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STYLE

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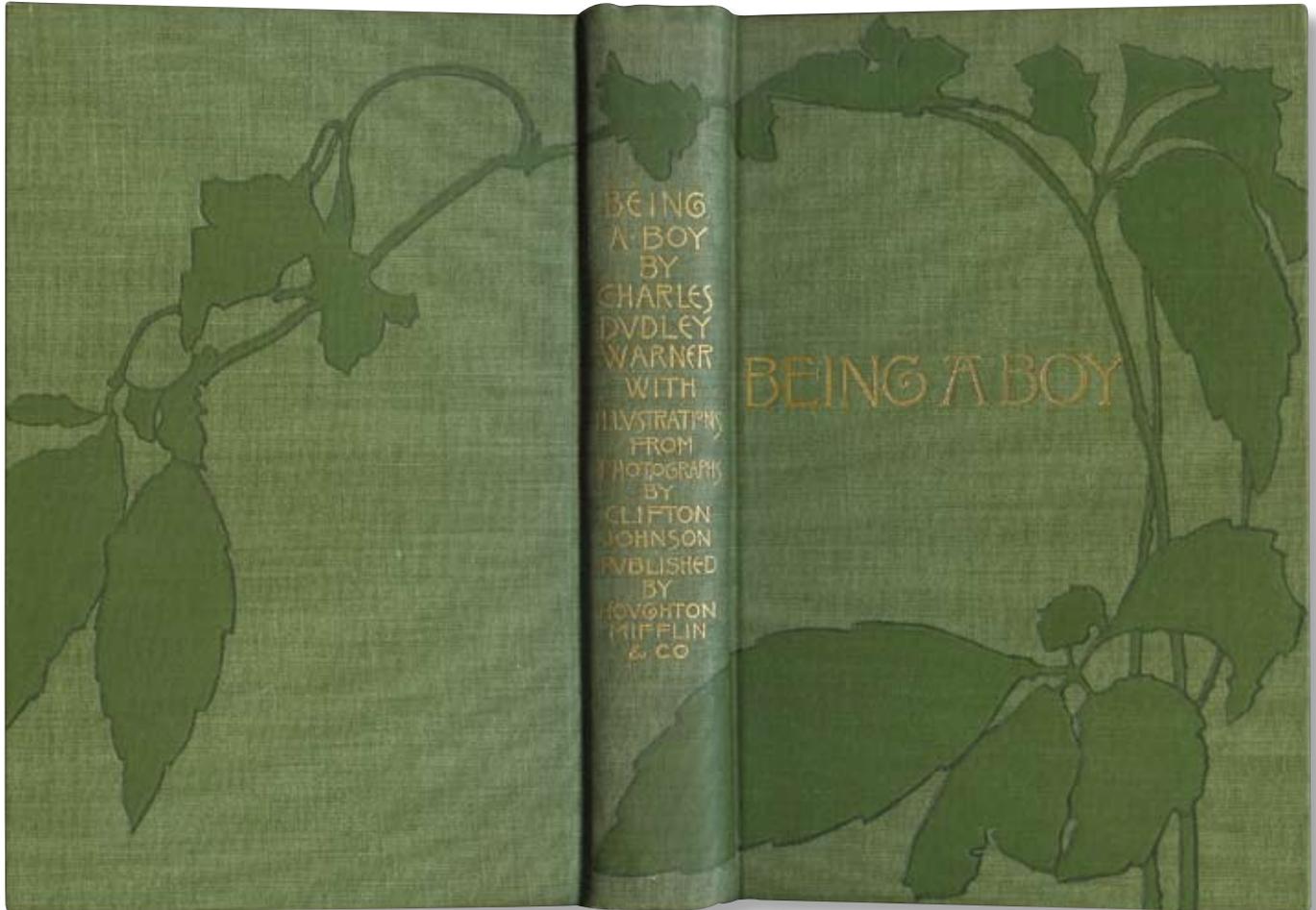
1900

The House that Stickley Built

Arts & Crafts Living in the Pacific NW
Collecting Beautiful Books
Mackintosh Church in Glasgow
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Designed by artists for a mass market, turn-of-the-century cloth bindings are coming into their own again.

Photograph by Stuart Walker. Courtesy of Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Book Department, Boston, MA.



Telling Books by Their Covers

By Anne Stewart O'Donnell

The typical book offered by the large American publishers of the mid-1880s sported a cover of moisture-resistant colored cloth, with a design die-stamped on it in black or gold. That design, generally concocted by the die-maker himself, might be a riot of type faces, borders, arabesques, and Japanese or Eastlake-style motifs. It might reproduce an illustration from inside the book. Or it might feature an incongruous vignette unrelated to the subject matter—perhaps “a volume of critical essays with a bunch of daisies thrown across the cover,” as designer Alice C. Morse later commented dryly. One thing you could count on, however: whatever the ornament, there was likely to be a lot of it.

That is, until Sarah Wyman Whitman came along.

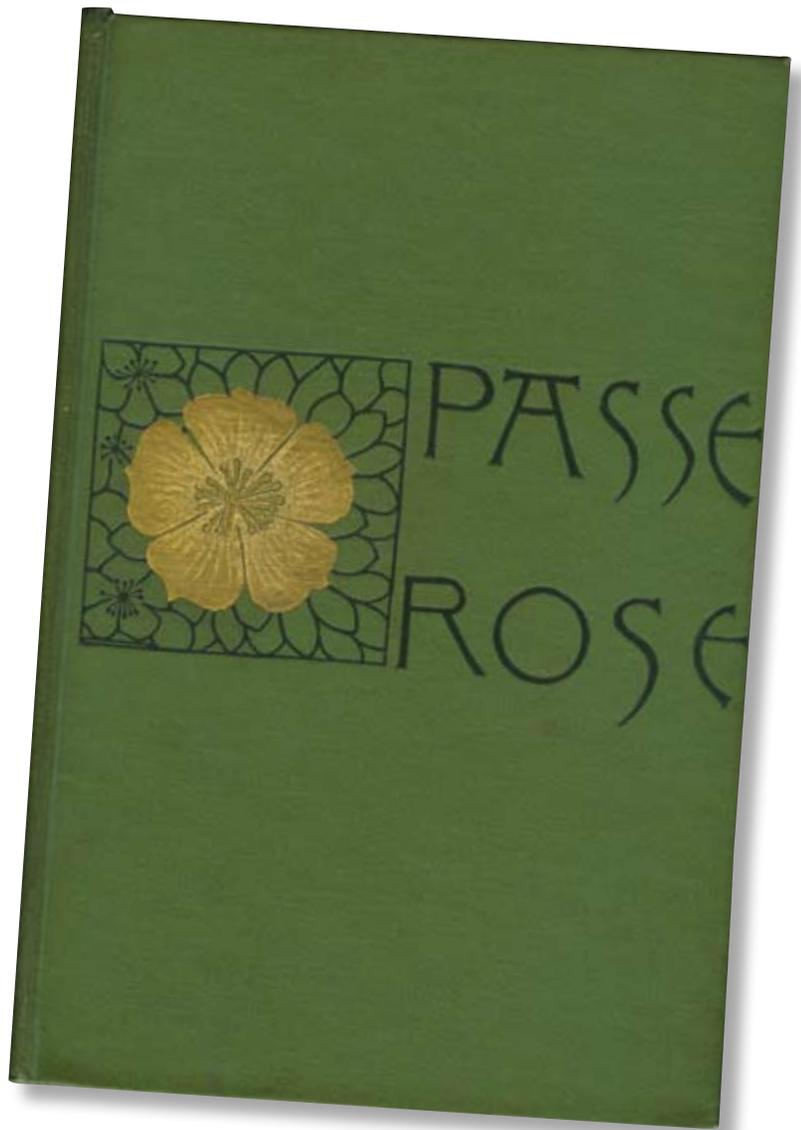
The formidable Mrs. Whitman (1842-1904) was a legend in her own time, a prominent society hostess to whom Boston's literary and artistic elite flocked like flies to honey. Eccentric and dashing, she was a noted painter and a professional stained-glass artist who helped oversee the design department of Boston's Museum of Fine Arts School, and later the city's influential Society of Arts and Crafts. When she turned her attention to book covers for the Boston publisher Houghton, Mifflin, she brought about a revolution.

