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Using Historical Bindings in Producing Contemporary Artists' Books

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USING HISTORICAL BINDINGS IN PRODUCING
CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS' BOOKS

by

Islam Mahmoud Mohamed Aly

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts
degree in Book Arts in the Graduate College of
The University of Iowa

August 2013

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Tim Barrett

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Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Islam Mahmoud Mohamed Aly

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Book Arts at the August 2013 graduation.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER		
I. BOOKBINDING MODELS	2
II. ARTIST’S BOOKS	17
CONCLUSION	32
REFERENCES	34

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1.	Nag Hammadi binding model.....	5
2.	Late Coptic cutaway model.....	6
3.	Late Coptic cutaway model.....	7
4.	Multi-quire Coptic model.....	8
5.	Multi-quire Coptic model with wrapping bands and bookmark.....	9
6.	Two mini Ethiopian models.....	10
7.	Greek sewing model.....	11
8.	Islamic binding model.....	12
9.	India Orissa palm leaf model.....	13
10.	Palm leaf binding model.....	14
11.	Early medieval cutaway binding model.....	15
12.	Metal clasps study.....	16
13.	<i>Concoctions</i>	20
14.	Another view of <i>Concoctions</i>	20
15.	<i>Recursive Sequence-1</i>	21
16.	Another view of <i>Recursive Sequence-1</i>	21
17.	<i>The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 1</i>	22
18.	Another view of <i>The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 1</i>	22
19.	<i>The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 2</i>	23
20.	Another view of <i>The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 2</i>	23

21.	<i>Crucial Perimeter</i>	24
22.	Another view of <i>Crucial Perimeter</i>	24
23.	<i>Ethiopian Talismanics</i>	25
24.	Another view of <i>Ethiopian Talismanics</i>	25
25.	<i>Corrugating structure</i>	26
26.	Another view of <i>Corrugating structure</i>	26
27.	<i>The Spice series-7 spices</i>	27
28.	<i>Precious</i>	28
29.	<i>Confined</i>	29
30.	<i>28 Letters</i>	30
31.	Another view of <i>28 Letters</i>	30
32.	<i>Capacious</i>	31
33.	Another view of <i>Capacious</i>	31

INTRODUCTION

I regard bookbinding as a culturally-rich format that holds great meaning. I am interested in making models of strictly historical structures but incorporating contemporary content with those forms, because I think the contrast between the historic form and the contemporary content makes the work striking and yet cohesive. I use my different experiences in bookbinding to enhance my work in making artists' books. I want to reuse these rich structures and give them a new life as artists' books. I am using two main themes. The first is abstract, where I'll explore texture, color, and form. For example, the book content might depend on the color of the dyed paper, or texture and sound of handmade paper. The second theme is language; I am interested in the similarities and differences between the English and Arabic languages. For example: writing, pronunciation, letterforms, and typography. I am also creating pieces where these themes will intersect through the use of material. In my work I experiment with different techniques on handmade paper such as laser cutting, waxing, stitching, and paper dyeing. My book art reproduces familiar book structures that embody the heritage of book history but contain some of the wonder that can come from contemporary book art. In essence, I wish to explore new ways to use the culturally-rich structures of bookbinding in contemporary artists' book practice.

CHAPTER I

BOOKBINDING MODELS

My first encounter with historical bindings was in the spring of 2009 in a class with Julia Leonard at the University of Iowa Center for the Book. The class was called “Historical Book Structures,” and it explored the forms that existed in different cultures throughout the history of the book. For example: scrolls, wax tablets, palm leaf structures, early codices, and books with wooden boards, both Eastern and Western. I made the binding models in class using different sources such as instructions and demos from Professor Leonard, handouts from Paper Book Intensive (PBI), and instructions from landmark references such as John A. Szirmai (1999), Berthe van Regemorter (1993), Jane Greenfield & Jenny Hille (2008), Gulnar Kheirallah Bosch, and John Carswell & Guy Petherbridge (1981). In addition, the University of Iowa Conservation Lab had an excellent collection of binding models. I became interested in how each structure had unique features, and how their forms transmitted information about their history. For example, when I made a model of the *St Cuthbert Gospel*, I learned about its significance and importance not only as a text but also for its physical importance being the earliest surviving intact Western binding and an example of the possible Coptic influences on both the binding style and the decoration.

