

## REVIEW

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Purpose: award of the degree Doctor of Philosophy in academic field 3.5 Public Communications and Information Sciences — Media and Communications (Visual Communications)

Dissertation: INNOVATIVE DESIGN AND EXPERIMENTAL STRUCTURES IN VICTORIAN DESIGN BINDING (1800–1900) — TECHNOLOGY OF RELIEVO PAPIER-MÂCHÉ BINDING BY OWEN JONES FOR THE PSALMS OF DAVID. THE VICTORIA PSALTER

Presented by: Malina Gospodinova Belcheva-Handzhieva, doctoral student at the Journalism and Book Publishing Department of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication.

Scientific adviser: Prof. Veselina Valkanova, PhD.

### 1. Presentation of the doctoral student on the basis of the materials presented

Malina Belcheva holds a **Master's degree in Philosophy** from Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski (1991-1996). In the period from 1997 to 2001 she completed the **Doctoral Programme in Philosophy** (Philosophy of Politics, Culture, Law and Economics (Political Philosophy) at the same University, going on to earn a Diploma in Conservation from the American Academy of Bookbinding, USA, between 2011 and 2015.

Since 2018, she has been the Head of **Rare Books Special Collection** of Sofia University St Kliment Ohridski, Bulgaria.

Professional memberships:

- Union of Scientists in Bulgaria, section *Philosophy Sciences*, Bulgaria
- International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works (IIC), UK
- Union of Bulgarian Artists (section *Conservation* and *Art Criticism*), Bulgaria
- Bulgarian Association of Conservators-Restorers, Bulgaria
- American Academy of Bookbinding, USA
- Association Les Amis de la Reliure d'Art du Canada (ARA-Canada), Canada
- Association Les Amis de la Reliure d'Art de France (ARA-France), France

- Guild of Book Workers, USA

**Malina Belcheva has curated the following exhibitions:**

- 2021 – **SELECTION OF DESIGN BINDINGS XVth – XXth CENTURY** from the Collection of Sofia University Library, Bulgaria.
- 2013 – **ARTWORK6**. The Art Institute of Chicago, Sullivan Galleries, Chicago, USA.
- 2012 – **Beauty and the Book: 19th and Early 20th Century Folios on the Decorative Arts**. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, USA.

Malina Belcheva is the author of numerous publications in renowned academic journals.

## **2. General description of the dissertation**

### **2.1 Structure and volume**

The dissertation comprises 350 pages, divided into an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, literary index, list of acronyms and abbreviations, publications and five annexes.

Some of the illustrations are integrated into the main body of the dissertation, with the five annexes containing the photographic material dedicated to the study of *The Psalms of David*.

The annexes comprise 108 pages in total, including 104 photographs from the doctoral student's practice as a conservator, complete with additional textual references. The main body of the dissertation includes 25 charts and 43 illustrations from the conservation of *The Psalms of David*. A total of six tables (3 main tables and 3 additional technological tables setting out a chronological summaries) are appended to the first three chapters of the dissertation.

### **2.2 Relevance of the subject**

The dissertation is the first comprehensive theoretical study of the successful endeavour of the doctoral student to restore *The Psalms of David* from the Ryerson and Burnham Libraries' folio of decorative arts collections. The depth and breadth of the study invokes compelling statements about relievé papier-mâché binding in the Victorian era — technologies that remain highly relevant in modern-day conservation and restoration practice.

### 2.3. Aim, object, content and tasks and method of the study

The **aim** of the dissertation is to study relieve papier-mâché binding and offer a historical, bibliographical, artistic, and structural examination of *The Psalms of David*.

The **object** of the dissertation is the technology of the relieve papier-mâché binding created for *The Psalms of David. The Victoria Psalter* by Owen Jones.

The **task** is the undertaking of a comprehensive study of Victorian design binding, and more specifically the technology of relieve papier-mâché binding created for *The Psalms of David*, and involves:

- a review of Victorian binding designs and published material on the technology of relieve papier-mâché binding used for *The Psalms of David*;
- a review of the patents associated with the design of the book and their technological specificities;
- a review of the structure of Victorian binding design, paper technology, and the use of leather, ornamentation and alternative methods for textblock and binding assembly;
- a review of prior conservation interventions to restore the book, which is now part of the decorative arts folio collection of the Art Institute of Chicago;
- elaborating an optimal model for textblock reconstruction for *The Psalms of David* from a conservation perspective;
- visual documentation of the conservation process;
- a comparative study of the conservation album and the remaining copies of first edition of the book by Owen Jones preserved in public collections in Europe, the United States, Australia and New Zealand.

