Millennial Bookbinding

A way of bookbinding innovated at the beginning of the first millennium is appearing again at the end of the second. The covers are flush with the text and attached as if they were pages and the text binding is with simple thread sewn construction. Sometimes called Coptic binding and sometimes called Ethiopian, this is the primeval codex binding.

From the first gospels to the latest computer manuals this binding type has emerged at important eras in the history of the book. Contemporary use of the structure is associated with mechanized edition binding, but there are also tangents of use in both short run binding and limited edition hand binding. This ingenious structure can also be applied to library binding, including bound replacement copies, and to conservation binding.

What is eerie in this is the mix of recurrence and invention and a reverse in the direction of change. At the same time that we consider digitizing the human record, this antiquity projects a future for the paper book. There is also the strange difference between the first codex binding and our familiar types of binding. The millennial binding is distinct from all the conventions of letterpress binding, case bound or paperback. It is so different that it seems new.

The millennial bindings are appearing unnoticed, everywhere. A confusion of names adds to the surprise; "Otabind", "lay-flat", "RepKover", "sewn board", "transfer tape binding", "Lap-Back". Yet all these are "Millennial". They are distinct; neither cased binding or the uncased binding of conventional paperbacks with covers produced from the text lining stock.

My impression is that the first person to use millennial binding, following the Gnostics, Nestorians and other north African desert sectarians, was Ellen McCrady. She used a paper tube wrapping around onto the page plane to attach card covers to off-prints and single sheet publications. Jeff Rigby applied the same tube to a Mexican imprint one day in the mid-seventies at the Newberry Library. I suggested a tubeless, sewn boards library binding at the LBS conference in 1987. BookLab completed the first limited edition run of the sewn boards binding for a Perishable Press publication of 1992.

Mechanized millennial binding, Otabind, was developed in Finland in 1980 by Otava Publishing, but was only introduced to North America at the end of 1988. The two million dollar Otabind line is most efficient with runs over 4000. Werner Rebsamen developed a short run option with the RepKover, a pre-assembled cover with cambric tape reinforcement that converges with a cold emulsion binder and then bonds cover to the text using a normal hotmelt binder. There are now dozens of long run Otabind installations in the United States. Meanwhile Planax North America has produced a

RepKover machine and cold glue perfect binder to extend the Otabind structure to the on-demand and copy shop markets.

What do all these occurrences have to do with the way books are? Why do they each reflect a new enthusiasm for binding? What are the irresistible and distinct features of the millennial binding?

The millennial binding is first distinguished by its action. Like the spread volumes opened to view in Byzantine mosaics this structure is remarkable for its docile, flat opening. The sewn bindings are constructed of chains of stitches that relax at the selected opening. Cold emulsion bonded texts are lined with a light paper. This pliant text back is not bonded to the cover stock. The cover wrapper is attached at a set-back joint and lifts off the back as the book is opened. The spine is not creased or damaged in use. It remains flat, shifted to the right or left, beneath the opened book. From the readers perspective the viewed opening lays flat. This leaves hands free and explains the popularity of the structure for computer manuals and cookbooks. Inverted the full opening scans or copies perfectly.

The millennial binding is distinguished by its adaptability. The sewn boards type, using a card folio as the outer sewn component, can be used for rebinding of the earliest printed books. In this application shoulder seated boards are bonded into the outer card folios producing the traditional mechanism of Eastern Orthodox bookbinding. Waterless versions feature bonds from acrylic transfer tape applied to prefabricated cover cards. This type is suited for library use, particularly in production of bound replacement copies. Polypropylene cover stock and polyester web covering add durability to this form for field uses such as service manuals. Computer and travel sections of book stores are filled with Otabindings.