I continued to make other binding models through workshops and self-exploration. I ended up with a number of blank historical bindings that I enjoyed looking at, browsing, and examining. Keith Smith (2003) writes about this process:

Pick up a book, hold it. Feel it. Look at it, then examine it, not routinely or mechanically by habit but make a conscious effort to see at every step in the

process, every movement of the eyes or hands... I use a blank book so that I am not seduced by this picture or distracted by that composition or those words...The procedure I am describing can't be learned by reading. It must be experienced.¹

When I made a historical book structure, I went through a learning process. I learned the history of the book structure's development and its relation to other structures. I learned the physical aspects of constructing the binding and saw how a book form was constructed in a specific sequence. I learned about the use of the different materials such as paper, wood, leather, and dyes. I learned to make choices in selecting and replacing traditional materials that I didn't have access to. I was not only concerned about the decorative aspects of the book, but I also paid attention to the physical aspects such as the text block material, end bands, binding, fastening, as well as decoration. By creating these models I gained skills and experience. This experience helped me to expand my view of the book as not only a recording tool, but also as an artifact that has a special energy and presence.

Whenever I exhibited the models I created, people would be interested in the feel and look of them and would want to know more about them, asking: "How were they made? Why are they not used anymore? Why don't contemporary books have this feel and presence?" These questions prompted me to use binding forms, and I started to think of different ways to use them in book art. I wanted to recreate that presence that contemporary books have lost. I was inspired to explore further the possibilities of binding in creating contemporary artists' books.

¹ Keith Smith, *Structure of the Visual Book*. New York: Keith Smith Books, 2003, 52.

Daniel Essig describes in *The Penland Book of Handmade Books: Master Classes in Bookmaking Techniques* (2004) how, “Bookbinders have been recycling books for 2000 years.”² He uses the first Coptic books as an example. With the scarcity of paper and other materials, binders would use old papyrus scrolls and laminate them together to make something similar to book boards, a practice which continued in different cultures through history. I think of book artists as recycling materials, but also recycling the forms of the book using old structures incorporated with new concepts and content.

² LaFerla, Jane, and Veronika, Gunter. *The Penland Book of Handmade Books: Master Classes in Bookmaking Techniques*. New York: Lark, 2004, 15.



Figure 1. Nag Hammadi binding model. Papyrus pages, papyrus cartonnage and leather covers, long stitch, 7" x 6.5", 2009



Figure 2. Late Coptic cutaway model. Papyrus pages, papyrus cartonnage, leather covers, and linen thread, 6" x 4", 2011



Figure 3. Late Coptic cutaway model. Paper, linen cloth, linen thread, papyrus cartonnage and leather covers, 6" x 5", 2009



Figure 4. Multi-quire Coptic model (4th century Glazier codex) paper, leather straps, and wooden boards, 6" x 5", 2009



Figure 5. Multi-quire Coptic model with wrapping bands and bookmark. Paper, tooled leather, bone, and wooden boards 6" x 5.5" (30" straps), 2009



Figure 6. Two mini Ethiopian models. Paper, tooled leather, linen thread and wooden boards 4" x 2.5", 2009

