

OFFICIAL PRESENTATION OF THE ALCUIN SOCIETY MEDAL

TO ODETTE DRAPEAU, RCA

McGILL UNIVERSITY—McLENNON LIBRARY

FEBRUARY 8, 2023

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For your kind words about me, I am thankful to all of you who have just spoken.

I am honoured to be here with you at McGill University to talk about my career path.

I owe my classical training in bookbinding techniques to Simone Benoît Roy, who, at L'Art de la Reliure, her studio in Old Montreal, shared her knowledge and instilled in me a passion for the profession in the early 1970s.

I continued my training in Paris at Henri Mercher's studio. Through an avant-garde approach and the use of new materials, such as Plexiglas, this master of bookbinding opened wide the doors of exploration and questioning.

The exhibition *Sonia Delaunay* at the Richelieu site of the National Library of France in Paris fascinated and challenged me. The artist's bindings did not follow the rules of the art of binding. In their raw aspect and originality, they opened another door for me: the power of the imagination. I saw the possibilities of working with different materials and not copying the past.

I devoted several years to my training because, I believe, learning and mastering techniques are the basis of creative freedom.

The bookbinder chooses the book as the ground for creation. Just as the canvas supports the work of the painter, and matter the work of the sculptor, the book receives this ultimate treatment: the binding.

My primary intention as an artist is to seek to take hold of the book, to grasp a truth beyond words that is transmitted in reading, and to immerse myself in the intention of the writer and the message he wishes to convey. I see the vocation of the binder is to add a visual dimension to the bookwork, creating, as in an artwork, a clear, formal and intellectual space. A form of appropriation subjected to aesthetic representation. A creation becomes a singular event that in each binding must prove itself.

My craving to create, my tendency to dare and my genuine passion for books and reading, along with a manual dexterity inherited from my mother and developed by practising music, convinced me of the relevance of my career choice: outstanding bookbinding to conserve and beautify the literary work. Time and history have led me to discover different techniques of bookbinding. I am drawn to older discoveries, often primary, more flexible and better adapted to the comfort and the pleasure of reading. They are at the same time more in tune with conservation.

In my practice, I draw a clear line between bindings made according to the constraints of client requirements and my creations: the books I choose to bind must touch me and animate my imagination.

My vision and approach to the artistic design have led me to think outside the box, and to expand the visual space for the binding I am creating. To do this, I have felt the need to transcend technique in order to give myself the freedom to express my feelings and sensitivity.

This is my way of honouring the book and giving it a new place in the visual arts. During more than a century of industrialization, machines have been manufactured to bind books. We must position ourselves out of reach of the machine by creating unique works.

This brief introduction gives an indication of some of the ideas which I have followed while working as a binder for well over 50 years. During this time, I have experimented and developed techniques likely to support my creation, working with a range of materials, some conventional and others less so.

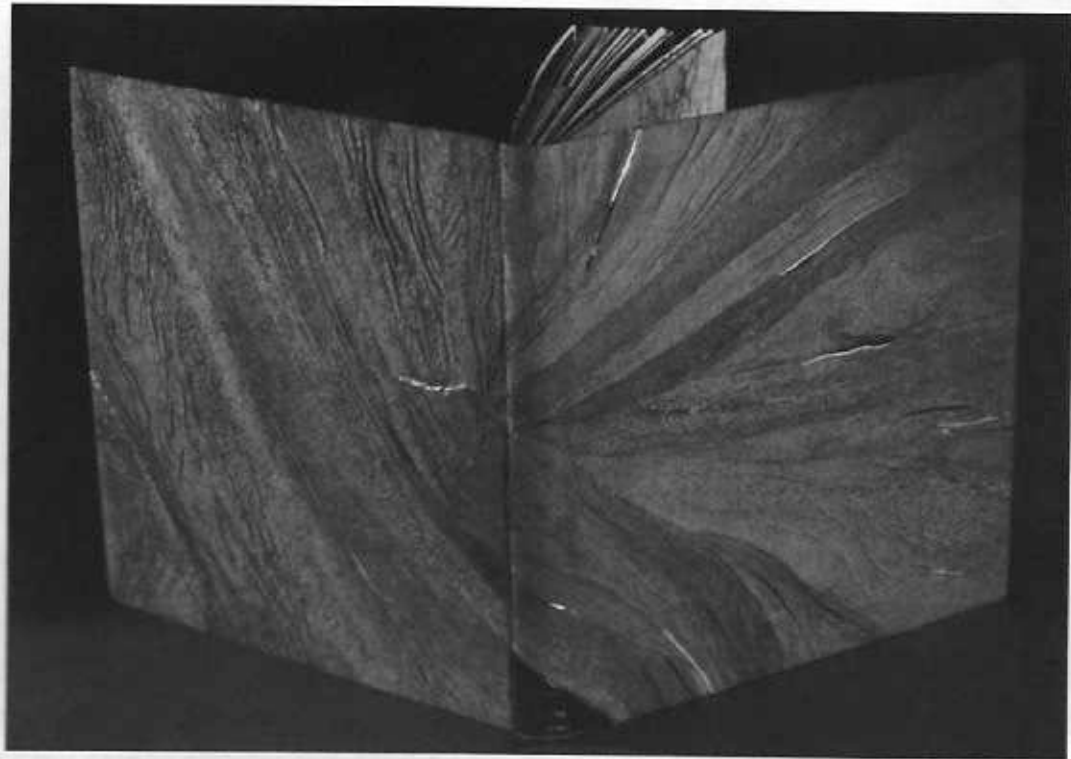
Having spent the 1980s working primarily with leather, I became interested in experimenting with other materials, most notably during the 1990s with marine leathers. As I explored this material and experimented with it – the raw, rough, unpredictable and often very small skins – I left behind me the comfort of familiar techniques and previously imposed aesthetics. I felt a strong need to tame the skins, and in turn was rewarded with the opening up of a whole new universe to artistically explore.

The 1990s started by exhibiting at the Americas Society in New York in 1991.

By the end of the 1990s, I had created dozens of bindings using marine leathers.