The millennial binding is distinguished by its structure which is built in-boards, except in its mechanized forms. In all variations it is not case binding. The cover is trimmed out with the text, even to video corner rounding on the foredge. This produces a compact, stackable solid like an audio cassette or CD. All the layers of cloth, card, endpapers, pages and adhesive films are sheared out together. Overcoverings can follow this finished bare-board binding...just as in the original nomadic versions. The sewn board edition binding features a linen spine wrapper with head and tail turn-ins and turned-in cloth covered boards.

Finally, the millennial binding is distinguished by its association with emerging, future forms of the paper book. Case binding, with oversize covers from glued cloth and board, is a process from cigar box manufacture. The square, or excess dimension of the covers over the text, has already proven a crucial flaw in book structure. At the same time, conventional in-line paperback binding cannot withstand reference book usage and repeated

scanning. Its niche is in the ephemeral, entertainment genre that may now pass to other media. The high resolution visual productions best presented in book form will benefit greatly from the full, flat spreads of millennial binding.

News and conjecture concerning millennial binding will continue to appear here. Request hard copy of BookNote #8 Sewn Board Binding and BookNote #24 Transfer Tape Binding for further detail. An interesting item on Otabind appeared in Publishers Weekly, June 28, 1991. Please send millennial binding news, references and comments via the message link here.

Thanks, Gary

Posting 2, Millennial Bookbinding

Philip Smith writes (4.10.96), "...I am present rather dilatorially investigating the potential for the Lab-back now that this has been granted a US Patent [08/257692] and a UK Patent [940540-3]". This is the binding structure that Philip has illustrated and described in Bookbinder, 7/93, (the journal of the Society of Bookbinders).

This binding structure emerges in the middle of the Millennial types because it is both old and new. In origin the earliest board attachment of Coptic bookbinding, known from examples at the Morgan Library, was a looping and not a tunnel lacing that permitted the boards to jut forward from the back of the text. Control of the swing of the gutter edge of the boards is also inherent in classical wooden board binding where the slightest opening motion is immediately transmitted to the text.

The transmission of board leverage action was investigated by Philip in his concept of the "single hinge" binding, where the mobility of the book is focused across the sewing. The Lap-back also has a controlled opening of the boards that swing to 90 degrees where the jut of the laps butt, ending the motion. As Philip points out; "the hinge which opens 180 degrees using fibrous materials is going to flex too much and will inevitably weaken joints and boards will drop off", p. 31, Bookbinder, 7/93.

The Lap-back has other relations to the family of Millennial structures including (1) boards sewn to the text as if they were gatherings, (2) sewing structure of chains of stitches alone and (3) a squareless or same size relation between the cover and text. The Lap-back does have a board which acts like any of the text sections, hinging at the folds of the back. The exposed folds are also visible and Philip considers link-stitching, without tapes as an option for text sewing. Philip mentions that he has "rarely departed from the use of squares on a book", but, "At the same time one thinks that a sagging bookblock (especially on large thick volumes) places stresses on the spine and hinges as the weight pulls downward, which a 'flush' binding does not have, standing as it would along the whole lower edge of the book. I like the idea of simply making the thickness of the covering material alone act as a slight separator ('square')."

Another characteristic the Lap-back shares with the earliest binding is its suitability for "books printed on stiff paper or paper wrong way of grain". (Echoes of the papyrus text!) Millennial bindings are docile and pliant at any text opening. They open fully either for display in the early Coptic church, or for accurate digital imaging on a flat bed scanner. The Lap-back also creates a strange alternative to an inner, two-page spread which is an "...almost unbroken or panoramic surface design" (across the cover). [see the illustration of Philip Smith's binding of Ravel: le Basque, Lap-back with yokes, 28 x 19

cm.] "What one sees when the covers are fully opened back for display is a single plane. The covers meet, hiding the spine entirely." This appealing symmetry, of the inner and outer diptych, seems both futuristic and ageless.

Finally, Philip describes his innovation and investigation of the Lap-back as an episode of "lateral thinking" when you take your mind away from known, familiar methods and begin again. "Why not dispense with back linings? Why not make a self limiting hinge structure?" Why not project the physical codex beyond the millennium and beyond confines of a digital copy?

