

## Good, Better, Best...

[Cover to Cover: Exposing the Bookbinder's Ancient Craft](#)



Not to be confused with 'poor', 'fair' or 'fine' (for these are booksellers' terms), the 'Good, Better, Best' cabinet was created simply to showcase some of the curator's personal favourites from Rare Books & Special Collections.

Hand-picked for their beauty, uniqueness and impeccable detail, these books highlight the training, practice, artistry, and patience necessary for a binder to reach the pinnacle of their trade. Enjoy!

### Good...

**The book-bills of Narcissus: An account rendered by Richard Le Gallienne; with a frontispiece by Robert Fowler. London: John Lane, 1895**

A splendid example of a 'Chivers' binding which exhibits a 1920s design of stylised narcissus on the front cover and spine, with a slightly simpler border to the back cover. Painted in subtle greens, blues and yellows, it has a delicately gold-tooled border, title and dentelles.



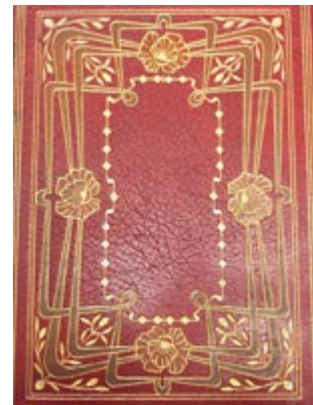
At the beginning of the 20th century, Cedric Chivers (1853-1929) of Bath, England, developed a remarkable technique for decorating the covers of books bound in vellum. Unlike the method patented by James Edwards, in which paintings were executed on the reverse side of the vellum showing through on the cover once bound, Chivers' designs were created on paper. They were applied to the book boards and then covered with transparent vellum. Chivers called this binding style 'Vellucent'. Vellucent books were usually lightly tooled in gold to highlight certain parts of the painted decoration but occasionally very thin layers of iridescent materials such as mother of pearl and precious metals were also laid under the vellum to enrich the design.

The first Vellucent binding appeared on a 1903 copy of *The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*. Bound in calf, it had a painting of a lady, surrounded by an elaborate Persian design, set into its front cover.

Better...

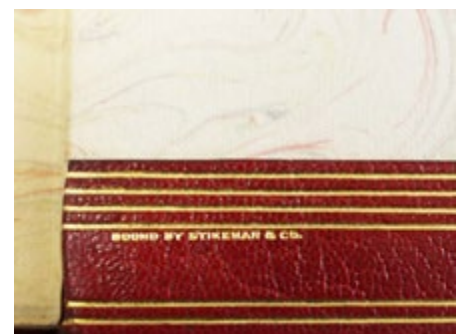
**Christmas carols, new and old; the words edited by Rev. Henry Ramsden Bramley; the music edited by John Stainer. London: George Routledge and Sons, 1871**

A custom 'Stikeman & Co.' design binding, this edition of *Christmas Carols* is particularly noteworthy. It is a fine example of early 20th century artisanship. Bound in full red, lightly crushed Levant (goatskin), its elaborate gilt cover decoration initially appears to be hand-tooled. On closer inspection, however, the tell-tale signs of hand-tooling are evident only in the cover's outer border. Comprising three straight rules, created using a heated brass fillet, the border lacks the depth of impression and precision typically associated with a blocked design. The cover's inner design, however, incorporating all of the flowers, leaves and decorative panels (many with additional brown and orange onlaid leather), would likely have been drawn first by hand on paper, with a steel die later cast from the pattern. The final metal block, with its design usually etched with a strong acid or perhaps engraved, would then be locked into the blocking press, where, under heat and pressure, the entire pattern would be pressed or stamped (in one motion) into the leather covered boards - one side at a time. A sheet of gold foil would then be added to the blocking press, where the process was repeated to fill the impressed areas, essentially creating the gilt border around each decoration. Similar to other Stikeman bindings, *Christmas Carols* also sports hand-tooled decorated gilt compartments to its spine, gilding to the top edge of its textblock, hand-sewn headbands, marbled endpapers and dentelles incorporating the impossibly small "Stikeman & Co." stamp.



