

Odette Drapeau: Simple, Traditional, and Innovative

PETER MITHAM visits a renowned Quebec bookbinder whose innovative work has deep roots.

THE WORK OF Quebec bookbinder Odette Drapeau is modest and unassuming. Working from a studio in a converted garage on a quiet residential street in Montreal's St. Leonard neighbourhood, Drapeau engages with the deep tradition of Western binding as she creates works of art that respect, protect, and honour the texts they enclose. "I always think to protect the book," she says.

Gently removed from the boxes that protect them, the books display an elegance. Drapeau opens them showing that each remains as much something to be read as admired. These bindings aren't flamboyant spectacles that compete with the text for attention. Ideally, they complement and amplify the texts. "You can read the book, you can open it. It's all the little details. I like to bind a book but to keep the book accessible,



Odette Drapeau shows an edition of Stéphane Mallarmé's poem Brise Marine that demonstrates the dynamic flexibility of bindings made from fish leathers. (Peter Mitham photo)

easily,” she says. “Look, you can open the book correctly, you can turn the pages—it’s nice to have a book like that. It’s not a traditional technique.”

Drapeau is familiar with traditional bookbinding methods and materials but notes that these often work to restrain the text rather than open it to the reader. It’s also fragile, wearing down in a way that some other materials do not. “For me, it’s against the idea to bind a book that’s supposed to be read, and supposed to be put on the table,” she says.

This vision of protecting books to ensure their longevity as things to be read, not just admired, has its roots in very traditional bookmaking skills. She traces her tradition to the Coptic bindings that predate moveable type and the text blocks stitched together in mechanised and now automated processes. “It’s very inspired by the past, the traditional techniques. Simple,” she says. “At the beginning of the story of books, it was the scrolls, and these were opened. When they decided to do the *cahiers*, they began to sew one section with the other section, and that was the beginning of the history of bookbinding. . . . They just used thread to connect the different sections to be able to open the book.”

Since bindings are integral to the use and longevity of books as well as being art in their own right, Drapeau sees value in the slipcases and boxes uses to protect her bound books. For a 2018 exhibition catalogue showcasing the work of Canadian artist Betty Goodwin (1923–2008) at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa, she created a veil to protect the embroidered binding she created for it. “I don’t have a problem if someone wants to take that by hand, because that’s what I want,” she says.

The unusual pains she takes to protect the book are rare, so much so that curators often see her boxes in much the same way as librarians of the past saw dust jackets—ancillary to the book itself. This isn’t the case, in the opinion of Drapeau, who proudly declares herself, “Queen of the boxes!”

“I’m concerned also, and it’s something we don’t see very often for binders, to put the book in a nice box, and to conserve it—for me it’s very important,” she says. “Very often when I send books for exhibition,

they don’t want the box. They say, ‘Why?’ For me it’s really something important.”

The symbiotic relationship between the book and its protective binding, and the box which encloses both, is really a conversation between three distinct pieces of art—each of them functional, but also discrete: “It’s a craft but it’s an art, and the support of my creation is the book; it’s another piece of art.”

Drapeau likens her bindings and their boxes to sculptures; indeed, for one exhibition, she drew inspiration from a church she visited in England where the service books were held within the seats of the chairs. The chairs were effectively a case for the books and their bindings, and played off the idea for the gallery installation. “You can put the book in the drawer, or up for display,” she says.

The idea of relationship also animates her choice of collaborators, such as the *joaillier* Claude Forand, who fashions pewter and other metals for her. Drapeau develops the plan for the binding, but then works closely with Forand and others to realise the project. The binder may work alone, but never in isolation from the world. “It’s a nice collaboration with Claude. I work [with him] very often, and I like to work with people like that,” she says.

