

REVIEW

Book Binding Ephemera

By Claudia Cohen (limited edition of 30 copies issued by the artist, US\$500).

Reviewed by Robert J. Desmarais

Claudia Cohen is an American bookbinder—trained by Gray Parrot—whose work over the past three decades has encompassed several of the later, super-deluxe Gehenna titles; a number of the Cheloniidae books in the '80s; and perhaps most exhaustingly, the Moser Bible. So one can imagine the kinds of ephemera that might be culled from her scrap bin.

Before I sat down to write a review of *Book Binding Ephemera*, I devised two simple questions to focus my thoughts and to provide structure to my written observations: How does this artifact work as a book? And does it engage the viewer, perhaps encouraging us to contemplate broader spheres of art and design? By applying these questions to the task at hand, I found that I grew to like *Ephemera* for its visual commentary on beautiful books, and I gained a greater appreciation for the myriad design decisions that make books “work” as aesthetically pleasing objects.

At first glance, the sixteen-panel accordion-fold book, with specimens of bookbinding materials pasted on the verso and recto of each page (and both sides), has the look and feel of a “sample book” that one would see in a designer’s showroom. Upon seeing the book unfolded, we are treated to a visual feast of various book clothes, marbled papers, thread, and leather and paper title labels. A few words of caution, though, to admirers of “art books”: *Ephemera* is not an art book per se. In fact, it has little in the way of innovative artistic display, with materials mostly pasted down in neatly aligned rows or circular arrangements. The book works wonderfully, however, as a scrapbook of beautiful materials, and when it is unfolded, I was reminded how well it lends itself to exhibition. Indeed, viewers have seen *Ephemera* on exhibit in the University of Alberta’s special collections library, and many have expressed particular interest in Cohen’s selection of papers, but few have recognized the paper patterns from the illustrious Curwen Press. To remedy this situation, Cohen might have supplied a descriptive listing of the samples as a way of introducing us to some truly exceptional patterns.

Despite the lack of explanatory material, *Ephemera* does a rather good job of inviting us to think about the ways that the inner and outermost

components of books convey meaning and perspective. For example, Cohen uses an exquisite selection of marbled papers, subtly reminding us how important endpapers are in their ability to captivate readers when they make that first entry into the book. And a judicious selection of the author’s own executed bindings is a true delight to behold, leaving many with the impression that books are truly magical. Indeed, when bibliophiles see gilt-stamped titles on leather bindings, we might feel compelled to hold the book, suddenly absorbed more in the book’s materiality than its content. And this is exactly the point Cohen makes so convincingly, that materiality matters. With this awareness, we start to notice patterns, grains, dyes and typefaces, and an appreciation of such matters is, of course, vital to an understanding and appreciation of a well-crafted book.

In summing up my final thoughts about *Ephemera*, I could not resist thinking that I had just indulged my eyes in a pleasurable aesthetic experience, made more real by attending to various physical properties, such as the needle and thread with the tips of my fingers. In effect, I simply reminded myself that books often acquaint us with multi-sensory aesthetic experience. This is perhaps the most commendable quality about *Ephemera*: the way it bids us to consider the physical book, to let its design speak to us, and encourages us to reflect on how books as physical objects have many meaning-producing qualities.

Robert J. Desmarais is a rare books librarian at the University of Alberta’s Bruce Peel Special Collections Library.

REVIEW

The Book of Lost Books

By Stuart Kelly (Viking, 2005, \$34).

Reviewed by Phyllis Reeve

It’s an irresistible notion, one of those byways into which bibliophiles are prone to stray: a virtual bibliography of non-existent books, books which almost existed or might have existed or did exist but subsequently vanished.

Books may be destroyed, like the contents of the Alexandrian library or the manuscript of Carlyle’s *French Revolution*; stolen, like Hadley Hemingway’s suitcase containing the complete unpublished works of her not-yet-famous husband; unfinished, like the forever unsolved *Mystery of Edwin Drood*; planned but unstarted, like Melville’s—or was it Hawthorne’s?—*Agatha*; or simply gone beyond recall, like *The Alexias* of Camillo Querno. We can all make our list of books that might have been.