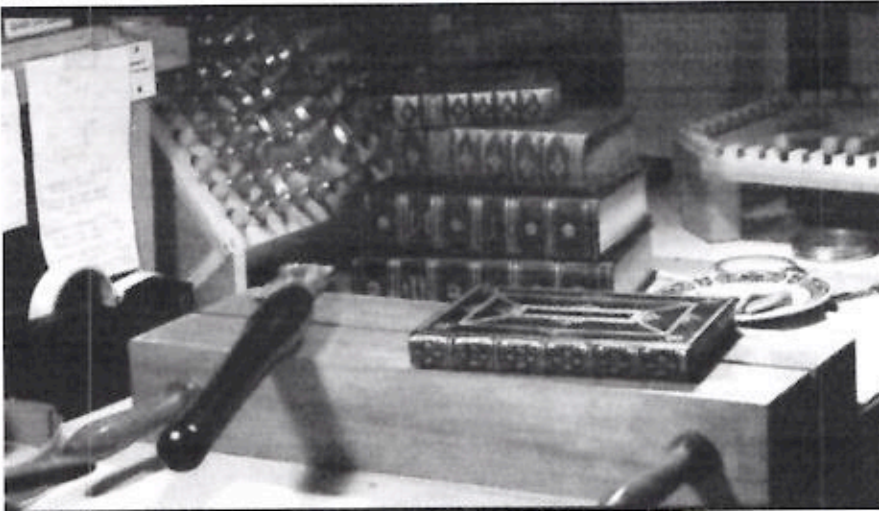




Alexander McGuckin is a antiquarian conservationist, binder, and restorer of fine antique books

Photo Credit: McGuckin website

Arts: The rare skill of restoration of antiquarian books

By Marc Montgomery | english@rcinet.ca

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It's a very rare occupation. Alex McGuckin of Edmonton, Alberta is one of only a handful of craftsmen who restore valuable antique books sometimes hundreds of years old.

You'd have to call him an artisan.

McGuckin came into the profession of antique book conservationist and restorer in a back door kind of way. It was first out of a mild fascination, but then the more he learned, the more enamoured he became of both the antique and rare books, and of the whole complex and very often delicate and precision skills needed to conserve or restore these treasured books to an original looking state.

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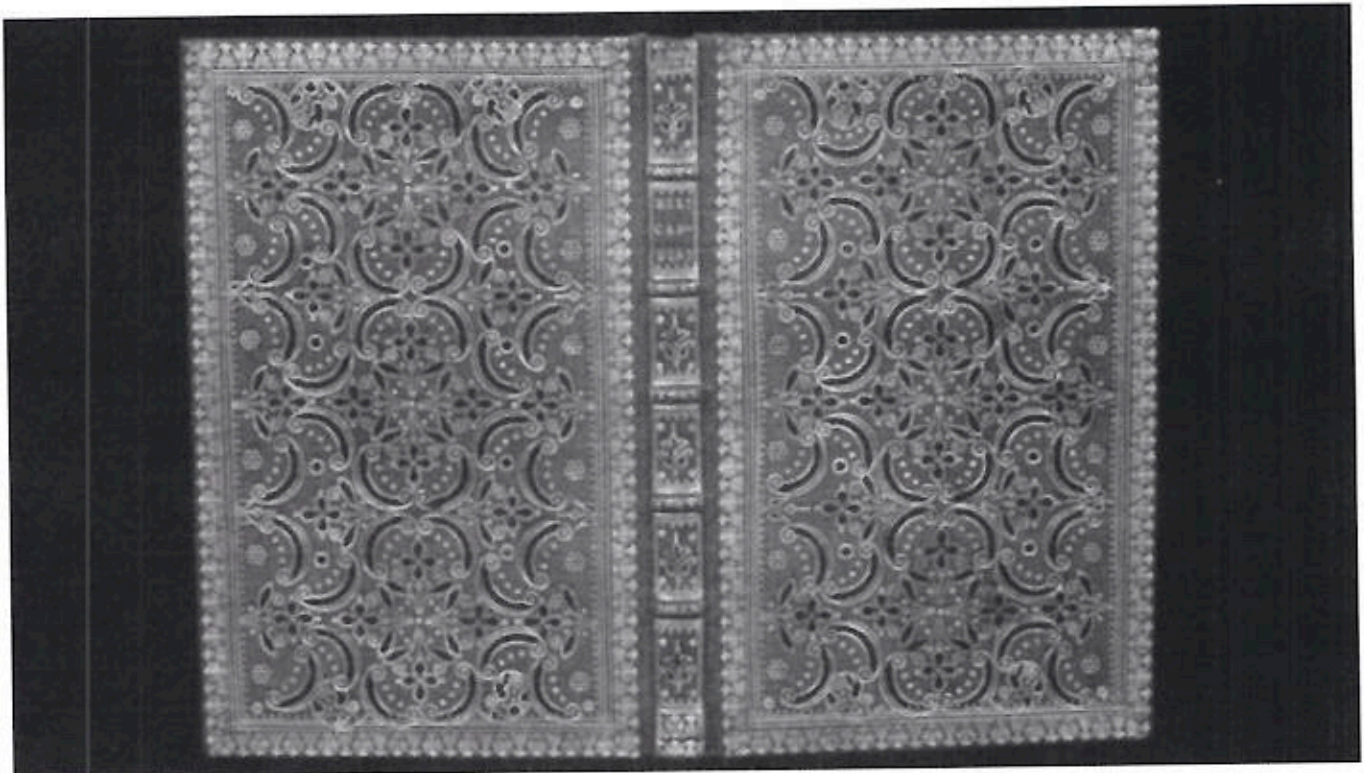
Alex McGuckin in his basement workshop surrounded by hundreds of highly specialized restoration tools, most handbuilt by himself exactly as they would have been hundreds of years ago. © supplied materials, sometimes with brass or copper hinges.

