

Edge Decoration

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



The practice of standing a book on its edge is relatively new. Until the 16th century books were shelved in a variety of ways, the most common of which involved piling them horizontally with their fore-edge facing outwards. Issues with identification were resolved by marking them with a design on this edge or by writing the book's title on it.

By the end of the 16th century, however, books had become so numerous in libraries that a new system of shelving, one which addressed the issue of storage, was required. When the method of standing them on end, with their spine facing outwards, was introduced binders lost no time in using the edges to beautify the book. Edge decoration today is so varied that it may appear to be limited only by the binder's imagination. It might come as a surprise then that its real purpose is not merely one of embellishment but of protection of the book's contents from dust and handling.

Common Forms of Edge Decoration

Coloured Edges



*Pharmaceutisches Centralblatt fur 1835. Sechster Jahrgang. 1835.
Solid colour fore-edge in vibrant green.*

Solid, plain coloured edges have been adopted virtually since the time of the codex; the earliest colour recorded being purple on a 4th century book. Colours such as yellow, red and ochre were most common to 15th-17th century bindings, however, rare colours such as green and violet could occasionally be found on 16th century volumes. It was the binder's responsibility to make the liquids for edge colouring, and some of the early recipes included rather creative ingredients. The colour purple required logwood chips, some powdered alum and a piece of green copperas (green crystals of hydrated ferrous sulphate), which were boiled together with soft water. Brown was produced with equal measures of logwood, French berries and water, and red required Brazil dust (likely from the seeds of the Annatto tree), vinegar and water. Binders of the early 19th century had it much easier, the availability of powders (ochres) meaning they simply had to mix these with paste and a little oil or

glaire (a sizing made from egg whites). The introduction of aniline dyes in a wide range of colours in the 1870s saved them even more time when it came to colour selection. The application of the solid colour to the fore-edge was quite simple. A sponge or a brush was used to apply the colour to either the top edge only or to all edges. Traditionally, the fore-edge was drawn back a little such that a slope appeared on the edge, then a sponge or brush was used to apply the colour to the top edge only or to all edges. This ensured a small amount of the colour would be visible when the book was opened. Usually, a second coat would be required.

Sprinkled



*The government of tongue. Richard Allestree. 1674
An early example of brown or black and red sprinkled edges.*

The 'sprinkle' was the most common and cost-effective form of edge decoration. It could be found on many books from the 1600s onwards and still finds its way onto Library bindings today. Earthy pigments, such as Venetian red, were frequently used, usually on their own but occasionally with another complementary colour. The pigment was mixed with paste, oil and water, and the book placed either in the laying press or on its side on a bench. The sprinkle was then applied in one of three main ways. Early binders dipped a small 'finger-brush' into the mixture and then drew their finger across its stiff bristles to spray the colour onto the book edges. Alternatively, they may have used a larger 'sprinkle-brush' with hog hairs. Once dipped into the mixture, the excess was pressed out and the bristles tapped against an iron bar (usually a press pin), making the colours fly onto the book edge. The third method involved the use of a 'sprinkle frame' made of interlaced copper. The binder simply took a short-bristled brush, similar to a nail brush, and rubbed it across the mesh of the frame to produce a very even sprinkle of colour.

German Paste Edges

This method of decoration, which frequently found its way onto endpapers, also appeared on edges. The mixture of pigment, paste and soap was usually brushed on or applied by the binder with their fingers. More information on German paste decoration can be found in the ['Endpapers'](#) cabinet.



Fore-edge and Hidden Fore-edge Paintings.



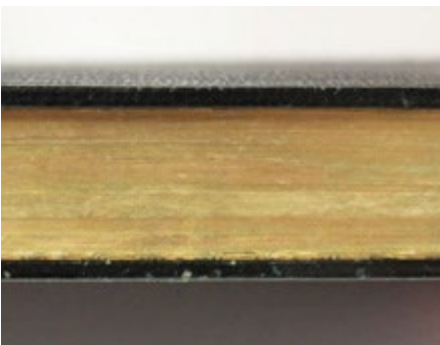
The simplest of paintings, usually symbolic, appeared on the closed fore-edge of books as early as the 10th century. It was not until the 14th century, though, that examples appeared in Europe of a heraldic nature. These usually had a neutral background colour to enhance the painting, which was always created using water-colours.

The mid-1600s saw a fascinating development in fore-edge painting, with the introduction of the hidden image. This method of decoration was achieved by first clamping the book with its fore-edge fanned out. The painting was applied lightly to the angled page edges and the book removed from the vice when dry. Since the picture would still be visible when the book was closed, the edge was then gilded such that it disappeared under the gold and could only be seen when the book's leaves were forced to fan out.

This form of decoration reached its peak in the 19th century, with edges depicting abbeys, country houses, landscapes, flowers and frequently erotica. A real treat was the double, hidden fore-edge, in which a scene was first painted on the leaves fanned in one direction and a second painted on the leaves fanned in the opposite direction. When the book was opened from the front one painting was visible, whilst a different image was seen when opened from the back, neither interfering with the other.