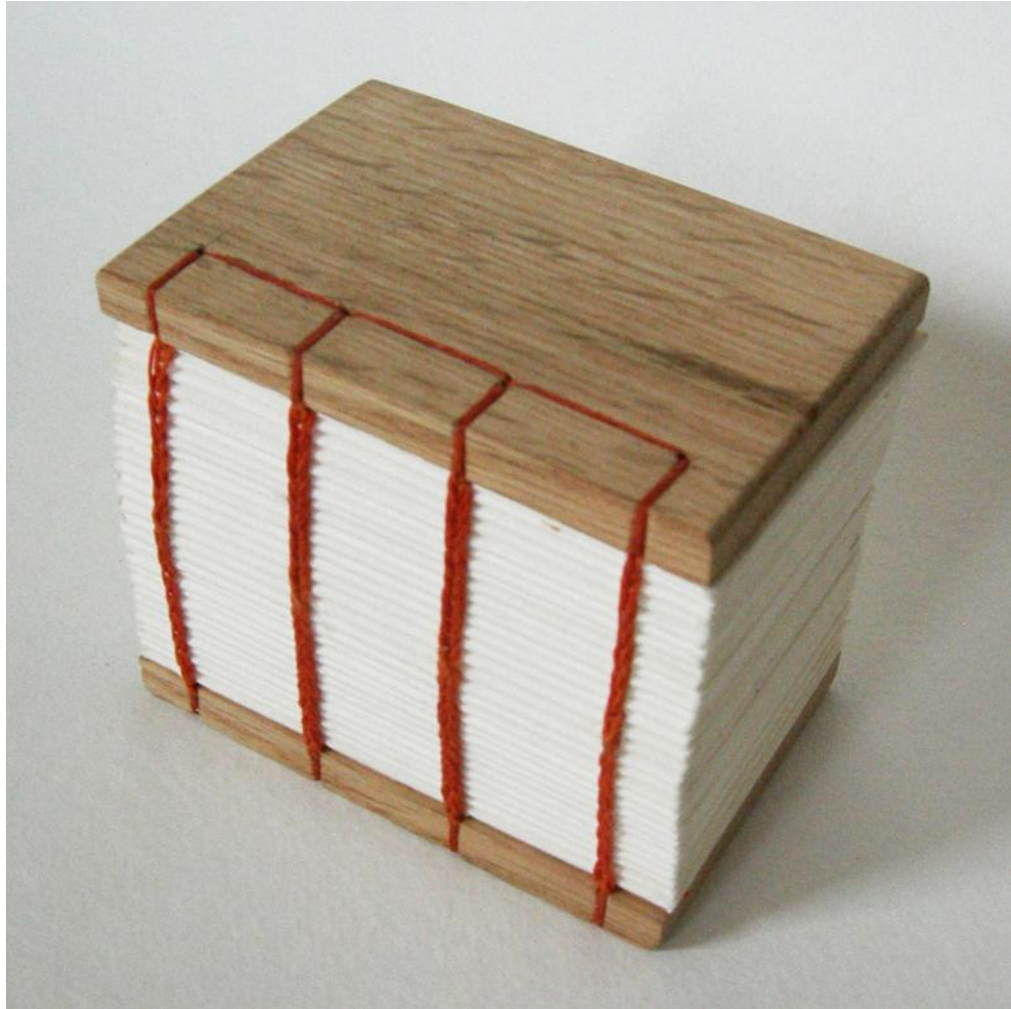


Figure 7. Greek sewing model. Paper, linen thread and wooden boards,
6" x 7" x 3.5", 2009



Figure 8. Islamic binding model. Handmade Islamic paper, handmade book boards, linen thread, leather, 6.5" x 5", 2012



Figure 9. India Orissa palm leaf model. Balsa wood with printing and drawing, 1" x 12"
(9.5" extended), 2011



Figure 10. Palm leaf binding model. Dyed Bass wood, gold leaf, hemp rope, 1" x 11.5", 2009



Figure 11. Early medieval cutaway binding model. Paper, linen thread, and wooden boards, 6" x 7", 2011



Figure 12. Metal clasps study. Paper, leather, wooden boards, brass, 5" x 3.5", 2012