The **methodology** is a medley of cultural and historical, biographical, descriptive, comparative, analytical and illustrational approaches.

The main body of the dissertation comprises an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, literary index, and five annexes.

In terms of genre, **Chapter One** *History of the Victorian Book. Structure and Design of Books in the Victorian Era* sets out a historical overview of the Victorian era, and the role of industrialisation and specific inventions, which propelled and shaped Victorian era book design. The doctoral student more specifically explores the division of the processes involved in creating bindings, which accelerated textblock sewing and lowered book

production costs. This, coupled with thriving entrepreneurial drive, set the stage for art masterpieces in book form being published that showcase the perfect marriage between the latest advances in machine technology of the era and the classical craft of bookmaking that resulted in books, truly in a class of their own, comprising paper, papier-mâché, ceramic, woodcarving, porcelain, textile, and leather elements.

Malina Belcheva logically focuses on the giant leap in bookmaking after 1820. Until then, books were cased and limp, meaning that they comprised loose signatures folded into individual sections, either unsewn or loosely sewn, and missing a hardcover. The author recalls that high production costs, which bookmakers at the time were unable to fully fund themselves, meant that high-volume and large-size editions were printed in individual signatures or serialized, each instalment in the series containing a certain number of sheets from the book. On the book market, these were available via subscription, which allowed the individual owners to obtain the full edition over time and subsequently have the entire stack sewn and bound. Textblock design and period bindings were standardized — a process primarily driven by the financial means of book owners.

The industrial revolution brought this to an end, and the period after 1820 saw textblock assembly and sewing come into their own, becoming distinct and separate from cover design and construction. Machine sewing became widespread, with cloth and leather lining, or a combination of binding materials, being applied to the casings, which evolved into a distinct element of books. Bookmakers rose to the challenge in a spirit of experimentation, which the dissertation puts under thoughtful and meticulous examination. Lower production costs brought about by advances in manufacturing in the Victorian era notwithstanding, Malina Belcheva reminds us that it was book ornamentation that ultimately soared to new heights in artistry, becoming a priority and a watershed moment for competition between book publishers for whom the matter assumed aesthetic significance. Design and printwork authorship gained independent significance. The doctoral student emphasizes various notations in the text, known since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, that are essential to verifying design and printwork authorship and therefore vital to the repair and conservation of the book.

Malina Belcheva has chosen to depict the history of the book collections of the Art Institute of Chicago in a way that eases us straight into the study of the design and restoration of *The Psalms of David. The Victoria Psalter*. Having journeyed through an elaborate and meticulous narrative, she delivers us to the year 2009, when a generous donation made it possible for the Art Institute of Chicago to launch the conservation of the first collection of signature books in its Library, including *The Psalms of David* by Owen Jones. Repair and conservation work took three years and was completed in 2012.

**Chapter Two** *Ornamentation Technology. Patents Associated with the Binding Design Created for The Psalms of David* sets out an analysis of three patents used to create the design: **Frederick Leake's** patent for *relievo leather hangings*, **William Hancock's** patent for *caoutchouc binding*, and **Joel Lepretre's** patent for *stub binding* used for filing loose sheets. The study conducted by the doctoral student entailed extensive research in the archives of numerous patent depository libraries in Europe and North America on account of scant surviving information which, if still in existence, would have made it possible to examine the binding design created for *The Psalms of David*.

Frederick Leake's patent for *relievo leather hangings* denotes the use of the relievo technique in leather hangings for walls, ceilings, windows, frames for paintings, items of furniture, books and albums. The description suggests that the *relievo leather* patent was also used in the binding design created for *The Psalms of David*. Excellent knowledge of the process enhances the set of technological skills the conservator has leaned on in repairing and restoring the binding and contributes to the punctilious scientific study, showcasing her thorough understanding of the technique used in Victorian era relievo design binding. The ornate relievo design bindings of almost all surviving copies of the first edition of *The Psalms of David* published in 1861 reveal various degrees of degradation and decay. Malina Belcheva's study therefore also explores the reasons for the degraded state of the materials and justifies their replacement with better conservation alternatives. It thus becomes possible for new book structures to be created that complement the historically familiar structure of the book and ensure the longevity of its binding.