"If you look at popular book design of the years 1884-85, the height of the craze of putting everything but the kitchen sink on book covers, her impact can be felt like a slap in the face," says Stuart Walker, a rare book conservator at the Boston Public Library who has long studied Whitman's work. "In 1884 she produced Crawford's *A Roman Singer*, which employs one sinuous poppy or anemone trailing along the left side, with the remainder of the cover left blank except for lettering. She was a master of the use of what is now called negative space."

Suddenly, any publisher claiming to purvey works of literary or cultural merit rushed to commission binding designs (which their die-makers would then implement) from the new crop of professionals—many of them women—emerging from schools such as Cooper Union in New York City and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, School of Drawing and Painting. Well-versed in the principles of "good design" that would also become central to the Arts and Crafts movement—stylizing motifs, for example, rather than depicting them in a shaded, rounded, realistic manner implying three-dimensionality—these artists developed further ideas regarding what Alice Morse called "the proper decoration of book covers."

Commercial bindings, which were a form of advertisement as well as literally an encapsulation of the entire work, should never illustrate a single scene, said Morse; instead, they should "suggest to the casual observer, in a symbolic way, the contents of the volume." Historic bindings could and should be used for inspiration, but only when this approach fit the subject matter; as Morse observed, modern cover treatments could range from "the thoroughly formal conventional sixteenth-century cover to something appropriate for the so-called railroad novel." Sarah Whitman summed up the challenges in 1894, telling a crowd of Boston art students that

You have got to think how to apply elements of design to these cheaply sold books; to put the touch of art on the thing that is going to be

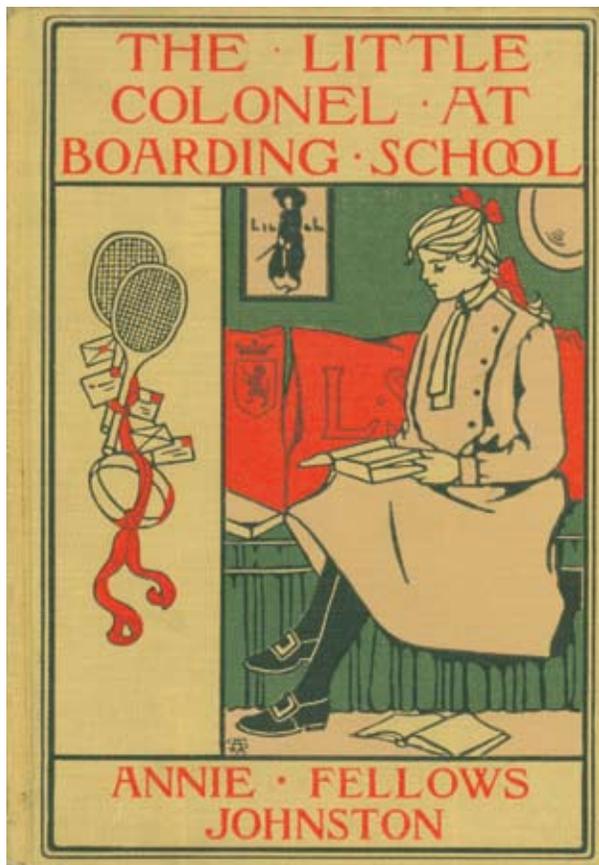


Above Without imitating historic bindings, Sarah Whitman's elegant treatment for Arthur S. Hardy's *Passe Rose* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1889) hints gently at the straps and clasps that held early books closed. *Photograph by Stuart Walker. Courtesy of Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Book Department, Boston, MA.*

Opposite After the frantically fussy bindings of the early 1880s, Sarah Wyman Whitman's restraint was a breath of fresh air. Charles Dudley Warner's *Being A Boy* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1897) shows her at top form.

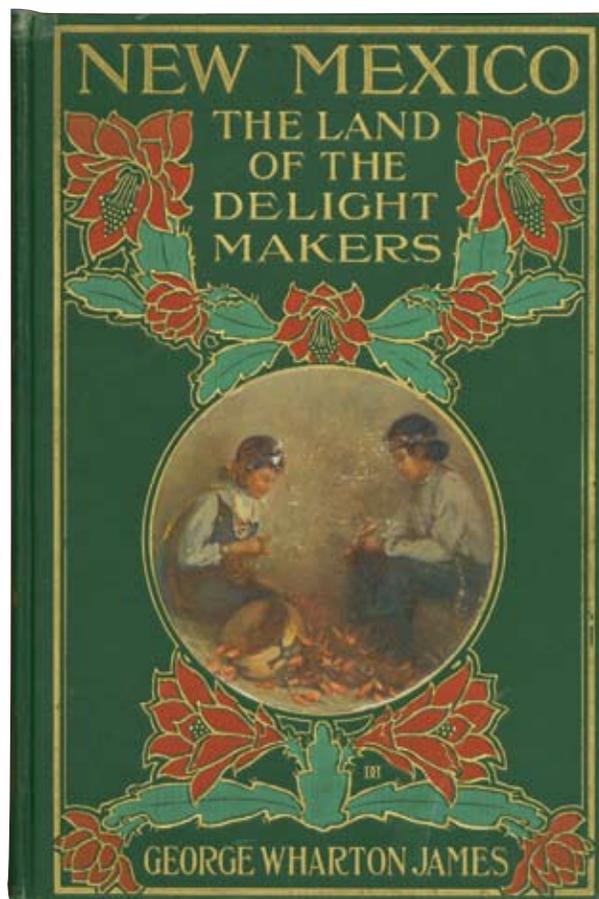
produced at a level price, which allows for no handwork, the decoration to be cut with a die, the books to go out by the thousand and to be sold at a low price....the decorations shall be delicate, elegant, sensitive to the associations the book has always had, and it must be done at the same time on the basis of cheapness, of machine work.