CHAPTER II

ARTISTS' BOOKS

The binding plays a powerful role in producing my artist's books. The look and presence of these bindings is an integral part of my work and is linked to the content and aesthetics. The binding is such a powerful tool that it can tell me a lot about the book, such as its development, production, and use. Historically, book structures contained a lot of text, either as calligraphy or print, and they sometimes also included illumination and illustration. I explore different ways to add alternative content to these structures while keeping their appearance and integrity. I want to reuse the old structures and give them a new life as artists' books. I was inspired by artists who had the same approach as me in using traditional book forms such as Daniel Essig, Shanna Leino, and Hedi Kyle. Daniel Essig creates unique sculptural books with different cultural influences. He uses different ancient binding techniques such as Coptic, Ethiopian, Greek, and Medieval. He also sometimes mixes more than one binding technique. Shanna Leino is also interested in historical structures, traditional materials, and using them in book arts. Hedi Kyle works to deconstruct the traditional structures by mixing them and building completely new forms. I was inspired by how Kyle uses uncommon and new materials in her work but still connects her artist's books with traditional structures.

In making artist's books I have two approaches. First when I have a concept that I want to include in a structure, I start comparing the different binding structures and see what would best be used. For example in my piece *Recursive Sequence-1*, I had 40 signatures so I needed a binding model that would facilitate binding these signatures together. I found that using a Byzantine binding would be perfect with my book; the use of the extended link stitch is visually appealing and having the link stitches in two

directions would divide the sewing tension to both sides of the book's wooden boards.

Another example is my piece *The Marginalia series, Marginalia-2*. This book is based on Arabic letters and text so I used a traditional Islamic binding with the fore edge and envelope flaps.

My second approach in making books is starting with the structure and letting it inspire the type of content. For example, I wanted to do a book inspired from the Ethiopian codices so I used the structure but incorporated contemporary content and materials. My book uses handmade paper not vellum, a cover pressed using polymer plate instead of tooled leather, and it shows the different talismanic elements through texture, color, and paper cutting.

My artist's book work is not strictly historical. Sometimes I mix different physical elements in a new structure which makes new meaning and makes the books attractive to the viewer so that he or she is curious about the kind of content included, for example, using a Coptic end band on an Islamic model or using an Islamic-style paper with Ethiopian sewing and Coptic end bands. For *The Marginalia series, Marginalia-2*, I used western-style paper, Coptic end bands, and Islamic binding. I also sometimes use contemporary materials. For example in *The Marginalia series, Marginalia-1*, I used Plexiglas for the covers instead of wooden boards, and in *Corrugating structure* I used handmade paper and basswood instead of palm leaf.

My work has two main themes. The first is abstract, in which I explore texture, color, and form. I do this through paper dyeing, watermarking, and embedding objects in the paper. The second theme is language. I am interested in the similarities and differences between English and Arabic languages in their writing, pronunciation,

letterforms, and typography. For example, in *Recursive Sequence-1* I used different forms of one Arabic letter. In *The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 1*, I used images of Arabic calligraphy of commentaries from manuscripts for their aesthetics not their meaning. I experiment with different techniques on handmade paper such as laser cutting, waxing, stitching, and paper dyeing. My book art reproduces familiar book structures that embody the heritage of book history but contain some of the wonder that can come from contemporary book art. For example, in *Recursive Sequence-1* I used the Greek structure, but I made it with paper and used Arabic letters. Another example is *Crucial Perimeter* where I used a Coptic structure but I exaggerated the number of sections and made laser etchings of Arabic calligraphy on the edges while I kept the inside of the book empty. I hope that by making these books I will preserve the legacy of bookbinding in a more contemporary form.

In the following works I want the viewer to have a deeper experience when interacting with these forms, to think about what content might be included and then, once that content is revealed, to consider why I chose to use a particular historical structure for a given content. I hope the viewer will think about the visual as well as the tactile appearance of the books. I want these structures to be inspiring books. I want the viewer to slow down and spend some time flipping through these books so that he or she can learn to respect the book form and its traditions.