Millennial Bookbinding #3/4.26.96/glf

Richard Minsky sent in this dicussion:

"I first started really studying Coptic bindings when Reggie Walker became my apprentice in 1975 or 76. He was a young black man (since died of AIDS) who became devoted to the issue of the African roots of the codex, and binding. Perhaps you remember him. I went to Columbia and Princeton with him and photographed quite a few details of original Coptic bindings. He then used that form and variations on it for his own work, both works of art and commercial blank book production, much of which he sold in the late 70's at NY Central Art Supply.

The earliest unsewn variation I know of may be the one patented in the mid 70's by Bernie and Morty Sendor of The Sendor Bindery. It was a hybrid case binding, consisting of a one piece case, the spine of which was melted onto the book block to adhere the pages.

I don't do them in my own work. I still like laced in raised cord sewing, rounded and backed, if I make books with paper, or sometimes tapes and flat back case binding, for production. Old books I try to do however they were first done, e.g., last year I replaced the sawn-in kerf 19th C. binding on a Jensen Pliny (1476)with a raised cord back-beveled paperboard (Davey's gold label) hybrid binding with linen endbands over linen cord. But I hardly bind books with paper pages anymore. I've been binding web pages with html recently. Though I did recently make a jail cell for Larry Sullivan's book on "The Prison Reform Movement," and chained the book to handcuffs. I painted the covers with old fashioned prison stripes, painted out the name, and stamped the isbn on the cover in hologram foil.

Love,

Richard
http://www.minsky.com"

Reggie Walker certainly was unique. One of his favorite remarks was, "I just can't get ready for (this or that)." Reggie was ready for Millennial bookbinding from its sources to it wider application. It may be that he began his adaptation of north African binding to design binding with Gerard Charriere when they worked together at the Newberry library in the late 60's. This idea of innovation in bookbinding from a traditional source is now well established and Keith Smith's new book on exposed spine sewing illustrates how the earliest methods now convey the latest expressions. Reggie was a pioneer of Millennial binding.

The paradox of innovation from tradition could be the 4th primary characteristic of Millennial bookbinding. This paradox operates not only bookbinding but in all other book arts such as calligraphy, papermaking or printing. An overarching example would be the alphabet. The letters and their sounds have remained similar for thousands of years yet the alphabetic code suddenly enabled the emergence of the World Wide Web of electronic communications.

Another theme here is the use of historical binding types for contemporary applications. Historical prototypes have been very important in application of binding methods for book conservation. The concept quickly identifies exemplars, excellent and inadequate, from the past performance of the bound collections. This theme has been examined further by Pamela Spitzmueller at the University of Iowa Libraries. This is the home of the magnificent historical binding models made by Bill Anthony. An Advanced Conservation Workshop on "Historical Book Models" will occur June 25-29 at the University of Iowa.

An interesting twist here is that historical binding models are themselves abstractions. With a binding model in hand we are creating manipulative features and a physical object detached from the time and technology that it represents. With it we engender our own discoveries of book action, sequence of fabrication and book structure. Is this a poor bookbinders' attempt to see a past craft in a past culture that is really too remote and too complex to understand? Or are we creating our own contemporary craft through reliance on the inventions of the past? Out of a persistent heritage of hundreds of thousands of years, do hands prompt the mind? Is the book among the first tools? Millennial bookbinding includes these issues.

Millennial Bookbinding, #4/4.30.96

Here is a response from Keith Smith. Follow along with a copy of his volume #3, Exposed Spine Sewings, 1995, Keith Smith BOOKS, ISBN: 0-9637682-4-7.

"Dear Gary,

I do not know what you are asking, in my ≥äopinion on millennial bookbinding, which is slightly described in the enclosures.≤ Do you want to know what I think of Coptic sewings? Or, do you want me to critique your writing titled Millennial Bookbinding?