While many publishers sought designs that would follow Whitman's spare and distinctive style, other approaches evolved as well—for instance, figural or scenic covers similar to the popular advertising posters of the day (see example, next page). The heyday of the artist-designed cloth book cover was brief,



Left “Poster” covers, featuring human figures in a style much like the advertising posters of the day, became a popular approach to binding design from the mid-1890s forward. Amy M. Sacker became a specialist with covers like this one for Annie Fellows Johnston’s *The Little Colonel at Boarding School* (L. C. Page, 1903). Photograph by Mark Schumacher. Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Left bottom Printed paper pastedowns (such as this one glued to the cover of *New Mexico* by George Wharton James from the Page Company, ca. 1920) and colorful printed dust jackets became the fashion around 1908 or 1909, causing publishers’ demand for stamped binding designs to plummet. This cover, with stamped portion by the Decorative Designers, is a late hybrid. Photograph by Mark Schumacher. Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

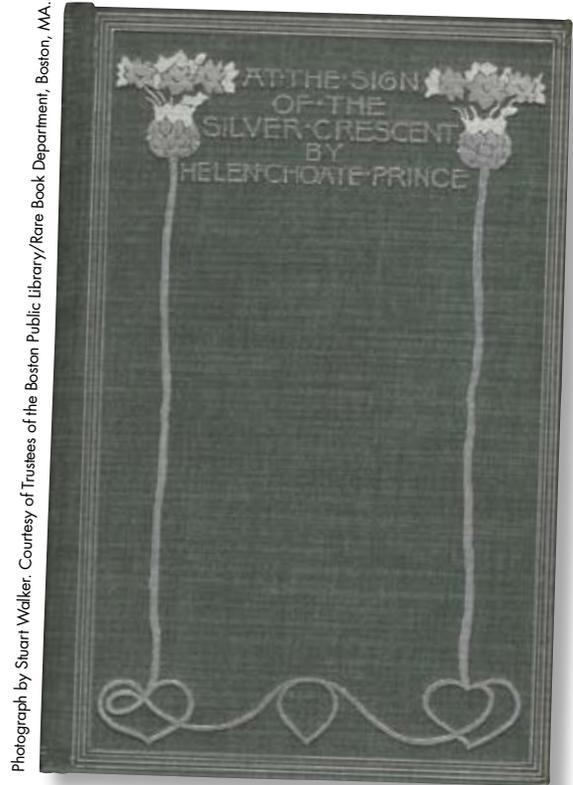
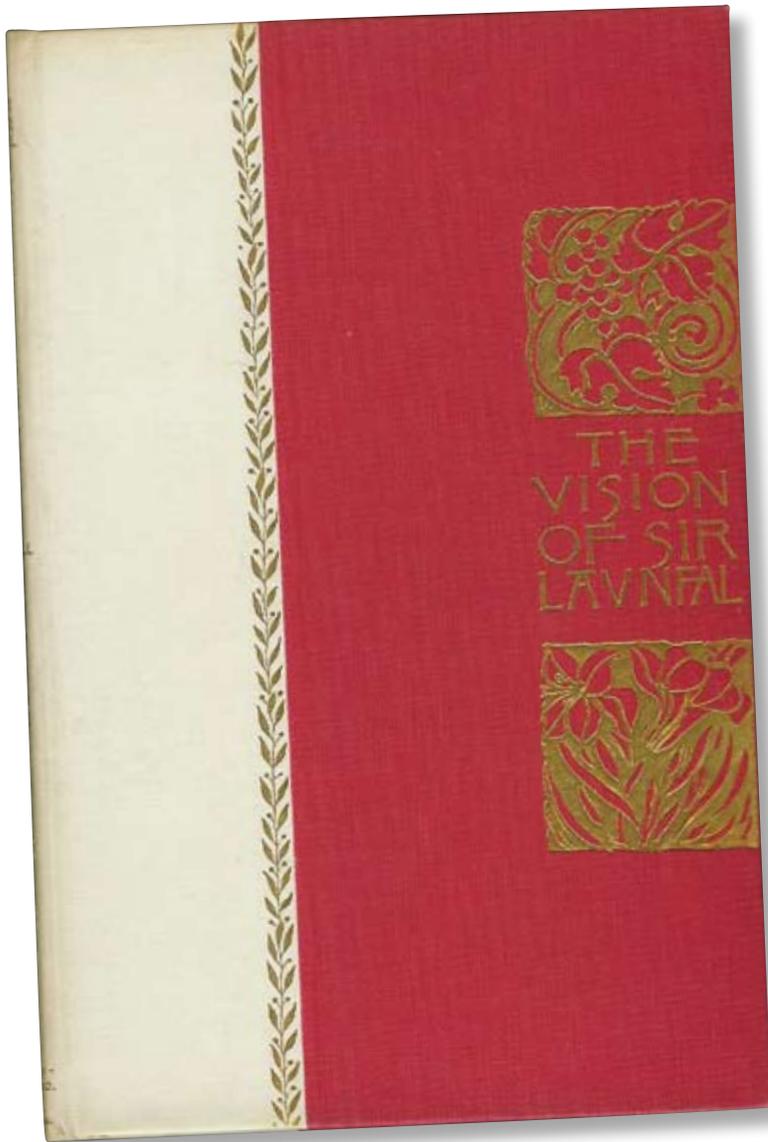


however. Around 1908 or 1909, the fashion suddenly gave way to the use of colorful glued-on paper pastedowns—a technique that paved the way, in turn, for full color illustrated dust-jackets over nearly undecorated bindings. As designer Lee Thayer reported, publishers’ insatiable demand for artistic stamped covers seem to dry up “in a month.”

A century later, however, these bindings and their creators are being rediscovered by discerning collectors. Building on the pioneering research of book historians Charles Gullans, John Espy, and Sue Allen in the late 1960s and 70s, a small but devoted club of aficionados—often librarians and book conservators who encounter such covers in the course of their work—are piecing together the oeuvre of various designers. The process is by no means easy. Though many covers were marked with initials, many others by the same artists were not; it can take research into publishing records and period advertisements, analysis of subtle differences in the lettering and motifs produced by different designers, and some inspired guesswork to make an attribution. Adding to the confusion is the fact that publishers reused designs, sometimes changing only the title and author, but in other cases adapting significant details. (On one design originated by Amy M. Sacker, the L.C. Page Company changed a sunhat to a sombrero and a big-city skyline to a vista of San Antonio. Sacker’s initials were dropped from the altered cover.)

As with any quest, however, the unknowns and challenges simply add to the allure. Despite the visual appeal of these covers and the fact that they are authentic products of the period, they remain relatively unknown, with new finds taking place every day. While an antiquarian bookseller might be able to supply a pristine Whitman first-edition for hundreds of dollars, you might also find one for a quarter at a yard sale—or for free on your own family bookshelves. The six designers listed below are only the tip of a large and addictive iceberg. Keep your eyes open, and you’re almost guaranteed to make discoveries.

Six Designers



Photograph by Stuart Walker. Courtesy of Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Book Department, Boston, MA.