**Chapter Three** *Description, History and Study of The Psalms of David* offers a painstaking account of the process of book restoration, logically preceded by a summary of the second

and third conservation treatments, involving primarily rebinding and replacement of the extended guards of each illustration. The doctoral student importantly notes that in 1903 the original book structure dating back to 1861, which had a type of caoutchouc binding created on the basis of the process developed by William Hancock, was replaced by stab binding with extended guards, and that the most recent treatment was based on a structural modification of **Joel Lepretre's** patent.

The restoration of *The Psalms of David* undertaken by Malina Belcheva has pioneered a new binding in book restoration practice that is specifically designed for folio books with album structure. Here, the doctoral student once again gives a punctilious historical overview, complete with a wealth of bibliographic material, a description of the textblock and binding design and an account of the process of textblock reconstruction — from elaborating a model for the reconstruction treatment to the finishing touches, such as creating a new album structure model — and offers a photographic reconstruction of the process of restoration.

In **Chapter Four** *Study of the Copies from the First Edition*, Malina Belcheva presents a comparative analysis of surviving first edition copies preserved in the collections of public institutions in Europe, America, Australia and New Zealand, which further solidifies her contribution to future restoration interventions on this previously unstudied album from the Victorian era. Here, the doctoral student focuses on **historical album binding design models and the way photography development reinvigorates the binding**. Malina Belcheva then offers proficient commentary on publications dedicated to the structure of Victorian album design. She emphasizes the innovative nature of her model for textblock reconstruction fashioned after designs used in prior conservation interventions and historical album structure models. The process of restoration and conservation is amply illustrated. The endsheet, textblock and the inner spine support have been altered and reinforced. The innovative model design specifically created for the restoration of *The Psalms of David* balances the combined weight of the paper and book cover while ensuring agility of the entire body of the book.

Earlier restoration work on individual copies has not been documented and no information is available about the process. The inclusion of most 1861 editions of *The Psalms of David* in

the restoration programmes of the respective institutions and several partial restoration treatments undertaken after study publication are a tribute to the doctoral student's valuable contribution.

The only complete restoration treatment for which a full complement of materials that document the restoration process is available was successfully undertaken by Malina Belcheva on *The Psalms of David* preserved in the decorative arts folio collection of the Art Institute of Chicago.

#### **2.4. Literary index**

The literary index contains 360 publications (47 in the Cyrillic and 316 in the Latin script). Some of the sources are facsimiles and others contain links that provide electronic access to the material.

#### **2.5 Abstract of dissertation**

The abstract comprises 34 pages and adequately reflects the structure and content of the dissertation. The contributions are correctly described.

### **3. Assessment of the contributions of the dissertation**

#### **3.1 Assessment of the scientific and applied research results**

No comprehensive study of the materials and technology of relieve design bindings has been conducted to date. Likewise, no dedicated publications in international research literature dedicated to the topic are available, hence the major contribution of the doctoral student's dissertation. This is particularly important in light of the condition of almost all relieve design bindings from the Victorian era, which display varying degrees of decay.

#### **3.2 Assessment of the scientific and applied research results**

The dissertation has a broad historical and thematic scope. It is internally consistent and coherent, gradually revealing the doctoral student's views, allowing her to make pertinent conclusions that are amply by relevant examples. It sets out a major study in the framework

of which the doctoral student has cooperated with a number of highly renowned international institutions.

The author of the dissertation has constructed a model for textblock reconstruction based on prior conservation treatment. The model, complete with abundant and meticulous visualisation, sets an example for the restoration and conservation process of similar editions.

#### **4. Critical notes, recommendations and questions**

On account of the vital contribution of the dissertation to be defended, I recommend its publication as a book.

#### **5. Assessment of the publications relating to the dissertation**

Three publications dedicated to the topic of the dissertation have been presented: one in Bulgarian published in the Yearbook of the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication and two in English published in renowned US academic journals.

The doctoral student has taken under advisement all notes and commentaries made in the course of the approbation.

#### **6. Conclusion**

The dissertation is dedicated to an important and relevant topic in book design. The text has a significant volume. It offers a comprehensive, in-depth analysis and sets out proprietary empirical studies, with the successful restoration undertaken demonstrating a result of major importance for cultural and historical heritage.

I therefore have no hesitation in recommending to the esteem panel that the degree of Doctor of Philosophy be awarded to Malina Belcheva in academic field 3.5 *Public Communications and Information Sciences: Media and Communications – Visual Communication*.

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**Assoc. Prof. Marin Bodakov PhD**