

*Leather-Bound Book in the Style
of a 16th Century Album Amicorum*
PROJECT DOCUMENTATION

Calontir Tri-Levels 2017
NOVICE ENTRY

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ABSTRACT

This is a leather-bound book in the style of an *album amicorum*, or “book of friends,” which was a form of autograph book especially popular in the Low Countries and German states from the sixteenth century onwards. While the sewn-on raised cord binding is representative of books of the mid sixteenth century through the End of Period, the content of the book – or lack thereof as found in the set of framed, blank page designs – is what sets it apart as an *album amicorum*. All the various page ornamentations and borders were sourced from scanned sixteenth century books, then digitally cleaned up and laid out to best fit the page sizes used in this project.

Introduction & Objective

I've long had a passing interest in the history of the printed word – particularly the post-incunabula period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when print culture across Europe took off and printers began to work with forms and layouts that last to our modern day. Given my professional background in design, that interest has largely been with typography, page layouts, and the myriad forms of print production (books, pamphlets, broadsheets, etc.) of the era. However, the requisite need of a printing press and massive collection of print characters means researching and then – importantly – recreating these forms in a manner acceptable to Arts and Sciences settings in the SCA is significantly challenging.

While my fascination with early modern print design remains, I have expanded my interests to bookbinding. This entry represents my first ever bound book.

Resultantly, my goal with this project was to understand the overall bookbinding process and to create a work that is representative of the period and common production methods as a whole. Understanding that this is a very novice effort, I have deliberately chosen to use more economical modern materials, but assemble them in as close to a historically accurate manner as possible – thus the use of signatures (i.e. folded collections of papers that make up the text block of the book) sewn together with linen thread against raised, natural material cords.

Historic Authenticity & Context

Books in the sixteenth century underwent a series of interesting if subtle changes. Cover “boards” traditionally made from actual wood began to be replaced by easier-to-produce and more economical pasteboards. Likewise, traditional use of metal-hinged latches slowly died out – first with by replacing them with ribbon or cord an eventually not including any method to keep the book securely closed. Yet, the mid-to-late sixteenth century generally did not see titles or text

on the covers or spines. As such, my book uses fiber boards, lacks a latching mechanism, and is devoid of stamped text.

The *album amicorum*, or “book of friends,” represents an interesting example of social networking and print culture that began in the sixteenth century and lasted well into the 19th century as the Victorian autograph book. Especially popular in the German states and Low Countries where it appears to have originated, the albums first took root with college students, but their most well use – and notable examples – come from the class of scholars and Humanists who instructed those students and filled their own *albums amicorum* with the signatures, inscriptions, heraldic paintings, art, versus, and pasted-in engravings of fellow academics and philosophers. Over the years, the collected works within become as much a testimony to the quality of one’s social network and contacts as it was something to be privately treasured.

The formats of the books varied. Some were wholly blank, some were popular emblem books with blank signatures inserted within, and some, as seen in figure one below, were printed deliberately as a book of friends printed frames surrounding an otherwise blank page. I have chosen to take this latter route in the design of my own *album amicorum*.



Fig. 1: The album of a Mr. Tixier, c. 1575, with printed page frames

Materials & Tools

This book entry is a generalized example of a binding type that appears to be common for the sixteenth century. As it was the foundation for my entry into bookbinding and meant as a learning exercise, modern, economical options have been chosen in place of expensive, more historically accurate components. Dyed goat leather, modern binder's board, acid-free PVA adhesive, and modern paper were used as the physical components of the book while I attempted to build it using the historically accurate method of a sewn together binding on raised cords.

The use of marbled end paper represents an admitted edge case in the context of Society considerations of Period. Various articles and books I read mentioned that marbled papers were first seen in Europe at the end of the sixteenth century via the Ottomans, but I have been unable to locate an extant example. Early-to-mid seventeenth century examples use a much smaller swirling pattern than what is seen in my entry, however the paper used represents a concession to delivery times and what I was able to source.

CREATION OF BOOKBINDING TOOLS—To aid in the creation of the book, I researched period and modern, hobbyist tools used to bind books as part of the general research and self-education process at the outset of the project.