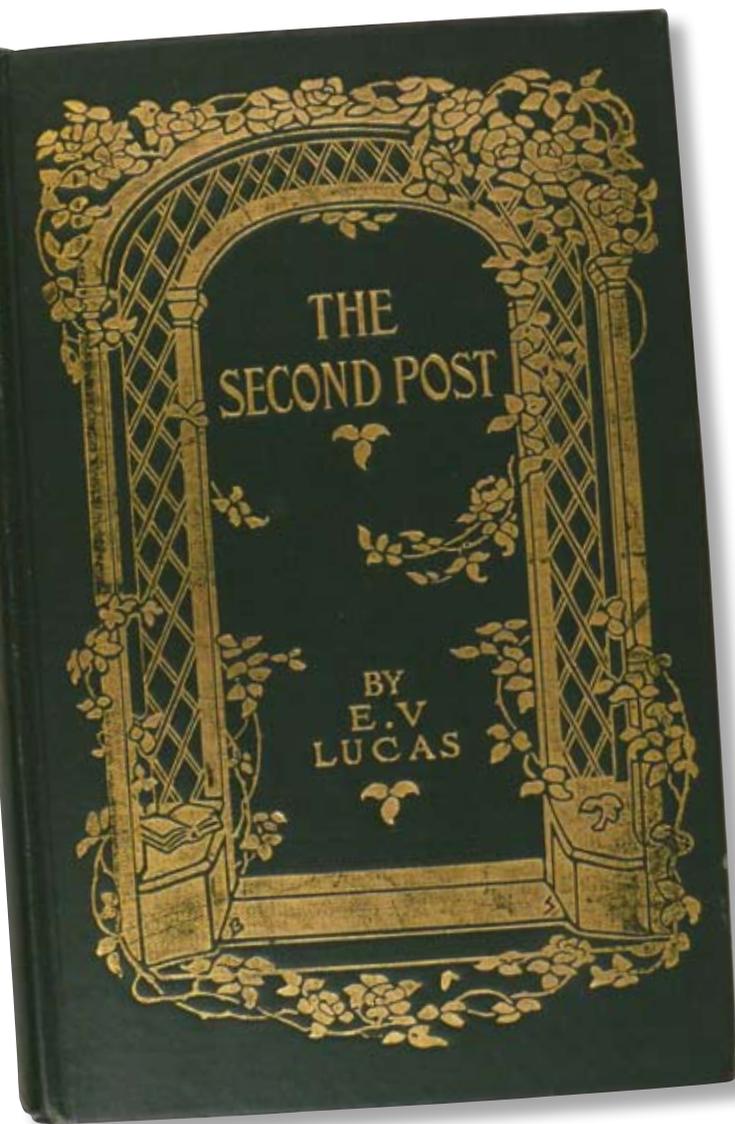
Above Repeated, vertical floral designs are often seen on covers by Sarah Wyman Whitman, as are heart shapes. Whitman chose an appropriate palette for *At the Sign of the Silver Crescent* by Helen Choate Prince (Houghton, Mifflin, 1898); the “silver” was actually a non-tarnishing aluminum alloy.

Left Three-part covers, where a book’s spine was made from a separate piece of cloth, were a favorite of Whitman’s. Here she uses the technique on James Russell Lowell’s *The Vision of Sir Launfal* (Houghton, Mifflin, 1891). *Photograph by Stuart Walker. Courtesy of Trustees of the Boston Public Library/Rare Book Department, Boston, MA.*

Sarah Wyman Whitman

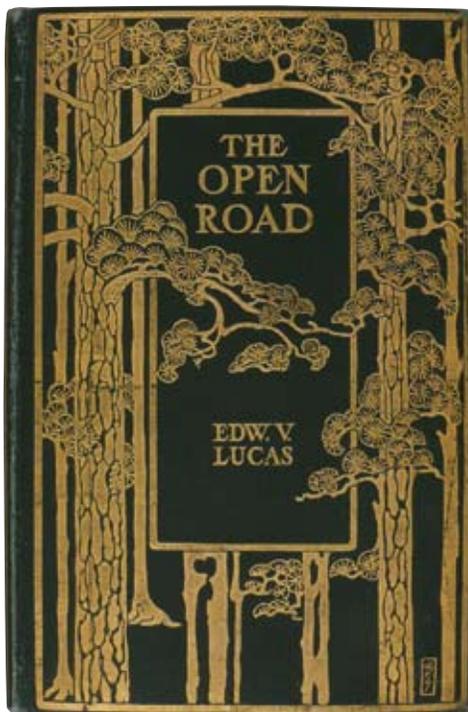
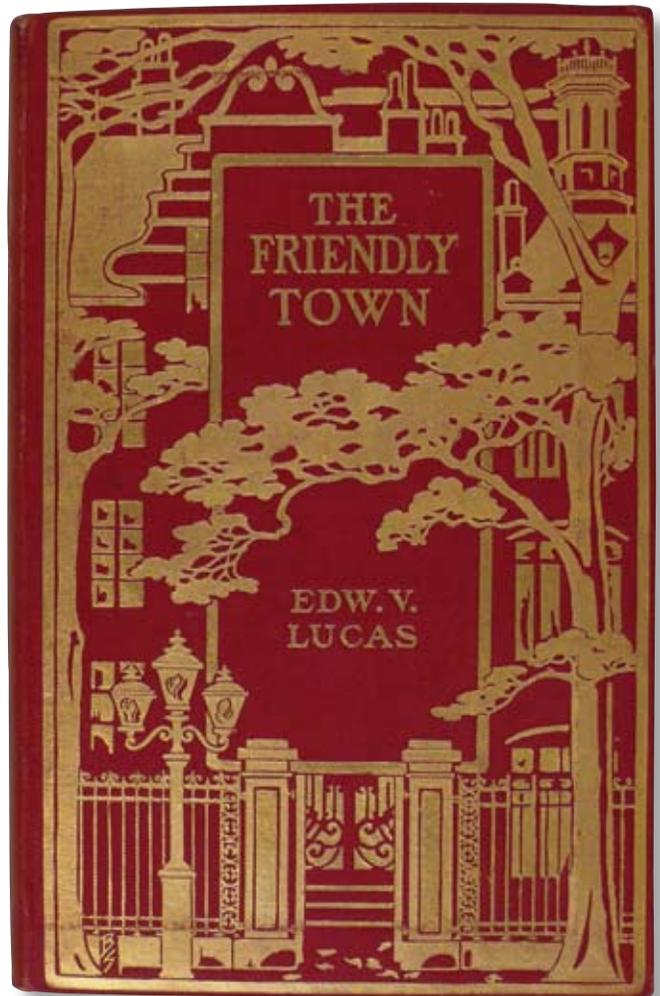
Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842-1904) produced most of her covers for Houghton, Mifflin, working from about 1884 to 1900. Her covers are rarely signed, though a very few show her initials enclosed in a heart surmounted by a tiny flame. While the elements she pioneered were widely copied, says Stuart Walker, “the imitators don’t really capture the ‘Zen’ of Sarah Whitman. There is something about the totality of her design that, after

exposure to many examples, jumps out at you. The reader should practice by looking at as many Houghton, Mifflin books as possible, and should bear in mind simplicity, restraint, and a careful geometric layout in addition to her distinctive lettering. My abiding rule would be, if in doubt and it isn’t Houghton, Mifflin, it probably isn’t Whitman.”



