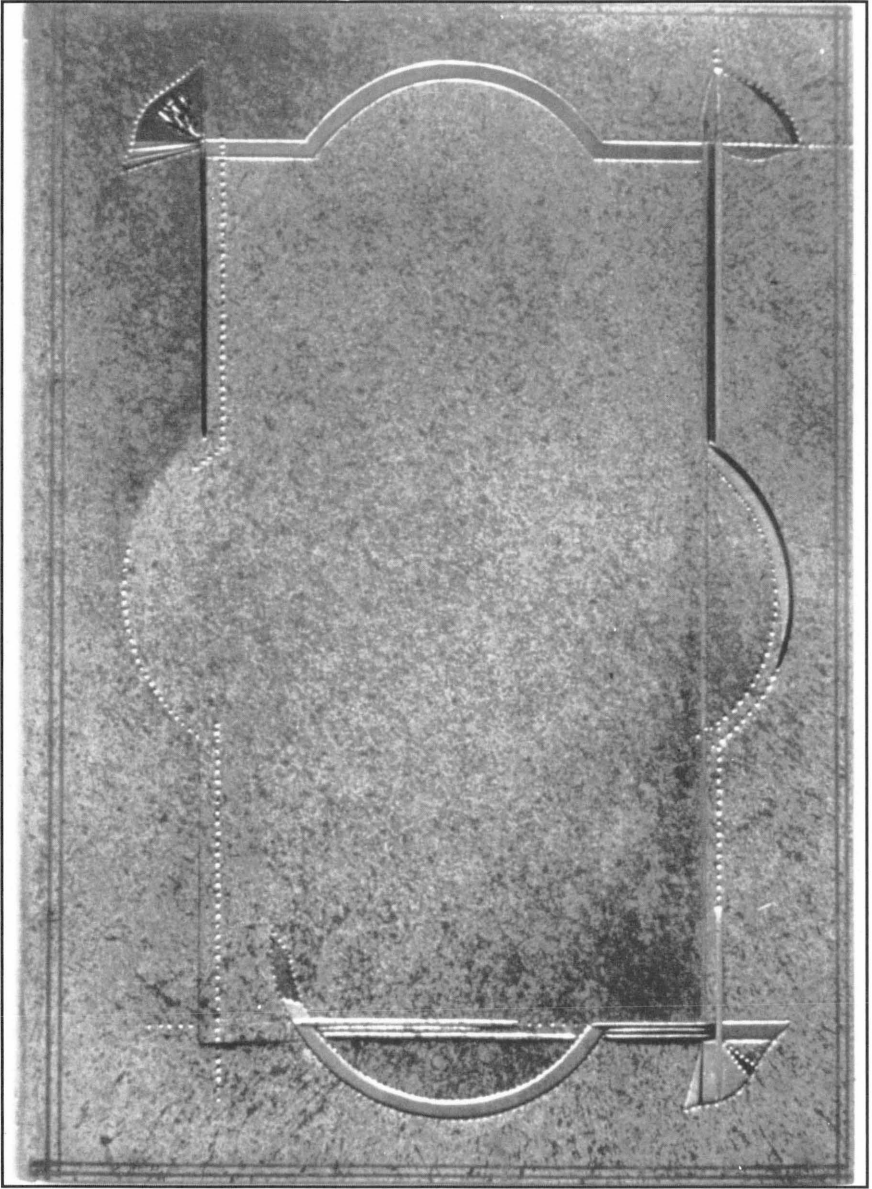


Figure 8
Jean de Gonet, Paz's Hommages et Profanations.

acknowledges its source. Now, scholars such as Robert Darnton and Roger Chartier have argued persuasively that the physical supports of the text—its paper, type, *mise en page*—are far from neutral or indifferent elements to the practice of reading. That bookbinding should be added to such a list seems both obvious and overdue. The virtuoso, contemporary renderings of the bound book by the binders studied here result in objects that are at once strange and familiar, and that invite the reader to a renewed, attentive consideration of an object which is, to quote Baudelaire, “*jeune, et pourtant très vieux*” (young, and yet so very old).

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jean Toulet, Introduction to *Georges Leroux* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1990) p. 9.
- ² On Jules Verne *cartonnages*, see Michel Roethel's two articles in *Connaissance des arts*, April and September, 1978. For an exhaustive study of the *cartonnage* binding at that critical moment when artisanry and industrialization collide, see Sophie Malavieille, *Reliures et cartonnages d'éditeur en France au XIXe siècle, 1815–1865* (Paris: Promodis, 1985). Finally, on the significance of mimetic illustration and its fate at the hands of the surrealists, see Renée R. Hubert, *The Surrealist Illustrated Book* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).
- ³ See Dominique Fourcade's provocative preface to *Jean de Gonet, relieur: une première retrospective* (Bruxelles: Bibliothèque Wittockiana, 1989).