The first marine leathers which I used were those which had been tanned in Gaspésie, Quebec. In my search for other fish skin providers, I found many tanners that specialized in marine leather in Brittany and Normandy, as well as in Australia where the salmon skin tanning is very common. I liked this raw material, in particular its strong resistance and variety of textures. Most often, I use the skins in their natural colours; for example, salmon skin comes in shades varying from charcoal to pearl gray. My objective has never been to inlay skin onto full leather but to cut the skins into thin strips and create motifs, sometimes figurative, using techniques of collage and assemblage. Entire bindings of marine leather.

My first major work using marine leathers was *Maria Chapdelaine*, by Louis Hémon, illustrated by André Bergeron. For me this was an artist's book, with a familiar text, and the colourful lithographs from Bergeron inspired me. My desire being to add energy to the book that would invite the reader to discover the content. The binding uses natural cod skins which have been folded and cut into long strips and then assembled, whilst encouraging me to pay attention to the subtle nuances of this wonderful natural material.



**Photo 1. *Maria Chapdelaine – Louis Hémon – Lithographs by André Bergeron.***  
Bound in natural cod skin (first major work).

The book *Noirs, bleus, sables*, published by Édition d'art La Tranchefile, is a poetic book by Quebec poet Nane Couzier, especially published for book artists, having spaces to illustrate this work. I illustrated my copy with photographs which I took during a long stay in the Middle East, where the sea, the sand, and the black night were my daily life. The soft cover bound in red eel skin was inspired by the intensity of the sunsets on the Red Sea. Nearly twenty bookbinders “played the game” and illustrated a copy as part of an exhibition at the History Museum of Château Ramezay.



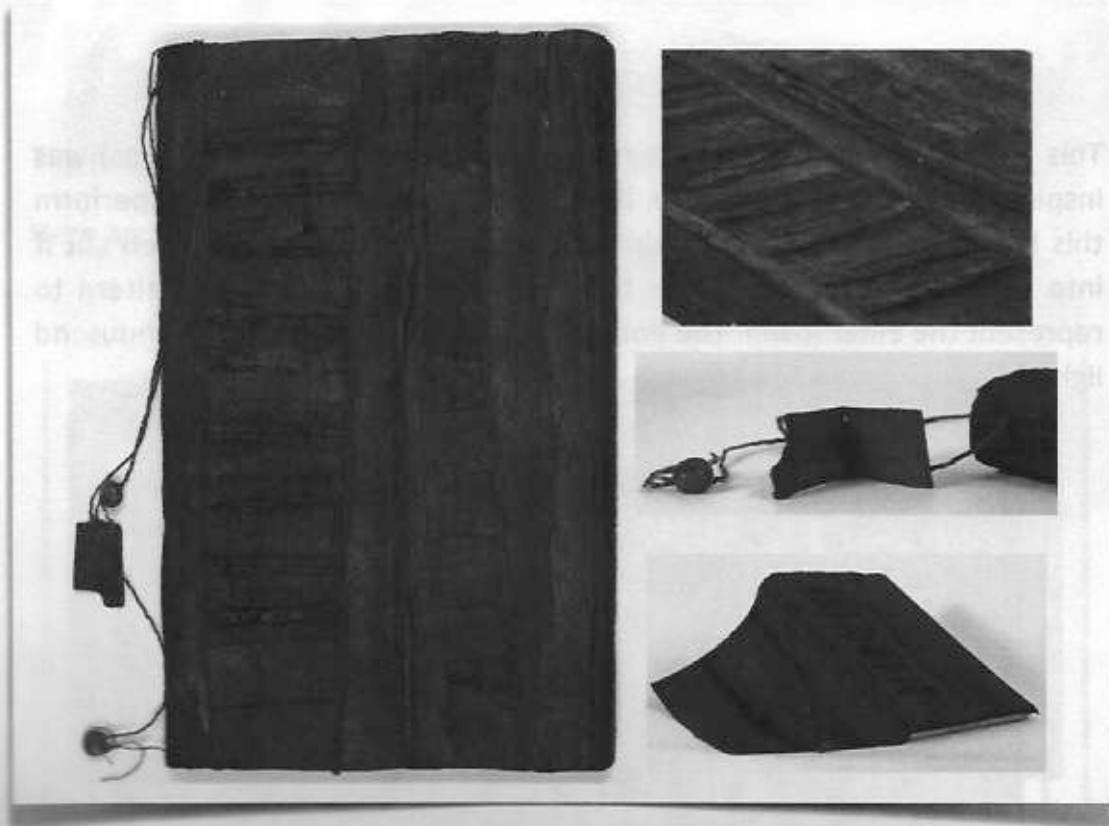


Photo 2. *Noirs, bleus, sobles*, Nane Couzier, illustrations by Odette Drapeau.  
Bound in eel skin.

While working with marine leather, I have toured the entire aquarium: carp, shark, flounder, plaice, turbot and its parchment look, cod, eel, and salmon. Among the amazing qualities and characteristics which I've found with marine skins are the following. Turbot skin has its own qualities. It is thin, transparent and can be pleated, making it easy to create a range of shadows and lights. Quebec eel skins have a lot of character. The central spine is very thick and the skin has a texture of small chevron. I favour the black and natural skin colours, but I have often worked with red, blue and yellow as well. Carp skin has larger scales and lends itself well to a glossier finish. Sharkskin has a somewhat long graining aspect that can be compared to morocco leather (this goatskin, so prized by French bookbinders). Salmon skin is certainly the most recognized and widely used in leather goods. It is resistant and interesting because of its shading.

This binding of *Paris, aspects et reflets* (Paris, aspects and reflections) was inspired during a visit to Greece, by the mosaics in monasteries. To perform this binding, I gilded salmon skin with gold leaf and palladium then cut it into very small and thin pieces that I glued in an overlapping pattern to represent the Eiffel Tower. The entire binding literally glows with a thousand lights!