THE BEGINNINGS

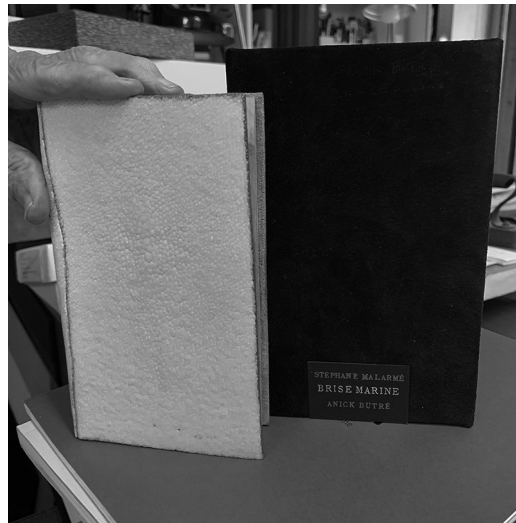
Born in Trois-Pistoles in 1940, Drapeau moved with her parents to Montreal the following year. She returned each year, however, to spend the summer months with her grandparents. At 19, she studied piano, obtained her diploma, and taught. But then Drapeau married, and as a mother with a growing family (she has three children) it became difficult to practice every day. “So I let that go,” she says, but the desire to pursue some kind of creative expression didn’t stop: “It’s because I was looking for something creative, I discovered bookbinding.” The craft was the perfect fit for her skills and interests, she recalled in 2005, combining a manual dexterity inherited from her mother and honed through her piano studies with a desire to create physical objects.

In 1968, she enrolled in courses being offered by Simone Benoît Roy in Old Montreal, and after three years with her she was starting to teach

others. She continued her studies with trips to France, spending a year in the *atelier* of Henri Mercher (1912–1976) in Paris. Drapeau arrived in 1977, a year after his death, but the experience was formative. “[He] was no longer there when I signed up for his workshop, but his spirit still reigned,” she recalled in 2005. “He played an important role in my manner.” She also encountered the work of Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979). “Her bindings did not respect the rules of art, but their raw appearance, their originality, opened a door for me, that of the power of the imagination,” she said. “I saw in them how one could work with different materials and not copy the past.” When Drapeau returned to Canada, she was ready to set up under her own name.

She opened her own studio, La Tranchefile (the French word for the headband of a book), on Montreal’s famous Boulevard Saint-Laurent in 1979, the same year as La Papeterie Saint-Armand established their papermaking business along the Lachine Canal, and began exhibiting. A great deal of the work at La Tranchefile was restoration rather than her own designs, but there were a few of those, too. The work gave her the experience, the practice, and the confidence to develop a vision for her own creations. “For me the technique is very important, and it takes quite a lot of time to be able to work, and to forget the technique, it’s natural. That, it takes time,” she says. “But once you learn the technique you can always decide to do differently.” She sold La Tranchefile in 2010 and began working from home. La Tranchefile is now in the hands of one of her former students. “I decided to work without telephone, clients, and I just decided to be myself with my creations,” she says. “It’s my work and I exhibit it, and they can critique it or love it. It’s my way to express my creativity.”

Drapeau’s awareness of and debt to the long tradition of bookbinding does not confine her to simply imitating what’s been done in the past but frees her to apply those techniques to modern works in a way that honours and maintains the tradition as something living and dynamic. She focuses her efforts now on working with the skills she learned, not simply applying them. This can mean spending upwards of 100 hours on a binding, typically



Fish leather binding of Brise Marine, a poem by Stéphane Mallarmé originally published in 1865 in Tournon, France. (Peter Mitham photo)

for limited editions and prize-winning titles. Since 2005, she has bound the winners of the annual competition of the Salon International du Livre du Québec. “I don’t want to repeat a binding of the 18th century,” she says.

