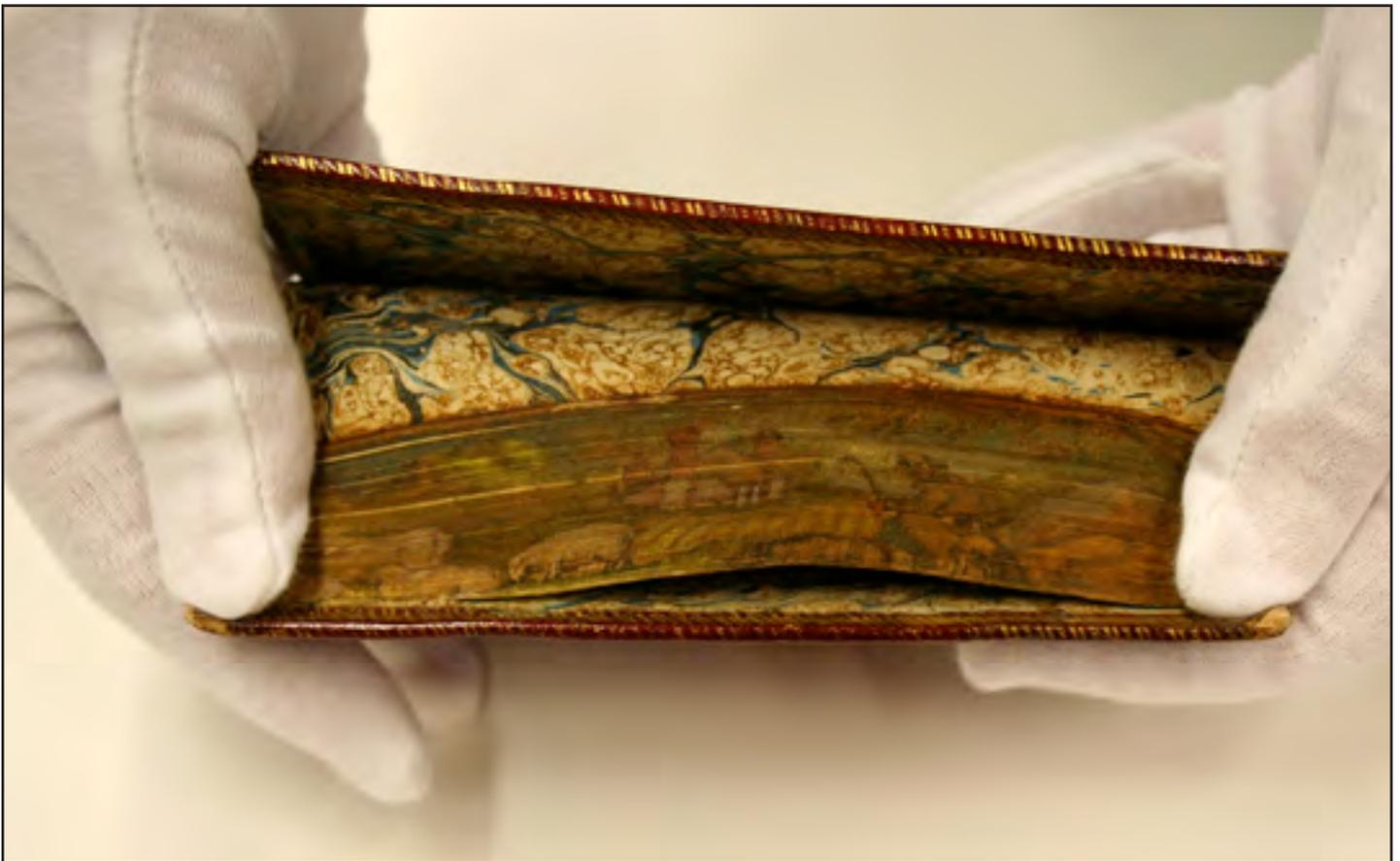


# Fore-Edge Paintings

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Photos By: Jamie Primo

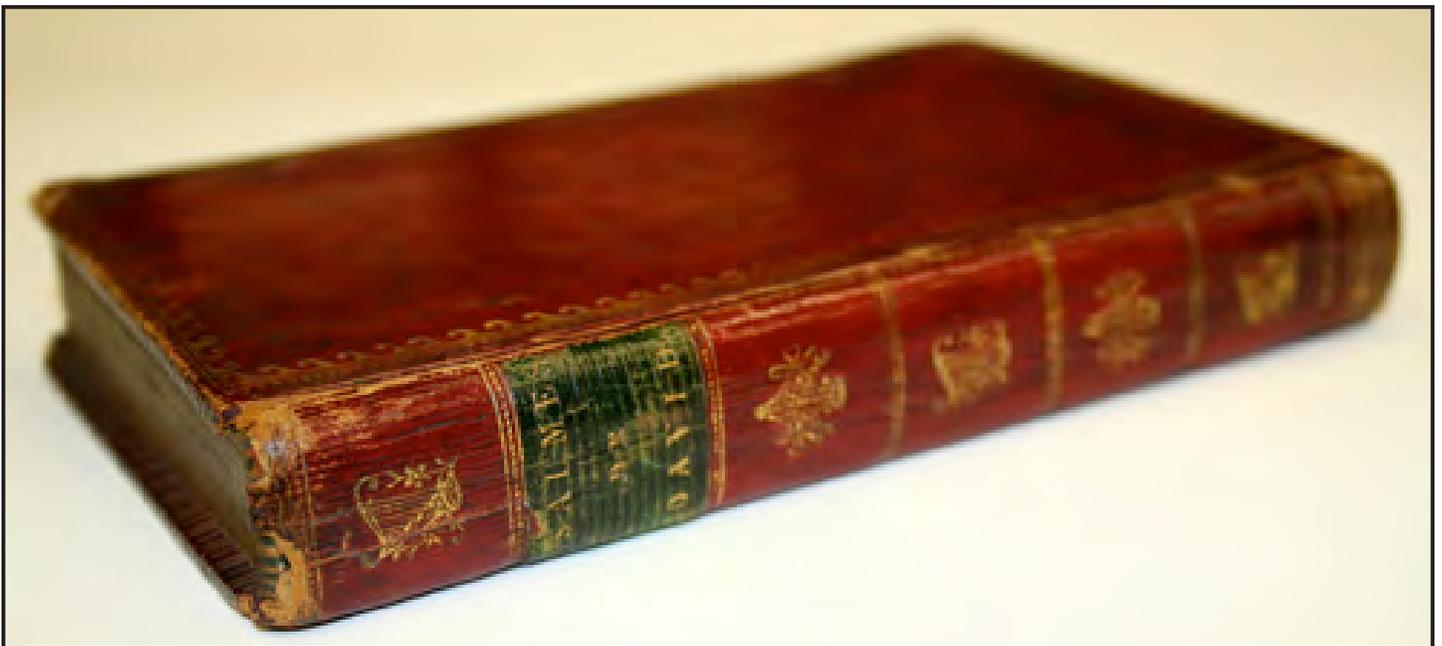
Special thanks to: Martin Frost, Bronwyn Hannon, Geri Solomon, and Susan Yohn



Sometimes there is more to a book than initially meets the eye. Sometimes there is something hiding between the lines or deep within the pages. Beginning in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries,<sup>1</sup> artists began putting images on the fore-edge of books. These hidden images are called fore-edge paintings.

The thing that makes a fore-edge painting unique and intriguing is that it completely disappears when the book is closed. When the pages of a book with a fore-edge painting are fanned back in such a way, a painting is revealed; otherwise, there is no evidence of the painting. It is for this reason these paintings are referred to as a "disappearing painting" or a "curious" art form.

According to John Carter, author of *ABC for Book Collectors*, fore-edge paintings first began to appear in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries in Italy. However, the paintings on the edges of these books were just that – paintings on the edges of the book's leaves. This is in fact, much different than what the term has come to refer to today. The fore-edge paintings that became popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were books that when "very slightly fanned out and held fast" revealed a highly detailed and elaborate painting. When the book is closed, one will only be able to see the gilded-edge of the book and will not be able to see the painting unless the pages are fanned out again.<sup>2</sup>



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<sup>1</sup> Carter, John. *ABC for Book Collectors*. Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 1995. p 104

<sup>2</sup> Carter, John. p 104 - 105

## a very special collection

Like many people, I had never heard of a fore-edge painting. However, on a visit to the Special Collections Library at Hofstra University in late 2007, that changed. Professor Geri Solomon was giving a lesson on different methods of communication when she began discussing books. She was not only able to talk about the various rare books in the collection, but she was able to show them to us, a group of students gathered in that small, beige reading room.