Ultimately, I settled on composites of several modern designs (using modern materials) to build out three separate tools to facilitate the creation of my book: a punching frame for easily creating sewing holes in my stacks of paper signatures, a cantilevered sewing frame to set up the cords or tapes the text block would be sewn onto (the cantilever design chosen to make more room for my large hands to work), and lastly a simple four-screw press.

Method of Construction

The process of creating the book was along the lines of the instructions called out in the bookbinding manuals listed in the bibliography with substantial cross-referencing and secondary online research and expert consultations when the manuals omitted information (e.g. what to do with the turn-in leather over the spine) or did not describe construction methods applicable for the historic form I was looking to replicate: sewn-together signatures on raised cords with a tightly backed, full leather cover.

PAGE DESIGN AND PRINTING—Authentic sixteenth century page designs and ornamentation were selected from high-resolution scans provided online by various universities, libraries, private collectors, and research institutions. However, these scans still needed to be cleaned up in Photoshop to be appropriate for a single-color printing on a white paper background. This process was followed for most of the ornamentation with the exceptions of the two-page simple borders and the shield of the blank heraldic arms page; both of these design elements are modern facsimiles of historic design elements.

The frontispiece was laid out specifically to match the format of Abraham Ortelius' own *album amicorum*. The map on the opposite page is Mercator's regional map of "Trans-Isulana," or Overijssel, the region my late 16th century Dutch persona calls home. This is a deviation from the historic examples, but a deviation I made by choice with hopes it would afford me educational and "high persona" opportunities in the future.

The pages were then printed and folded as folios (a single fold) on 8.5x11 in 24lb linen paper with a texture reminiscent of historic laid paper (which was simply unaffordable with the almost ninety pages used in the book). The prints were with an acid-free commercial laser printer, which should afford an acceptable shelf life of several decades.

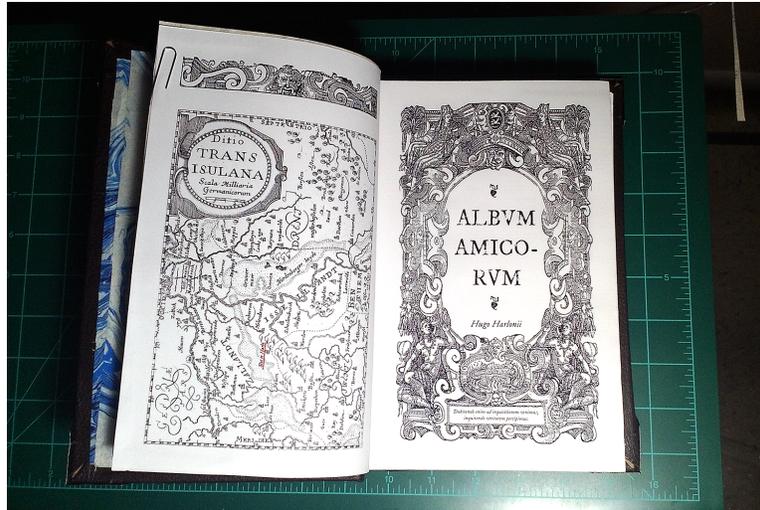


Fig. 2: Book frontispiece

ORGANIZING AND PUNCHING SIGNATURES—With the leaves all printed, they were folded into signatures. Given the delicacy of correctly arranging pages in order with higher-page count signatures, I went with a very small signature size of four leaves, which resulted in eight pages per signature. While this allowed the page layout process to be comparatively simpler (versus an 8, 16, 24, or even 32-page signature), it resulted in a tedious, time-intensive process when the following sewing step began.

The newly assembled punching cradle was used in conjunction with an awl and paper stock hole punching guide to punch matching holes through all the signatures. As books of this period showed a wide variety of number of cords (but usually evenly spaced), I arbitrarily chose to punch holes for four cords for aesthetic preferences.



Fig. 3: Holes punched in signatures and resting in the punching cradle

SEWING SIGNATURE TO RAISED CORDS—The new cantilever sewing frame was then used to secure the natural hemp cords and line up the signatures, which were then sewn together with waxed linen thread. My attempt to create a sewing frame with a series of holes rather than a long slot was a failure, and I secured the cords to the top and bottom with heavy binder clips and masking tape, respectively. Ensuring the cords were aligned at 90 degrees to the text block was a challenge, and the slight deviation from perpendicular can be seen in the final book.