A NEW TECHNIQUE

A pivotal moment for Drapeau came early in her career. The aftermath of the historic 1966 floods in Florence saw conservators rally to save and protect the city’s library collections. Their observations changed how binders thought about their work. Drapeau learned how changes in book production practices had made the flexible medieval codices easier to restore while those in rigid bindings were ultimately more vulnerable to damage in a natural disaster such as a flood. “They realised the problem of the leather at that period of time,” she says. “The product they used to prepare, tan the leather. . . is what destroyed the book, but the *liés de livre* was just easy because it’s very easy to restore the paper *surtout* [wrapper] before the end of the 19th century,” she says.

By the end of the 19th century, high-acid wood pulps that disintegrated more rapidly and did damage to adjacent materials made even the paper a threat to the longevity of the book. The rapid industrialisation of book production in Great

Britain as well as the Netherlands and other countries divorced them from the traditional book production practices, which persisted in France. Seeking out books on restoration in her own language, Drapeau discovered plenty of books about restoring bindings but none on other elements of the book. “I just found English books on restoration because they needed that more than the French,” she says, coming to the conclusion that the more traditional materials and production practices were actually better for the book.

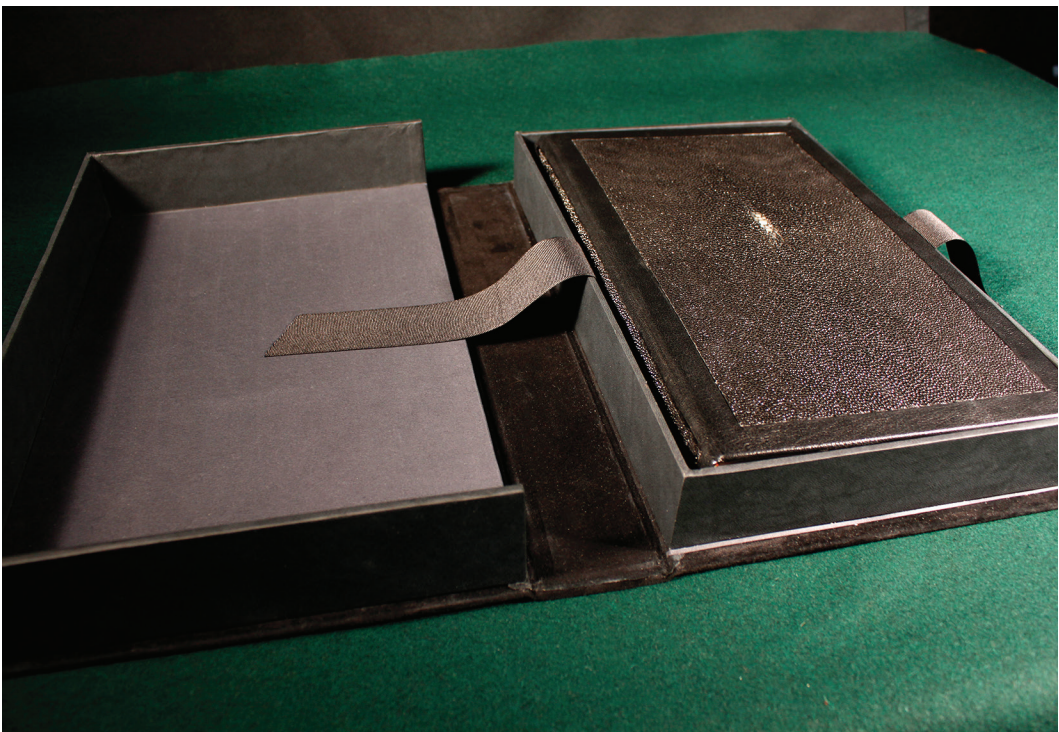
This early experience inspired her to seek more organic bindings that rely less on chemical adhesives and more on craftsmanship. “I’m working a lot doing a new way to bind the book, because the textile doesn’t like glue,” she says. “I don’t use glue, so everything is made by the needles and thread.” Instead, Drapeau sews using a solid linen thread, which is close to the traditional way, but she avoids using a bookbinder’s hammer in assembling the book as she feels it inhibits the opening of the book and creates a less

comfortable reading experience. Where an adhesive is required, due to the materials being used and the inability to use any other method, she’ll use a dry adhesive similar to what photographers use to mount prints: “It’s pH-neutral and it’s fantastic, and I do a lot of things with that now.”