After sometimes hundreds of years, antique books may have suffered badly through misuse, water or sun-damage, or any number of other problems.

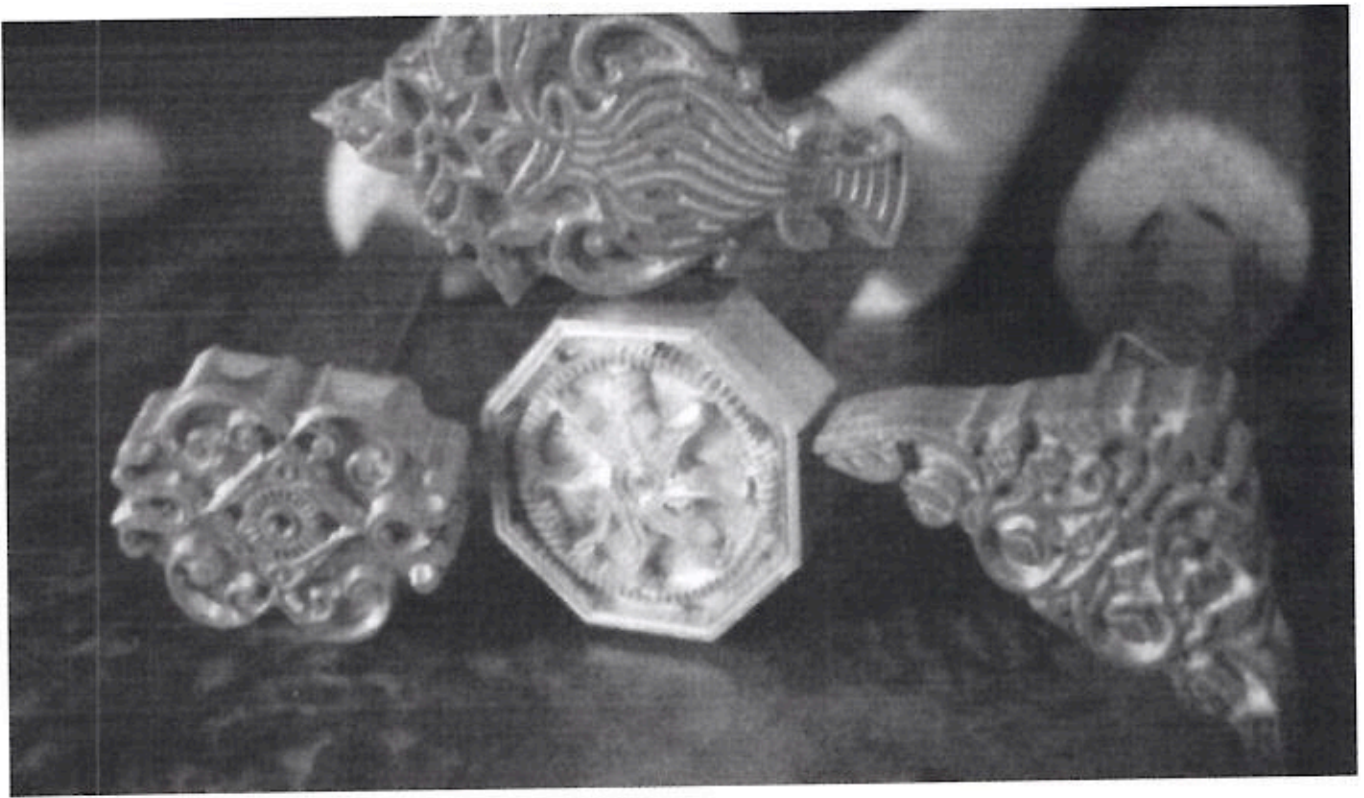
Many of them were once incredible works of art with intricate filigreed gold decorations on fine leathers, silks, and other

Canadian Alex McGuckin is one of the very rare breed these days, who can bring these valuable artefacts back to their former glory.

