
Since it opened its doors to the public in 1983, the Bibliotheca Wittockiana, the book-binding museum in Brussels, has hosted many important exhibitions, several of which concerned collections brought together by the Brussels antiquarian book dealer Eric Speeckaert.

Three of these exhibitions were devoted to Belgian bookbindings through the ages: *Quatre siècles de reliure en Belgique, 1500-1900* exhibitions in 1988 (I), in 1993 (II) and in 1998 (III). Luckily, a private collector and the Brussels Royal Library found a means to keep the 1988 and 1993 collections in Belgium. Another Speeckaert collection, this time devoted to Plantin imprints, was exhibited in 1990: *1589-1589, Labore et constantia; a collection of 510 editions issued by Christopher Plantin from 1555 till 1589.* Several books in this exhibition were nicely to even luxuriously bound, but the majority of them had utilitarian bindings. This collection was also sold to a Belgian private collector, but the dealer found it difficult to part with it. So he set himself the task of expanding an already begun collection of imprints of the Moretuses, successors to the firm of Plantin, and combined both loves by bringing together copies in interesting or fine bindings only. His work resulted in 129 pieces that were exhibited in the Wittockiana in 2006/7 and in an accompanying catalogue of perhaps not the same scholarly value as the Plantin catalogue of 1990, but still sound, well made, interesting and useful.

The catalogue contains an untitled and short introductory note by Michel Wittock, the founder of the Bibliotheca. The note is followed by a foreword by Eric Speeckaert, in which he explains why and how he brought the collection together. Two introductions, on the books and on the bindings, follow. Dirk Imhof, connoisseur *par excellence* of this subject, deals with the history of the Plantin-Moretus firm until the building and its contents were sold to the town of Antwerp in 1876. Claude Sorgeloos, an excellent scholar of Belgian bindings, discusses the bindings, at the same time paying attention to all the aspects of this ‘peculiar’ collection. Both essays are followed by a list of the literature referred to. The main body of the book consists of the catalogue of books and bindings. Each item fills one spread, with a colour reproduction of the binding on the left-hand page and the relevant text on the right, often supplemented with a colour illustration of the engraved title page of the book. The text consists of a short description of the binding, a description of the contents, a statement of the provenance and a discussion of both binding and imprint, followed by the relevant literature. The book ends with a general index.

It is tempting to try to draw specific conclusions about this unique collection – in which both the imprint and the binding were taken into account – and to try and determine what the bindings can tell us about the books, as well as what extra information may be gained from them. One must differentiate between the contemporary
bindings and the later ones, which comprise about 30 of the 129 items. As to the remaining 100, it is not possible to get any further than Claude Sorgeloos did in his essay. The bindings prove that the books were dispersed over a large part of Europe, especially until c.1735. There are bindings from the Southern and Northern Low Countries, France, Italy, Germany, some from Spain – far less than I would have expected – and one from England, from Poland(?) , Portugal(?) and Mexico(?). It is interesting to learn that the bindings confirm what was already known, but there is no new information. A large part of the earlier bindings covers scientific texts and a large part of the later ones religious texts. This only underlines that, throughout the centuries, the Moretus firm concentrated increasingly on (large) religious books, like Breviaria and Missals.

Since Speckaert either did not collect or did not include utilitarian bindings, we cannot get an impression of the relationship between the type of literature and the type of binding. We do not know what type of book would most often get really luxurious bindings and what type would not. For example, it is nice but not surprising to find an originally beautiful binding (no. 1 in the catalogue) with repeated laurel wreaths around monograms, which remind us of those for Pietro Duodo, on an Officium B. Mariae Virginis, or to find bindings with a sené and the arms of the Gras-sin college at Paris, or a prize binding (no. 2), on a Suetonius; or two bindings with the arms of the famous collector Jacques-Auguste de Thou on a text by Lipsius (the number of texts by, or edited by Lipsius is surprising) and on Aristophanes’ Comoediae (nos. 7, 12). It is even nicer to find a parchment binding with the arms of Jacob van der Does on the Cruydt-Boeck by Dodoens (no. 71), not because of the text, but because of the scarcity of Dutch seventeenth-century bindings with the arms of private persons. In the seventeenth century the Moretus firm published several texts that were thought to be fit to serve as school prizes. Tacitus’ Opera in the 1648 edition is covered by a Zierikzee prize binding from the late seventeenth century, Albertus Rubens’s De re vestiaria veterum is covered by an Utrecht 1682 prize binding in mottled calf and therefore interesting (no. 86), Tacitus’ Opera in the 1668 edition is covered by a Leiden prize binding from the late seventeenth century (no. 87) and the same text in the same edition by a late eighteenth-century Dordrecht prize binding with tools that are similar, but not the same, as those of Hendrik de Haas. Several other texts are covered by prize bindings from the Southern Low Countries and some even by French ones.

The second part of exhibition and book, especially, show many bindings that are large to very large, due to their contents. Not all of them, by far, are elegant or very well made, but they contribute to our knowledge of bookbinding of that time. I was especially pleased to see the huge binding (no. 95) on the Psalterium Romanum (1713) – in blind-tooled calf, with heavy bosses and furniture – because it is a very late example of its kind and may add to our knowledge of what kind of texts were normally covered by bindings with a secondary spine covering in chamois leather (no restoration!). I was