



THE ART OF
AMERICAN BOOK COVERS
1875-1930



1. [Unknown], 1881. *Mr. Bodley Abroad* by Horace E. Scudder. Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company. 21.3 x 17.5

Printed paper wrapped over boards and spine cloth. The artist who created this is still unknown, but had skills similar to those of painter/illustrator John La Farge. This design anticipates Constructivist, Futurist, and Abstract Expressionist paradigms, as well as the influence of Japanese asymmetry (see also p. 82).

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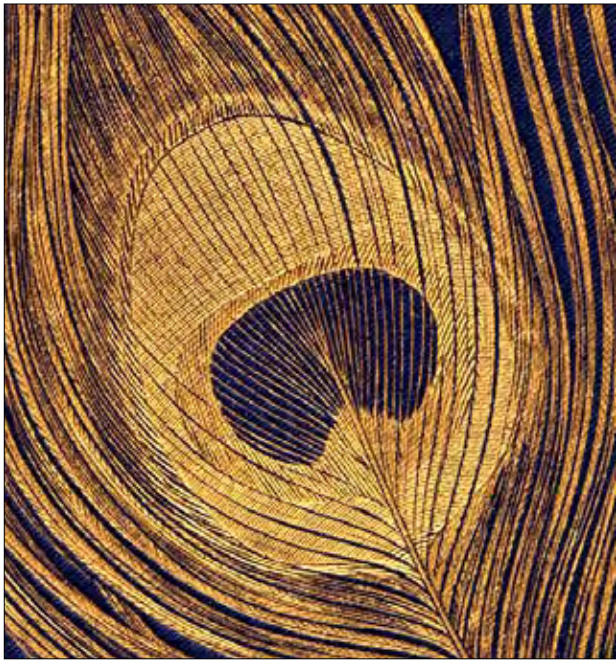
by
Richard Minsky

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Mifflin series featuring the adventures of the Bodley family, represented here by *Mr. Bodley Abroad* [1, frontispiece]. A work such as this, with a masterful sense of composition, classical drawing technique, and exhibiting a vision decades ahead of its time, required an artist with the skills and sensibility of John La Farge. Although there is no evidence that La Farge designed any book covers, we do know that he worked as an illustrator for Houghton, Scribner, and other publishers. He knew and taught several of the younger cover artists, which gives rise to the enticing speculation that La Farge was either involved with, or created, book cover art.

The British Influence

Several American publishers maintained offices in London. This group included Harper, Macmillan,



Detail from *The New Day*, 1876 [2]. This peacock feather design achieves luminance by hand engraving the lines at different angles, and cross-hatching with different textures. Stamped in fine gold leaf, it is as beautiful and satisfying to look at as a master's brushwork on canvas.

Century, Funk & Wagnalls and Putnam in New York; Lippincott in Philadelphia; Luce, Ginn, and Lamson-Wolffe in Boston; and Revell in Chicago. D. Appleton had been importing British books since the 1840s. By the 1860s Cassell and Routledge had branches in the United States. By the 1880s, London publishers Longman's, Hodder & Stoughton and John Lane had offices in New York. Artistic and literary ideas flowed quickly across the Atlantic on steamships that took less than a week to make the crossing.

British book cover art in the last third of the nineteenth century was influenced by two distinct artistic trends—the Arts and Crafts Movement, associated with John Ruskin, William Morris, and T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, and the Aesthetic Movement, associated with Dante Gabriel Rossetti and industrial designer and ornamentalist Christopher Dresser. The latter's modernist methodology was codified in several books, particularly *Principles of Decorative Design* (four 1870 articles printed as a book in 1873), and *Studies in Design* (1874). American cover artists would have been familiar with the works of Dresser, who lectured in Philadelphia at the Pennsylvania Museum and School of Industrial Art in 1876.

Charles Eastlake's popular book *Hints on Household Taste in Furniture, Upholstery, and Other Details* was published in England in 1868, and in the USA in 1872. Many book covers were produced that capitalized on the popularity of the "Eastlake style" (see p. 23). Although it was considered "modern" at the time, today it looks more like a vestige of the Victorian era than a precursor to Modernism.

