

The Coptic Bindings Collection at the Morgan Library & Museum: History, Conservation, and Access

ABSTRACT

The Morgan Library & Museum (ML&M) houses the largest single cache of Coptic manuscripts and bindings in the world. The manuscripts were discovered in a hidden well, intact, but in a deteriorated state, in the Faiyum Oasis near Hamouli, Egypt in 1910. This paper describes the discovery and purchase of the collection, the conservation and restoration of the manuscripts and their bindings at the Vatican, their eventual return to the Morgan Library, and the digitization and rehousing of the collection.

THE COPTIC BINDINGS COLLECTION

This discreet collection of volumes, known officially as The Morgan Library & Museum's Coptic Bindings Collection, is made up of over 50 volumes, 49 of which were part of a collection discovered at Hamouli, Egypt, in 1910. The village of Hamouli is in the desert oasis region of al-Faiyum. The governate of al-Faiyum is located along the River Nile, approximately 60 miles south of Cairo. These manuscripts were copied on parchment in the Sahidic dialect of Upper Egypt and bound during the 9th and 10th centuries. Paul Needham writes, "In 1910 the library of the ancient Coptic monastery of St Michael of the Desert was discovered in the southern Fayum, near the village of Hamuli. Nearly sixty parchment volumes were found in a stone cistern, many still in their original bindings; they compose the largest surviving group of intact Coptic codices coming from a single source." (P Needham, 1979, 12).

J. Pierpont Morgan purchased the collection of codices just over 100 years ago. This paper will focus on the story of the bindings themselves and will touch only briefly on the rebound manuscript text blocks, which also reside in the vaults at The Morgan Library & Museum. The bindings were separated from their text blocks shortly after being

purchased in 1911, and since then, have remained almost entirely inaccessible. Due to their extreme delicacy and their historic importance, an appropriate re-housing plan had been difficult to determine. A great deal of research and a thorough review of the bindings' care was undertaken by Deborah Evetts, the long-term Head of Book Conservation at The Pierpont Morgan Library, after she began working with the collection in the early 1980s.

Though little has been officially published regarding the bindings or the text blocks, a photographic facsimile edition of the collection was completed in 1922 and has permitted its limited study and the addition of its contents to the field of Coptic and ancient Christian literature. The facsimile edition of the volumes was made at the Vatican Library and it photo-reproduced each of the manuscripts in its own, separate volume.

The discovery of the manuscripts in the desert in 1910 held the only evidence at that time of the existence of the monastery of the Archangel Michael, and the contents described a well-organized operation and active devotional life. Despite the Copts being a tolerated minority across both the Christian Byzantine and then Islamic Egyptian worlds, it is speculated that the monastery may have been destroyed or disbanded around the year 1000 in a spate of religious persecution, a belief supported by the span of colophons (823-914 CE) found in the Hamouli manuscripts. None of the colophons are later than 914 CE. At the time of purchase, "At least five of the codices had already strayed, and are now in the Coptic and Egyptian Museums in Cairo, and a number of fragments, broken up from whole codices after the find, were more widely dispersed. That the remainder was kept together was due especially to the efforts of Professors Emile Chassinat and Henry Hyvernat", both of whom are discussed below (Needham, 1979, 12).

Certainly familiar to manuscript researchers, Coptic scholars, and book historians, the collection is instantly recognized by its Gospels binding, from approximately 850 CE (fig. 1). The central design element details the delicate strips of vellum that the binder laced through a single piece of

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Fig. 1. Image of the upper cover of the Gospels binding MS M.569, ca. 850 CE, ML&M; Courtesy of Graham Haber.

