



**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 McMurry 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,