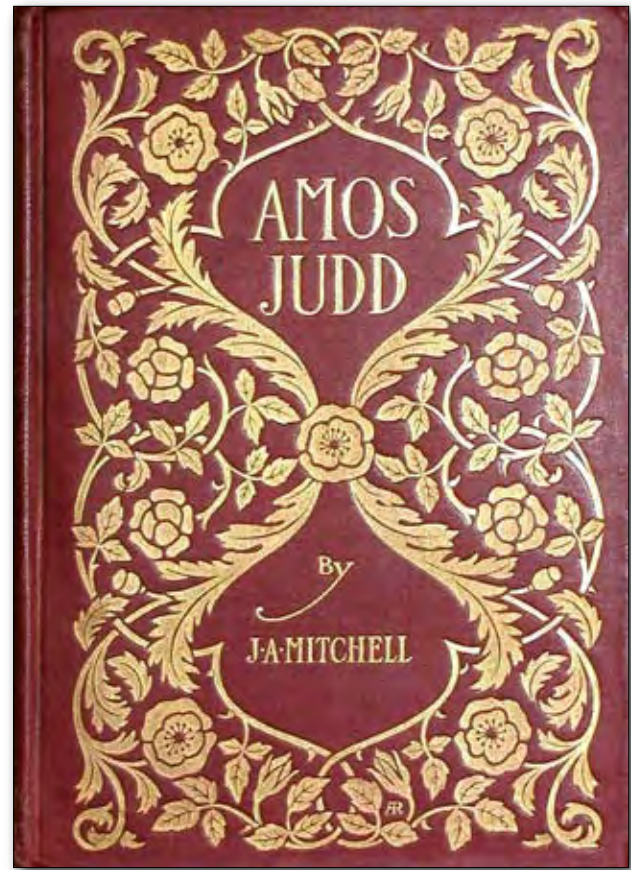
The transition to new visual paradigms produced remarkable effects when combined with the highly evolved skills of traditional die-engravers. This is seen in the gold peacock feather on the 1876 cover of Richard Gilder's poems, *The New Day*, published in New York by Scribner, Armstrong and Company [2]. The extremely fine detailing makes the image shimmer, with even slight movements causing one part or another of the cover to flash more brightly.

The die work creates the illusion of dimensionality with flat gold stamping that one wants to touch to see if it is embossed.

The peacock feather was a favorite device of the Aesthetic Movement. This book was published the same year that James McNeill Whistler, a friend of Gilder, created his famous Peacock Room for the London home of Frederick R. Leyland.

One of the most important steps in the development of American cover art came in 1878, on Bayard Taylor's *Prince Deukalion: A Lyrical Drama* [3]. This edition, issued in Boston by Houghton, Osgood, had a cover that was neither new nor by an American artist. It was created by Rossetti for Algernon Swinburne's *Atalanta in Calydon*, published in London by Edward Moxon and Co. in 1865. Taylor knew Swinburne, and also was a friend of Samuel Bancroft, Jr., who owned Bancroft Mills in Wilmington, Delaware. That firm manufactured the faux vellum cloth for the cover of this book.

Would an author be so involved in a book's production as to select the cover art and the cloth? Taylor was apprenticed to a printer early in his career, but became a poet, novelist, and popular travel writer. This led to his appointment as United States Minister to Germany in 1878 while *Prince Deukalion* was being produced. Shortly after arriving in Berlin he began suffering with a digestive disorder. *Deukalion* was published in November, and he held a copy in his



Scribner's 1901 edition of *Amos Judd* featured a cover by Amy Richards that was strongly influenced by the British Arts and Crafts Movement, particularly the work of T. J. Cobden-Sanderson.

