



BOUND *to stitch*

Caroline Zoob visited
designer bookbinder
Hannah Brown in
her Somerset studio
to see her exquisite
embroidery on
leather.

ALL PHOTOGRAPHY HANNAH BROWN
UNLESS OTHERWISE STATED

LEFT The hand-embroidered leather cover for a 1969 First Edition of **British Birds**, before it has been glued to the book. Two curlews, a skylark ascending and a lapwing (far left). The fluffy texture of the clouds was achieved by painting suede roughly with white acrylic paint before cutting out the onlays. The grass and drystone wall were embroidered directly onto the leather, with French knots used for the stones as the wall recedes into the distance.

As part of her degree course in Three-Dimensional Crafts at Brighton University, Hannah Brown learned neither bookbinding nor embroidery. Yet today she is an award-winning Fellow of Designer Bookbinders, working from her immaculate, light-filled studio in the converted attic space of a Grade II-listed Somerset grange and well-known by book collectors for her inventive, exquisitely embroidered fine bindings. "In my final year at Brighton," recalls Hannah, "a friend joined a bookbinding evening class and I thought it might be fun, and then quickly discovered that I loved the craftsmanship involved". This is not surprising, for much of Hannah's childhood was spent in her father's workshop, making things. Talking through some of her work, it becomes clear that there is very little she cannot make, if required: her own tools, the tactile wooden boxes housing her precious collection of sample boards, ➡➡



the hammered-brass eye of an embroidered mayfly, a replica pen nib, a hinge or a clasp. Hannah talks nonchalantly about rounding off brass rods and soldering things onto pins or heating tools on a camper-stove. The impressive range of tools hanging on the pegboard wall are not for show.

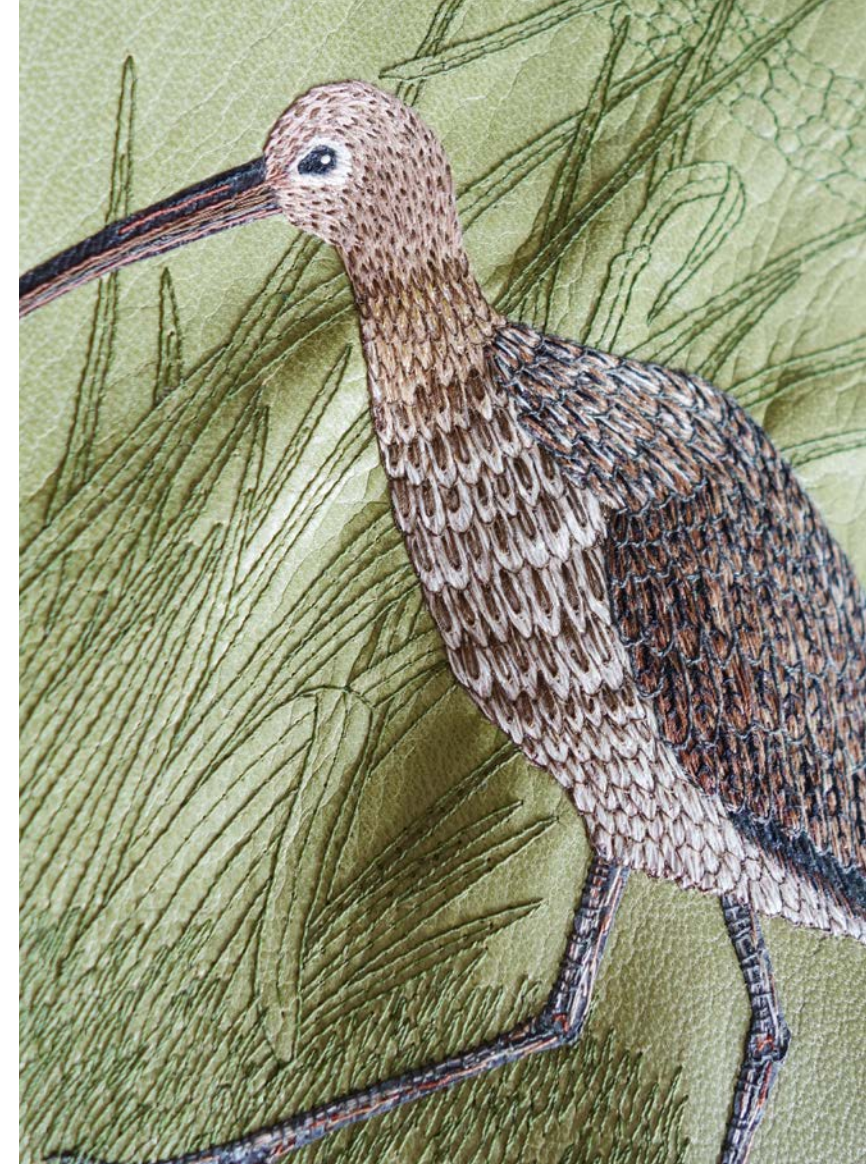
Her practical making skills were called upon over the eight years she spent designing and making mounts for many of the beautiful objects on display at London's Victoria & Albert Museum (V&A), for which she has also recently created mannequin wigs for the NAOMI and KIMONO exhibitions.

