

From Edinburgh to Paris: the Book Art of Phoebe Anna Traquair

by Elizabeth Cumming

Dr Elizabeth Cumming is a historian and curator of Scottish art and design and an Honorary Fellow in History of Art at the University. A graduate of the University (MA 1969, Diploma in the History of Art 1971, PhD 1987), she was a fine art curator in Dundee then Edinburgh and later a lecturer in design history at Edinburgh College of Art. This article follows an illustrated talk she gave in March to the Friends of Edinburgh University Library, following the Library's recent purchase, with the generous support of the Friends and the University of Edinburgh London Club, of Phoebe Anna Traquair's fine 1898 binding on an 1862 edition of The Psalms of David (see Journal 47: 2, 98). The binding has joined her beautiful 1897 illuminated manuscript of scenes from the Creation (EUL MS Gen. 852) which is also discussed below.

Until recently Phoebe Anna Traquair HRSA (1852-1936) has perhaps become best known for her mural decoration, with such Edinburgh schemes as the Song School at St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral or the Mansfield Traquair Centre having been restored and now regularly open to the public. She had a strong interest in literature, and in these vast programmes of expressive decoration and her equally astonishing embroidered panels Traquair took a text as her starting point. So it is no surprise that she was also committed to book art and enjoyed the many pleasures of working on manuscript illumination or book-tooling.

Traquair's book art reflected her literary interests. As a child in Dublin she had admired the Book of Kells in Trinity College Library for its colour and pattern and the scribes' response to the text. So it is not surprising to find her choosing early on to illuminate the Psalms which, with their variety of moods and emotions, offered a challenging series of texts for interpretation. Working on 51 single pages (now with the Scottish National Gallery) from 1884 into the early 1890s, she introduced references to medieval work alongside her own imagery. We know she attended lectures given by Gerard Baldwin Brown (1849-1932), Watson Gordon Professor of Fine Art, although exactly which is unclear. But he, and also John Miller Gray (1850-94), the first curator of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, were to provide her with a range of visual and literary sources.

Gray's influence focused on modern poets, with Garth Wilkinson especially important. Wilkinson was a celebrated translator of Swedenborg and had worked on a letterpress edition of William Blake's *Songs of Innocence and Experience*. Traquair's first illumination of a modern poet was a few pages of Wilkinson's *A Little Message for my Wife* (1884), and in 1887 she would also produce her version of his *Improvisations from the Spirit*. Closest to Gray and Wilkinson is her nine-page illumination *The Dream* (1886-7, National Art Library, London) where her own text is illustrated with images infused



Phoebe Anna Traquair, *Birds also filled the air with song* from *Reproductions by me, of medallions painted by me, in a border on the walls of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh*, ink, watercolour, Chinese white, gold leaf on vellum 1897.

with Blakean classicism. On its completion she wrote to John Ruskin to ask his advice on which medieval manuscripts to study: this initiated a short correspondence in which the writer lent her at least one manuscript, a little thirteenth-century French Book of Hours, from his Brantwood library for copying. Even at this stage her skill was remarkable.

Apart from Gray, two other local friends were Walter Biggar Blaikie (1847-1928), proprietor of T&A Constable, printers to the University, and Dr Alexander Whyte, minister of St George's Free Church in Shandwick Place and a future Principal of New College. In 1887 Traquair had designed a book cover for *Women's Voices*, published by Walter Scott in London. Having thus proved her worth, she was given commercial commissions by Blaikie from

1889, with the earliest examples being illustrations for *The Children's Guide*, a Free Church Sunday school magazine for children. Whyte had most probably introduced her to Blaikie, as Whyte and his wife Jane Barbour invited her to join them on their visit to Italy that year ahead of the commission. The visit to Florence with the party, which also included Jane's brother Robert Barbour and his wife Charlotte and the theologian John Sutherland, was revelatory for Traquair and henceforth would greatly influence all her art. The visit also directly inspired their popular joint book *Dante Illustrations and Notes* (1890), printed by Blaikie, for which she supplied drawings in which her visual sources were both Botticelli and Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Whyte would maintain his support of Traquair as a commercial book designer with several later books of his having covers stamped with a Traquair design in gold.

At this early stage, however, we find Traquair enthusiastically absorbing a range of ideas and sources. Keen to explore and understand as many arts as possible we know that in early 1892 she was 'up at the university' looking at 'examples of Designings, Greek, Keltic, Gothic, Eastern, Egyptian and so on'.¹ She was also so impressed by seeing Greek sculpture in the British Museum that even half-jokingly considered turning out household furniture to make room for a life-size cast of a Nereid with its superbly sculpted windblown drapery. She read poetry – Tennyson and the Brownings, the Rossettis especially. Her earliest major illumination of such modern work is *In Memoriam* (Lisa Unger Baskin Collection, Rubenstein Library, Duke University), started in 1889 and completed in 1892, a year when she seriously began to consider book-cover tooling. Not surprisingly, perhaps, her *In Memoriam* pigskin binding is infused with a mix of Blake and Renaissance images alongside Gothic lettering. In 1890 she had taken a studio space at the Dean Studio in Belford Road (next to Drumsheugh Baths and long since a gap site) where she encountered the silversmith John Maitland Talbot (1861-1909), then much involved in teaching metalwork classes for the Edinburgh Social Union. She commissioned him to make two Mannerist silver clasps for the manuscript, and was obviously so delighted with the result that she prepared three photographic copies of selected pages, each to be similarly bound in 1893. One of these was exhibited at the 1893 Columbian Exhibition in Chicago – her first international contribution.