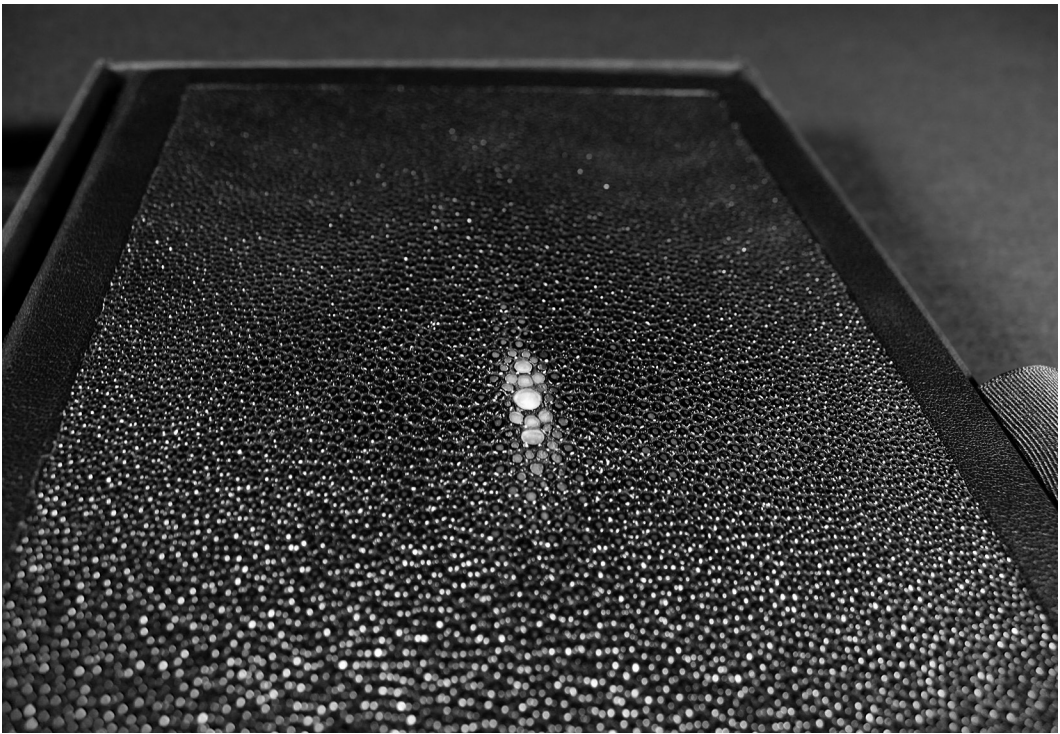
She also avoids the use of traditional animal leathers, preferring since the 1990s to use supple leathers made from fish skins. Sourced from the Gaspé, it’s an elegant but expensive material but also one that’s resilient: “I discovered the fish skin because it was more resistant, so I decided to treat that and now I do a lot of things in textile.” A prized example is a 1947 printing of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, completely bound in textiles, with embroidery. This book is illustrated with 24 etchings by Marianne Clouzot as well as 48 initials and tailpieces engraved on wood. The binding also illustrates how the emotive power of the work it protects guides Odette’s designs. “The binding, if it’s an art, it’s because it’s a personal process,” she says.