The binding most likely dates from 1910-1915. As such, it is unlikely to be the work of the renowned American art book binder, Henry Stikeman, himself but that of another highly skilled binder within the Stikeman & Co. firm.

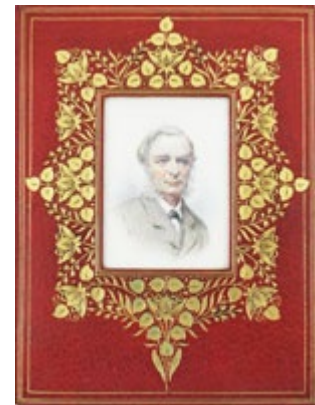
For those interested in learning more about Henry Stikeman and the fabulous bindings produced by his firm, Jeff Stikeman has created an excellent blog where he explores the history of the company: <https://jeffstikeman.wordpress.com/stikeman-bookbindings/>



Best...

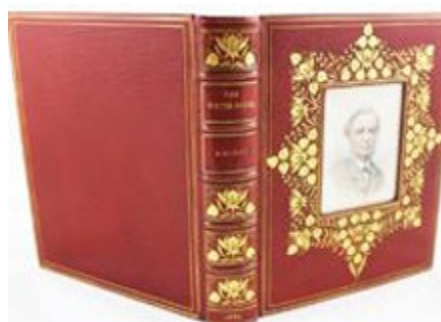
**The water-babies: A fairy tale for a land-baby. Charles Kingsley. London: Macmillan and Co., 1885**

In many ways the holy-grail of bindings, this edition of *The water-babies* exhibits one of the finest covers of all of the books held in Rare Books & Special Collections. This first edition is presented in a magnificent 'Cosway' binding by Rivière & Son in a red crushed Levant (goatskin). Its cover, with a gilt triple fillet border, inner double fillet border and floral ornamentation, is set with a miniature portrait under bevelled glass. The portrait, depicting the author Charles Kingsley, is painted by Miss C. B. Currie on ivory. In addition, the book features raised bands, gold-decorated spine compartments, fillet-tooled board edges, ruled turn-ins (stamped "Bound by Rivière & Son") and watered-silk doublures, the rear of which is also stamped "Miniature by C. B. Currie". An inserted certificate leaf has also been signed by J. H. Stonehouse and Currie and reads: "This is No. 951 of the Cosway Bindings invented by J. H. Stonehouse, with Miniatures on Ivory by Miss Currie."



Always a traditional leather binding, the 'Cosway' is named after Richard Cosway (c1742-1821), the acclaimed English miniaturist. He painted various English and French aristocrats and many members of the British Royal family, and much of his work can still be seen in Windsor Castle. An early 20th century creation though, the Cosway binding didn't actually have anything to do with Richard. The earliest designs were in fact the work of Miss C. B. Currie whose services were employed by the bookselling firm of Henry Sotheran, the manager of which was J. Harrison Stonehouse. Her paintings were almost always on ivory. Often one large painting was set into the cover; occasionally multiple graced the front cover. In 1911, a particularly lavish example appeared in Sotheran's catalogue which had 21 miniatures inset into the front cover.

Importantly, all of the early bindings are by Rivière and the paintings the work of Miss Currie. Over the years, numerous attempts have been made to reproduce the Cosway bindings. These Cosway-style bindings, however, lack the quality of the early pieces and collectors should be wary of the less expensive designs. If it seems too good to be true, it probably is...





*This is No. 951  
of the Cosway Bindings  
invented by J. H. Stonehouse,  
with Miniatures on Ivory  
by Miss Currie.*

Signed *J. H. Stonehouse* Inventor.  
*M. S. Currie*, Artist.