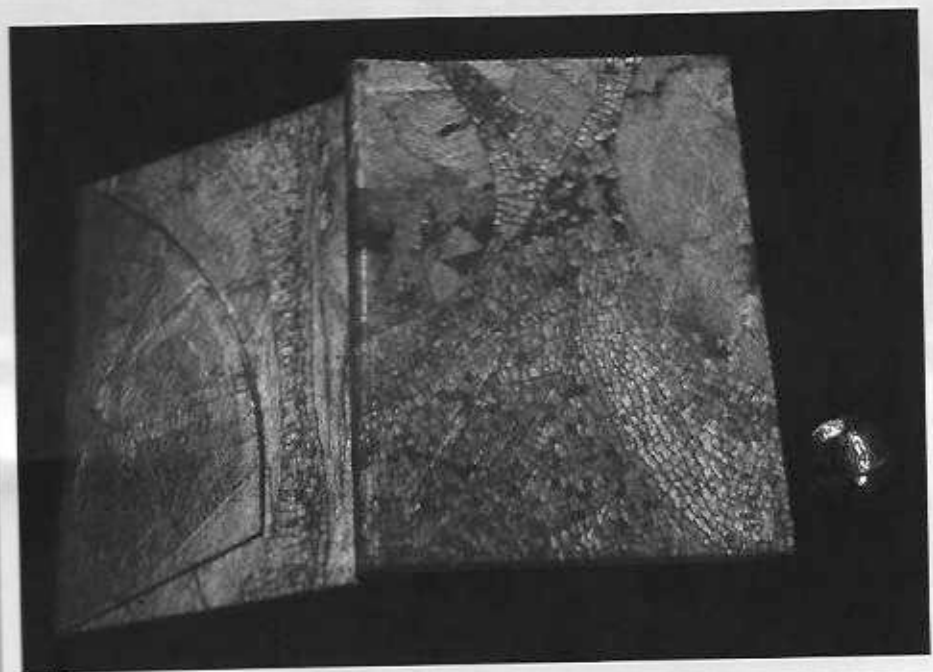


Photo 3. *Paris, aspects et reflets*. Exhibition « *D'or et d'argent* » (Gold and silver) at the Bibliothèque historique de la Ville de Paris (BHVP: Historical Library of the City of Paris). Fine gold and palladium gilding on salmon skin.

The possibilities of creation with marine leather are limitless.

Here are some other examples:

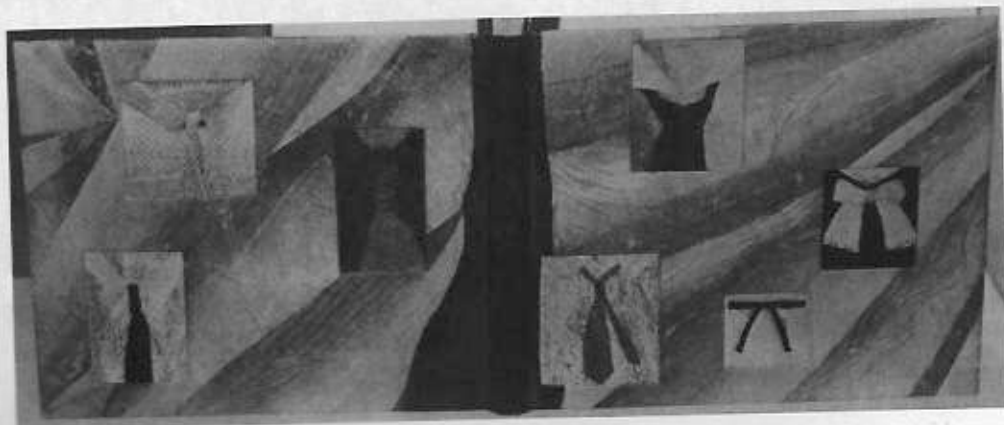


Photo 4. *Les 188 façons de nouer sa cravate* – Bound in marine leather: cod, turbot, carp, plaice, salmon – Collage and assemblage

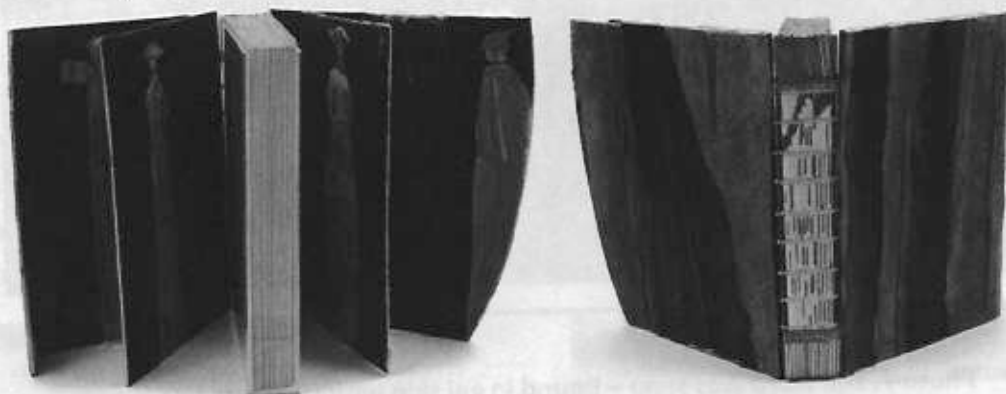


Photo 5. *La Moda* – Bound in eel skin – Collage and assemblage



Photo 6. *La mer écrite* – Marguerite Yourcenar – Bound in parchment of salmon skin