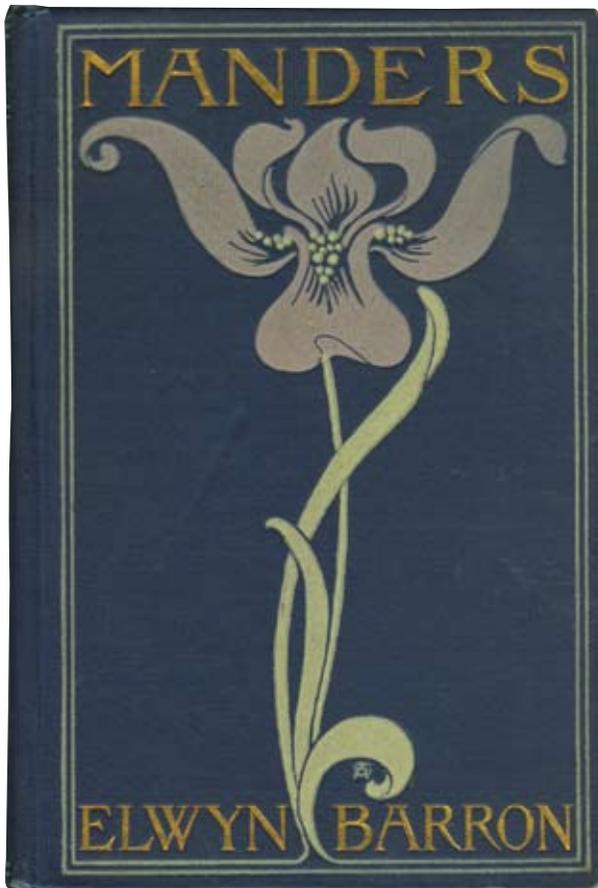
Bertha Stuart

Bertha Stuart (1869-1953) studied in Chicago and New York and lived most of her life in Portland, Oregon, where she thrived as an interior designer (see page 96 for more). She designed book covers from 1902–1912; expert Barbara Adams Hebard of the Boston Athenaeum has located 168 titles, roughly half of them for Henry Holt and Company. Stuart's monogram varies; look for the initials "BS," separated or together.



All images Bertha Stuart created a number of covers for author Edward Verrell Lucas, including *The Second Post* (Macmillan, 1910), *The Friendly Town* (Henry Holt & Co., 1906), and *The Open Road* (Henry Holt & Co., 1905). Collection of Barbara Adams Hebard.





Amy M. Sacker

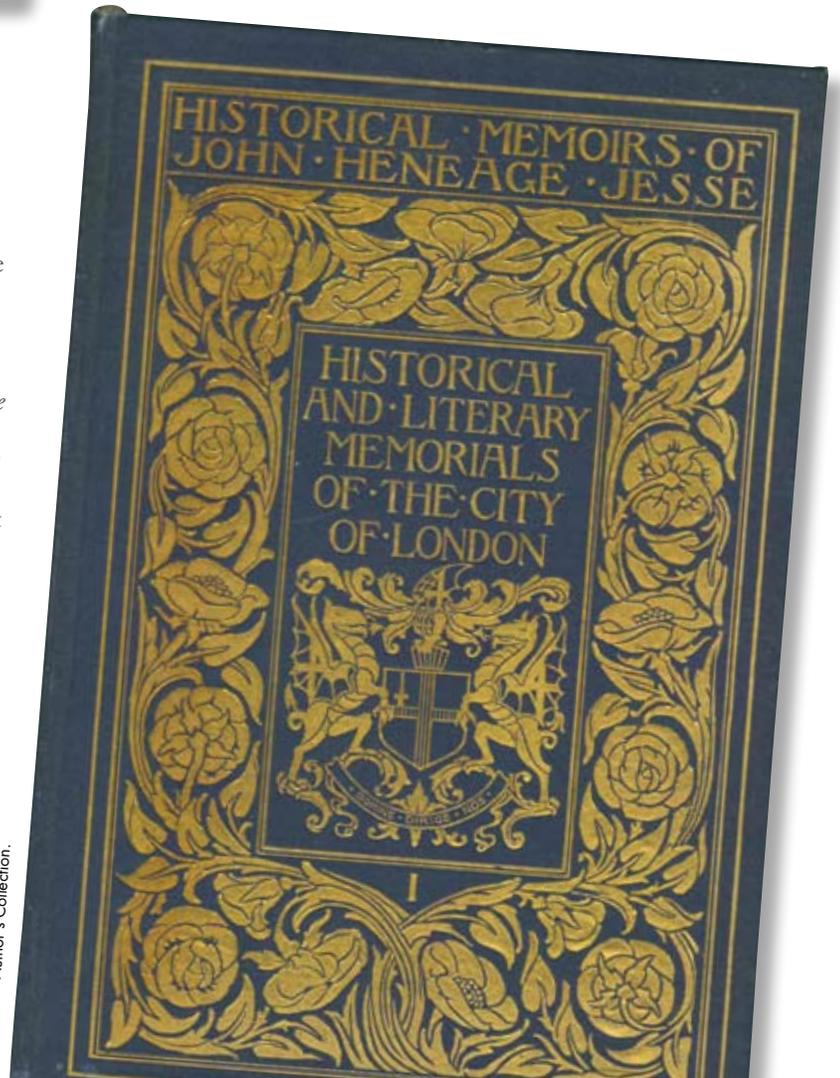
As a prize-winning design student at the Museum of Fine Arts School in Boston and then as a worker on committees of the Society of Arts and Crafts, Amy M. Sacker (1872-1965) probably knew Sarah Whitman personally and could hardly fail to have been influenced by her example, if not directly by her style. Sacker herself made a specialty of the poster cover (example, page 48), though her vast output (“in the thousands,” according to one educated guess) runs the gamut of stylistic sources. Beyond covers, Sacker applied her skills to illustration, bookplate design, portraiture, greeting cards, and other media. Last, though far from least, she was also a well-loved and influential teacher, running her own school of design and interior decoration for some fifty years. Though not all of her bindings are signed, her favored mark was a superimposed “AMS.” She sometimes used a separated “A” and “S” instead.



