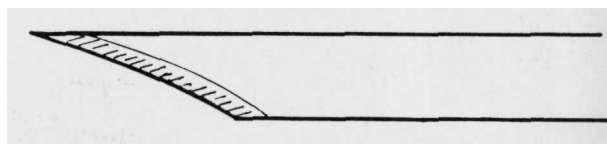


*O n l a y s :   S o m e   S u g g e s t e d   T e c h n i q u e s*

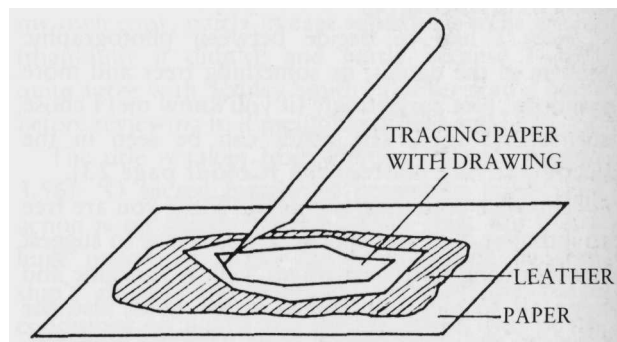
When I was first learning about the range of decorative techniques available to bookbinders, I came to the early decision that onlay was preferable to inlay because it left the basic functional binding intact. In spite of the most adverse conditions of wear and damp, the book would remain protected by its leather cover so long as I did not chop it about. That was thirty-five years ago, and I have come a long way from those ideas, but it did mean that from the beginning I concentrated on the use of onlays and exploited their various possibilities.

A simple basic onlay is a piece of thinly pared leather cut to shape and pasted on the cover. For me the following procedure produces the best results. The outline of the shape to be onlaid is drawn on plastic tracing paper leaving about 1/4" margin of extra paper outside the line. A completely separate drawing must be made for each individual onlay and should be as accurate as possible, especially if the onlays are to fit together in an intricate manner. (Plastic paper is a great help because it can be removed without damping which saves time and avoids some other small problems. It comes single and double sided, but I always use the single sided as there is, then, never a risk of finding you have cut out the shape in reverse!) Paste a piece of paper larger than the pared leather (cartridge or similar will do although hand-made is ultimately easier to remove) and lay on it the hair side of the leather, smoothing out all wrinkles. The leather will stretch quite a lot which will, of course, make it even thinner. I always cut away any blemishes in the leather first, that being the only certain way to avoid them. Then spread paste on the side of the tracing paper which has the drawing on it and position it on the flesh side of the leather. Put the whole sandwich under a light weight to keep it from curling and leave it to dry.

When dry the onlay can be cut out, making a bevelled cut through all three layers: the tracing paper, the leather and the cartridge, following the guide lines on the tracing paper. I use a knife with a long, narrow point made from a 1/2" hacksaw blade.



I am not comfortable with scalpels because I don't feel I can press as hard as I want without the risk of breaking the blade. I hold the knife at about 45 degrees, rather as I hold a pencil, and make sure the handle is always tilted over the onlay, not over the part to be discarded.

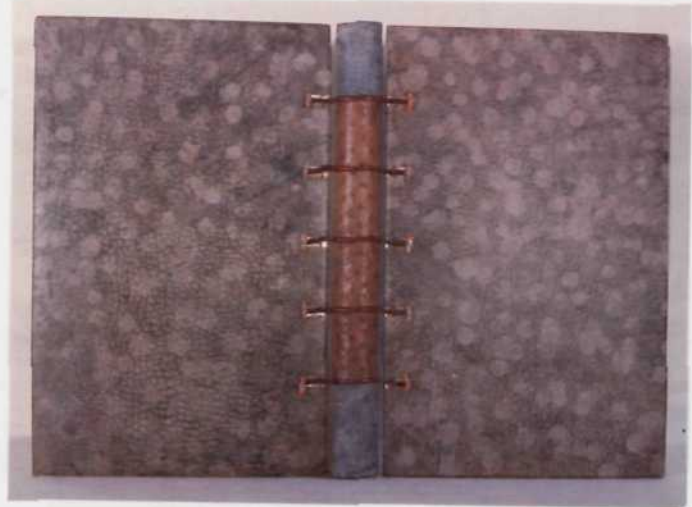


If the onlay leather is very dark coloured it may not be possible to see the guide lines. However, if the outline has been drawn over a slightly soft board there will be an impression of it on the tracing paper which is easy to see. Cutting a bevel in this manner ensures that it will be in the right direction and avoids the chance of a hair line of raw leather showing at the edge.