Photo 7. *The word was sung* – Bound in eel skin with visible seams

Photo 2. *The word was sung* – Bound in eel skin – Collage and embroidery



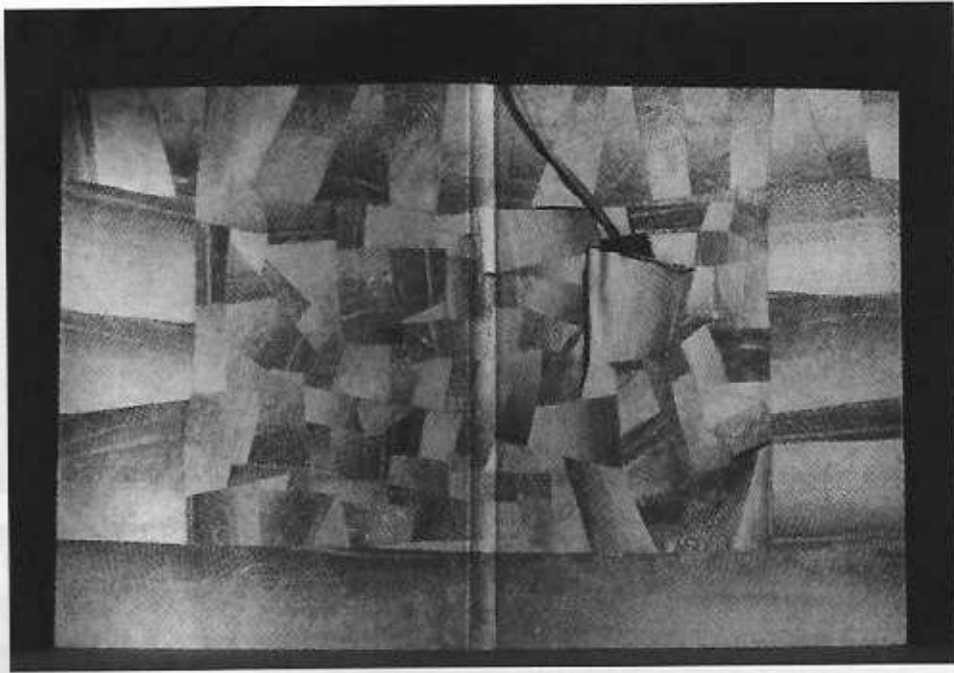


Photo 8. *Derrière le miroir* – Riopelle – Bound in salmon skin

In the late 1990s, I discovered ray skin (known in France as “Galuchat”). A wonder of nature with its string of pearls that adorns its centre. In the Art Deco period, the Galuchat was used by great decorators and bookbinders. In the eighteenth century, Mr. Jean-Claude Galuchat made ray skin boxes in which precious objects, navigational compasses, and women’s poudriers were stored.

The first Galuchat binding I made was the *Apocalypse* of D. H. Lawrence which is Lawrence’s last testament. I found a taupe-coloured Galuchat, with subtle shades that blended well with the desert sand. Nature came to me and I performed this flexible work pleasant for the hand, resistant and soft to the touch that time will not alter.

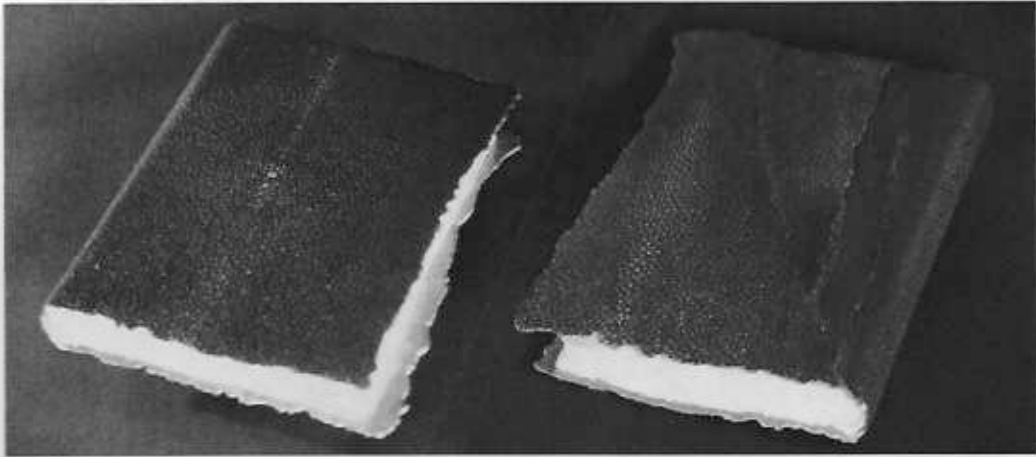


Photo 9. *Apocalypse*, D. H. Lawrence – first flexible binding in Galuchat

I also like to think that every binding and every object of my creation corresponds to a rhetorical form.

In the binding of “*Le murmure : condition et destin de l’artiste*”, written by Francis Ponge in the 1920s, the burgundy ray skin, with its shine, its silky texture and simple beauty, adds relevance and harmony to what is still regarded as an important contemporary text.

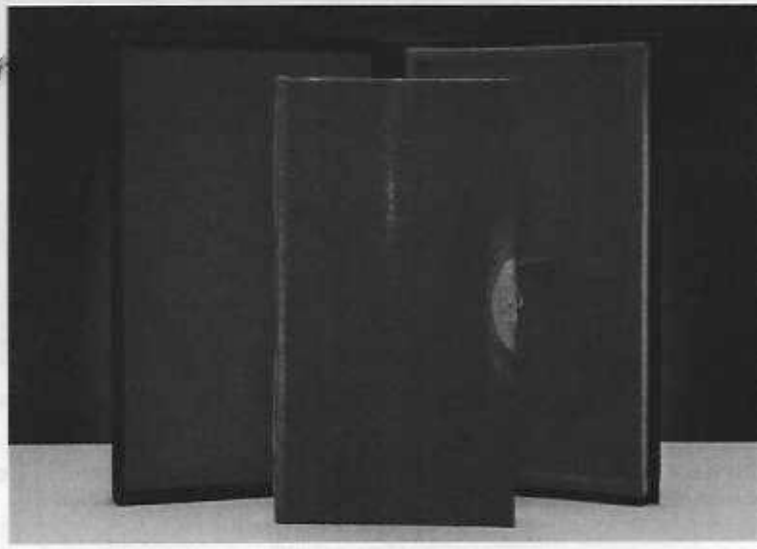


Photo 10. *Le murmure : condition et destin de l’artiste*, Francis Ponge

Year 2000 was a year of massive production of Galuchat bindings, an intense preparation for the exhibition in 2005 at the *Bibliothèque historique de la ville de Paris* (BHVP: Historical Library of the City of Paris), This exhibition was entitled “Des Rives du Saint-Laurent aux quais de la Seine” (From the banks of the St. Lawrence River to the Seine) and presented 50 retrospective works and 50 recent works under the direction of Jean Derens (Director of the BHVP). I am one of two bookbinders out of France to have exhibited at this prestigious gallery dedicated to artists’ books and art binding.