Ä I think your writing is very good. The books not open flat, but as you say, they do not crack the spine when photo-copying. I failed to mention that in my binding book. You spoke of the ≤ächain of stitches that relax at the selected opening.≤ I am not enough of a binder to realize that. However, on one of my visits to Betsy (Eldridge), she explained that phenomenon to me. I did not think my reader would need to know that, and, I was not sufficiently versed to explain it in my own words. I try not to talk about what I know nothing about.

I am happy you said åchain of stitchesπ, not åchain stitchesπ. Betsy boxed my ears more than once for saying that. She insists they are link stitches, which form a chain. She says in binding, there is no such thing as a chain stitch, a term from my embroidery vocabulary.

Ä If your question is what do I think of such bindings, of course I am excited about themãI devoted almost half of Volume III to them. And, my audience is eager to learn this kind of sewing, whereas most of my audience has no use for the first half of Volume III.

One of my main reason for these Coptic sewings, as opposed to the one described in Volume I, page 174, is that they are sewn across, rather than along the spine. If a thread breaks, only that portion of the sewing is jeopardized, rather than the entire sewing. Another reason I prefer them, is that I can start several separate sewings across the spine. They might be the same, or a different stitch, started again from the back side-cover, or sewn from the front to the back (Vol III, illustration on page 213). I can play with different color threads with each paired sewing (p 228). On a double needle sewing, I can tie two colors of thread together, place a needle on each, exit the first section. The span is one color, the link, the other (illus top left, page 226, and middle, page 234). If I use double needles in one color to sew the odd-numbered sections, I can thread a second color thread with double needles to sew the even-numbered sections. The linking action forms a herringbone effect (middle illus page 241).

If I link, then climb diagonally on the spine, I set up a crisscross pattern. I call this the Celtic Weave (page 247). It is my favorite deviation from the standard link stitch sewings which Betsy taught me. Sewing the head and tail with an across the spine link sewing hinges