Make guide marks - not too heavy - on the cover, peel off the tracing paper, paste the onlay and position it on the book. Lay a sheet of blotting paper over the whole cover to absorb any excess paste and nip it for about five minutes, being sure to have the press screw centred over the *onlay* not over the board. Sometimes it seems appropriate to nip the whole book, sometimes only the board. Remove the book from the press and, with damp sponge or cotton wool, remove the paper from the hair side of the onlay. The thickness of the paper will have



Flora Ginn: *Serenity House*



Romilly Saumarez Smith: *Daughters of the House*



Jenni Grey: *The Butcher Boy*



Lester Capon: *Black Dogs*

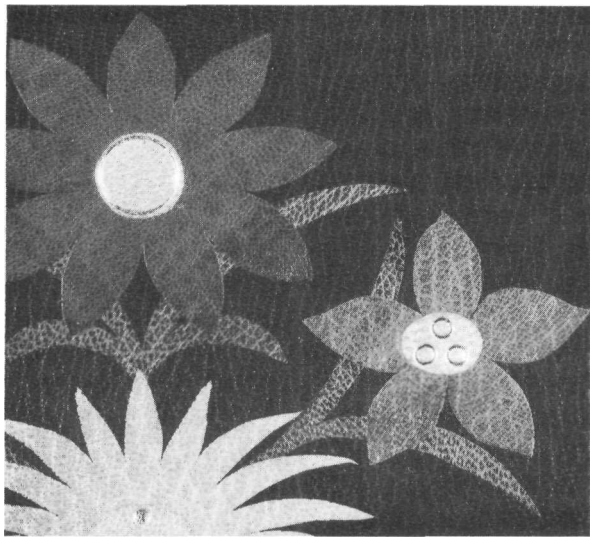


David Sellars: *The English Patient*



Paul C Delrue: *The Sacred Hunger*

helped to drive the onlay into the covering leather. If there are several onlays the paper should be removed from each piece after it has been nipped, especially if the onlays are adjoining, as it will allow for accurate positioning (no cracks). Also, the paper will be easier to remove if it is still damp. But beware of pressing the bare onlays while they still look wet, because this can flatten the grain and cause bruising and darkening. When onlays are on, paper removed and all appears dry, the book can have a longer pressing, or at least be left under a heavy weight. The boards should have been filled in before onlaying begins, otherwise the covers do not get adequate and even pressing.



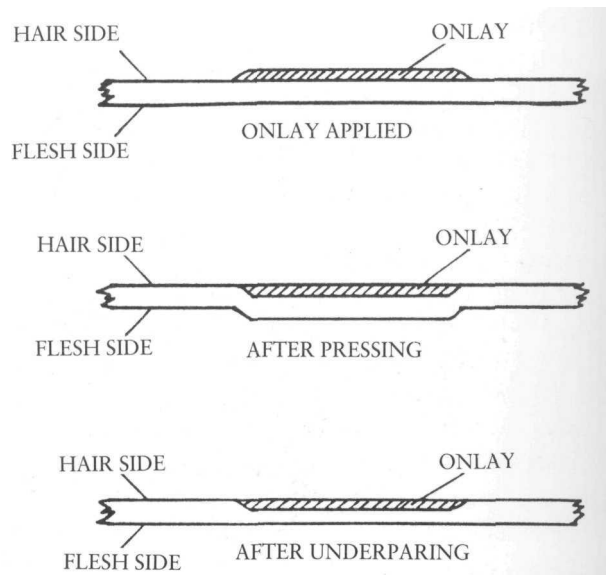
An onlay will be as thin as you make it. I have always pared onlays with a spokeshave, finishing off with a knife. I begin at the edge, taking very short strokes, pare it as thin as I can or want, then gradually work inwards to the centre with very short strokes.