Fig. 4: The completed sewn text block.

ROUNDING AND BACKING THE SPINE—Lacking a dedicated bookbinder’s or cobbler’s hammer, small, smooth-faced shop hammer was used to first gently round the spine and then, after placing the text block back into the press, back the spine to create a curve.

CUTTING OUT AND ATTACHING COVER BOARDS—While earlier codexes used wooden boards, sixteenth century binders moved to pasteboards (series of stacked papers saturated in an adhesive and compressed under great pressure into a single “board”) to meet the increased demand for books. As such, I used the modern equivalent of binder’s board.

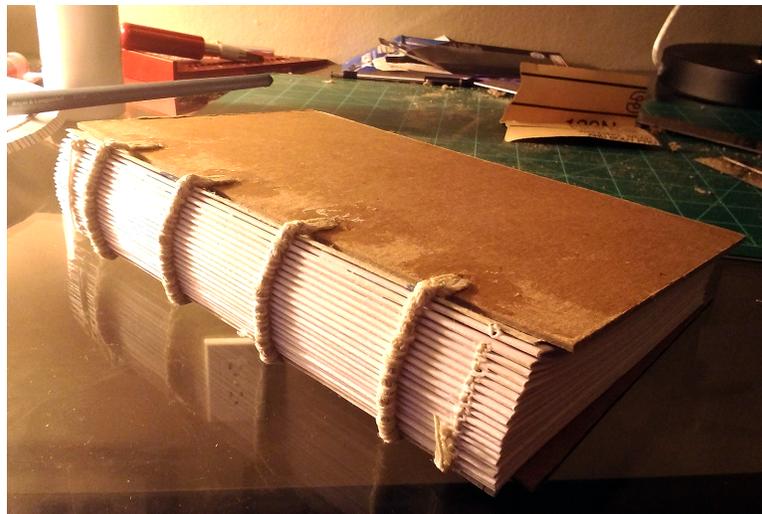


Fig. 5: Cover boards attached and pasted down



Fig. 6: Interior photo of the frayed and pasted down cords

REINFORCING THE SPINE WITH MULL AND PAPER—A layer of mull and three layers of brown craft paper were glued onto the spine to add rigidity and support the rounded back.

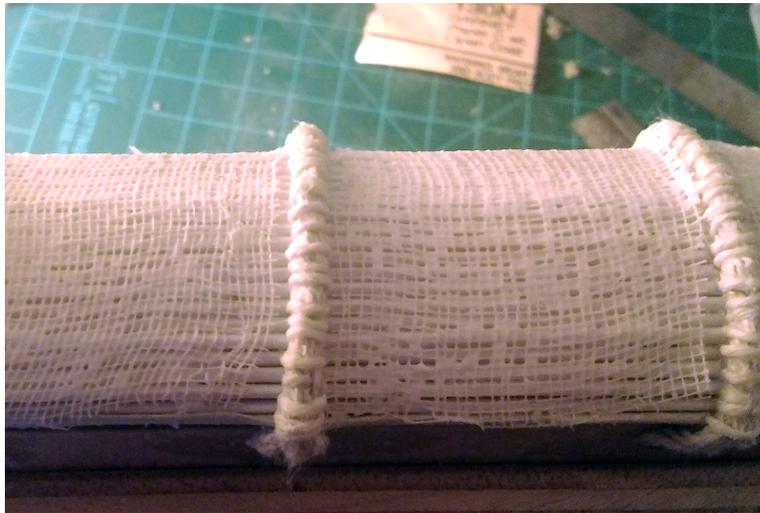


Fig. 7: Mull drying on the spine

MEASURING, CUTTING, AND PASTING ON THE FULL LEATHER COVER—Measurements were taken of the final text block with attached covers using rulers and a strip of paper. The goat leather was cut to measure, soaked with water, and then PVA applied thoroughly to the insides before being stretched across the book. Care was given to the spine and the French groove – the space acting as the hinge between the end of the cover board and the spine itself.