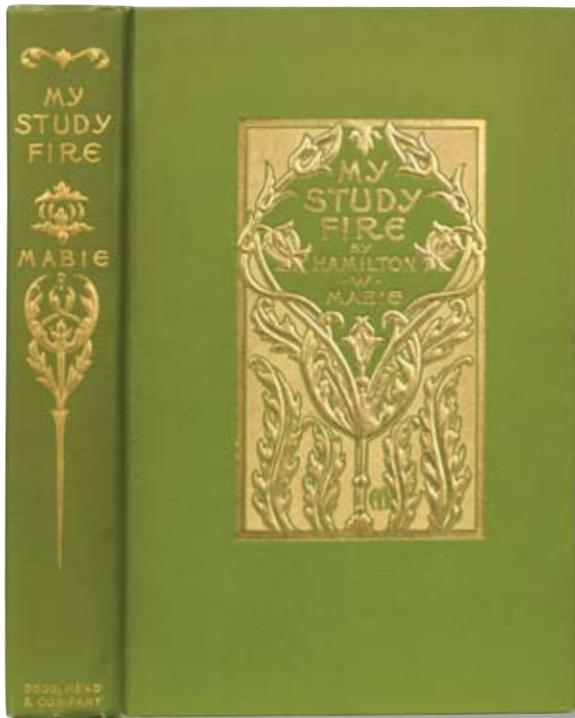
Above Because *Manders* by Elwyn Barron (L. C. Page & Company, 1899) is set among artists in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, Amy Sacker’s design is doubly appropriate: the iris (when stylized

as a fleur-de-lys) is the heraldic symbol of France, and the Nouveau-inspired treatment reflects the artistic currents of the time and place.

Right Sacker chose roses, traditional symbol of England, for the cover of *Historical Memoirs of John Heneage Jesse: Historical and Literary Memorials of the City of London*, volume 1 (L. C. Page & Company, 1901). Her interpretation recalls the page borders executed a few years before by William Morris for his famed Kelmscott Press edition of Chaucer.



© Mindell Dubansky. Photograph by Eileen Travell.



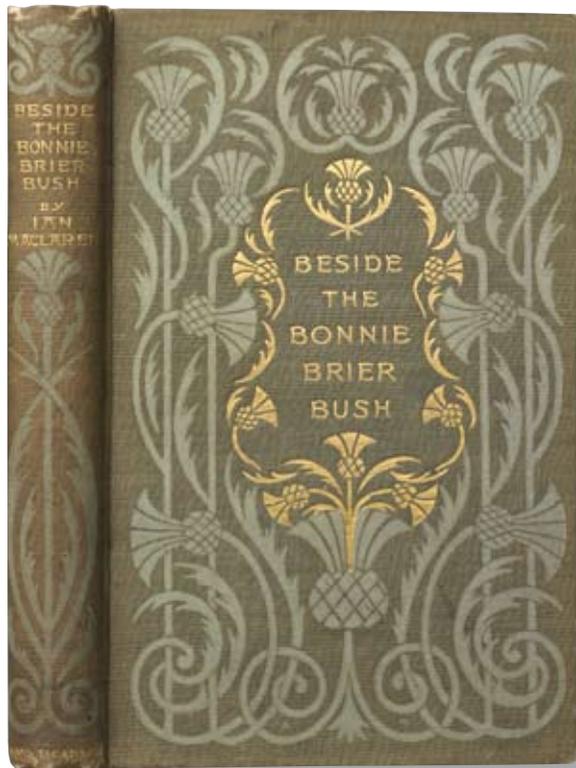
Alice C. Morse

Alice C. Morse (1863-1961) trained at the Woman's Art School at Cooper Union in New York City, studied with stained-glass pioneer John La Farge, and worked in Louis Comfort Tiffany's stained-glass studio before resigning to concentrate on book cover design. She also worked to plan the displays of bindings, wood-engraving, and illustration in the Woman's Building at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and wrote the chapter on illustration for the official Woman's Building guidebook. (Her own covers won a medal at the Exposition.) Though she moved in 1897 to Scranton, PA to serve as an arts administrator in the public schools, she continued to design bindings into the 20th century.

Until recently, collecting Morse has been a challenge. She didn't start signing covers until 1894, some eight years after she began designing them, and her work spans a huge stylistic range, from classic 16th-century binding motifs to Nouveau-inspired florals. Mindell Dubansky's recent exhibition and catalogue, however, lists the 80-plus known Morse covers, and may lead to the identification of more. Morse's mark, when it appears, may be in the form of a plain capital "A" and "M," or of the two initials joined, as shown.

Above and below Morse's design for *My Study Fire* by Hamilton Wright Mabie (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1899) incorporates an appropriately flamelike floral. The design, in both bright and matte gold, is not merely stamped but also embossed ("sculpted" in relief by being pressed with heated, engraved plates). By contrast, she used stamping alone for *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* by Ian Maclaren (Dodd, Mead & Company, 1896).

© Mindell Dubansky. Photograph by Eileen Travell.



© Mindell Dubansky. Photograph by Eileen Travell.



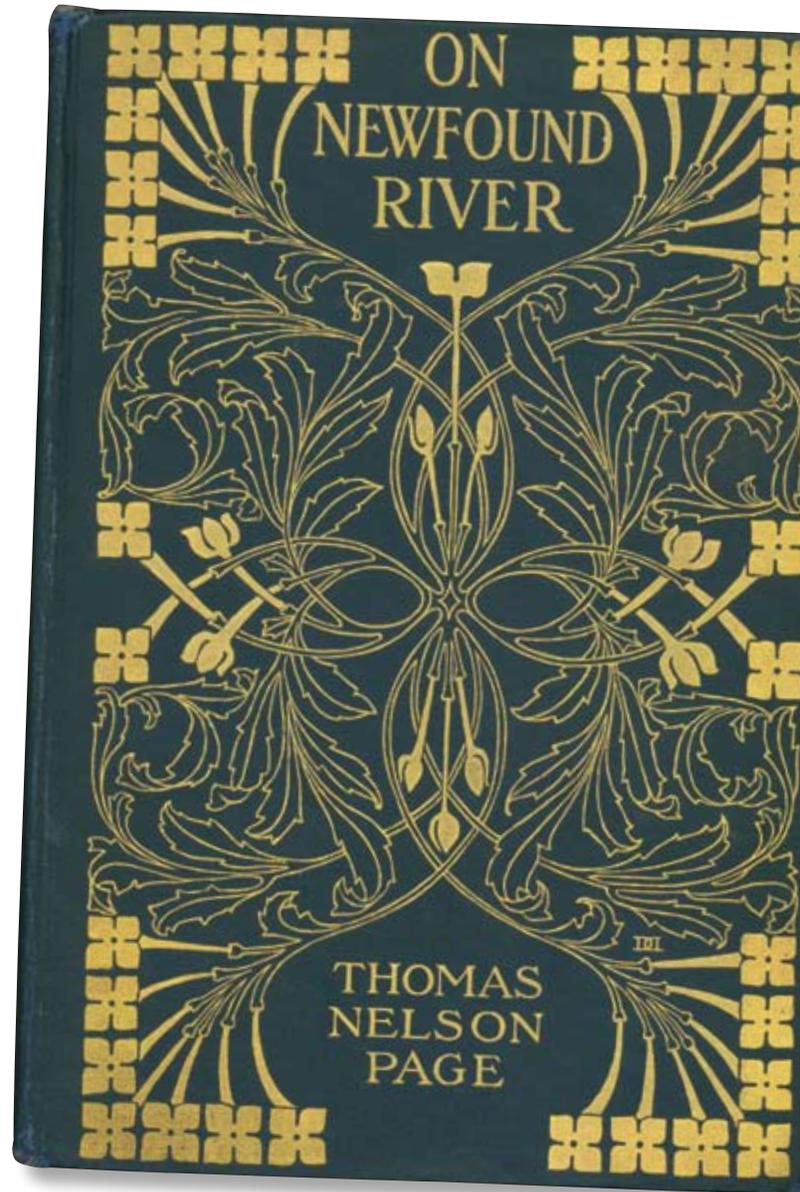
Above Morse produced only three known pictorial covers, among them Henry G. Catlin's *Yellow Pine Basin: The Story of a Prospector* (George H. Richmond & Co., 1897). Note how the cover scene continues across the spine.