In 1890, in the midst of her work on *In Memoriam*, she illuminated Rossetti's *Willowwood*, the sonnet at the heart of *The House of Life*. In these four beautiful pages, now on display in the new galleries at the National Museum of Scotland, her style is personal yet reflects the art of the poet. Between 1892 and 1897 she illuminated Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, swiftly followed from 1898 to 1902 by the entire text of *The House of Life*: both these major examples of Arts and Crafts manuscript work were made for her brother William Moss and are in the National Library of Scotland. Now digitised, the *Sonnets* may be viewed online at <http://digital.nls.uk/traquair/>. In the *Sonnets* it is interesting to see how Traquair increasingly found her personal style, although still intrigued and inspired by European, notably Italian and French, manuscripts. Her appreciation of

these, and her sheer enjoyment in working on her pages were quoted in an interview published in *The Studio*:

[...] purple and gold are delightful things to play with. Add to this a love of books, and a great desire to project feelings or emotions, and a consciousness that direct transcript from nature did not relieve me of the burden of feeling which for the moment was master... the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries have always appealed to me most in illuminated work, as truest and more vital in feeling, more restrained in execution, the essential unerringly seized, the non-essential rejected, line and colour used with greater delight in the inherent beauty of each (line as line, colour as colour), and a deeper insight into the capacity of line and colour to convey emotion, quite apart from the subject represented.²

Together with *La Vita Nuova* of Dante illuminated in 1898-1902 for Sir Thomas Gibson Carmichael (private collection), these manuscripts are major books of the period, with each consisting of more than 40 painted pages. One manuscript of particular note is the little 'Creation' manuscript³ of thirteen pages made in 1897 for Hugh Barbour, another brother of Jane Whyte, and his wife Margaret as a gift to the recently widowed Charlotte Barbour. *Reproductions by me, of medallions painted by me, in a border on the walls of the Song School, St Mary's Cathedral, Edinburgh*, as its formal title states, translates details of earlier mural work into illumination. It is an example of the small-scale artwork to which the artist would later refer in interview as the 'little perfect thing'.⁴ Each image depicting the creation of the spiritual and physical worlds in her mural border was reassessed and sometimes reinterpreted through brilliantly coloured and minutely detailed painting, at times using very fine brushes to apply tiny amounts of paint. Each page is given a quotation from the Book of Genesis and is framed by appropriate animated compositions of birds, animals, human figures or angels set within gold leaf or, in the case of the creation of flowers, a delicate Italianate patterning of burnished gold trefoil leaves.

In another 1892 letter to her young nephew (and future bibliophile) Willie Moss, Traquair described her materials and technique.⁵ She avoided colours which had a body as they cracked and chipped off in time, but rather only used pure transparent colour. If she wanted green then she would use transparent blue and hatch it with a transparent yellow. For purple she used a pure blue hatched with carmine or madder, for orange, a yellow then red, or used each side by side in small particles. Chinese white could be used for touching up. This technique had been perfected by 1897.

Traquair chose to have the Barbour manuscript beautifully bound in green calf by the Doves Press in London, with her choice allowing a fine delicacy of treatment which contrasts with her own sturdier binding style. By this date Traquair was more actively engaged with bookcover tooling as a craft to be pursued actively alongside illumination. Annie Macdonald (1849-1924), also a friend of John Miller Gray, joined Traquair at the Dean Studio where in the late 1890s they formed the nucleus of a group of four or five women all working in leather book-cover tooling. According to Macdonald, she and

Traquair had learnt their craft in T & A Constable's workshop. The women worked in finishing, i.e. the books were first bound for them by Constable's men in their choice of leather, usually morocco but occasionally pigskin, and made ready for tooling. Macdonald described their tooling method in 1899 in *The Magazine of Art*:

'The embossed leather in which most of the work is done is an idea of my own. It is not cut, or raised by padding, but is quite solid leather, and it is worked on the book after it is covered, with one small tool. It allows of great freedom of design, no two people work it alike [...]'⁶