On this occasion, ten bindings had the city of Paris as their theme, among them a book by Henri Laedan entitled “De Paris au Bois de Boulogne”. I wanted to add a flamboyant and luxurious touch to this book on Paris. The blue from the ray skin, along with the glass beads, was designed to invite discovery of the text and of the splendid images of this bibliophile’s book.



**Photo 11. *De Paris au bois de Boulogne*, Henri Laedan. Bound in blue Galuchat surrounded by glass beads.**

On the occasion of the third millennium, the Canada Council for the Arts called on artists to commemorate this passage. I submitted a project in collaboration with the architect Alena Prochazka that we called "The Book of the Year 3000". We received a millennium bursary and this project "The Book of the Year 3000" was hosted and installed at the Marché Bonsecours, a historical and tourist site in Old Montreal to commemorate the advent of the third millennium.

The installation invited people to deliver a message to the inhabitants of the year 3000.

This installation was inspired by an old press used by bookbinders called "press satin" that inspired architect Alena Prochazka. This concept of circular aluminum represents the wheel of time and evokes the duration of this spherical world in which we live. The round pages of this book are made of handmade rag paper from "Papiers Saint-Armand" workshop, a pledge of their inalterability, and they received daily messages written by the inhabitants of the year 2000, Montrealers and tourists passing through, messages intended for the inhabitants of the year 3000. It is a book of memory, a time capsule.

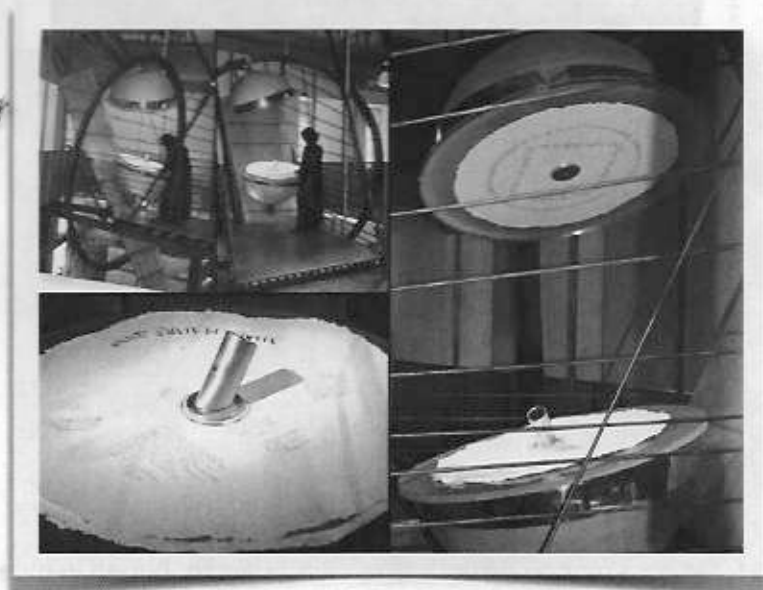


Photo 12. *Le livre de l'an 3000* – Installation

Photo 10. *Le murmure* - condition et dessin de l'artiste, Francis Ponge

During the 2010s, I created installations. The idea for the one called "Chaise" came out of a visit to Westminster Cathedral in London. Chairs containing a storage drawer for the prayer book suggested that I create "a new place for the book." Following this first idea, I added the table, the staircase, the wall. Later, a kinetic tower containing small breviaries has been added. The chairs could be hung to the picture rails or installed on a slightly raised platform.

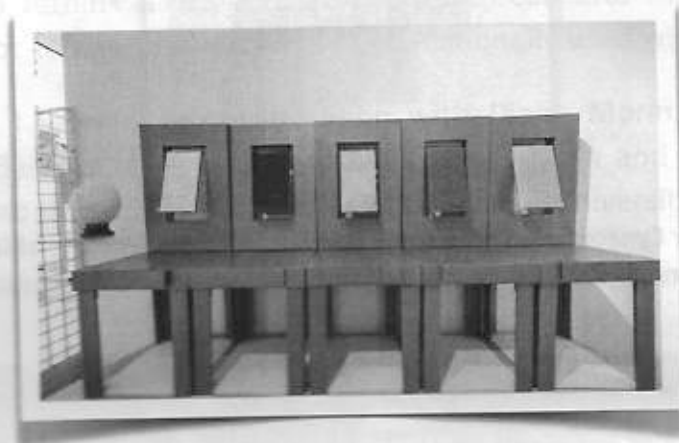


Photo 13. "Chaise" Installation – Five chairs containing a book from the ABCdaire collection of Éditions Flammarion

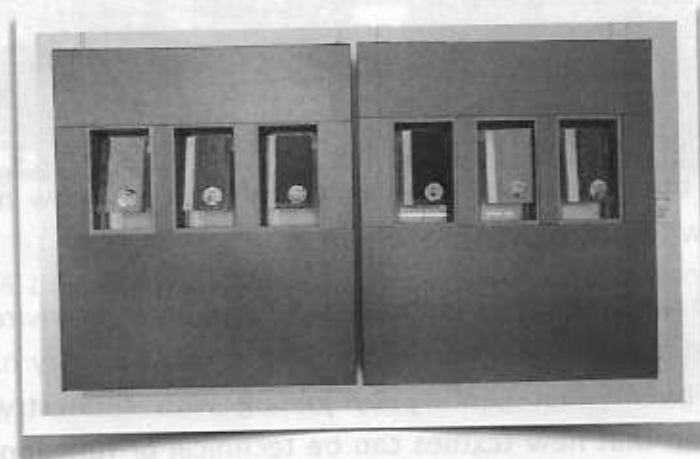
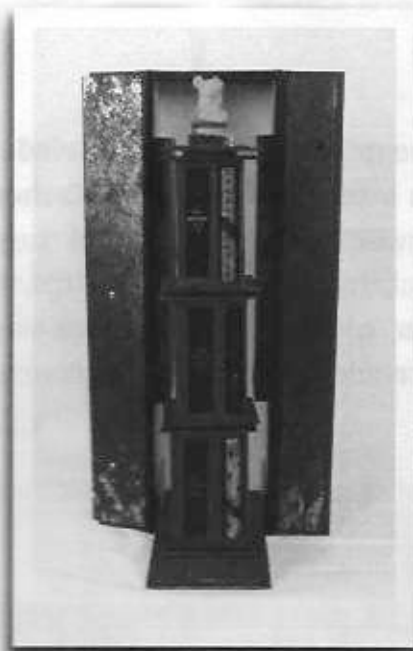