Professor Solomon briefly described fore-edge paintings to the class and then walked around the cramped room putting the painting that had been hidden for so many years on display. It was beautiful and intriguing; I was fascinated. From that moment on, the image on the edge of the tiny red book she showed us stuck in my mind. After discussing the painting with many people, including professors and bibliophiles, it became apparent that everyone was even more clueless about this type of book than I, at the very least I had seen one!



Almost a year after my initial encounter with the fore-edge painting I decided to go back to the Special Collections Library and acquaint myself with the book that had raised so many questions in my mind. I came to find out the tiny red book Professor Solomon showed the class is called *Les Psaumes de David*. The book, which was written entirely in French, is clearly

a religious work and is dated MDCCLIV (1754).<sup>3</sup> At first glance, the book, which is approximately the size of an adult's hand, appears to simply be an old book. The cover is red with a gold trim and gilt-edged, meaning the edges are covered in gold.

The scene depicted along the edge of the book is small and faded with age, but one can still easily see the painting. On the edges of this particular copy of *Les Psaumes de David* lies a painting of a shepherd in a field tending to his sheep. For such a small painting, the image is remarkably detailed; there are a few sheep in the field, a house (or possibly a barn), numerous trees and a shepherd. On top of the rich detail, the color, though faded, is clearly visible on the fore-edge painting. The greens and blues are quite prominent.<sup>4</sup>

Upon seeing the disappearing painting on the edge of *Les Psaumes de David*, I wanted to see more and was pleased to learn the Special Collections Library had another example of a fore-edge painting. However, the second fore-edge painting, this one a green book with gold decoration entitled, *Outlines from the Figures and Compositions upon the Greek, Roman and Etruscan Vases of the Late Sir William Hamilton*,<sup>5</sup> is distinctly different from the first.

First of all, this book is not a religious work, but, as the title suggests, an outline of Sir William Hamilton's collection of vases. The book was published in London by T. M'Lean of Sackville Street in Piccadilly in MDCCCXIV

<sup>3</sup> Table of Roman Numeral Dates. Online: November 30, 2008.

<http://www2.inetdirect.net/~charta/Table.html>

<sup>4</sup> *Les Psaumes de David*

<sup>5</sup> *Outlines from the Figures and Compositions upon the Greek, Roman and Etruscan Vases of the Late Sir William Hamilton*. Londone: T. M'Lean. 1814

(1814) and was printed by B.R. Howlett, 10, Frith Street. The book is written in English and contains illustrations of the vases. The inside cover lets readers know that the book was "Drawn and Engraved by the late Mr. Kirk."<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note the illustrator and engraver is mentioned, but there is no mention of the fore-edge painting or who may have painted them.



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<sup>6</sup> *Outlines from the Figures and Compositions upon the Greek, Roman and Etruscan Vases of the Late Sir William Hamilton*. London: T. M'Lean. 1814

## double fore-edge

Them – a word generally used to describe more than one person or object. So, why would one use the word them to describe a fore-edge painting? *Outlines from the Figures and Compositions upon the Greek, Roman and Etruscan Vases of the Late Sir William Hamilton* has not one, but two fore-edge paintings hidden beneath the gilt. A double fore-edge painting is a very rare form of fore-edge paintings.<sup>7</sup> The reason why there are such a small number of double fore-edge paintings is credited to the level of difficulty in creating them.<sup>8</sup>

It is believed that these types of fore-edge paintings date back to the eighteenth century, although an exact time period is unknown. The reason the eighteenth century is given as the date for double fore-edge paintings is because these paintings typically contain landscape and picturesque images while earlier fore-edge paintings contained floral designs.

Like the fore-edge painting on the edge of *Les Psaumes de David*, the double fore-edge painting on the edges of *Outlines*, has a connection to the subject of the book. When the leaves of the book are fanned one way, a painting of the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, appears. The painting is truly incredible and if one did not know it was on the edges of a book, she probably would not believe it. The detail, from the Acropolis itself to the horses grazing near the trees, is truly outstanding. The colors, mostly greens, yellows, blues and browns, are magnificent. And this is only one side of the double fore-edge!



When fanned in the opposite direction a painting of The Bridge of the Euripus, also located in Greece, is revealed. Like the painting on the other side, this painting is simply splendid as the level of detail is nothing short of amazing. Some of the things visible in this painting are: the bridge, which stretches across the entire fore-edge, the reflection of the bridge in the water, the boats on the water under the bridge and even a walkway leading up to a house alongside the bridge.