The Decorative Designers

This active New York firm consisted primarily of the husband and wife team of Henry and Lee Thayer, though they also employed other respected designers, particularly Jay Chambers from 1902-1916. Originally an architect with the celebrated office of McKim, Mead, and White, Henry (born 1867) founded the cover-design workshop in 1895. His first hire was Emma Redington Lee (1874-1973), who had trained with Candace Wheeler as well as at Cooper Union and at the Pratt Institute. "Lee" and Henry married in 1909. According to the University of Alabama's Publishers' Bindings Online site, by the time this unusually long-lived concern was dissolved in 1931, "the Decorative Designers monogram appeared on over 25,000 book covers, dust jackets, and text decorations."

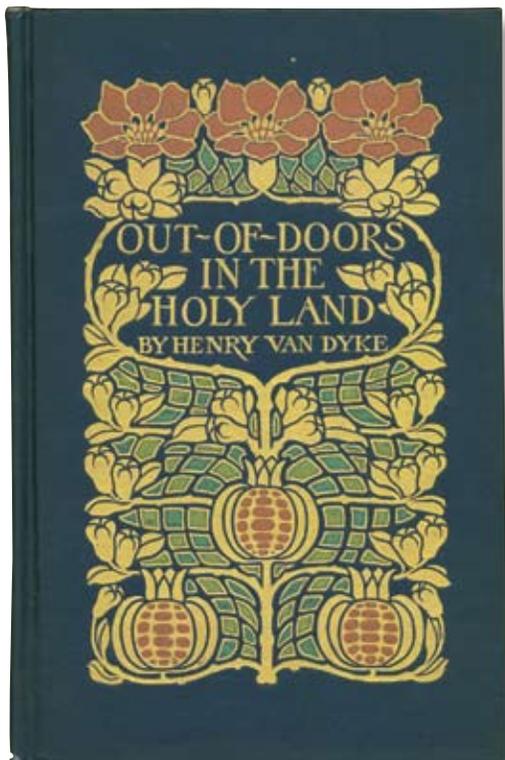
While some Decorative Designers covers are the work of one individual, most are joint efforts, with Lee specializing in borders and designs, Henry in lettering, and Chambers in human figures. Regardless of designer, look for the linked "DD" mark.



Above *On Newfound River* by Thomas Nelson Page (Scribner, 1906) shows Decorative Designer Lee Thayer's inventive use of line. *Photograph by Mark Schumacher.*

Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

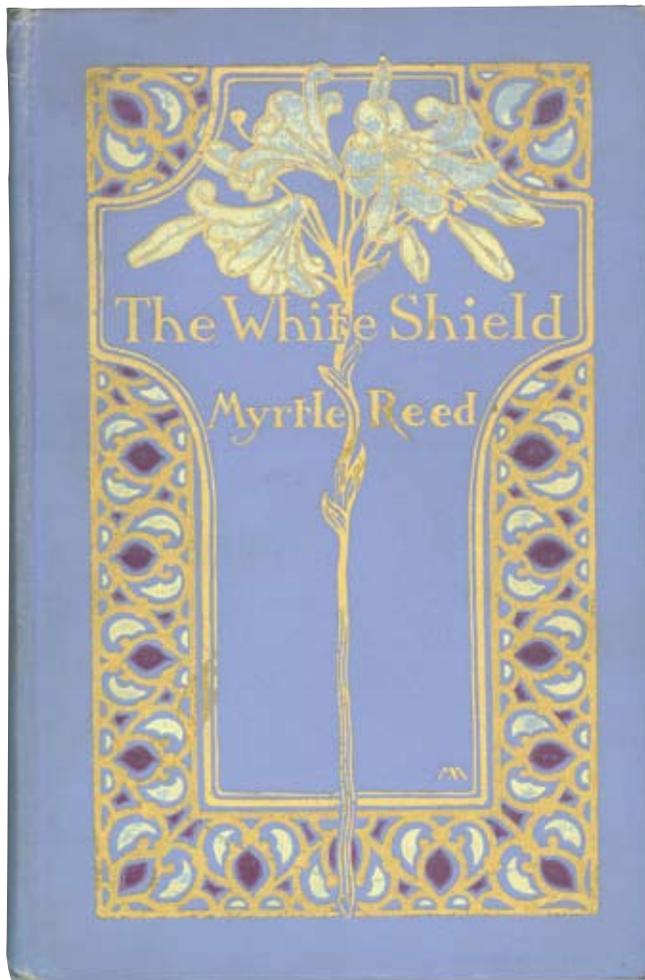
Left Lee Thayer of the Decorative Designers created a simple but striking cover for *The Warriors* by Anna Robertson Brown Lindsay (Crowell, 1903). *Photograph by Mark Schumacher. Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.*



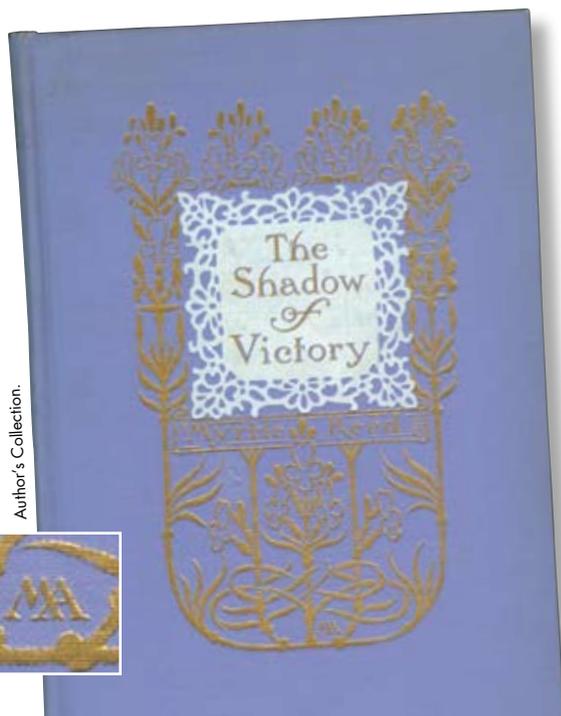
Above Margaret Armstrong often covered nearly the whole face of a book with striking, multicolored designs, as with *Out-of-Doors in the Holy Land* by Henry Van Dyke (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908). Photograph by Mark Schumacher. Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Margaret Armstrong

Margaret Armstrong (1867-1944) studied at the Art Students' League in New York, then completed approximately 270 covers between 1890 and 1920 (in her later life, she wrote bestsellers and produced over 500 studies for her *Field Book of Western Wild Flowers*). Certainly her binding work showed an affinity for floral designs; among the most sought-after are complex, multicolored intertwining plant forms that fill a rectangle covering most of the front of a book. She also designed differing but related covers for series by particular authors, such as the lavender-colored bindings (shown) for works by Myrtle Reed. Her signed work bears an overlapping "MA."