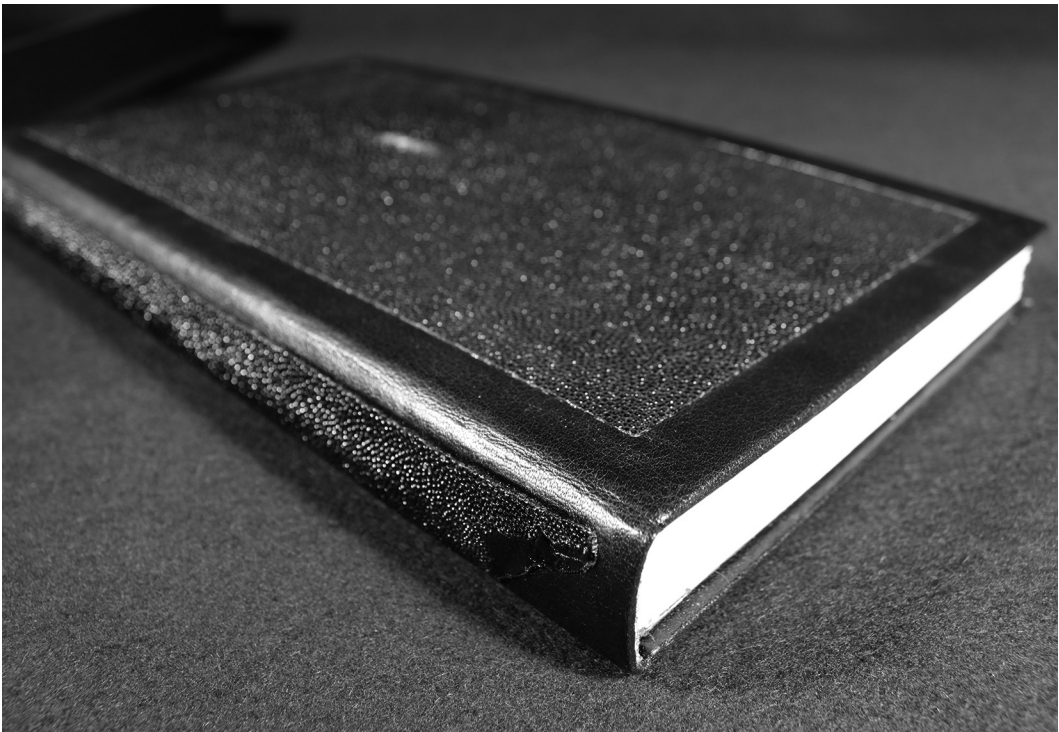
A 1947 printing of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, bound in textiles, with embroidery. (Peter Mitham photo)



La Parole Des Pierres: Stones That Speak (2016), a poem by Kattan Naïm with English translation by Robyn Sarah and photographs by David R. Cowles, bound by Odette Drapeau in black pebble-grained Morocco leather with several small polished inlays resembling stones on the front cover, mountain design in central panel on rear cover; red suede on pastedowns; red and gold endbands; in black suede clamshell.
(All photos by Gregory Houston, McGill University Library.)



La Parole Des Pierres: Stones That Speak (2016) bound by Odette Drapeau; detail of polished inlays resembling stones on the front cover; and red suede on pastedown. Housed in McGill University Library, Rare Books and Special Collections, Colgate Collection.



*Detail of binding with black pebble-grained Morocco leather by Odette Drapeau of
La Parole Des Pierres: Stones That Speak (2016).*

“I never use an image to reproduce an image. For me, it’s the influence of the text. It’s what I feel, *c’est une émotion*. And that’s the way I treat every book. I read it, I look at it, and I feel something—sometimes it’s the colour, it’s the movement. . . . But it’s not to copy something.”

Another example is a book designed in Lyon, France, by an artist who syndicalised numbers. Drapeau developed an “Oriental” binding that allows the large pages of the book to lie flat for the reader and viewer. The motif for the binding is discreet, drawing inspiration from the content but implying it rather than speaking directly to it. The text stands independent of the binding, but the binding is always in conversation with the text it encloses. “For me, it’s respect for the writer, what I’m doing. I try to respect the writer, and the emotion the text gives me, that’s what I have in my mind,” she says.