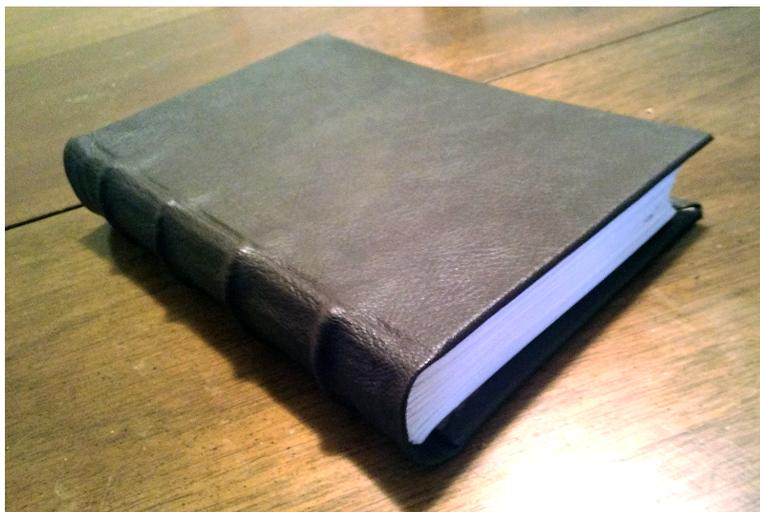


Fig. 8: Photo of the mostly-dry leather cover after the first pressing

GLUING DOWN THE ENDPAPERS—To counteract the pressure of the leather cover curving the cover boards outward and to cover the exposed binder's board and cords, a standalone piece of marbled paper was cut out and then pasted down onto each interior cover. Following drying in the press, the sewn-in endpaper was then also pasted onto the interior covers.

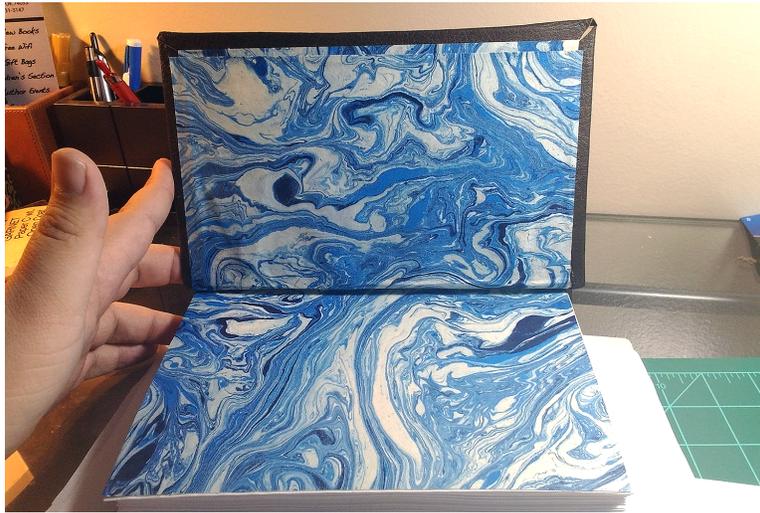


Fig. 9: Endpapers pasted onto the interior covers

COVER DECORATIONS—Many books of this era were richly decorated with metal ornaments, gilding, and/or blind tooling. The latter two were out of reach for the project for reasons of time and tool availability (however, I have plans to blind tool the cover in the future as these two factors are addressed). In the place of tooling, metal corners of a reasonably plausible design were sourced locally and affixed with nails through the leather and board.



Fig. 10: Completed book with metal corners in place

Conclusion

While the book is complete as-is, there remains some elements I would like to add in the future. The cover deserves some blind tooling. This does not need to be ornate as there are numerous extant examples of simple, geometric tooling to reference. But before that happens, addressing the misaligned and mismatched endpapers is my first concern.

The long-term success of this project, however, rises and falls on getting the album in the hands of others I learn from and am inspired by in the Society. Like the humanists who made these books popular four hundred plus years ago, I aim to fill my own book of friends up with inscriptions, with art, with verses, and with words of wisdom so that I, too, can look back fondly on friendships I've made and lessons I've learned.

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