Photo 14. « Mur » Installation – 3 suspended walls each containing 3 bindings from the ABCdaire collection of Éditions Flammarion





**Photo 15. *La Tour Cynétique* – Three small breviaries, of the woman, of life, of death neatly arranged in a kinetic tower topped by the cat, guardian of the place.**

I must thank the Canada Council for the Arts for awarding me a grant from the “Research and Creation” program in 2010 to explore the use of fibres and textiles, as well as so-called smart new materials for the realization of art binding and creation.

This research added a new dimension to this project, which will evolve as the book evolves, reminding us that binding remains a current, contemporary and never outdated practice.

In the age of the e-book and at a time when the bookbinding industry is at the cutting edge of technology, I believe that we must bring a fresh look to the world of bookbinding by innovating and exploring new materials and mastering new technologies.

As part of this research on “smart textiles,” I explored the environment both in Canada and abroad. I discovered that the textile industry has resolutely entered the twenty-first century by joining with chemistry, physics or electronics, and that new textiles can be technical or functional, that is to say made of high-tech fibres, offering new functions such as fire-retardant

suits for firefighters, insulation of buildings, airbags, antibacterial clothing and more.

I have gathered information, experiences, meetings and I have done many tests to see the possible links with binding. My exploration of binding materials has mainly focused on smart and eco-responsible textiles, giving books a new form, a new dimension.

I also had to rethink a working technique, thread and needle, because textiles are not compatible with the glue traditionally used with leathers.

In Montreal, I worked in collaboration with Diane Morin, sculptor and assistant to Barbara Layne, director of Studio SubTela and the Hexagram Institute, in the Department of Textiles at Concordia University.

Let me introduce you to some works created and bound in textiles:

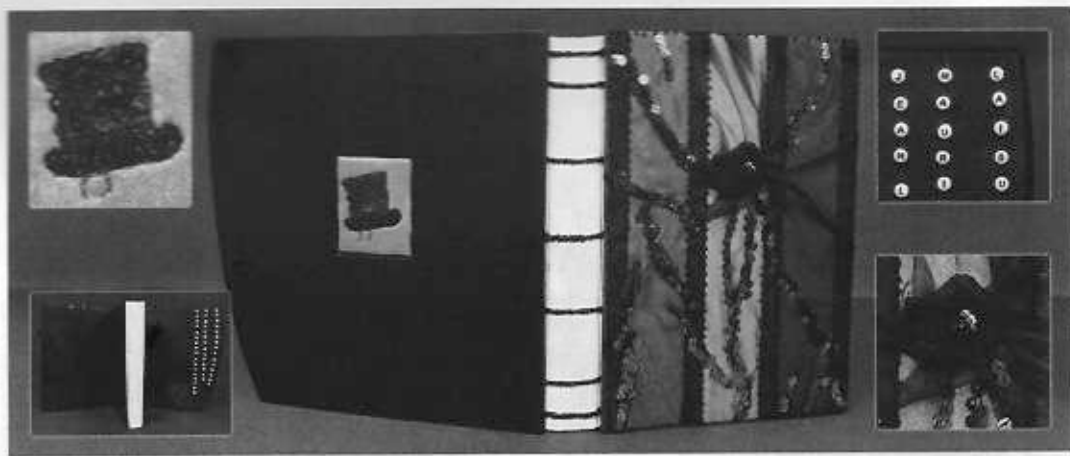


Photo 16. *L'aiguille creuse*, Maurice Leblanc – bound in textile and glass beads



Photo 17. *Flux et Reflux*, Michel Butor – “Haute couture” bound with exposed seam and glass beads

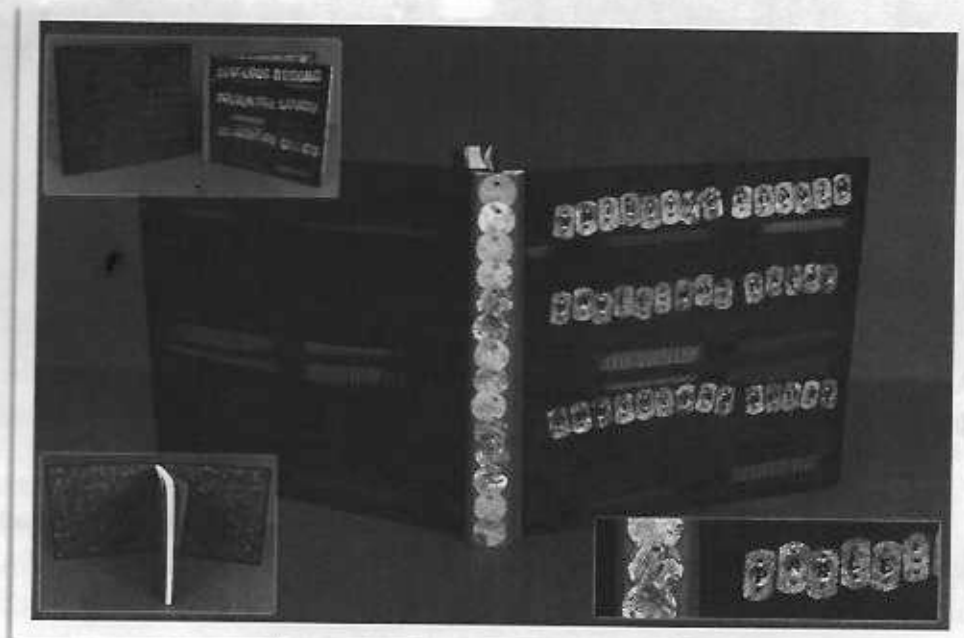


Photo 18. *Parle-moi d'Albi*, Brigitte Coppin – bound with exposed sequin and glass beads