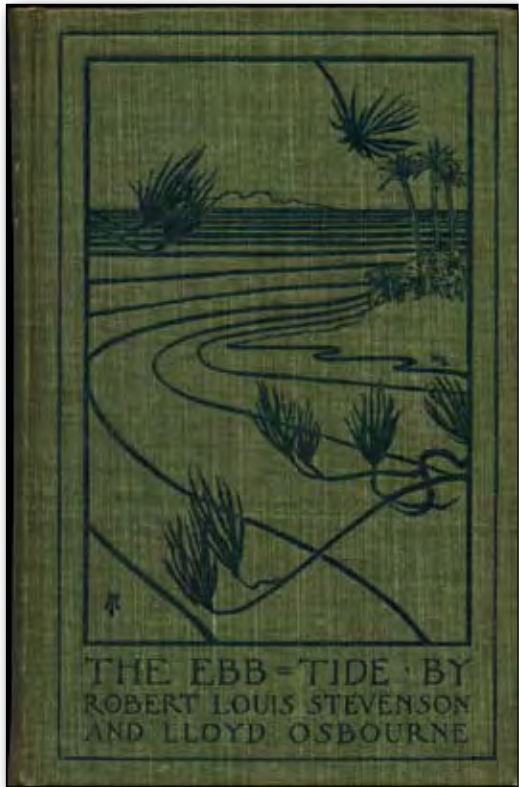
hands just a few weeks before his death at age 53.

The Rossetti design, with its adaptation of Japanese emblems, was then an anomaly in American publishing. What made it important was its influence on a young artist who began designing book covers a few years later.

Sarah Wyman Whitman was a gifted painter as well as a prominent Boston hostess, married to a prosperous wool merchant. She was a student of the painter William Morris Hunt, and had studied in France with Hunt's teacher, Thomas Couture. She apprenticed herself to John La Farge, who, among his



Detail of Rossetti's 1865 design, left, used by Houghton on the 1878 edition of *Prince Deukalion*. To the right is a detail from Sarah Whitman's 1880 cover on the *Verses of Susan Coolidge*.



11. Thomas Buford Meteyard, 1894. *The Ebb-Tide: A Trio and Quartette* by Robert Louis Stevenson and Lloyd Osbourne. Chicago & Cambridge: Stone & Kimball. 17.7 x 11.4

Green cloth with gold title on spine, dark green line art of stylized tidal beach on front cover, single line border on back cover. In this deceptively simple line drawing, the illusion of depth is heightened by curves like those on a topographic map. The top of a cloud sits on the horizon, implying the space beyond—or is it an island in the distance?



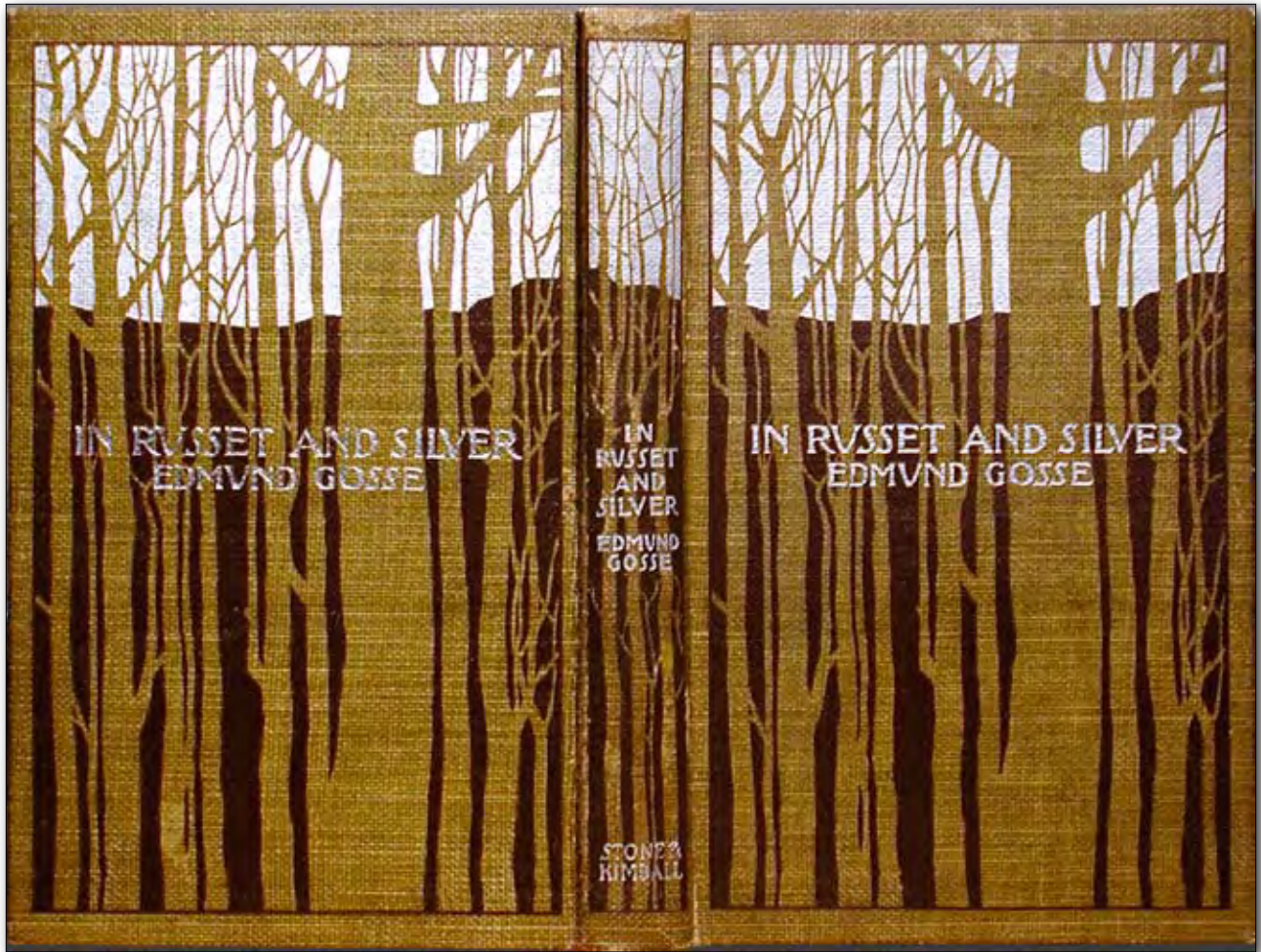
12. [unknown], 1898. *Love and Rocks* by Laura E. Richards. Boston: Estes & Lauriat. 17.5 x 11.2