Long strokes over partly thinned leather will stretch the leather, cause it to bunch up, catch and tear. A knife is then used to smooth out any irregularities. Using this method, I can pare leather very thin and can use scraps of any shape or size. Since use of the Brockman paring machine has become widespread, I am sure that a skilled operator can achieve excellent results.

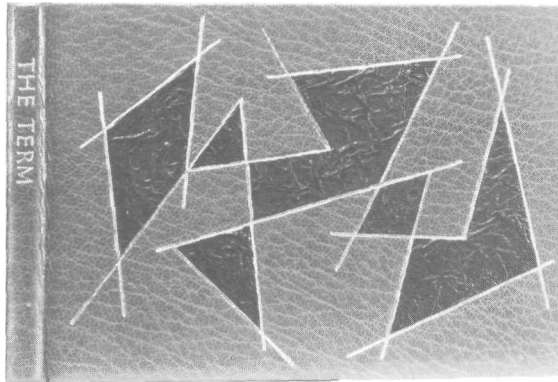
I always apply onlays with paste, occasionally adding a touch of PVA in the joint areas if the onlay is crossing the joint. If the onlay is to have blind or gold tooling on the edge and it has been applied with PVA, the hot tool can melt the adhesive and force it out, forming a fine thread difficult to remove.

If a level surface is wanted on the book cover, but there is a reason why the onlay cannot be made sufficiently thin, the effect can be achieved by underparing or by creating a recess. Underparing is done by applying the onlay to the cover before covering, then, with the spokeshave, removing the extra thickness from the flesh side of the cover. Making a recess, perhaps for a non-leather onlay, is done in a similar manner. The required shape is cut from card of an appropriate thickness, pasted on the cover and underpared. These techniques require careful planning. After paring the cover and marking clearly and precisely the board edges and the joints, paste the cover well, once only, and lay the pasted side on a sheet of Perspex, smoothing and pressing it down, but not stretching it. When it is completely dry - it will take a few hours - and lifted off the Perspex, the lines indicating the joints and board edges should be checked again and adjusted if necessary. Then the onlays or pieces of card are applied. The cover is then pressed for at least two or three hours with a hard board on the hair side and foam rubber between the flesh side and another board. This keeps the top surface flat and allows the excess thickness to protrude from the under side. The thicker areas can be gone over with the spokeshave until the whole cover feels flat and level.



The book is then covered and the rest of the forwarding completed. If recessed areas are being made, it is as well to leave the card in place until the time comes for replacement with the actual material. The card should be easy to remove with a damp sponge. This recessed area technique I often use when onlaying calf. The calf can be left thicker and the grain of the cover is flattened under the card so there is less likelihood of it showing through the calf. Also, I usually make recessed areas when making crumpled onlays because they blend into the cover better and seem less vulnerable to knocks.

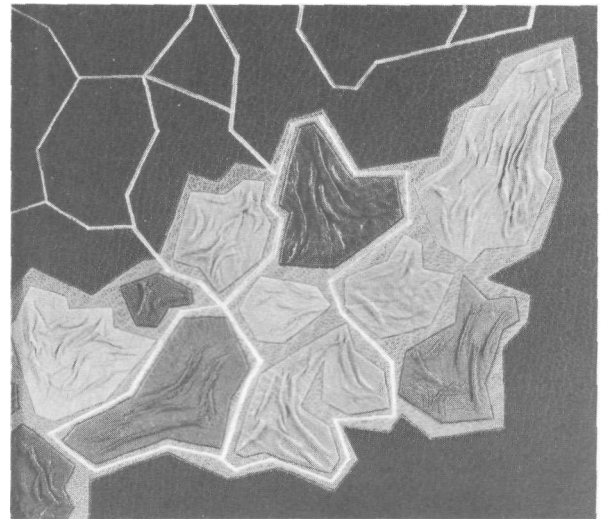
I discovered crumpled onlays by accident on an occasion when an onlay was slightly out of place and I pushed it hard to try to correct its position. Of course, it buckled under my fingers and I decided to plan for it next time.