During her time at the V&A she was also working her way through the stages of training offered by the London Institute of Bookbinders. 'Stumbling across' the Society of Bookbinders and Designer Bookbinders, Hannah started to enter their competitions, winning several prestigious awards, gathering commissions and collectors until, a ➤➤



*'Higher still and
higher
From the earth
thou springest,
Like a cloud of
fire;
The blue deep
thou wingest,
And singing still
dost soar, and
soaring ever
singest...'*

— PERCY BYSSHE SHELLEY
ODE TO A SKYLARK



OPPOSITE (top) Building up the colour with small stem stitches with threads in colours to match the leather onlays. **(Below)** The flying curlew on the finished cover. Note how the delicate blind tooling in the sky and clouds adds movement and texture.

ABOVE (left) The skylark at the top of the spine, a clever echo of Shelley's famous line describing the skylark's vertical ascent.

ABOVE Each feather has been outlined over the stem stitch filling, before adding a lazy daisy stitch on top.

RIGHT Cover (detail) for *Mayflies of the Driftless Region*, published by Midnight Paper Sales in the USA in 2005. It includes beautiful wood engravings by Gaylord Schanilec. It is a study of mayflies by an artist rather than a field guide.

Hannah started by looking at images of mayflies, liking the 'structured yet random pattern' of their wings and feeling that their delicate forms might be well represented by embroidery. She made the eye by rounding off the end of a brass rod, soldering it to a pin and using something called a centre punch to create the dots. The grasses are worked in a clever combination of long, flat stitches over thin leather onlays in green, brown and black. The body of the mayfly is worked over an onlay of a deep green, with touches of metallic thread. Tiny leather onlays lie behind the fretwork of the wings.

BELOW The completed book with its bespoke, decorated box.



➤ couple of years ago, she received her fellowship. She is one of a very small group of designer bookbinders worldwide who has specialised from the start of her career in using embroidery on her fine bindings. The textural element of embroidery is something Hannah has always been drawn to, from childhood when she learned cross-stitch with her grandmother, to pulling thread

through holes pricked in her ceramic and metalwork degree pieces.

Designing a fine binding to commission is perhaps akin to being a theatre designer, except that instead of having a team of craftsmen to bring the ideas to life, Hannah makes everything herself. Her clients range from institutions with important libraries, such as The Athenæum Club in London's Pall



CAROLINE ZOBB

LEFT Sample Board No. 55 for *La Charrue D'Érable (The Maplewood Plough)* A book illustrated with twelve full-page, colour wood-engravings drawn by Camille Pissarro and engraved by his son, Lucien Pissarro, primarily printed in shades of soft peach, green and/or blue. The title-page border features apple tree branches and blossom which inspired Hannah's design and colour palette, featuring pistachio-coloured bull skin with apples and apple blossom onlays, all hand-cut from vellum, suede and leather. Each of the flowers, apples and leaves are embroidered in a variety of coloured cotton and metallic threads, using stem stitch and French knots. The centre detail of all the apples and the apple blossom was added using acrylic inks.

The little indents are made by pressing the heated ends of differently shaped tools (see right), into the leather, known as 'blind tooling'. In the mayfly cover opposite, the little gold dots were made in the same way, only gold leaf was picked up on the heated end before being pressed into the leather.



this in a way that is both representative and artistic, using a seemingly endless variety of skills and techniques. She starts by reading the book, just as a theatre designer will first read a play before meeting the director. Some clients want to be surprised by Hannah's creative response to the book, others want to be more involved in the design process. Either way, Hannah has, inspired by one of her tutors, made a sample board slightly smaller than a mobile phone for each of the fine bindings she has designed. It is impossible to describe the haptic pleasure derived from handling these. Filed in chronological order in numbered grooves in their hand-made (initially by Hannah, now by a trusted maker) wooden boxes, they form a precious record of her work and creating them is a key part of Hannah's design process.

Once she has thought of a concept, Hannah carries out research online, makes detailed drawings and tracings (an example floats under the text on page 2-3) and gathers leathers and threads. Her embroidery is almost always worked over hand-cut leather shapes or 'onlays', which she often tones with acrylic paint or inks to deepen or correct the colours. The backs of both the leather cover and the onlays are pared down to compensate for different thicknesses when the cover is glued to the boards of the book. Some of the leather shapes are tiny. To place these correctly, Hannah ➡

Monograph of the Meropidæ or Family of the Bee-eaters by Henry Eeles Dresser. *The author was a Member of the Athenæum Club from 1885, and donated this copy to its magnificent Library.*

OPPOSITE

1 Title Page and **2** Sample illustration.

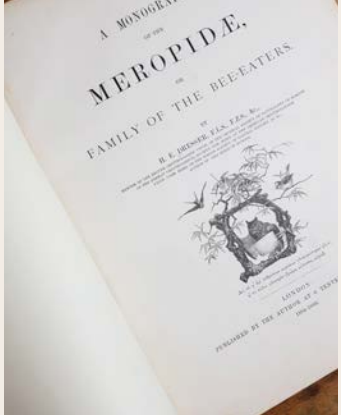
3 This book was going to require a large variety of colours to cut into the feather onlays, so Hannah set about working out which colour was going to work best for each. As the feathers varied in colour along their length Hannah used acrylic paints to match them tonally with her reference images, gathered online.