Blue, white, brown, and gold on beige~gray cloth. This anonymous work has a similar compositional structure to Meteyard's cover on *The Ebb-Tide* [11], but anticipates the color sensibilities and spatial relationships of the Art Deco period and serigraphic works of the 1970s. The asymmetrical composition shows a Japanese influence reminiscent of the woodblock seascapes of Hokusai and Hiroshige.



13. Lee Thayer (DD), 1900. *Shadowings* by Lafcadio Hearn.
Boston: Little, Brown & Company. 10.7 x 13

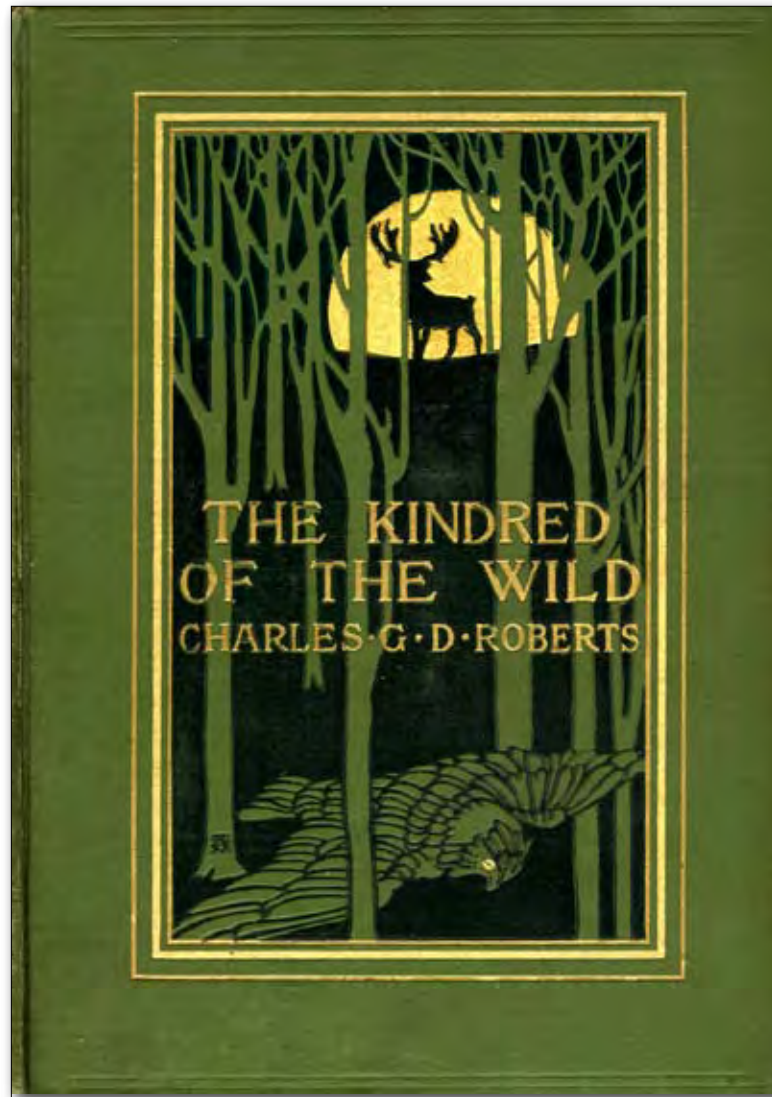
Light blue, blue and gold stamping on dark blue cloth. Many booksellers list the artist as Bruce Rogers when it is by Lee Thayer of The Decorative Designers firm. Cover historian Charles Gullans considered this to be her masterpiece. The wraparound composition breaks into bordered