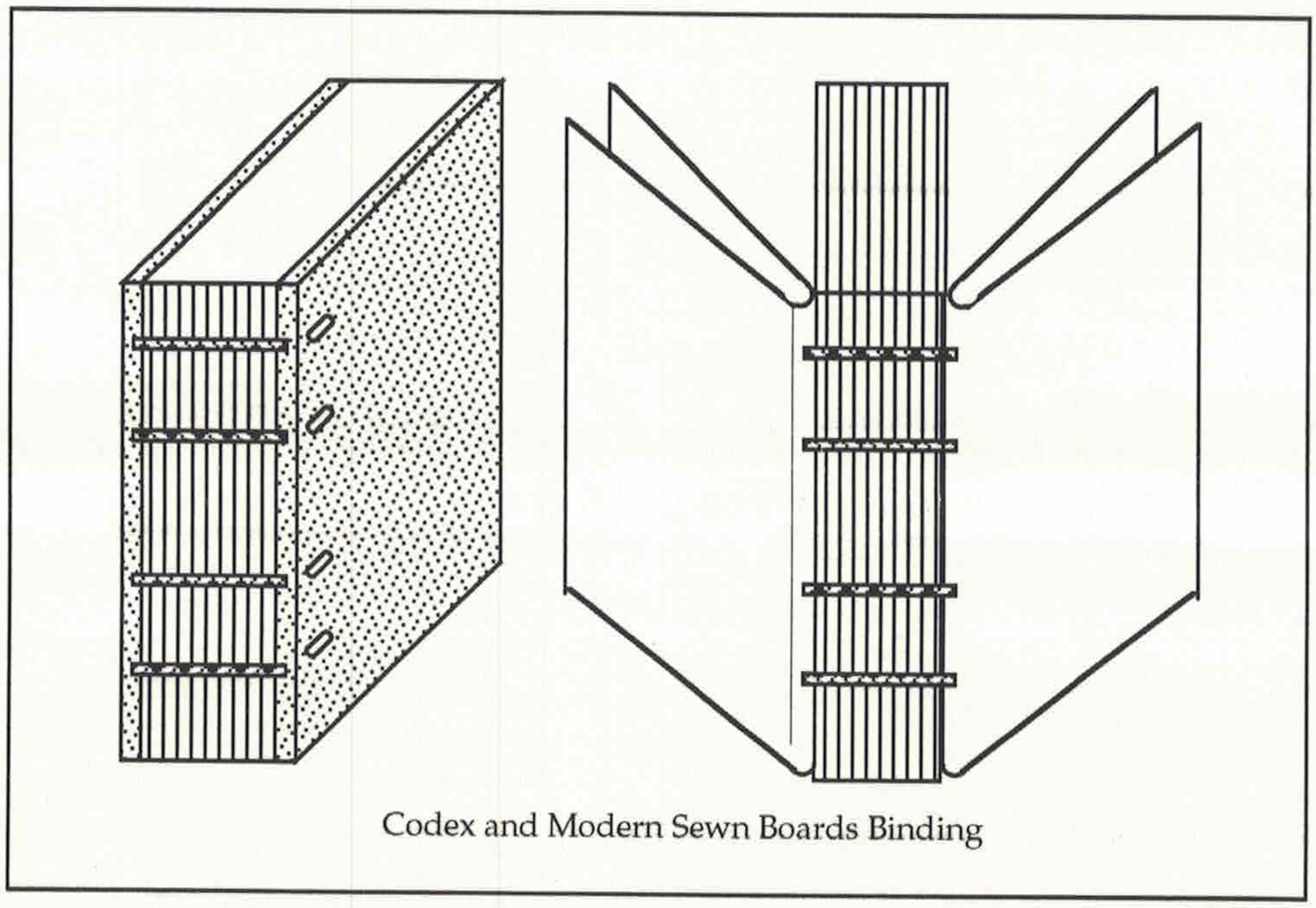
the book block. I can then use the remainder of the stations between these two sewings to string raised thread supports. The last chapter of the book explores these possibilities, page 273, where the book, itself, becomes its own sewing frame.
My Centipede (page 282) is sewn on double raised threads. However, I will attempt a similar pattern, without raised supports. Probably wonπt get to it for a while, as I am busy on Volume IV right now. For now,"

Keith draws out another Millennial quality. These bindings can be divided, fractal-like, into smaller bindings. The paired sewing means that multiple bindings can be constructed in the same book. Double fan, transfer tape bindings can even be cut out like slices of bread from the same stalk binding. Cecilia and I, in production work on Utopian Ethiopian bindings make small, medium and large with one, two or three pairs of sewings.

These bindings remind me of an extruded product that must be cut to height to be identified. This is an organic, timeless design concept. But that is not an exact image. The chains of stitches are built into pairs simultaneously. There is a mirror of the thread pairs and stitch motions that enables them to build together independently at the same time like sprouts. They also connect gathering to gathering in the same growth pattern. Unlike the mixed structure of kettle and cord supported stations conventional in western craft bookbinding, unsupported chains of thread stitches connect the gatherings equitably from head to tail and from front to back. Even the covers are sewn as if they were the outer, last gatherings.

And that's all too. There is no subsequent adhesion of liners or no subsequent casing-in. When they are used, covers are gloved over the anatomy of a binding built "in-boards". This is real bookbinding.

I also enjoyed Keith's Centipede sewing. This book could catch a bass. Tony Cains ties flies too. There is a bass pond on the creek here. The endband on a traditional Greek or Armenian wooden board binding would work too. Remember that these endbands built the transmission of board leverage into the Millennial bindings of the Eastern Orthodox methods, transmitting the live motion of the readers' manipulations to the text.



Codex and Modern Sewn Boards Binding