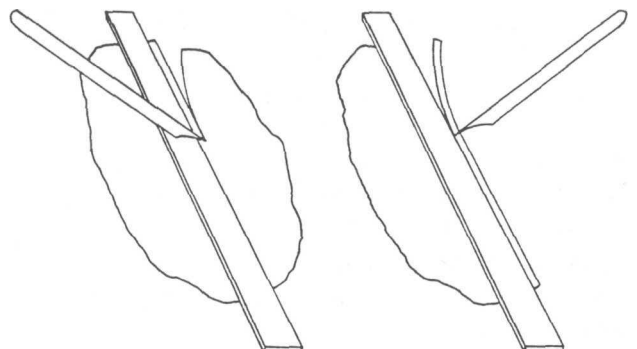
The first few times I mounted the onlays on tissue which was left permanently underneath them, but now I use plastic tracing paper which is removed.

The method I have devised for making crumpled onlays involves drawing the outline on plastic tracing paper and paring the leather in the usual way. The thinner the leather the finer will be the wrinkles. If the onlay is long and narrow, it is best to have the grain of the leather, if any, lie along it as the wrinkles will form lengthwise naturally. A sheet of heavy glass held upright in a lying press allows the work to be checked from both sides. Attach the tracing paper with Sellotape to the glass with the drawing outwards. Liberally paste the leather, place it on the tracing paper and model the leather as required. So long as the leather is kept wet, it is possible to take as long as necessary to get the desired effect. Remember that the wrinkles will shrink as they dry and lose prominence. It is best to avoid having bulky wrinkles and folds on the cutting lines as it will make it difficult to cut out the onlay accurately. Leave it to dry completely, then

carefully release the tracing paper from the glass and cut out the onlay on a bevel following the guide lines. Remove the tracing paper. Quickly but liberally paste the onlay and put it in place on the book. Lightly press it down with a damp sponge, check that the edges are all where they should be and be sure that they are all well down (I use only my fingers for this). Leave to dry. Once crumpled onlays are on a book, it cannot be pressed without padding, therefore it is wise to leave the application of them to the very last or as late as possible. Also, I like to blind tool the very edge of the onlays to seal them down and prevent roughness to the touch.



Another sort of onlay I have used often consists of a mosaic of tiny pieces of leather usually in the form of narrow strips. For these the leathers should be pared as thickly as possible, then pasted on a sheet of Perspex (paste on the Perspex, not on the leather) and allowed to dry. When the leather is dry, it lifts off easily. This stiffens and flattens the leather so that it is easier to cut into narrow strips. The strips are all cut on a bevel, hair side down, with a knife against a straight edge. When a very narrow strip is wanted, it can be made with two cuts



without moving the straight edge: first cut with the knife leaning to the left; second cut leaning to the right.

When enough strips have been cut, paste the piece of plastic tracing paper on which the outline of the onlay has been drawn and lay on it lens tissue. The outline should be visible through the tissue, but, if not, the lines can be emphasised once the paste has dried. It is useful, as well, to draw some general directional lines on the tissue to prevent stripes, curves etc. from developing accumulating errors. Note that narrow strips of thin leather can be pushed into curves quite easily. Applying paste to the tissue, not to the leather, and adding paste as the work progresses, then mount the strips on the tissue, starting at one edge. Place the first and last strips over the lines and extend all of them beyond the lines at the ends. The edges of the strips should overlap slightly, by approximately the amount of

bevel. Working over a light-box helps to avoid gaps. When the whole area is covered and the paste completely dry, place it between Formica pressing boards and press it for an hour or more. Then the onlay can be cut on a bevel, the tracing paper removed and the onlay affixed to the book in the usual manner. The lens tissue remains on the back holding the tiny pieces of leather together. Of course there is no limit to the ways the little pieces of leather can be cut and arranged, but the onlay as a whole should be cut out last to ensure an even outer edge.

The possibilities in the use of onlays are endless. Even were another binder to follow the techniques I have described here, the results would be slightly different from mine. I enjoy making onlays and experimenting with them and hope that others will be encouraged to develop them further.