Figure 13. *Concoctions*. Hibiscus embedded in handmade flax paper, linen thread, Cave paper covers, modified accordion binding, 4" x 6" (33" extended), 2013

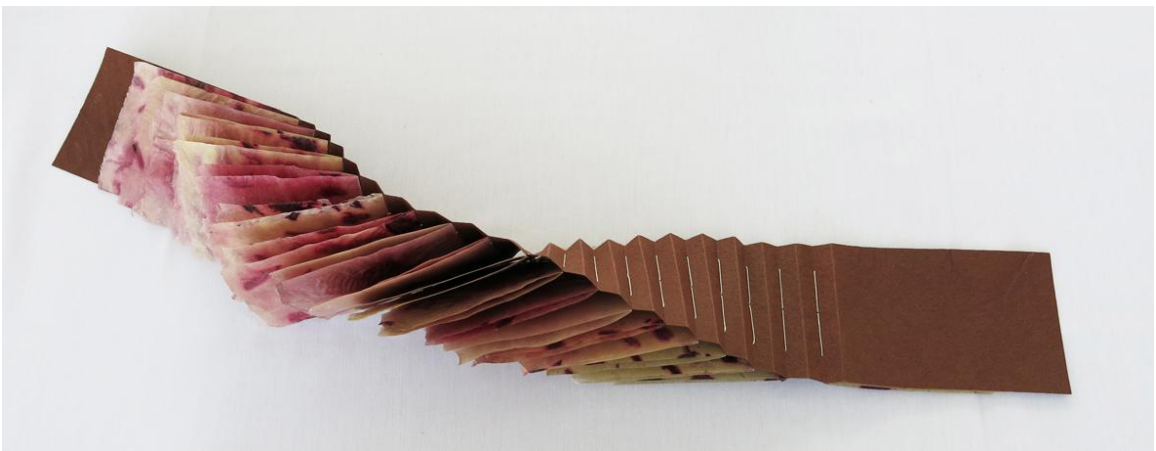


Figure 14. Another view of *Concoctions*.

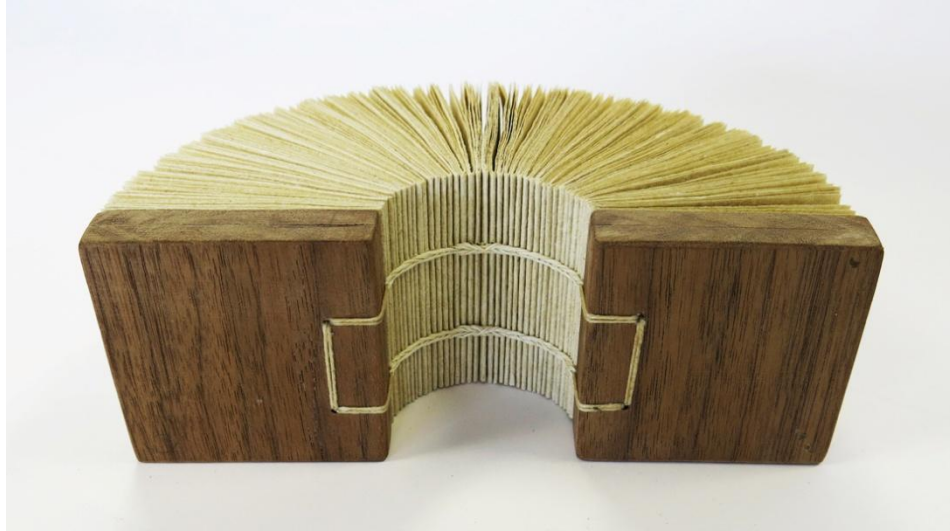


Figure 15. *Recursive Sequence-1*. Laser cut handmade flax paper, linen thread, wooden boards, Greek binding, 2" x 2" x 4", 2013.