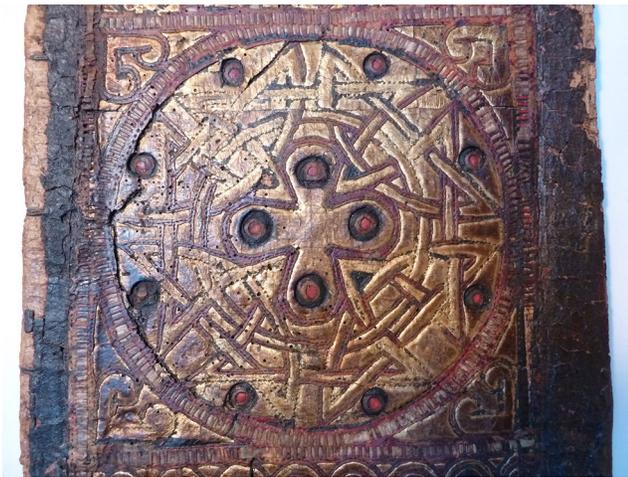


Fig. 2. Detail of central design element on upper cover of the Gospels binding MS M.569, ca. 850 CE, ML&M; Courtesy of the authors.

cut red leather. The gilded leather is described as silver leaf and varnish followed with a colorant by Theodore Petersen in his unpublished *Coptic Bookbindings in the Pierpont Morgan Library* (fig. 2).

THE BINDINGS

These Hamouli manuscripts offer a wealth of information as a unit, and as such, help to build an accounting of the state of Coptic bookbinding from the region of northern Egypt in the 9th and 10th centuries. The educational power is displayed in the repeated examples of sewing structure, board attachment method, covering details, and decorative elements (figs. 3-5). These volumes carry forward the story of how bookmaking was changing, following on the heels of other studied manuscripts from the centuries previous like the collection of Nag Hammadi manuscripts from the 3rd and 4th centuries housed at the Coptic Museum in Cairo, and individual examples of 5th and 6th century wooden board Coptic bindings, such as the Freer Gospels at the Freer Gallery of Art, the Scheide Codex, in the collections of Princeton University, and the Glazier Codex, also in the collections of The Morgan Library & Museum. Unlike these tremendous finds, the Hamouli volumes make up virtually an entire monastic library, and show repeated examples of structural and decorative elements. Even detached from their text blocks, these covers tell a tremendous amount about the ongoing development of the Codex. The gap between the 5th and 6th century codices mentioned here and the 9th and 10th century Hamouli Manuscripts leaves a very long time between recorded examples of Coptic bookbinding structure, but many of the basic innovations developed in the earliest centuries of the Codex format remain largely unchanged through the 19th century, and continue even now in hand-bound art books and small fine press editions.

Emile Chassinat was a French Egyptologist and the Director of the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology in Cairo, and he was the first scholar to see and inspect the manuscripts following their discovery. Alerted to their existence, and encouraged by Chassinat's findings, Pierpont Morgan purchased the available manuscripts in late 1911 from the Parisian art dealer Arthur Sambon, following consultation with the Kalebadian Freres dealers based in Cairo and Paris, and had them shipped to New York. The force behind the acquisition was Belle da Costa Greene.

Belle Greene became Pierpont Morgan's personal librarian in 1905, leaving a new librarianship at Princeton. She was intelligent and savvy, and despite the fact that she was only in her early 20s when hired, she very quickly became the driving force behind the growing Library. Pierpont Morgan entrusted Greene with the funds and the autonomy to collect broadly and, for all intents and purposes, to run the library, which she officially did when she was named The Morgan Library's first Director when it became a public institution, welcoming visitors to the newly expanded Annex, in 1928. The combination of their skills, finances, and powerful personalities made Morgan and Greene a formidable collecting team. Belle was an extremely intelligent art collector, and with the backing of



Fig. 3. Binding detail, Coptic Bindings Collection, ML&M; Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 4. Binding detail, Coptic Bindings Collection, ML&M; Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 5. Binding detail, Coptic Bindings Collection, ML&M; Courtesy of the authors.

the great US financier, and then by his son, J.P. Morgan, Jr., over the next 43 years she built the core of the unparalleled collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library.