4 Drawings and templates of different bee-eater feathers were attached to the appropriate leathers, numbered to cross-reference with the design drawing.

5 Matching threads to the paint colours with which Hannah plans to 'tone' the leathers.

6 The leather onlays are glued, pricked and painted for the sample board.

7 The completed sample board.



will sometimes lay the base leather onto a thick foam board and pre-prick holes, using her tracing of the design as a guide. This sounds relatively straightforward until you look at the design for a copy of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, with its intricately pieced and stitched galleon and rolling wave of text and French knots (see pages 14-15) and imagine actually doing it. As she works, Hannah records each stage of the process in illustrated posts on her blog, offering an illuminating glimpse into the mind of a master craftsperson at work.

It is important that the design takes into account the need for the book to be handled, perhaps for centuries — as she works, Hannah sometimes imagines conservators of the future being asked to conserve her books — and so the edges of most of the leather onlays are stitched down and longer stitches carefully couched. It is not possible to use a hoop. Instead, Hannah rolls up the left-hand side of the cover, fixing it at the end of the roll with a binder clip and holds the roll in her left hand as she works (see 3 opposite). "Leather doesn't distort the way fabric does," Hannah assures me, as I probably look incredulous at the idea of doing such fine (and it is extremely fine) embroidery without a frame or hoop. She uses a small quilting 'between' — "I have tough fingers after all these years" — and, mostly, Gutermann polyester thread which is stronger and gives a cleaner, flatter line. ➡➡

OPPOSITE

1, 2 & 3 Embroidering the feathers. Hannah started with the shafts, using various thicknesses of threads and whipping. For the feather vanes, she worked long, wide-angled stitches about one millimetre apart, using a fine embroidery thread, couching each long stitch. The vanes were built up using different coloured threads, to try and emulate the actual feathers of the bee-eaters. Some of the wider stitches were started nearer to the edge of the feathers and overlapped to blend the colours. The 'afterfeather' is the downy lower barbs of the feather which are much fluffier than the rest of the vanes. These were built up using the same type of thread but laid onto the leather in a more random fashion to create the different texture.

4 The finished book. Hannah decided to use a different coloured leather on the spine, allowing her to work the front and back covers separately. The book is quite large (38cm x 30cm | 15" x 12"), so to handle the cover as one piece would have been very cumbersome.

"There are over sixty different feathers on this cover design, with each taking me on average of two hours to complete..."

1



2



3



4



"Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands;
Courtsied when you have and kiss'd
The wild waves whist,
First it comes, here and there;



OPPOSITE & LEFT Hannah chose to depict the shipwreck ("We split, we split!") in Act I, Scene I of *The Tempest*, combining the wave which causes the storm, conjured by Prospero's magic, with the words of the first stanza of the spirit Ariel's song from Act I, Scene II, sung again at Prospero's command to lure the shipwrecked passengers to him on the island to which he has been exiled. The wave begins as five lines, like a musical stave, and transforms into the words, swirling in a foamy sea of French knots, building in power and size as it travels across the cover of the book. Each letter and intricate piece of the galleon is a hand-cut leather onlay, stitched down by hand onto the hand-dyed calf leather.

The finished book is 314 mm x 215mm (roughly 12" x 8"). This Journal is 215mm long.

Hannah admits that the embroidery is the "bit I enjoy the most!". Perhaps this is because, after the precision cutting and placing of the leather shapes, it is the most relaxing part of the process. She makes creative use of stem and straight stitch, often whipping these. Longer stitches are couched and her French knots are so perfect and tiny that at first glance they might be beads, possibly because Hannah has devised a way of stitching these without the need for wrapping the thread around the needle.

It is clear that Hannah relishes the intense relationship with each book as she responds to it creatively over many weeks. Recently, she returned to The

AthenæumClub to deliver a talk about the binding she did for the *Monograph of the Meropidæ* in 2022. "It is always great to revisit one of your previous bindings in person; although I always have my sample board, there is nothing like seeing the physical book again, being able to handle it and flip the pages." For a moment, I imagine a day in a future century, when a member of the Club does the same, perhaps wondering about the hands which created the exquisite feathery binding before settling down to read. ♣

For more information about embroidery and bookbinding workshops visit www.hannahbrownbookbinding.com.
@hannah_brown_bookbinding