

PART VII ♦ ♦ ♦  
FLORENCE WALTER OF  
MILLS COLLEGE ♦ ♦ ♦

THE BOOK CLUB OF CALIFORNIA  
SAN FRANCISCO ♦ MDCCCCXCIV



**D**URING her career of almost four decades as a bookbinder, Florence S. Walter's bindings were described by critics as having bold strength, well balanced treatment, sentimental romanticism, creative artistic imagination, and were said to capture the inward spirit of the book. Upon her death in 1972, an obituary in the San Francisco *Chronicle* described Mrs. Walter as "a prominent patroness of the arts and a nationally known maker of fine bookbindings." These superlatives alone suggest that she was a pioneering advocate of bookbinding as a creative art, who deserves more than a brief footnote in the history of twentieth-century bookbinding.

Not comfortable with merely decorating leather, Florence Walter saw the harmony of text and cover as

essential to her design. Bookbinding was a creative art, not a craft. Influenced by Pierre LeGrain, she demanded that the binding have unity and insisted that subject matter, illustrations and cover blend to make an artistic creation.

Walter was an avid collector of twentieth-century press books, of contemporary sculpture and pottery, Chinese porcelains, pre-Columbian figures and prints. Her initial interest in bookbinding began in 1936, when she studied in the San Francisco ateliers of noted bookbinders Herbert and Peter Fahey, and then with Belle McMurtry Young. Her introductory study made her familiar with the concepts of forwarding and finishing. Bookbinding became an avocation for her after three months of study in Paris with Charles Collet, the principal finisher for Paul Bonet. It was with Collet that Walter perfected her finishing skills, established her identity as a bookbinder and became a committed Francophile. Her love of the French style did not go unnoticed in America, and in Number 14 of *The Bohemian Club Library Notes* it was noted that "Mrs. J. I. Walter of San Francisco is currently considered, without question, the greatest binder of the French school in the United States."

Influenced by the strict and exacting standards of her teachers and mentors, Florence Walter insisted on quality in her work; her ideal was perfection. Before undertaking the design of a lesser known work, she would research the history of the book itself, so that her binding would be reflective of the book's content rather than mere decoration. Her approach was meticulous and careful; she would sometimes make as many as forty preliminary designs before deciding on the most appropriate one. Florence Walter involved herself in the entire binding process, feeling equally comfortable with sewing, attaching boards, backing, paring leather and so on. The bindings were not overwhelming; many were abstract in design, often incorporating motifs from the book's illustrations. They utilized full morocco, which she obtained from France, and incorporated imaginative colored inlays,

gold tooling and mosaic design. On occasion, she would embellish her designs with tooling alone.

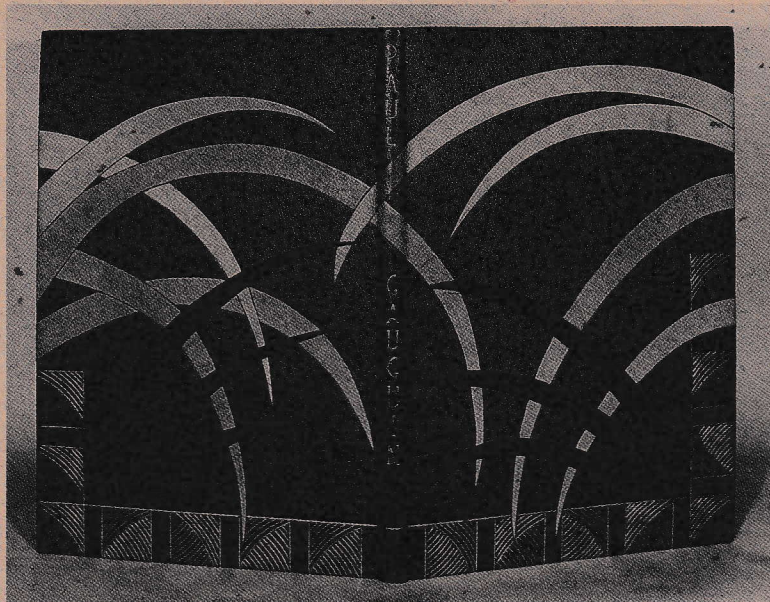
Walter's bindings were shown widely in exhibitions including the Golden Gate International Exposition, San Francisco (1939-40); The San Francisco Museum of Art's 29th Annual Exhibition of San Francisco Women Artists, where she received an Award of Merit for *Lysistrata* and *La Seine à Paris*; a one-woman show at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor (1953), where 34 books were exhibited; The Grolier Club, New York; Princeton University; The Brooklyn Museum; Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York; and the Brussels Universal and International Exhibition (the World's Fair of 1958), where she was one of only three American bookbinders invited to exhibit, and the only West Coast representative.

