May 1949

A Thousand and One Fore-Edge Paintings By Carl J. Weber, Colby College Monograph No. 16, 187 pages, 24 plates. Colby College Press, Waterville, Maine, 1949-

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Recommended Citation
Colby Library Quarterly, series 2, no.10, May 1949, p.164-166
Colby Library Quarterly


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LIKE other curious things, the art of fore-edge painting has its fascination. What might be merely recondite if treated conventionally, becomes in the hands of an enthusiast like Mr. Weber an occasion to write charmingly not only about the art of “hidden painting” itself but about much else.

The almost universal ignorance of the subject of this book (in itself sufficient reason for its publication) prompts me to describe fore-edge painting briefly even in a review. The directions for the execution of such work in a mid-nineteenth-century manual of bookbinding are these: “Fan out edges, apply water color landscapes or other miniatures. Then let leaves take their proper position. Then place the volume in the press, lay on the size and gold.” In other words this “mysterious art,” as it has been called, is water-color painting hidden beneath the gold of the fore-edge of a book, to appear only when the pages are “fanned out.”

Mr. Weber has ascertained that fore-edge decoration began in England in the mid-seventeenth century, and has remained an English art ever since, though perhaps Anglo-American might be a more exact term, since there was much emulation of the art here. Though fore-edge painting is thus geographically limited, its quality at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth is so high that it is strange that so little has been published on the subject heretofore. In fact only a magazine article or so and brief references in connection with
On the two pages that follow we reprint two of the illustrations from *A Thousand and One Fore-Edge Paintings* by Carl J. Weber. Both the books whose fore-edges are decorated with these water-color paintings are in the Doheny Library at St. John’s Seminary, Camarillo, California. The upper view is of an English country mansion as painted on the fore-edge of a *Book of Common Prayer* printed by Didot in Paris in 1791, just before the French Revolution. The book was bound by the famous Edwards firm in Halifax, England. The lower painting shows a white-towered castle on a riverbank, as painted on the fore-edge of an anthology published in London in 1810 under the title *English Minstrelsy*. These two landscapes are more delicately done than any of the fore-edge paintings found in the Colby College Library; but among the Thousand and One which are listed in Weber’s book, the dozen or so at Colby play an interesting part. The landscapes shown on the two pages that follow disappear when the books are shut tight, and they then seem like any other gilt-edged volumes.
other aspects of bookmaking have dealt with the matter until the appearance of this book. Though not as essential a branch of bookmaking as paper or binding or as significant a one as printing or illustration, fore-edge painting well deserves the consideration finally given it here. Half of the statement by a well-known American book collector that fore-edge painting is "pretty but petty" has been amply refuted by Mr. Weber in this book, written with the careful research born of the discriminating curiosity which we have come to expect of him.

The contents of the book consist of ten chapters and an appendix. The text covers the history of fore-edge painting from its origin in the hands of Samuel Mearne, royal bookbinder to Charles II, to one of the most recent examples of the art (of particular interest to Colby readers), the view of the new Colby campus on the fore-edge of Edith Diehl's *Bookbinding: Its Background and Technique*, painted by Frederick R. Cross, one of the few living masters of the art of fore-edge decoration. The main concerns of the author are these: a discussion of the Edwards family, publishers and booksellers of Halifax and London, who are responsible for the greatest period in fore-edge painting in both quantity and quality; a consideration of their followers; and the influence of American buyers on English production of this book-decoration. Mr. Weber concludes with a survey of the art in the twentieth century and an illuminating chapter on technique.

The appendix with its catalogue of one thousand and one fore-edge paintings in American collections (which the author modestly states is not a complete census) is worth a volume in itself. It is not only interesting for its information upon the subject of fore-edge painting, but illuminating as a survey of books thought worthy of such embellishment—at least in the period before the practice degenerated into the hit-or-miss decoration of books with no thought of appropriateness.
Perhaps the most rewarding aspect of the book is that indicated in its subtitle, "Notes on the Artists, Bookbinders, Publishers, and Other Men and Women Connected with the History of a Curious Art." This "one man's search for missing information" on the subject of fore-edge painting has led the author into many interesting byways. The literary quality of this incidental information relates the book in spirit to the essay rather than to the compendium of knowledge. In a way the book is no more a descriptive handbook of fore-edge painting than Izaak Walton's Compleat Angler is a manual of fishing. The discussions of William Gilpin and the picturesque, of the complexities of the Edwards family (requiring a genealogical chart like that of the Forsytes), and of the craze for fore-edge painting on the part of gullible nineteenth-century Americans are only the more conspicuous diversions from the main subject, for nearly every page has some singular information which makes the book a delight not only for the bibliophile but for every lover of the curious.

The only aspect of the subject which might have been mentioned by the author is the relationship of the fore-edge painting of the best period to English landscape painting in water color prevalent at the same time. I think it would be safely said that the fore-edge painting associated with the Edwards and their imitators derives from the topographical water-color school of Paul Sandby, bearing a rather close resemblance in general to the work of Edward Dayes and Thomas Hearne.

A word should be said about the book itself which reflects the usual taste and skill of the Anthoensen Press. The title-page is especially elegant with its little woodcut by Bewick or his school, reflecting the same Gilpinesque sense of the picturesque which inspired both the watercolorists and the fore-edge painters of the time.