<sup>7</sup> If one were to hold all the pages of the book and fan them in one direction, an image would appear. If one took that same book and fanned the leaves in the opposite direction, a totally different image would appear.

<sup>8</sup> *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Brief History of Fore-edge Paintings*. Online: November 30, 2008.

<http://library.marist.edu/archives/gill/doublefep.html>



## understanding the parts of a book

In order for one to truly understand fore-edge paintings, one must fully understand the different parts of the physical book.

In the image below, the fore-edge is on the right side. Also clear in this image is the section labeled the “text block.” The text block is the part of the book that is fanned to reveal the fore-edge painting. In the case of a double fore-edge painting, the text block is fanned in both directions to expose the two individual images.



## how a fore-edge painting is created

One of the first questions that immediately comes to mind when thinking about a fore-edge painting is simply "How?" It is almost inconceivable that a miniature painting can literally be hidden on the edges of a book.

Over time there have been very few written instructions on the procedure for creating a fore-edge painting. While the majority of the descriptions are similar, they sometimes offer slightly different methods, as exhibited by the following examples. James B. Nicholson, author of *A Manual of the Art of Bookbinding*, described his take on the process to his American audience in 1856. He wrote, "Fan out edges. Apply watercolor landscapes or other miniatures. Then let leaves take their proper position. Then place the volume on the press, lay on the size and gold."<sup>9</sup>

Joseph W. Zaehnsdorf, an English author who wrote *The Art of Bookbinding*, said,

"The edge is to be fanned out and tied between boards, and whilst in that positions some landscape or other scene, either taken from the book itself or appropriate to the subject of it, [is] painted on the fore-edge, and when dry it is gilt on the flat in the usual matter. This work of course requires an artist well skilled in water-color drawing."<sup>10</sup>

Alphonse Blanchon, a French author who wrote *The Art and Practice of Bookbinding*, said,

"The fore-edge is scraped and burnished; then the book is placed between two boards in such a way that the fore-edges of the leaves assume an oblique position, and on them some sort of subject is painted in water-colors. When the paint is dry, the sizing and gilding are done in the ordinary way."<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Edith Diehl, author of *Bookbinding: Its Background and Technique*, gives the most detailed description of the process. Diehl says,

"The technique used for book-edge paintings is not difficult, though the painting of the designs requires the talent of an artist. The artisan and the artist, though they may be one and the same individual, have distinctly different functions to perform. To produce a painting under gold, the fore-edge of the book is first 'cut in boards' with a plough, so that the edge will offer a perfectly smooth surface to work on. The leaves of the book are



<sup>9</sup>Weber, Carl. *Fore-Edge Painting: A Historical Survey of Curious Art in Book Decoration*.

New York: Harvey House, INC., 1966 p 169

<sup>10</sup> *ibid* p 171

<sup>11</sup> Weber, Carl. p 172

then 'fanned out,' and they are held in this position clamped tightly between wooden boards. The design is painted on the edge with a brush held at right angles to it so that the paint will remain on the surface, and the paint is used not too much thinned in order to prevent the colors from running. When the painting is finished and is thoroughly dry, the clamps are removed, the book is put in a gilding press between gilding press, and after burnishing the painted edge, it is gilded like any ordinary book-edge, though the press must be screwed up as tightly as possible to prevent the glaire, or size, from penetrating the painting."<sup>12</sup> A book with a gilded edge is not all that uncommon and one has probably come across a few in his or her life. While a gilded edge may simply add to the aesthetic value of an ordinary book, it is extremely important in persevering a fore-edge painting.<sup>13</sup>

Gilt is the gold on the edge of a book and in the case of fore-edge paintings, the gilt is the very thing that conceals the painting. James B. Nicholson describes the elaborate process of concealing the image. He says, in order to begin the gilding process, one must first create a mixture of red chalk and black lead, which is to be ground up and mixed with water. Once the mixture becomes a liquid, one must add muriatic acid. After one perfects the mixture and gets the consistency just right, they are ready to begin gilding. First, one must smooth out the fore-edge. Next, using a "broad, flat camel-hair pencil" or piece of sponge, one can evenly coat the surface of the edges. Finally, the gold leaf is cut to size and placed on the surface. When it is completely dry, one must polish the edges once again.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Diehl, Edith. *Bookbinding: Its Background and Technique*. Courier Dover Publications, 1980. p 170 - 171

<sup>13</sup> Weber, Carl. p 172

<sup>14</sup> Weber, Carl. p 169

## the edwards of halifax

At this point, one of the questions that remain is, "Who is responsible for these paintings?" Unfortunately the answer is unclear. No one truly knows who began the process of creating fore-edge paintings so many centuries ago. However, while they did not create the art of fore-edge painting, one family played a huge part in reviving the lost art, the family is known as the Edwards of Halifax.

