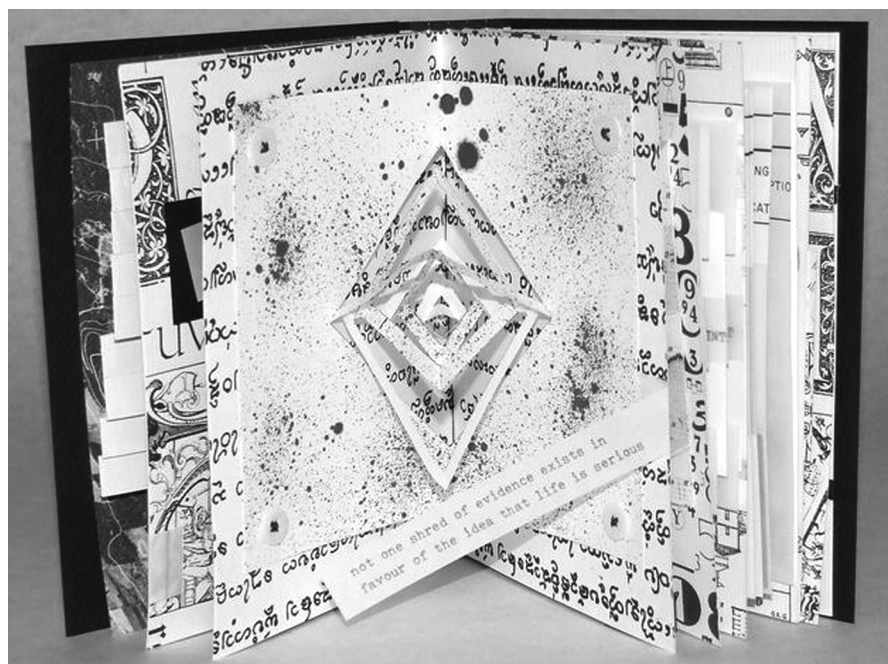


## *Livres d'artistes: Not Your Grandmother's Books*

TRISHA KLUS provides insight into the many factors that affect the ultimate look—and feel—of one-of-a-kind, handmade books.



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*Black & White & Just for Fun is an example of how the choice of structure can differentiate an artist's book.*

JUST WHAT IS A *livre d'artiste*, or artist's book? As one who makes hand-bound books, I am often asked this question, and I understand the confusion. When you see a book beautifully bound in leather featuring colourful illustrations and an interesting story placed next to a structure made of a couple of pieces of rough wood with human hair and toenails attached, it's hard to believe that both may be considered artists' books! (And yes, there is such a book out there.)

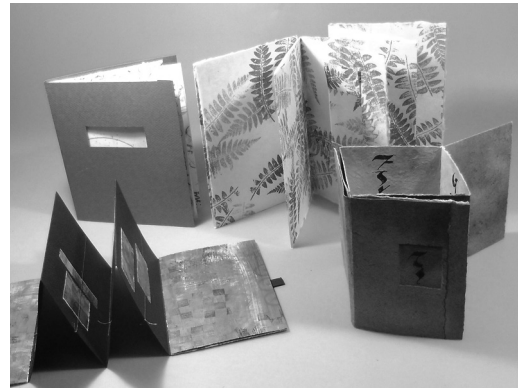
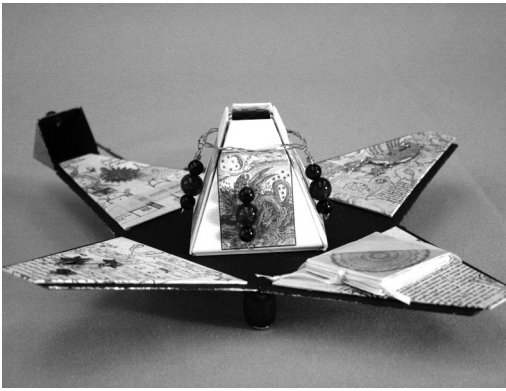
Ask a hundred different book artists what an artist's book is and you will receive a hundred and one replies. It is generally accepted that an artist's book may be defined as a piece of work inspired by the book form that tells a story in an artful and comprehensive way. The creator combines structure, format and presentation to best complement the content and present it coherently.

The books we are most familiar with connect elements such as pages or panels and follow

a sequence in order to have continuity of an idea or theme. Artists' books expand on the traditional and allow the book to become the medium whereby creativity can be expressed through materials, content and structure.

These books then become works of art. Artists' books may be created as one-of-a-kind or in small editions. The structure, format, content and illustration are all decided upon by the artist to enhance the theme of the book.

Books made by artists are created in a wide variety of formats. These may employ pop-ups (in three dimensions), fold-outs, collage, scrolls, concertinas, folded structures, loose items contained in a box as well as bound printed sheets. The use of non-traditional bookmaking materials is another feature of the artist's book. Wood, stone, Mylar, glass, Plexiglas, three-dimensional objects, and even bones and human hair are some examples of what has been used!



*Magnum Opus (left) is one example of how to structure a book, while the various books on the right show how a single structure can be expressed in different formats.*

New techniques and technologies in computers and photography offer even greater possibilities for the artist willing to push the boundaries of what we consider a book.