To do that, he has often had to make his own tools to recreate those used centuries ago, hundreds of them.

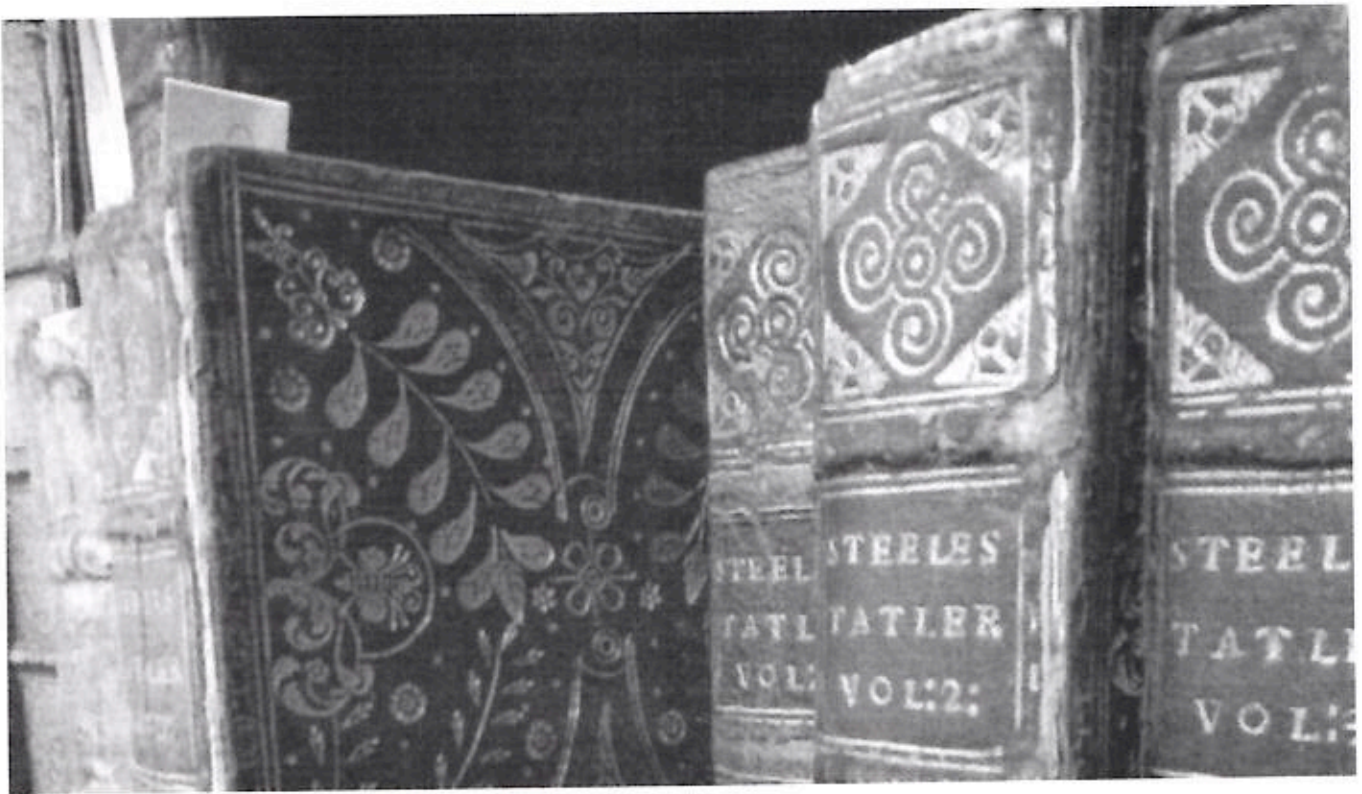


An example of some of the extremely precise and intricate work that McGuckin does © McGuckin



Some of the intricately carved *stamps* McGuckin hand makes to recreate the intricate original patterns pressed in gold leaf into bindings. © McGuckin

He also has all the materials used in period books, either the same, or as absolutely as close to it as those used by the craftsmen centuries ago; gold leaf and albumin from egg used as the adhesive, silk thread, Irish linen, hemp, skins of calf leather, goat, sheep, reindeer skin, even salmon skin. McGuckin says in the past it was not unknown to even use human skin in some cases!