In 1910, with the discovery of the Coptic library, Greene put into motion the communication that led to its acquisition. She opened correspondence with Henry Hyvernat, a Coptologist and professor at Catholic University of America, in Washington, DC. Hyvernat became the scholar who shepherded, academically and physically, the Hamouli manuscripts through their next 25 tumultuous years, eventually passing the baton to his assistant, Theodore Petersen. Dr. Hyvernat and Belle Greene created a plan for the manuscripts, and set forward a 5-point contract addressing the needs of the newly acquired volumes. Hyvernat agreed, contractually, to 1. Collate and complete the collection, as possible. 2. Restore all of the manuscripts and the bindings. 3. Rebind all of the manuscripts in old or new bindings. 4. Produce 9 (a number that was later increased to 12) sets of a 56 volume facsimile collection to be distributed to prominent libraries and museums, and 5. Compile a complete catalogue of the collection. Following negotiations with the Prefects of the Vatican Library in Rome, Morgan and Greene decided to send his new manuscripts back to Europe to be restored in the well-respected Restoration Studio of the Vatican Library, and in 1912 the bindings re-cross the Atlantic, to be received in Italy by Henry Hyvernat.

The bindings were removed from the text blocks almost immediately upon arrival at the Vatican. “Unfortunately, the first step taken in restoring the books to health was the removal of all the bindings, an operation effected by Ehrle himself, with the aid of his desk scissors” (Needham, 1979, 13). In 2016, following decades of study of bookbinding structures and technical art history, the 1912 decision to cut the bindings from the manuscripts seems shocking. Yet, Vatican Prefect and medievalist Franz Ehrle was initiating the first step in preparing the volumes for the photography for the facsimile edition, while allowing more direct access to the contents. Regardless of historical context and hindsight, the bindings were separated from their parchment text blocks after 1000 years. They were wrapped in paper, labeled to indicate the manuscripts from which they were taken, and packed together in cartons, their needs to be addressed later, as stated in Hyvernat’s contract with Pierpont Morgan.

Belle Greene was very protective of her role, and of Pierpont Morgan himself. In 1912, in her defense of their recent Coptic acquisition, Ms. Greene wrote to Morgan, saying freely:

My dear Mr. Morgan:

As you know me so well, it would be useless for me to disguise the fact that I am quite furious, and probably should wait until I calm down before I write you: but, also, as you know me so well, what is the use of that. It concerns the collection of Coptic manuscripts. The New York “World”,

which hates you personally, as you know, and will probably always do so, has published an article this morning, saying that the collection is not genuine; and I am writing to ask your permission, or rather your opinion as to the wisdom of my giving to the “New York Times” copies of the letters I have received from scholars all over the world, in which they state that this collection is of inestimable value and actually priceless. I suppose you think I am crazy. I wrote you in the beginning that I am mad, and I am mad! I don’t care what anybody says of me personally, but, if I had your permission, I would not allow the “World” to make such disgraceful mis-statements unprotected.

To which Morgan replied via telegram “What World says unworthy your time or thought. Would ignore others. Will set straight. Love Going AIX Saturday.” He signed it Flicht, his personal cable telegram sign off. Correspondence such as this letter and telegram from April of 1912 further indicate the closeness with which Pierpont Morgan and Belle Greene worked, as well as her confidence to speak with authority for the growing Morgan collection and decisions regarding acquisitions, even ones of this importance.

RESTORATION AT THE VATICAN

At the outset of the restoration, some of the covers were rife with wormholes, deteriorating leather, crumbling papyrus, and heavy losses, and were indeed in need of stabilization in the Vatican lab. The photographs taken of the bindings in the first stage of treatment evidence their varying states of preservation after spending centuries in the cistern that had safeguarded their existence. Their delicacy combined with their inaccessibility following removal from the text blocks meant that only a few people ever saw the actual bindings, either at the Vatican or following their return to the Morgan Library, and even Henry Hyvernat had produced a small-scale Photostat version to work from, as his contact with the materials was limited, as well. The treatment plan initiated between The Morgan Library and the restorers at the Vatican Library focused almost exclusively on the repairing and rebinding of the parchment manuscripts, which was carried out under the supervision of the head of the Restoration Studio, Augusto Castellani, the oversight of Prefect Ehrle, the project management of Professor Henry Hyvernat, and the watchful attention from New York, of Belle da Costa Greene.