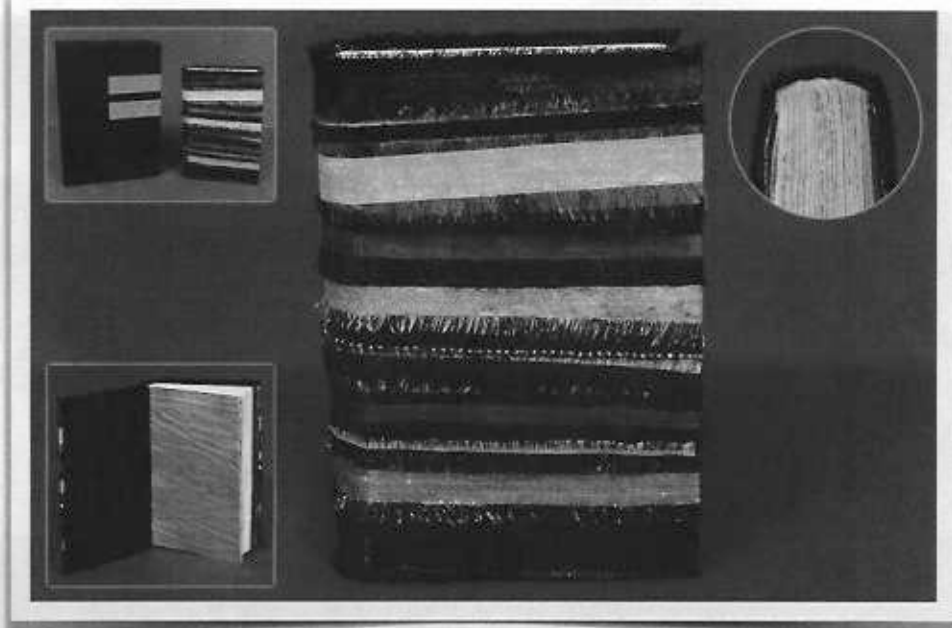


Photo 19. *Au Bonheur des Dames* – Émile Zola – traditionally bound in black, grey and white silk with a hint of pink silk

The CTT (Centre de transfert technologique en textiles) associated with the CÉGEP de Saint-Hyacinthe accompanied me in the realization of the luminous binding of Stéphane Mallarmé's book – "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard".

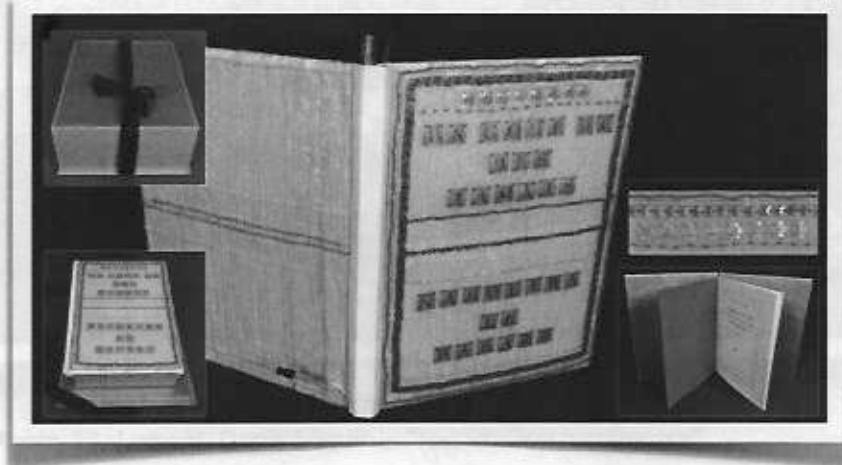


Photo 20. *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* – made with thread and needle by integrating light

As I come to know the fibres and specific qualities of all these beautiful, intelligent and flexible materials, I am learning how to add light to them.

In 2015, the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec awarded me a career grant, a grant that gave me the opportunity to continue my research and work.

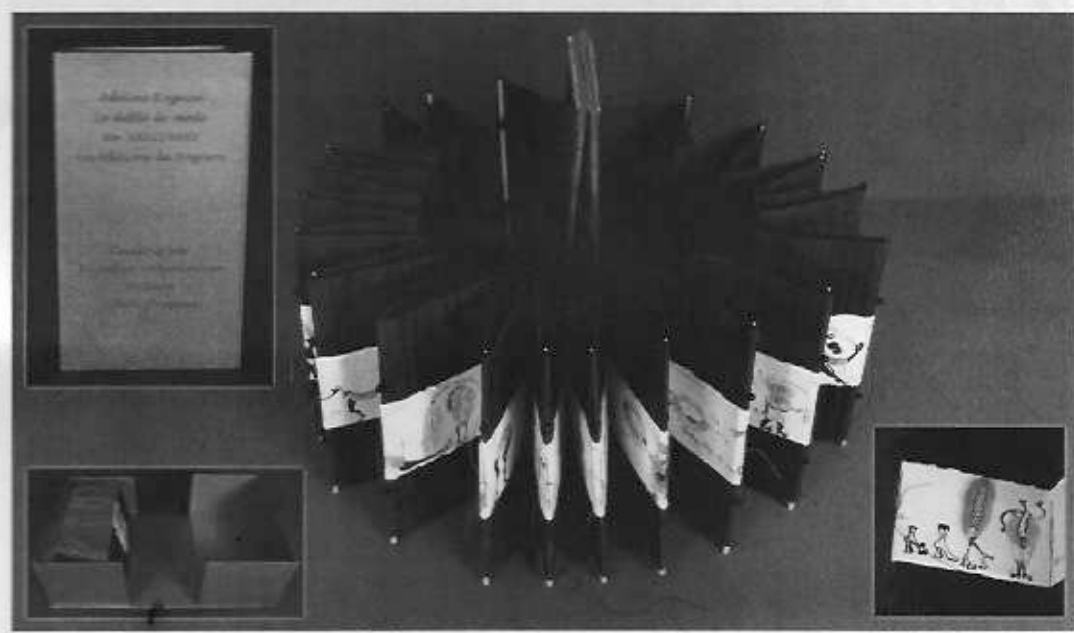


Photo 21. *Le défilé de mode*, Adeline Rognon – “Installation lumineuse” “Cat Walk”