Photograph by Mark Schumacher. Courtesy of Special Collections Department, Jackson Library, University of North Carolina at Greensboro.



Author's Collection.

Above and left Margaret Armstrong designed coordinating covers for authors such as Myrtle Reed, whose early title, *Lavender and Old Lace*, set a certain look for the series. Pictured here: Reed's *The White Shield* (1912), and *The Shadow of Victory* (1911), both published by G. P. Putnam's Sons.

For generously providing images and an expert's perspective on specific designers, the author would like to thank Barbara Adams Hebard of the Boston Athenaeum (Bertha Stuart), Mindell Dubansky of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Alice C. Morse), and Stuart Walker of the Boston Public Library (Sarah Wyman Whitman). Thanks also go to Mark Schumacher of the Jackson Library, UNC Greensboro, for providing photographs. His infectious enthusiasm for all things Amy Sacker, embodied in his ever-expanding Sacker website, is a continuing inspiration.

To Learn More

TO READ

The following sources were consulted for this article. Many are hard to find; your local librarian can help you locate copies.

“American Trade Bindings and Their Designers, 1880–1915,” by Charles Gullans and John Espey, in *Collectible Books: Some New Paths*, edited by Jean Peter, pp 32–67 (R. R. Bowker Co., 1979).

“Amy M. Sacker: Designer & Teacher—A Link in an Arts and Crafts Chain,” by Anne Stewart O’Donnell. *The Tabby*, vol. 2 no. 1 (Spring 2005), pp 20-53.

Artists of the Book in Boston, 1890-1910 by Nancy Finlay (Houghton Library, Harvard College Library, 1985).

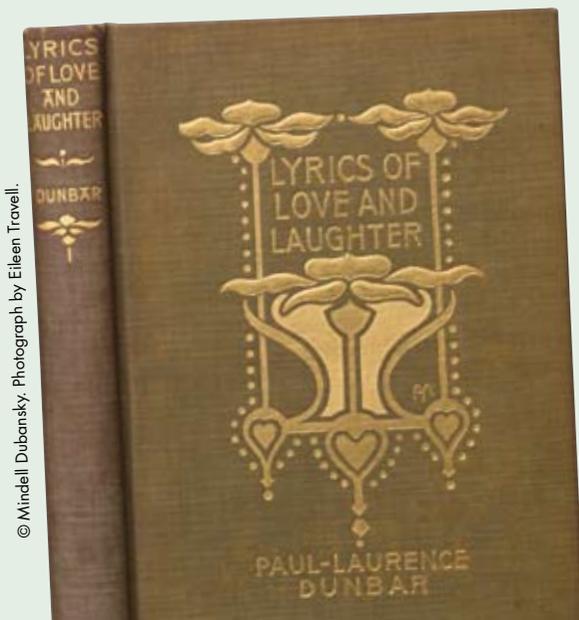
“Bertha Stuart,” by Barbara Adams Hebard. *Athenaeum Items, a Library Letter from the Boston Athenaeum*, no. 119, March 1999.

Decorated Cloth in America: Publishers’ Bindings, 1840-1910 by Sue Allen and Charles B. Gullans (Oak Knoll Press, 1994).

“The Life and Work of Bertha Stuart,” by Barbara Adams Hebard. *Pittock Papers, Quarterly Publication of the Pittock Mansion Society*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Spring 2000).

The Proper Decoration of Book Covers: The Life and Work of Alice C. Morse by Mindell Dubansky (The Grolier Club of New York, 2008) is “the” source for Morse information, as well as a good introduction to the topic of circa-1900 stamped bindings. Hot off the press, the book can be ordered through the Grolier Club (212-838-6690 or www.GrolierClub.org/publications.htm#New). Signed copies are available from the author (mindell.dubansky@metmuseum.org or 212-650-2890).

Below An embossed floral design graces Alice C. Morse’s cover for *Lyrics of Love and Laughter* by Paul Laurence Dunbar (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1903).



© Mindell Dubansky, Photograph by Eileen Travell.

Publishers’ Bindings Online, 1815-1930: The Art of Books (<http://Bindings.Lib.UA.edu>). This terrific website from the University of Alabama brings together images of thousands of decorated covers, biographies of known designers, and other helpful materials.

TO COLLECT

Antiquarian bookshops and internet sites such as eBay and www.BookFinder.com can be good sources of decorated covers; however, it is still unusual for a seller to mention (or even to know) a book’s designer, so be sure to examine covers for yourself. Ideally, a book should have a bright, clean, undamaged binding, sharp corners, and a firm spine—but make exceptions if the price is low or if the book is a rare or even unknown title.

TO SEE MORE

The Rare Book School at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA (www.RareBookSchool.org or 434-924-8851) offers five-day, non-credit courses; Sue Allen, expert emerita on the topic, will teach the next session of “Publishers’ Bookbindings, 1830-1910” from July 28 – August 1.

The Amy Sacker Site (Library.UNCG.edu/depts/ref/staff/mark/SackerHomePage.htm) includes checklists of known Sacker covers, illustrations, and bookplates, with images.

Online, modern-day book artist Richard Minsky shows off two extensive collections of turn-of-the-century bindings; catalogues can be purchased on CD, or in limited-edition, Minsky-designed bindings (see www.Minsky.com/orderform-subscription1.htm).

Beauty for Commerce: Publishers’ Bindings 1830-1910 is an image-rich online exhibition from the University of Rochester (www.library.rochester.edu/index.cfm?PAGE=3352).

The Boston Athenaeum, one of the nation’s oldest independent libraries, boasts a stained-glass window by Sarah Wyman Whitman and much more. By appointment, conservator Barbara Adams Hebard would be pleased to show you bindings and other objects by Whitman, Bertha Stuart, and others. (The Boston Athenaeum, 10½ Beacon Street, Boston, MA 02108; 617-227-0270 or www.BostonAthenaeum.org).

The historic Central Branch of **the Boston Public Library** houses a superb Rare Books and Manuscript department, with thousands of covers by artists mentioned here and others. Contact conservator Stuart Walker for an appointment (Boston Public Library, 700 Boylston Street, Boston MA 02116; 617-536-5400 x2225; swalker@bpl.org; www.BPL.org).

To see the **Metropolitan Museum of Art** collection of 58 Alice C. Morse covers (given to the Met by Morse herself in 1923), make an appointment at the Print Study Room, Department of Drawings and Prints, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Ave., New York, NY 10028; 212-570-3920 or www.MetMuseum.org.