Yet, as work got underway at the Vatican, World War I did as well, and the scheduled restoration and photography of the collection was gravely delayed. In the years that followed the arrival of the Coptic manuscripts in Rome, various new people became involved in the restoration project, further extending the schedule. In 1913, Pierpont Morgan passed away, leaving his collections and fortunes in the management of his son, J.P. Morgan, Jr, called Jack. As well, the head of the



Fig. 6. Line drawing made at the Vatican Restoration Lab for proposed replica binding; Courtesy of Graham Haber.

Vatican Restoration Studio, Augusto Castellani died, with the result that his brother began treating the volumes. Monsignor Ratti succeeded Franz Ehrle, the Vatican director at whose hands the text blocks had lost their original bindings. All of these changes, combined with the onset of the War, further tangled the already complicated thread of the project.

Theodore Petersen, Henry Hyvernat’s assistant and then successor at Catholic University of America, wrote later in his unpublished *Coptic Bookbindings in the Pierpont Morgan Library* “During the years 1919-1920 the covers had been treated. Their leather coverings had been oiled and waxed; many of their boards had gauze pasted over their papyrus faces and each binding had been packed between cotton in a separate cardboard box.” In addition, exquisite line drawings were produced in the hope that exact replica bindings would be created for the restored text blocks (fig. 6). Yet the covers, stored away in cartons, suffered greatly in the ensuing years of European turmoil, incurring more insect damage before full eradication. Only in 1929 are they finally returned to New York, remanded by Greene.

In the years following the return of the manuscripts and their covers from Rome, Theodore Petersen researched the collection and its history, detailing the find even further. Dr. Petersen’s unpublished manuscript became, and is still, the primary source of academic information about the collection, as the original bindings remained inaccessible. The remaining restored and re sewn manuscript text blocks were also returned to New York in 1929.

REHOUSING

Rehousing the Coptic Bindings at The Morgan Library & Museum is not a new project at the Morgan. The rehousing was a high priority for Deborah Evetts, former Drue Heinz book conservator at the library. She, with the advice

of book conservator Christopher Clarkson, had pursued numerous ideas to determine proper and safe housings for the bindings. In 1984, she discovered the bindings still in their crates shipped from the Vatican and immediately began a treatment and housing protocol. Her lecture and essay in the Bookbinding 2000 Conference detailing how she used Petersen's manuscript as a historical guide provide fascinating information on her efforts.

Deborah Evetts directed minor conservation interventions to a small number of the bindings, such as the consolidation of papyrus board edges, the use of thin skivers of alum-tawed skin to stabilize surface deterioration, and the bridging of precarious papyrus with Japanese paper to prevent loss. Additionally, she and Christopher Clarkson re-bound one of the manuscripts in quarter leather and wooden boards as a test to see if the entire collection should be re-bound. Eventually this idea was not pursued.

The bindings were housed in what were meant to be temporary folders made out of mat board, with each cover wrapped in glassine. The individual folders were then housed in Solander boxes. This was an effective housing method, but required several bindings to be housed on top of each other in one box. This was in part due to vault space limitations. Evetts continued to seek appropriate housing for the bindings. Housing prototypes through the years have included small scale mock up models of covers housed in deep matboard sink mats, non-adhesively sandwiched between Plexiglas with pressure tabs of mat board to keep the boards in place, and sandwiched between layers of shape-cut Plexi and placed in a frame for exhibition (fig. 7). These efforts tried to balance preservation, exhibition and minimal handling. All of these ideas and the concerns that led to their prototypes were part of the decision making process when this most recent housing campaign was undertaken.

The extreme delicacy of the bindings prevents any direct handling. The bindings, though consolidated, continue to deteriorate (fig. 8). Their age, importance, and condition led to the decision to house them non-adhesively, neither adhering anything physically to the objects nor securing them to a secondary support. Safe, inert housing material was required; something soft, non-pilling, and cohesive. Also needed was a housing construction that could allow visual access to the entire object, including its 3-dimensional details, without direct handling. The bindings need to be stored horizontally on shelves. Individual access is particularly important, allowing a single binding to be studied at a time, without adding the risks of moving multiple objects out of the vault with the goal of examining just one. High-resolution digital images were an essential step in the plan, updating the photographs taken in the first decades of the 20th century, and permitting detailed access to materials for researchers.