Although possible, it's unlikely that the binder took on the challenge of fore-edge painting. This was the domain of artists, most of whom have been notoriously difficult to identify. Rarely did they sign or date their work. However, some paintings could be recognised by their subject or style and attributed to a particular artist based on these.



Gaufered Edges



*Proverbial philosophy. Martin F. Tupper. 1855
Gaufered edges in a diamond/diaper pattern.*

Gaufering, or goffering as it is also known, is likely as old as the process of edge-gilding. In its simplest form, gaufering involved impressing a pattern into the edges of a book, after they had been gilded, with warm finishing tools or rolls. Presumably due to the work involved, it was not a common form of decoration and by the mid-1600s the practice had mostly died out. The 19th century saw its

resurgence, however, with numerous ornate and religious bindings sporting a variety of lace-like repeating patterns.

Though glamorous in its most basic form, the binder could further enrich the design by scraping away parts of the gold to reveal the white paper underneath which had been stained with colour. A similar, interesting effect which was popular in the 19th century was that of the plain white edge with only the tooled pattern visible in gold. According to Arnett (*Bibliopagia*, 1835), this method involved first gilding the edge of a book, then lightly rubbing its edge with palm oil once dry. A second layer of gold (in a slightly different colour) was next applied, and the desired pattern impressed into the edge with warm tools. The gold that had not been touched by the tools was then rubbed off with a cotton cloth, revealing only the design imprinted by the tools.



Marbled Edges



Historiae augustae scriptores. Isaac Casaubon. 1671.

One of the early examples of marbled edges held in Rare Books & Special Collections.

Some of the earliest examples of marbled edges can be found on leather bindings of the 17th century, though the practice was most common to works of the 19th century. The patterns were many and varied and often at the binder's discretion, though they were always expected to match the design with that of the endpapers. There were three different methods for edge marbling: the traditional process which involved placing the edge of the book on the tray of colours and size; the transfer of patterns from existing marbled papers, and the use of the roller.

The traditional method required the same preparation of colours and size as for marbling sheets of paper. When the marbler was satisfied with the pattern that appeared in the bath, the book's fore-edge (knocked flat and secured between a pair of binder's boards) was dipped into the mixture and withdrawn immediately. The size was blown or shaken off quickly to prevent it from running into the book. The process was repeated for the head and tail of the book. Once dry, the marbled edges were burnished.

Alternatively, the edges could be decorated by means of transfers from ordinary marbled papers. These were soaked in hydrochloric acid and then placed on the edge of the book, in the lying press, before being thumped all over. The pattern transferred, the edge was then burnished. By the late 19th century there existed transfer marble paper which could be placed face down and pressed on the edge, then dabbed with hot water until the pattern appeared. It was a convenient method and one still employed today.

By the late 19th century binders could also create the marbled edge using rollers, invented by Wilhelm Leo and others. The device usually comprised two rollers; one was smooth and designed to accept colour which it transferred to the other. The second roller had on its surface a marble pattern in relief. When the entire instrument was passed over the book's edge it simply transferred the pattern.



Also on display in this cabinet were the following items:

Armenian Bole

Essentially an earthy clay, usually red in colour and native to Armenia, bole has a couple of applications in bookbinding. It can be used as a colouring material but is more frequently applied to the surfaces of the book to be gilded. It serves as a base for the gold and provides a greater depth of colour, particularly when it is applied to the edges of a book.



Agate Burnisher

This burnisher is made from the highest quality agate stones in Italy. It is designed for burnishing, or polishing, gold and silver leaf and other surfaces to a very high lustre. The stone is mounted in a machined brass ferule on a hardwood handle, which provides for a strong hold on the stone. When treated with care, the burnisher should last a lifetime.



All Edges Gilt

A centuries-old practice, edge-gilding likely finds its origins in Europe, with Continental examples of the gold page edge appearing on books as early as the 15th century. Though incredibly striking, appearance is not the sole, nor arguably the main, purpose of the gilt edge; the gold leaf, applied and burnished into the page edges, prevents pollutants such as dust from penetrating through the book, at the same time making it much easier to clean.

The edge-gilding process differs depending on whether a book has been cut 'in-boards' or 'out-of-boards'. Common to both, however, is the preparatory work of scraping, in which the book is placed into a lying press and its page edges scraped such that only the tiniest amount of paper is



removed. This is followed by delicate sandpapering to smooth away any remaining roughness. A small amount of Armenian bole is then applied to the edges, the binder taking care never to touch them, for any transfer of grease could render the whole gilding process futile. Gold leaf, usually 23 or 24 carat, is then cut with a gold knife, on a gold cushion, and applied to the lightly glaired edges. Several applications of the gold may be required, each overlapping the last, to

achieve full coverage. Once the whole is nearly dry, the heated burnisher is pushed gently across the surface to set the gold.

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