The Edwards of Halifax was a family of bookbinders and book collectors who perfected the art of fore-edge painting. William Edwards and his sons James, John, Thomas and Richard had a great impact on the world of books and fore-edge paintings.<sup>15</sup>

The Edwards of Halifax not only specialized in fore-edge paintings, but according to John Carter, William Edwards "revived" and "popularized the technique, which was carried on by his sons," Thomas in particular. Carter goes on to say the Edwards of Halifax also specialized in the "Etruscan style of decorating calf," noting William either "evolved" or "successfully adopted" the process. Finally, James Edwards had a patent for "rendering vellum transparent" and "painting or drawing designs on the under-side."<sup>16</sup>

The eldest Edwards, William (1723 – 1808),<sup>17</sup> should be given complete credit for giving his family legendary status in the world of books. William began the family business in 1784<sup>18</sup> when he set up shop in Pall Mall, which is located in London, England. Carl Weber, author of *Fore-Edge Painting: A Historical Survey of a Curious Art in Book Decoration*, describes William Edwards: "'Was he a binder? Asked A. Edward Newton. The answer is yes, he was. 'Was he a craftsman himself?' Yes, he was. 'Did he keep a shop?' Yes, he did and kept it well over fifty years. 'Did he give his name to a certain type of binding' Yes he did; in fact he gave to three types."<sup>19</sup> It is evident from this bit of information that William Edwards was able to make a great impact in his field. The description of William Edwards also demonstrates the many different aspects of not only someone who had worked on fore-edge paintings, but the book industry in general.

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<sup>15</sup>Weber, Carl J. *Fore-Edge Painting: A Historical Survey of Curious Art in Book Decoration*. New York: Harvey House, INC., 1966 p. 27

<sup>16</sup> Carter, John. *ABC For Book Collectors*. Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 1995. P. 104

<sup>17</sup> Weber, Carl J. p. 29

<sup>18</sup>*Hidden in Plain Sight: A Brief History on Fore-Edge Paintings*. Online: November 30, 2008. <http://library.marist.edu/archives/gill/index.html>

<sup>19</sup> Weber, Carl J. p. 30

## the artists

While the Edwards of Halifax were able to build somewhat of a book empire in part due to their knowledge of fore-edge paintings, they were not typically the ones painting on the books they were commissioned to produce. The artists who worked for the Edwards of Halifax remained nameless and typically received no recognition for their work because their work went unsigned. Because of this, there is very little known about the people who actually painted the tiny images on the edges of the books.

However, a few artists who painted in the late 1800's and early 1900's did begin to sign their work. One woman, Claire Wain, both signed and dated her work.<sup>20</sup> Another woman by the name of Miss C.B. Currie not only signed her paintings but also numbered them. She worked alongside Riviere Bindery and Henry Sotheran who kept sale records. Because of this, a lot of the work she did can be given an accurate date. Her earliest work is dated 1914.<sup>21</sup> As Jeff Weber, author of both *Fore-Edge Paintings at Syracuse University* and *The Fore-Edge Paintings of John T. Beer* notes, Currie completed somewhere around 200 fore-edge paintings and still, there is very little known about her.<sup>22</sup>

One artist who signed and applied his bookplate to his paintings was John T. Beer. It is believed Beer painted from 1884 to 1900.<sup>23</sup> Beer took an interest in fore-edge painting when examining his own collection of books.<sup>24</sup> In fact, Beer literally took books out of his own book collection and used only those books for his fore-edge work.<sup>25</sup> He often worked on the larger books in his collection and preferred to work without the already applied gilt-edge.<sup>26</sup> Beer would scrape the gilt-edge off of the books that had them because he had no desire to hide his paintings from whoever wanted to see them.<sup>27</sup>

Because his work was done for leisure only and he was not commissioned to paint anything in particular, Beer often took inspiration from the contents of the book.<sup>28</sup> In some cases, Beer was even inspired by bible passages.<sup>29</sup> Beer has been described as an amateur fore-edge artist because he painted for himself and did not sell any of his work.<sup>30</sup> All together, Beer completed 214 fore-edge paintings on books that spanned over five centuries: four incunables, 36 sixteenth century, 48 seventeenth century, 33 eighteenth century, 86 nineteenth century and seven undated pieces.<sup>31</sup>

Much of what is known today about fore-edge paintings has come from numerous book collections. For example, John T. Beer's collection was sold by the auction house Sotheby's and was therefore completely catalogued and documented.