After a period of planning and scheduling, the results are very satisfying because the new housings provide the

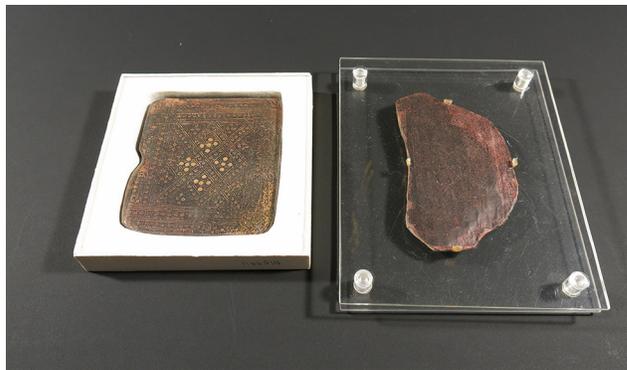


Fig. 7. Prototypes for Coptic Bindings protective enclosures; Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 8. Deterioration of bindings makes handling difficult; Courtesy of Graham Haber.

key element desired of rehousing projects—the ability to individually track collection material and safely house each Coptic binding. The T17 reinforced clamshell e-flute boxes (purchased from Talas) provide substantial support for the bindings. A cloth tab was added for easier opening of each box. The tabs were added after the boxes were constructed. Easier opening of the boxes means less movement for the bindings inside. The non-adhesive package in which each binding is housed consists of a top and bottom of 1/8" Artcare archival foam board and 4 layers of 1/4" Volara®, a closed cell



Fig. 9. Binding in its “sandwich” of archival foam board, outer layer of Volara, and inner layer of laser cut Volara; Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 10. Binding fragments rehoused; Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 11. Large binding rehoused; Courtesy of the authors.



Fig. 12. Final individual housing; Courtesy of the authors.

polyethylene foam. The top and bottom layers of Volara are adhered to the sturdy foam board. The two inner layers house the bindings and are attached to each other and the outer layers of Volara with a system of punches and posts. The inner layers have a laser cut outline of the bindings that allow for the padded support of each binding (fig. 9). The inner layers of Volara accommodate the depth of the individual binding housed within. The University of the Arts in Philadelphia produced the layers of laser cut Volara. A detailed outline of each object and large fragment was drawn; this was turned into a vector drawing by a graphic designer using Illustrator software, which was in turn sent to the laser cutting lab at the University of the Arts. These inner layers have a perfectly cut outline of the binding, and serve as bumpers around the object without actually touching it. The binding rests on the uncut smooth layer of Volara, its recto and edges visible. The custom laser cut layers accommodates the binding depth. Each layer of Volara is held together with non-adhesive cut

cylinders of foam to avoid any planar movement. This post, or sandwich, closed, can be gently inverted, and the Volara layers removed from the other side, revealing the verso of the binding, and all of its 3-dimensional details.

The large number of fragments associated with many bindings was a concern. It would have been too difficult to make so many small cutouts for the fragments and would have required more than one box per binding. Instead, fragments were housed in Mylar envelopes, barcoded with the parent binding information and housed in a single box with the other fragments (fig. 10). The housings were broken down into small, medium and large boxes to accommodate the different sizes of bindings and are stored in the Morgan vaults according to size (fig. 11). The bindings are now accessible to researchers in a safe housing (fig. 12). The images are currently in the process of being made available to the public on the Morgan Library & Museum website.

It has been a long journey from the Faiyum Oasis to the Morgan website for the Coptic Bindings Collection, but they are now fully and safely at home and await another century of discovery.

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GEORGIA SOUTHWORTH
Consulting Conservator
Jackson Heights, New York
southworthconservation@gmail.com

FRANCISCO TRUJILLO
Associate Book Conservator
The Morgan Library & Museum
New York, New York
ftrujillo@themorgan.org