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FORE-EDGE PAINTINGS

AMONG recent accessions to the Rare Book Room of the Colby library, nothing has attracted quite as much attention and aroused as much enthusiasm as the vanishing fore-edge paintings. Visitors who have seen them have noised abroad their delight over our dozen examples of this mysterious art, and the result of this word-of-mouth advertising has been a fairly constant flow of inquirers who have wished, not only to see the books, but also to hear all about the art of decorating their edges.

It is an easy thing to show the books and then to startle the visitor with the sudden display of the painting on the fanned edges; but it is no simple matter to answer the inevitable questions. Anyone who turns to that repository of all knowledge, the *Encyclopaeda Britannica*, will find nothing about fore-edge paintings, not even a mention of the words in the capacious index. *The Encyclopedia Americana* (1943 edition) is content with the curt statement (under "Bibliomania"!) that "even the edges of books are often adorned with fine paintings." There is no book devoted to giving an account of this mysterious art, and the practitioners of it are all but unknown and have been generally content to issue their products anonymously. The entire bibliography of fore-edge painting is so scanty a list of brief articles as to leave everyone except the most general and superficial inquirer dissatisfied and unanswered.

Visitors to our Rare Book Room frequently ask: "What is a fore-edge painting?" but there is one question that they ask even more frequently: "What is a fore-edge?"

It will help the uninitiated if we begin at the beginning. "If you wish to converse with me," said Voltaire, "define your terms." There are persons who have lived with books all their lives but who have not learned that books possess fore-edges. Let us then define them. A book is bound along one edge of the leaves; this is called the back-edge. Then there is the top edge and the bottom edge. The other edge

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is of course the fore-edge. The paintings, or decorations, about which we are talking are painted in water-colors on these edges of the leaves of the book. To quote Norman L. Dodge:

“Fore-edge painting . . . is an almost magical art that delights both the instructed and the naïve. . . . Though the art is an old one, new book-collectors are coming along all the time . . . and so we’ll not hesitate to define. A fore-edge painting is accomplished by spreading the front edges of the leaves accordion-fashion and clamping them so that the artist can paint on a fore-edge surface extended to two or three times its size when the book is in its normal [i.e., its closed] position. When the job is done and the clamps removed and the leaves return to their usual position, the painting all but disappears, and is then entirely concealed by gilding. Thereafter, when the leaves are fanned, the painting is again disclosed by an approach to magic.” *

One of the rare refinements of this mysterious art is the creation of a *double* painting. When the leaves of the book are fanned in one direction, one picture is disclosed; when the leaves are fanned in the opposite direction, an entirely different picture is exposed to view. Colby is fortunate in owning a fine example of double-painting. In a copy of Scott’s *Lay of the Last Minstrel* (the gift of Mrs. William R. Campbell), there are two nicely contrasted fore-edge landscapes.

Those who have never seen an example of this curious art are apt to scoff, but many a visitor to the Rare Book Room of the Colby library is ready to agree with Cyril Davenport’s statement: “In a fine specimen the work is very effective.” No wonder copies often sell for over a hundred dollars! No wonder (as Norman L. Dodge remarks) “today comparatively few of us bibliophiles own a fore-edge painting.” Colby is fortunate to own a dozen.

* Norman L. Dodge, “Treasure under Gold, or The Art of Fore-Edge Painting,” *The Month at Goodspeed’s* (XVI:119-120), Boston, January-February, 1945.