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<sup>20</sup>Weber, Jeff. *Fore-Edge Paintings at Syracuse University*. Library Associates Courier.

Volume XXVII, Number 2 (Fall 1992). p. 94

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.* pgs 94 - 95

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.* p. 95

<sup>23</sup> Weber, Jeff. *The Fore-Edge Paintings of John T. Beer*. Los Angeles: Jeff Weber Rare Books, 2005. p. 26

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.* p. 21

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.* p. 20

<sup>26</sup> Weber, Jeff. *The Fore-Edge Paintings of John T. Beer*. p. 19

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p. 20

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p. 47

<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p. 16

<sup>30</sup> Weber, Jeff. *Fore-Edge Paintings at Syracuse University*. Library Associates Courier.

Volume XXVII, Number 2 (Fall 1992). p. 94

<sup>31</sup> Weber, Jeff. *The Fore-Edge Paintings of John T. Beer*. p. 47

## collections and collectors

Many people involved with fore-edge paintings were also involved in book collecting. It is for this reason that so much can be learned from the catalogues of book dealers such as Pirages and auction houses such as Sotheby's. The book catalogues often show an image of the book, or in this case, the fore-edge painting. They also often give a detailed description of the book.

Although John T. Beer had quite a large collection of fore-edge paintings, his collection cannot compare with that of Estelle Doheny. According to Jeff Weber, Doheny's collection "was widely regarded as the most important and largest fore-edge collection ever assembled."<sup>32</sup> Doheny (1875 – 1958) began her book collection by collecting fore-edge paintings. Her collection became extremely important because it became a main source for Carl Weber whose work is perhaps the most important work ever done on fore-edge paintings.<sup>33</sup>

Overtime, Doheny's collection grew to be so large that in 1940 the Edward Laurence Doheny Memorial Library was established. The library was given Estelle Doheny's collection and as she continued to collect books throughout her life, she would add them to the library's collection. Hofstra University's Special Collection library has a copy of Doheny's catalogue.

Another famous collection of fore-edge paintings belonged to the Edwards of Halifax. A prime example of not only how much money, but also power went along with book collecting and the Edwards of Halifax name is when James Edwards outbid King George the Third for a book entitled the *Bedford Missal*.<sup>34</sup> According to Carl Weber, King George offered to pay as much as two hundred guineas for the book. The King believed the amount to be extremely high for a book, but felt the *Bedford Missal* was worth the price.

Weber said, on May 24, 1786 the auction was held for the *Bedford Missal*. The royal librarian offered the dealer the two hundred guineas, the limit set by King George. One would think that once the King had made his final offer, the auction would have been over, but this was not the case. Instead, the bidding continued and the book was eventually sold to another bidder for two hundred and three guineas. The other bidder was none other than James Edwards.<sup>35</sup>

Allegedly, James Edwards held onto the *Bedford Missal* for approximately thirty years. At that point, or soon after, the *Bedford Missal* was sold again. This time, the book sold for "well over a thousand pounds." Today, the book is in the British Museum.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, books during this time meant a lot more to people than they do to the general public now. However, James Edwards and King George the Third did not simply get into a bidding war over a book because they wanted to read it. According to Mary Sheriff, author of *Decorating Knowledge: The Ornamental Book, The Philosophic Image and the Naked Truth*, "collecting books was fashionable among the elite of eighteenth-century France." From this quote, it is evident that having large book collections were a kind of status symbol in Europe in the 1700's. The books themselves were like art pieces, especially those decorated with a fore-edge painting or a nice binding.<sup>37</sup>

One woman with quite an impressive collection of books was Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, marquise de Pompadour (1721 – 1764). Apparently, she was the "powerful mistress of Louis XV." Sheriff notes that while Jeanne Antoinette Poisson collected many books and had an extensive library, it is unknown if she actually read any

<sup>32</sup> Weber, Jeff. *Fore-Edge Paintings at Syracuse University*.

