

Leather Bookbinding and Gold Tooling in ancient Portuguese Goa

Franklin Pereira

During August '89, I visited for the first – but not the last – time, Goa, the former Portuguese settlement in India. My tourism tends to mix study and leather art and history. These provide a better understanding of society, actual cultural links and much more enjoyment!

Though my main interest was in leather in antique furniture (these findings will be a chapter in my future book on the subject), I visited the Printing and Bookbinding department in Goa which was formerly under the local Portuguese Government orders.

Whilst researching and looking for pieces of this incredible “puzzle” of leather history, I have exceeded my expectations – I met two former workers of the Portuguese press who showed me a few of the books, some of which had won awards at European bookbinding shows in the '30s. Before applying the gold tooling, the high relief of the covers was produced by gluing strips of hard paper on to the board of the covers before putting on the leather. The skins (goat, sheep and very thin imitations of reptile skins) came from Portugal. Not far away (about 300km. north-east), there is the tanning in Kholapur city, still famous for its decorative richness in sandal making but Indian tanning and leather work is mostly for footwear, there is no tradition of imitation of printed skins.

Most of the other old books – former Portuguese official documents and literature – still kept on the shelves, had sheepskin on the back and fantasy paper over the covers. Some leather bindings were dyed using the “broom process”: take a hard straw small broom and dip it into a liquid with iron sulphate; shake the broom on top of the skin to be used for the binding so that a few drops will smash on to the skin surface; take another broom and do the same but this time dipping it into a

liquid with potassium; the melting of both irregular drops, after drying, gives a nice tone to the skin. Actually this process can be used with other liquids and a used toothbrush can be substituted for the straw broom – this gives very tiny “sprayed” dots.

Gold stamping was done using a “sticker” of egg white and olive oil; a very ancient recipe to stick gold foil to sheepskin. The brass tools – like leather stamps – were heated and pressed by hand over the gold foil; the heat sticks the gold foil and the stamp design on to the leather, the non heated foil is then taken out. Tools have different lines and shapes, so that the decoration of the book’s cover is in a variety of geometric patterns.

One worker showed me the shelves where the 19th century gold stamping tools (made in Portugal) were kept – quite a museum, telling so much of art and trade! I was allowed to ink print all the designs; there were the crosses and the crowns from the Royal times of Portugal (up to 1910); some heraldic symbols and decorative leaf designs, used for borders and corners of the covers.



Marks of gold tooling stamps kept in the Printing and Bookbinding Dept.in Goa
Dating from last century

The old tools aren't used any more, the times changed as Goa turned back to India in 1961; the two friendly press workers, in spite of 30 years in the job, get about £50 a month – living in India is cheap but such an income still isn't much.

What nowadays is the press? Besides newspapers and books, the bindings are of low quality, with very repetitive tasteless fantasy-paper covers and artificial leather backs. A little gold tooling is done using a warm press but the gold foil is the fake which is commonly used. The pressed designs are the opposite of outstanding, as they just fill a very practical use. It is necessary to give a thought to this: the famous “arts and crafts” from India are produced mostly as a repetition of the past (painted as a paradise), as a means of giving employment to thousands for very little money; there is hardly a sense of art and beauty within – and peace and enjoyment are part of it! -- but plenty of repetitive human factories. This is reflected in everyday activities as well, as Goa district turns more and more similar to any messy and crowded Indian town.

Happily I found a few cultural survivors speaking Portuguese, very helpful in showing me the most interesting places, particularly the ones – museums and private houses – where leather art has left footprints.