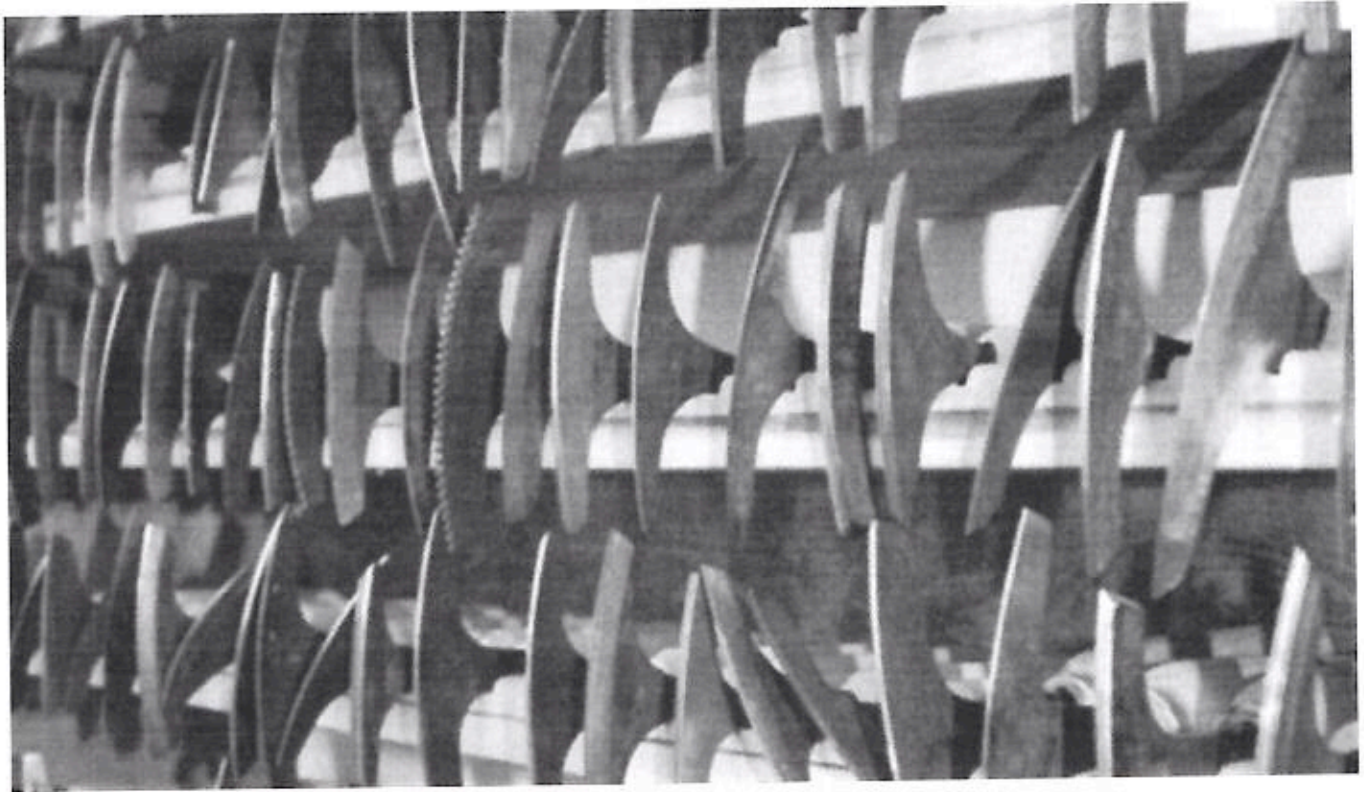
Examples of the many antiquarian and rare books awaiting either restoration or recreation in a carefully precise and painstaking process by Alex depending on owner's interests and especially the condition of the books, some hundreds of years old. © McGuckin



The specialized papers resembling styles used inside covers of antiquarian books © McGuckin

There are also bottles of various dyes and tints and spools of special thread. These are in addition to the hundreds of unique

tools that he himself has created, exactly as they would have been in times of long ago.



Literally hundreds of special tools to cover the multitude of designs and technologies in embossing into a variety materials used as bindings and covers over hundreds of years © McGuckin

While he is a most certainly a highly skilled artisan, even easily called an artist in his own right, he not only loves the work he does for others, but loves the antique books, which he collects himself.



McGuckin using one of his special tools to emboss a gold leaf design into a binding with the book held firmly in his own vice designed to hold the book firmly but with no damage to the rare books
© McGucking

Alex McGuckin is a fascinating individual who is preserving not only a rare skill, but at the same time, preserving a little bit of our collective history through the restoration of these many and varied ancient and often now extremely rare and valuable books.



More examples of the books that Alex will work on, arriving at his workshop in a variety of conditions, not to be unexpected given the age, history, and travels of most of these old and rare texts. © McGuckin

Alex McGuckin website

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