Walter was an accomplished and honored woman outside bookbinding circles as well. She joined The Book Club of California in 1913, one year after its founding; besides holding other offices, she served as the Club's first woman president from 1952 to 1955. She was a lifelong music enthusiast and served on the Board of Governors for the San Francisco Symphony.

Among her clients were notable Bay Area book collectors and institutions, including the Lilienthals, Norman Strouse, Lewis and Dorothy Allen, David Magee, James D. Hart, Mills College, The Bancroft Library, and Stanford University. These clients were fortunate to have acquired her select commissions, as Florence Walter produced four bindings a year at

most. Her fee ranged from \$50 to \$400, a modest amount considering the labor and meticulous handwork involved.

Upon Mrs. Walter's death in 1972, her three daughters donated to Mills College a library of forty-two of her books, in addition to more than five hundred hand finishing tools, and a selection of presses, polishers, nippers and knives which had been part of her well-



PAUL GAUGUIN: LETTERS (binding by Florence Walter)

equipped studio on Larkin Street in San Francisco. The books became a part of the special collections in the library's rare book room, and form the nucleus of a collection which currently numbers over three hundred items on the history of binding. In addition, the Walter Collection was established, which today includes some two hundred examples of beautifully executed bindings, many in the French style—a tribute to Florence Walter's first love.

The equipment and funds associated with the Walter gift to Mills were first used in February, 1973, for *Art Technique 81*, a course in hand bookbinding taught by Betty Lou (Beck) Chaika, a young San Francisco binder. Ms Chaika's English-style training (one of her mentors was San Francisco binder Stella Patri) led her naturally to emphasize the structure of the book; this focus on form rather than finishing was to become a hallmark of the Mills curriculum in bookbinding.

The location of the first Florence Walter Bindery, behind the periodical stacks on the second floor of the Carnegie Library, made it almost a secret club for those students who managed to find their way there.

The number of these students increased in 1983 when Mills added a Graduate Program in Book Arts to its offerings. When the program ended in 1989, Mills students had individually and collectively become an increasingly influential and innovative voice in the national arena of book arts in both printing and binding.

The death of the graduate program did not diminish the undergraduate program in book arts at Mills, which since 1989 has actually increased in size and scope. Now housed in the Division of Letters, with faculty appointments in the Department of English, book arts have become a vital part of the liberal arts curriculum, one which President Jan McKay has referred to as "central to the mission of Mills." Even the Walter Bindery has moved to a more central location on campus, close to the Eucalyptus Press. In 1989 a Macintosh computer, LaserWriter and scanner were added to the equipment available to book arts students, and many binding students generate content for their mostly one-of-a-kind projects on this equipment.

Since Ms Chaika's departure in 1987, Mills binding instructors have included Janice Mae Schopfer, print conservator with the Achenbach Collection at the Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco, and Keith Vinson, noted calligrapher, landscape designer and alumnus of the Mills College Graduate Program in Book Arts. In September of 1993, Gillian Boal joined the faculty as Lecturer in Bookbinding. She is book conservator at the library of the University of California, Berkeley; she brings her conservation expertise to Mills along with her training in traditional English hand bookbinding. She continues the Mills approach of fostering innovative, student-directed work that combines an emphasis on traditional technique with contemporary exploration of form.

The contributions of Mills alumnae in bookbinding to the professional community of bookmaking and



HENRY MILLER: INTO THE NIGHT LIFE (binding by Florence Walter)

book arts continue to be impressive. Since May 1993, three of these alumnae have held jobs in the field: as a binder at Arion Press in San Francisco; as a binder with Molly West of San Francisco; and as an intern at the Library of Congress. The legacy of Florence Walter has ably supported these and many other Mills students in the twenty years since the inception of this important studio at Mills College.

~Renée Jadushlever & Kathy Walkup



## HAND • BOOKBINDING • IN • CALIFORNIA

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