Photo 22. *Le défilé de mode*, Adeline Rognon – “Installation lumineuse”  
“Cruising bar”

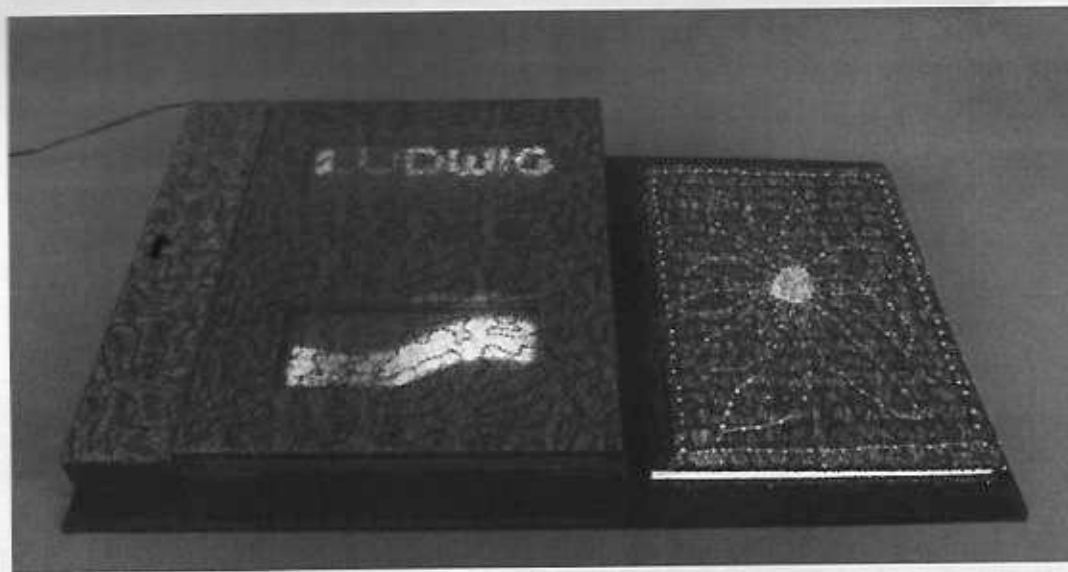


Photo 23. *Ludwig*, Denis Séguin – “Installation lumineuse”

My investment in this niche of creative binding has been rewarded and valued by the acquisitions of bibliophiles, the Bibliothèque et archives nationales du Québec (BAnQ), Library and Archives Canada (BAQ), the Bibliothèque de l'Université de Montréal, the McGill University Library, the Musée des artisans (MUMAQ), the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris, the Bibliothèque nationale du Luxembourg, the Musée de la reliure de Granville in France, the University of Alabama, and by collectors from abroad.

This career has been accomplished:

- In the context of a family life raising 4 children of which I am proud.
- In a context where I have transmitted my knowledge to more than 600 students, many of whom have become professionals. Passing on my knowledge has given me real pleasure, both in the exchange and sharing of ideas, as in research with my students and sometimes challenges. I was invited to give training workshops abroad: in France, Belgium, Estonia, Lithuania and Switzerland.
- In a context where I created, managed and administered the company "Reliure d'art La Tranchefile" which still exists and which has become the largest workshop in Quebec with a storefront that has survived thanks to an institutional clientele, large private companies and the many customers who have been loyal to "La Tranchefile". I am proud to inform you that the workshop is still present in Montreal, on St. Laurent Street thanks to Josée Dessureault, a former student who had the courage to invest herself in acquiring the company and who for more than ten years has been managing it with competence and brilliance.
- In a context where I have been involved in several organizations in Quebec, by creating ARA Canada, ARQ (Association des relieurs du Québec), by creating in France the association "AIR Neuf" in collaboration, French, American, English, Belgian, Swedish and Swiss bookbinders who have united to spread a "new air", with the avowed

aim of questioning the ability of bookbinding to join the circle of plastic creation. I am a member of many organizations in Canada, America, Europe, Sweden and the Baltics.

- In a context where I have participated in many juries in Canada and abroad.
- In a context where for more than 10 years, I operated the "Galerie d'art La Tranchefile" and exhibited many artists of the bookbinding and artist's book world, to name a few: Betty Goodwin, Roland Giguère, Ghitta Caiserman Roth, Pnina Gagnon, Francine Simonin, Jonathan Tremblay, Jacqueline Lelouche, Jean-Claude Cipriani, Jocelyn Lemieux and many others.

If I have been allowed to present to you a synopsis of my career as an art binding artist, it is thanks to the Alcuin Society, which honours me today by presenting me with the Robert R. Reid Medal for my body of work in the world of book arts in Canada.

I thank Mr. Chester Gryski, who travelled from Toronto to represent the Alcuin Society.

I thank Ms. Jacquelyn Rosenberg for her presence and support along with her colleagues Anne Marie Holland and Jennifer Garland.

I cannot fail to mention the contribution of Ms. Marlene Chan who initiated my presence here today.

I extend my warm thanks to David Carruthers and Denise Lapointe, friends who are passionately dedicated to providing visual artists and bookbinders with access to a wide selection of high-quality paper.

Thank you all for attending this event hosted by McGill University at the McLennon Library.