panels on front, back, and spine, but the lotus pads are rendered in the cloth color, as is the border, creating continuity. This is a photograph of the second (1901) printing.



21. Will Bradley, 1894. *In Russet & Silver* by Edmund Gosse. Chicago: Stone & Kimball. 17.8 x 11.5

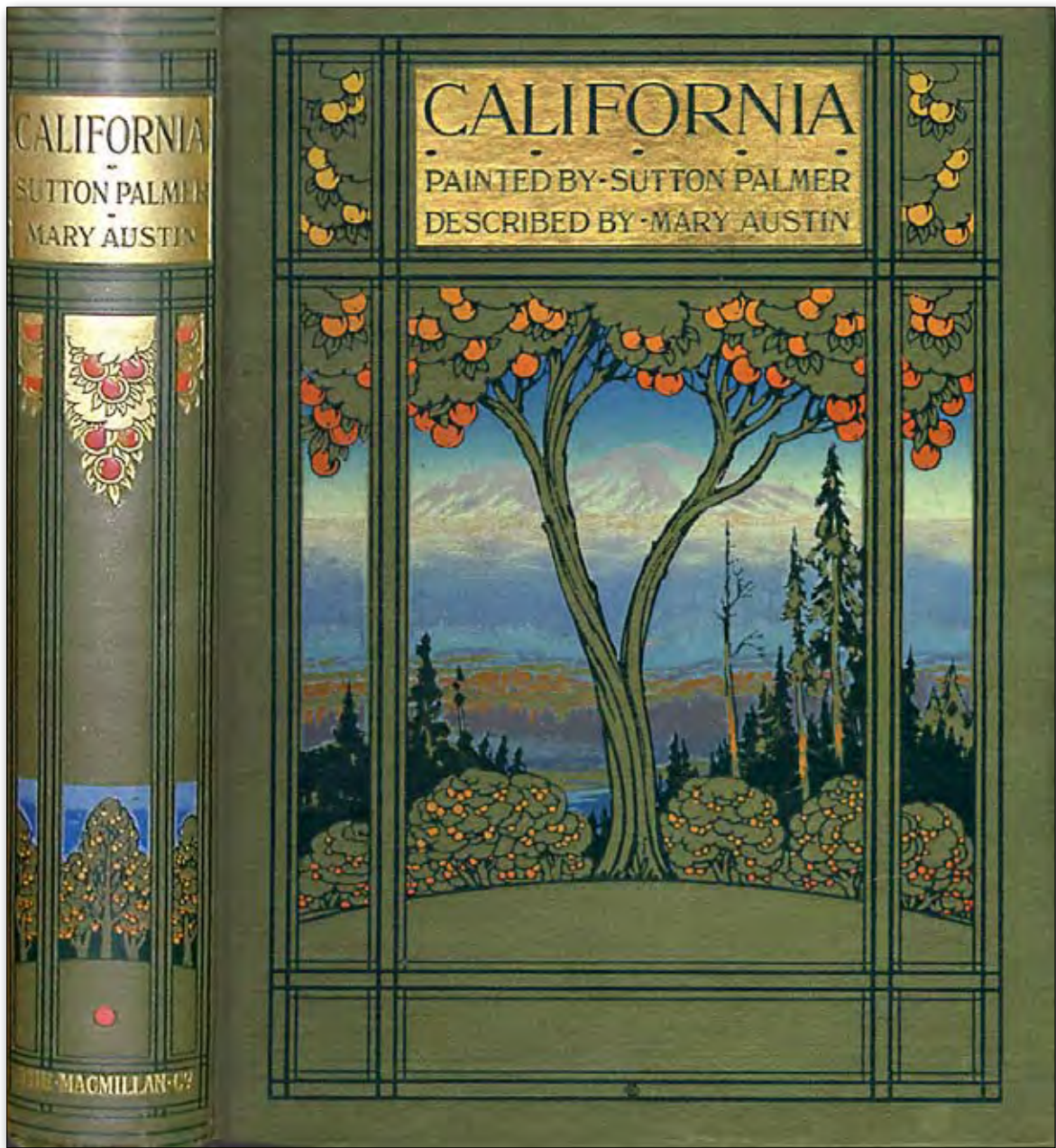
Russet and silver-stamped tan buckram. Bradley wrapped the art around the book in an unusual way. The forest scene appears to be continuous from the front cover across the spine to the back, but in fact the front and back cover images are identical, with the spine treatment bridging them. The landscape is reduced to abstract silhouettes, yet retains a naturalistic feeling. The trees are the color of the cloth, requiring only two colors for production. The title floats in front of the image in silver.