<sup>33</sup> Dickinson, Donald C. *Dictionary of American Book Collectors*. New York: Greenwood Press., 1986. p 94-95

<sup>34</sup> Weber, Carl. p 5

<sup>35</sup> Weber, Carl. p 4

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

<sup>37</sup> Sheriff, Mary. *Pompadour's Books. Decorating Knowledge: The Ornamental Book, The Philosophic Image and the Naked Truth*.



of the books she had in her possession. Sheriff describes the elite woman's collection: "But it is clear she had taste for fine bookbinding's. Many books in Pompadour's library were sumptuously bound, stamped with her coat of arms, and decorated with ornamental motifs."<sup>38</sup>

From Sheriff's description, it is clear that book collectors were not necessarily avid book readers, they just collected books for status and image. The book world in the 1700's was quite different from the one the world sees now. Books were not mass-produced and simply tossed off to the side when the reader was finished. A lot of time, energy, and money went into collecting and book decorating that in today's culture is virtually unheard of. The simple fact that Pompadour had her books stamped with her coat of arms shows how meaningful and important books were to her and her family. The physical book was truly like a piece of art.

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<sup>38</sup> Sheriff, Mary.

## **martin frost**

Because so few people are aware of fore-edge paintings, it came as quite a shock to learn that they are still being produced today. Martin Frost is one of the very few artists who continue to paint on the fore-edges of books. I had the opportunity to discuss fore-edge paintings with Frost and get his input on the subject. Frost believes he was destined to work in the art industry - his mother sold art materials and his father was a professional portrait painter. In college, Frost trained in theatre design. He then worked for a local opera house, the BBC, and in graphics. He eventually met and became friends with Don Noble, a man who had 20 years experience in creating fore-edge paintings.

Noble taught Frost about fore-edge paintings and Frost went on to create a "small number" of paintings. However, around 1980, Frost "won a commission for a quantity of book paintings from an antiquarian book dealer." It was then that Frost decided to paint fore-edges full time and has since created over 3,000 fore-edge paintings and "portrait miniatures for Cosway-style bindings."

For the last 30 years or so, Frost has been commissioned to work on many "traditional" types of fore-edge paintings, mostly landscapes and various scenes. Frost goes on to note that these types of fore-edge paintings are also easiest to sell. Over the course of his career as a fore-edge painter, he has tried to vary the styles he creates by working on modern books, painting portraits and doing figure-work.

While a single fore-edge painting, which Frost says can take just over one day to complete, is by far the most common style, there are a few other styles. These include: the double fore-edge, a split double and an all-edge. Frost says out of the many paintings he has done, some of the large Bibles stand out amongst the rest; it is with these large books that he is able to work on all three edges (all-edge) of the book. Frost particularly enjoys painting all-edges and split doubles and notes "two-ways doubles are particularly satisfying when they work well."

Frost's fore-edges may be a lot more complicated than those single fore-edges of the past, but his work is different in another way as well. In the past, many fore-edge paintings were often commissioned and given as gifts. While some people do still in fact do this, Frost says the majority of his work consists of painting "traditional styles on antiquarian books." He goes on to say that recently he has begun gilding and rebinding more modern books and painting more modern images. These he says, are indeed popular gift items. Frost, like the Edwards of Halifax before him, has also recently begun to "take on designer bindings, which with a related edge painting can prove a very impressive gift for a special occasion."

Like John T. Beer and the Edwards, Frost also has an extensive book collection. The collection reflects his interest in book illustration, design and binding.

On a final note, Frost says,

"The market for fore-edge paintings has always been pretty conservative with a tendency for the artist to be anonymous. However, my taste in later years has been to widen the range of subjects and styles and also to add more information about the painting and artist than just the monogram that all my 3,000 odd works carry."

Frost hopes to one day publish a catalogue of his work.

## the mystery of a disappearing art form

There is little known about fore-edge paintings, however, they are part of a much larger topic: books. So many things go into creating a book, it is far more involved than an author just telling a story. As this paper points out, there have been many bookbinders, publishers, illustrators or painters and book collectors who have helped shaped the history of both books and fore-edge paintings. So why have these precious pieces of art virtually vanished from society? Why do people not know about fore-edge paintings anymore?