Figure 16. Another view of *Recursive Sequence-1*



Figure 17. *The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 1*. Laser cut handmade flax paper, Plexiglas covers, linen thread, Ethiopian and Coptic binding, 6" x 8", 2013



Figure 18. Another view of *The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 1*



Figure 19. *The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 2*. Stenciled and dyed handmade flax paper, linen and silk thread, leather-covered Islamic binding, 4.5" x 4", 2013



Figure 20. Another view of *The Marginalia Series-Marginalia 2*



Figure 21. *Crucial Perimeter*. Laser cut paper, embossed leather covers, modified Ethiopian and Coptic binding, 2.5" x 2.5" x 5", 2013.



Figure 22. Another view of *Crucial Perimeter*



Figure 23. *Ethiopian Talismantics*. Drawing and hand cutting on handmade flax paper, embossed leather covers, linen thread, Ethiopian binding, 4" x 8", 2003.



Figure 24. Another view of *Ethiopian Talismantics*



Figure 25. *Corrugating structure*. Drawing and inkjet printing on watermarked handmade flax and abaca paper, basswood, linen thread, and gold leaf. Orissa palm leaf style binding, 12" x 2" (17.5" extended), 2013



Figure 26. Another view for *Corrugating structure*.



Figure 27. *The Spice series-7 spices*. Different spices embedded in handmade flax Paper, wooden boards, linen thread, Ethiopian and Coptic binding, 4" x 4", 2013



Figure 28. *Precious*. Laser-cut paper, gold-leaf-covered wooden boards, linen thread, Ethiopian and Coptic binding, 3" x 2", 2013



Figure 29. *Confined*. Handmade flax paper, laser cutting, laser engraved wooden boards, late Coptic binding with leather straps, 3" x 5", 2013



Figure 30. *28 Letters*. Laser cut handmade flax paper, accordion binding, Cave paper covers, 6" x 7" (40" extended), 2012



Figure 31. Another view of *28 Letters*



Figure 32. *Capacious*. Handmade flax paper, wooden boards, Greek binding, 3" x 3", 2013



Figure 33. Another view of *Capacious*

CONCLUSION

In the pieces I made I tried using different historical models. I also used new and traditional materials, mixing different structures. Historical bindings can be innovative structures to use in artists' books because they spark ideas about content, material, and concept. They are a very powerful tool in creating contemporary artists' books, because they reflect the tradition of bookmaking and do not need an explanation, even if they don't contain words. These structures easily connect the book art with people, making the viewers curious and thoughtful about history, art, and their intersection. In addition, the variation in the binding structures provides unlimited options for artists to experiment with and at the same time keep an honored tradition of the book. While I make books, I learn about the histories and cultures behind the structures. They are valuable sources for inspiration for contemporary artists because they have both visual and physical aspects that cannot be ignored by contemporary book artists. I concentrated on a number of them because of their unique features such as the Nag Hammadi which are the first folded codices, the Coptic codex that opens flat and displays its distinctive end band with a link stitch on top, the Byzantine codex and its sewing on both sides which enables sewing large numbers of signatures with its extended link stitch, and the Islamic codex with its distinctive fore edge, envelope flaps, and the palm leaf structures which are very unique structures with completely different mechanisms for reading and opening.

I always think about what the audience will gain from my work. I am more concerned about the *aesthetics* of the calligraphy and type than about the meaning, because the aesthetics cause the book to become an experience for the viewer. The bindings encourage the viewer to interact with the book, to touch it and turn the pages,

and the direct visual and tactile experience with the binding structures, materials, and content make the pieces more approachable. Even without words, they are still fascinating. I am hoping more people will learn that these historical bindings still exist and are still used in book art, and that the kind of content I use in my books will foster cross-cultural learning by making viewers learn about Islamic art and culture.

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