Prior to Bradley, cover artists created the illusion of pictorial depth with perspective drawing. The use of color in flat planes to create depth of field was a significant change in concept. The trees are on the picture plane, with two other planes, the mountains and the sky, receding behind the trees. The silver title and sky squeeze the image into a flatter space. Decades later Hans Hofmann used "push and pull" of the picture plane as a central concept in his art and teaching.



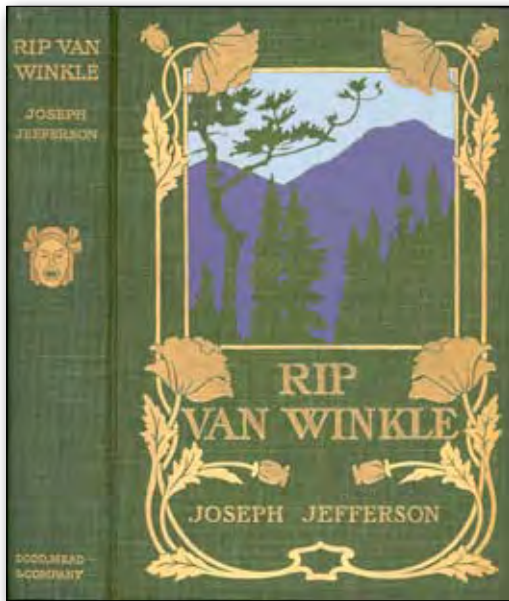
22. Amy M. Sacker, 1902. *The Kindred Of The Wild: A Book Of Animal Life* by Charles G. D. Roberts. Illustrated by Charles Livingston Bull. Boston: L. C. Page & Company. 20.8 x 14.7

Dark green and gold on green cloth. Silhouetted by a golden moon, the elk on a hill creates a dramatic image behind Bradley-style trees. The gold title advances, creating tension. But below the title Amy Sacker gives a twist to the picture plane, with a gold-eyed owl coming toward us, pulling the space around it forward as it flies between the trees.



78. Henry Hunt Clark, 1914. *California: The Land of the Sun* by Mary Austin. Illustrated by Sutton Palmer. New York: The Macmillan Company. 24.1 x 19.4

Gold and multicolor stamping on olive green cloth. This elaborate production looks almost like an oil painting on the cover of the book.