In 1897 Macdonald had sent some of her bindings to the Woman's Work Section of the Victoria Era Exhibition at Earl's Court where they were seen by the London bookseller and publisher Frank Karslake. He proposed holding an exhibition of bookbinding by women from across the country in his own premises at 61 Charing Cross Road that winter, which led in turn to the formation of the Guild of Women-Binders. The Guild was a federation of six clubs or societies in England and Edinburgh plus a small number of individuals. Phoebe Traquair, Macdonald and the others, including the now forgotten embroiderer and muralist Jessie MacGibbon (1867-1918), regularly participated in the London exhibitions of the Guild until 1902, under the aegis first of the Edinburgh Arts and Crafts Club, then the Edinburgh Social Union – both groups having their base in the Dean Studio. The Edinburgh women became especially known for their uncoloured work – in stark contrast to the commercial 'conglomerations of gold-tooling and meaningless inlays' which the Guild wished to abolish. Their work was catalogued by the Guild as a 'revival of the monastic bindings of the Middle Ages; embossed by hand on undressed morocco (specially suited for early printed books and Church Services'. MacGibbon especially was known for her bindings on Bibles and Books of Common Prayer.

At the second exhibition, in 1898, Traquair showed four bindings including a 1897 one on F G Stephens' monograph *Rossetti* (now also on display at the National Museum of Scotland) which shows a Pre-Raphaelite angel catalogued as 'resting upon the folds of a serpent, with lilies and roses above, and the sentence "La Passion qui consacre"; on the reverse, a plaque of a lily, with four circles enclosing grotesques'. None of her bindings was for sale and all returned to her Edinburgh home. Of more relevant interest, perhaps, is the Edinburgh contribution to a sale held in December 1900 by Sotheby, Wilkinson & Hodge in London. This displayed and offered for sale those bindings by the Guild of Women-Binders and the Hampstead Bindery for which the silver medal had been awarded at the Paris Exhibition 1900. It included bindings by Macdonald, MacGibbon, Traquair and others. Together with her bindings on Sir Thomas Browne's *Religio Medici*, Michael Field's *The World at Auction* and *The Marriage of Cupid and Psyche* (both Vale Press editions with woodcuts by Charles Ricketts), Traquair showed *The Psalms of David*, worked on a 1862 edition from Sampson Low, Son and Co. of London, with illustrations by John Franklin engraved by W J Linton. All her bindings sold and vanished into private collections, with the *Psalms* only resurfacing relatively recently.

The design on the *Psalms* shows Traquair at her most typical and best. On the front she ran the text 'David Son of Jesse King of Israel' around three sides, followed lower left by her monogram *PAT* and left the date 1898. Within this she placed four compartments which depict David as shepherd, as warrior, as lover and as king. The figurative designs are animated and worked with total confidence. The spine bears the word 'Psalms' and the reverse has a Lion of Judah within a shield, and here, as with the four scenes on the front Traquair supplied a subtitle in her medieval lettering. John Maitland Talbot probably made the silver clasp, rare among these later 1890s bindings. Although the binding is in generally good condition it now lacks the connecting hasp on which would have been engraved his mark *JMT* alongside Traquair's monogram and the year date. The binding contrasts with the binding she prepared at the same time on her earlier illumination of the *Psalms* where she unusually introduced gold leaf to the design.

In 1905, three years after she worked her final page of illumination, *The Studio* commented that Traquair's 'feeling is against isolated compositions; anything in the nature of a 'series' affords fuller scope for that rhythmic quality which is the soul of large work'.⁷ This naturally referred to her mural schemes, but serial imagery is also a key component of her several books of illumination and the compartmentalised cover design of the *Psalms*. By the mid to late 1890s she was an artist who worked well on both small and epic scales, and such imaginative and highly skilled book art deserves to as much valued as her mural work, or the enamelling which succeeded illumination as her challenging, small-scale colour craft.

As a postscript it is worth mentioning that years later, when the book *Atalanta's Garland* was published to celebrate the twenty-first anniversary of the University's Women's Union and to raise funds, it was Traquair's painting, *Motherhood* (1902, Scottish National Gallery), which was chosen as its frontispiece, and in a chapter 'Atalanta in Caledonia', her fellow artist Cecile Walton paid tribute to an artist inspired by the 'rich emotional colouring of the Middle Ages'.⁸ How fortunate the University is to have in the Creation manuscript such a treasure, now joined by a fine binding.

Notes:

1. Letter of 13 January 1892 from Traquair to her nephew Willie Moss, NLS MS 8122, fol. 15.
2. Margaret Armour, 'Beautiful Modern Manuscripts', *Studio Special Winter Number*, 1897, 51.
3. A F Morris in 'A Versatile Art Worker: Mrs Traquair', *The Studio*, vol. 34, 1905, 342, refers to the manuscript as 'the Creation'.
4. Morris, 341.
5. Letter of 17 August 1892, NLS MS 8122, fols. 21v., 22.
6. D M Sutherland, 'The Guild of Women Binders', *The Magazine of Art*, 1899, 420.
7. Morris, 341. Interestingly, the article illustrated both the 'Creation' manuscript and the *Psalms* binding among a range of Traquair's art work.
8. Cecile Walton, 'Atalanta in Caledonia', *Atalanta's Garland, being the Book of the Edinburgh University's Women's Union* (Edinburgh: 1926), 59.