In making artists' books, the following all go hand in hand and are dependent upon each other:

- structure: the style of binding, or how the book is held together, whether it is sewn, glued, folded or woven
- format: the shape, style, size, page shape, layout and materials used
- presentation: the look of the finished piece—the icing on the cake

The rest of this article looks at each of these aspects of the artist's book in more detail.

#### CHOOSING THE BEST STRUCTURE

The artist must decide on a structure that best works with the content and vice versa.

- Will it be a case-bound book (one that looks like a regular book), a folded style (concertina or leporello), a pop-up, a scroll or a box with inclusions? Will it even look like a book?
- Will there be many pages? How will they be attached?
- If sewn, will the binding be shown and therefore will it be decorative?
- If not sewn to the cover, will it be glued, will a folded structure be used, or will the pages be left loose and stored in a custom box?
- If items are added to the pages, how

will they be attached and how will that affect the format of the book?

#### HOW STRUCTURE INSPIRES FORMAT

One structure can inspire many formats. For example, a book artist may start with a concertina folded book, measuring 5 by 4 inches. By sewing pages onto the folds, gluing on pockets or changing the size to 6 by 8 inches, the structure is the same but the format has been changed. It is easy to see how one structure may inspire many formats. This is the beauty of artists' books: the possibilities for artistic expression are endless.

When thinking about the format, the artist needs to make decisions about the size, shape, style, colours, imagery, illustration, page layout, and which materials to use. Considerations include the following:

- What weight of paper will be used? It must be suitable for the size of the book, as very thin paper would not be strong enough for a large book.
- Will the page be landscape, portrait, or will it be a shaped page, and how will that affect the layout?
- If illustrations will be used, where will they be placed on the page?
- Will devices such as envelopes, pockets, hidden/concealed spaces or pop-ups be used?
- How will colour be used to complement the theme of the book?
- How will the story be told? Will the text be hand-lettered or printed? Will it be

legible, used as a graphic design, formal or informal, or will there be no text at all?

- How will the amount of text affect the size of the pages?
- Can specific materials be used to visually enhance the concept of the book?

With so many considerations, the choice of format can make a book go from quite simple to very complex. Often the artist has to go back and forth, making allowances and changes in structure and format, to arrive at the most pleasing final presentation.

#### PRESENTATION TO DELIGHT THE SENSES

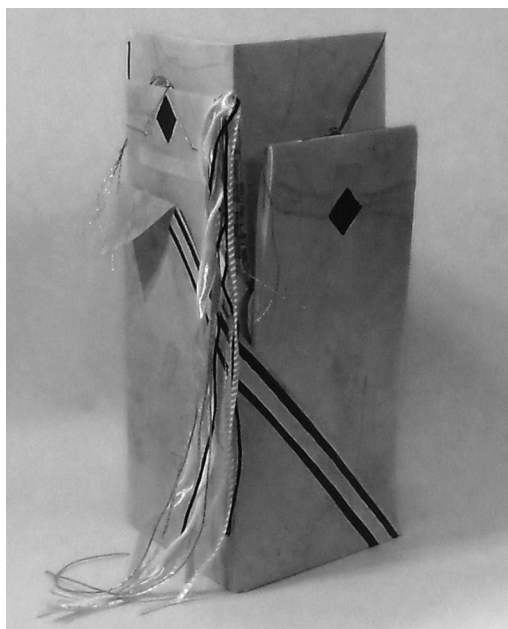
As anyone who has ever worked in a restaurant will tell you, presentation is everything! The same goes for artists' books. How a book is first perceived by the reader is determined by its presentation. It is the way the artist attracts the reader and makes him want to pick up the book.

When one is intrigued enough to want to open and explore a book, then the presentation has been successful. Once again, the content or theme of the book is often the guide. One artist may want the book's content or theme clearly indicated at the first glance, whereas another artist may want to surprise the reader with a delightful book placed in an unassuming slipcase or box.

Good presentation should not be confused with over-the-top shine and glitz. A simple codex with a letterpress-printed title and a handmade paper cover can be just as intriguing as a decorated box concealing the book within. It just depends upon how involved the artist wishes the reader to become.

The reader will experience the least amount of involvement with a basic codex, much more with a pop-up book or one where the story has to be "discovered." Sometimes the presentation is designed to be more interesting or involved than the content; the presentation then becomes the art and the content plays more of a supporting role.

Holding an artist's book in your hands delights the senses. As your eyes gaze upon the decorated pages, you can feel the texture and hear sounds as your fingers handle the book, sometimes even smell the materials used. It is



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*Magnum Opus (top) presents as a pyramid, while other structures (bottom) present quite differently.*

a wonderful medium that opens a new dimension to readers and gives them a deeper sense of the content, a new way to read a story. So maybe a lot more thought has gone into that wood, hair and toenail book than I originally thought. I still wouldn't touch it though!

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~ Trisha Klus is a lettering and paper artist specializing in calligraphy, hand-bound books, marbling and collage. She lives in Cobble Hill, B.C. A previous version of this article appeared in the newsletter of the Fairbank Calligraphy Society.