The centrality of the text and the several collaborations that go towards creating a single work are exemplified in an edition Drapeau oversaw of Quebec writer Michel Tremblay’s

La mort de Phèdre (2020). The story focuses on the last day in the life of Phèdre, Tremblay’s beloved elderly cat. Drapeau commissioned a letterpress printing of the novel in an edition of 32 for binding by artists participating in *Tribute to Michel Tremblay*, an international exhibition of creative bindings and artist’s books at the newly reopened Museum of Artisans of Quebec in the Montreal borough of Saint-Laurent, February 1 to May 8, 2022. Beyond the bindings, Drapeau had the idea that each copy would be illustrated and ornamented by a different artist, allowing each artist to respond as they saw fit. “The idea for me was to do an edition with space for the artists,” she explains. “I decided to give a copy to a young woman, [Nicole], 17 years old, who was always doing design, so she illustrated the book. . . . And I gave another copy to the daughter of one of my good friends. . . . Nehemah explored the book differently.” Other copies went to one of her students, a bookbinder, and architect. Each was given cat silhouettes cut from paper that Drapeau had marbled (another of her skills). “The young

woman who bought my studio, now she has a machine to cut the things. I asked her to cut me little cats,” she says. “It was a good experience for me, because I sold a [dozen] copies of that book to bookbinders who wanted to participate in this exposition, *Hommage à Michel Tremblay*.”

A LEGACY IN THE MAKING

Now in her 80s, Drapeau’s energy and creativity is in many ways just as strong as when she returned from France in 1978. She’s now considered a pioneer of the contemporary artist’s book, having leveraged her formation in Paris to incorporate the materials of her native Quebec in creations that participated in an international vision for bindings that not only protect but enhance books and add meaning to them. She was a founding member of the nine-member group of contemporary binders, AIR Neuf, formed in 1979, and spearheaded the formation of the L’association Les Amis de la Reliure d’Art du Canada, an affiliate of the Forum International de la Reliure D’Art, in 1995. She has generously taught others through courses, exhibitions and other events.

Drapeau’s work is part of many collections, recognising her important contributions to the book arts. The key repository of her work is Library and Archives Canada, which accepted 135 of her bindings in 2001, and then added a further 78 in 2018. The Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec accepted the items that comprised a 2005 retrospective of her work in Paris, *Des rives du Saint-Laurent aux quais de la Seine*, which acknowledged her debt to the French tradition while showing how she had evolved it with the materials available in her native Quebec.

In Europe, her works are found in the Bibliothèque nationale du Luxembourg, the Musée de la Reliure de Granville in France and several private collections in Belgium, France, Germany, and Switzerland. She is also widely collected in North America.

Among other honours, Drapeau received the 5th International Trophy for Art Bookbinding from the Forum International de la Reliure D’Art in 1996 and was named a recipient of the Robert R. Reid Award in 2020. Presentation of the medal was delayed by public health restrictions associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. Drapeau plans to deliver a lecture as well as conduct two workshops in conjunction with the medal presentation.

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~ Peter Mitham is editor of Amphora.

LES CENT-UNE

Of the many honours Odette Drapeau has received, the most exclusive is her inclusion in Les Cent-Une. Created in 1926 by and for female bibliophiles, the group—as its name implies—is limited to 101 members; an existing member must die for a new member to be added. Drapeau was invited to join in 2018, becoming its first Canadian member.

Currently chaired by Catherine de Vasselot de Régné, the society was founded by Russian Princess Zinaïda Schakowskoy (1906–2001) after being snubbed by a member of the Société des Cent, now defunct. The story goes that the princess replied that she would found a society for women bibliophiles. The gentleman doubted she would find enough to establish such a society. “I won’t just find one hundred, but one hundred and one,” she shot back.

Today, the society has its full complement of members, and once every two years, publishes a beautiful book for its 101 members that has been illustrated by a contemporary artist.