79. Thomas W. Ball, 1899. *Rip Van Winkle* by Joseph Jefferson. Dodd, Mead & Company. 21.3 x 16.3

Green cloth with bright and matte gold decorations and title surrounding a landscape with light blue sky, purple mountains, and trees in the cloth color.

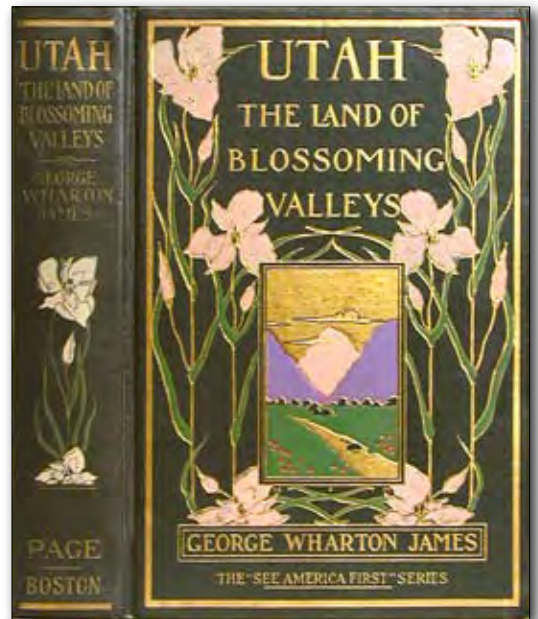


80. [Unsigned, possibly The Decorative Designers], 1900. *Unknown Switzerland* by Victor Tissot. New York: James Pott & Co. 20.5 x 14.2

Multitoned gold, pink, white, lavender, light and dark green stamping on gray cloth.

81. Blanche McManus Mansfield, 1922? *Utah: The Land of Blossoming Valleys* by George Wharton James. Boston: The Page Company. 24.5 x 16.4

Pink, purple, green and gold on brown cloth. Stylistically similar to the 1899 and 1900 covers above, this may have been done years earlier than the 1922 publication date.





136. Rockwell Kent, 1914. *Architec-tonics: The Tales of Tom Thumtack Architect* by Frederick Squires. Illustrated by Rockwell Kent. New York: The William T. Comstock Company. 19 x 13.3

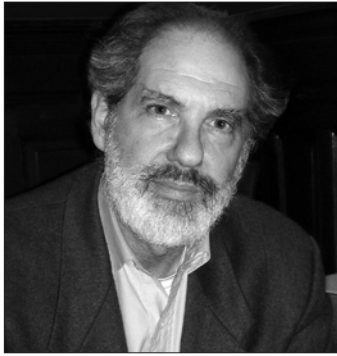
Dark blue cloth stamped in burnt orange and gold with a nude male figure leaping over a golden Earth through a celestial space with stars, the Moon and Saturn. Title in gold on orange border. The border and title are in a format used in eighteenth-century France, while the central allegorical panel is a precursor of Art Deco and Social Realism.



137. [Unknown], 1897. *The Square of Sevens* by E. Irenaeus Stevenson. New York and Boston: Harper & Brothers. 19.4 x 15.2

Gray cloth stamped with figure and cat in cloth color with white outlines on gold background at aqua table with playing cards in white with black and red features, red title. The cat has blue and red eyes, and its head is repeated on the spine.

About the Author



Richard Minsky is widely acclaimed as a pioneering book artist whose work is collected internationally by major museums and libraries. He is the recipient of numerous awards, including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant and the prestigious US/UK Bicentennial Fellowship, awarded by the National Endowment for the Arts and The British Council. In 2010 Yale University, the repository of The Richard Minsky Archive, presented an exhibition of fifty years of Minsky's work.

Richard is the Founder of the Center for Book Arts (1974), which has mounted over 200 exhibitions during the past 35 years, and currently offers 100 classes and workshops. He has lectured at many institutions, including Brown University, The London College of Printing, Washington University, and The Wizard Academy.

He has published three limited edition volumes on *American Decorated Publishers' Bindings, 1872-1929*, which are in the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Morgan Library, and [other great institutions](#).

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