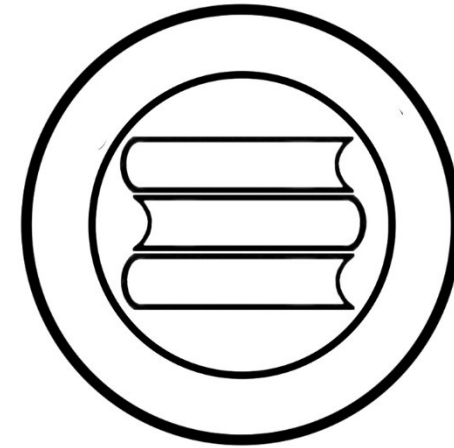


thesociety
ofbookbinders
internationalcompetition



We would like to send a huge thank you to Ali Strachan, Christopher Harvey and Sue Doggett for being our wonderful 2024 judges. Below are their follow up statements from the competition.

Ali Strachan

'I was thrilled to be asked to judge the International Competition and was impressed by the variety and quality of entrants, particularly in the Book Arts and Fine Binding categories. As someone who works in traditional bookbinding, the creativity involved in realisation of idea in the former was refreshing to see, and I found the work interesting and impressive. The winning entrant, which was beautifully executed and a delightful voyage of discovery, was chosen by Christopher and me alone as the work was known to Sue, who was at pains to distance herself from it. The fine binding entrants offered some exquisite forwarding and design and the top three were immaculate in their execution. The quality of entries across the board was high (although there is a tendency to sew books too tightly!), but I was disappointed in the low number of case binding and restoration entries. Both categories are hugely relevant in the commercial world, requiring particular skills that are not easy to do well, and I would like to encourage more entries to these categories in future years.

All in all it was an uplifting day - the entries showed skill and passion for bookbinding and book craft from an international coterie, and the competition is a credit to the Society. Well done to Mylyn and her helpers for making it run so smoothly.'

Alison Strachan started working at Shepherds Bookbinders in 1994 whilst doing her HND in craft bookbinding at London College of Printing (sic) and celebrated her 30-year anniversary there this year. Initially working at the bench, management duties took over after the integration of Sangorski & Sutcliffe and Zaehnsdorf in 1998, and she became Bindery Director in 2001. Since the untimely death of Rob Shepherd in 2022 she has been MD and continues to be involved in the sales and production of the bindery whilst overseeing the running of the company as a whole. She has been a Trustee of the charity Bound by Veterans since 2013 and became a Trustee of the Stationers Foundation in 2023.

Christopher Harvey

The competition presents a rich palette of criteria to judge, both wide ranging, and inventive in the use of materials and structures. I was impressed with the sequence of the well thought out judging process, that enabled each entry to be given due time and consideration.

I was looking for hand skills that demonstrated an understanding and empathy to the working qualities of materials and in the application of techniques and processes, so that the qualities of the natural material remained apparent and that the visual of aesthetics were equalled to the function.

I was also interested in how the binder had interpreted the subject of the book and to see this reflected in their choice of materials and binding techniques. Some books not only visually looked right, but had a balanced weight, good opening character, which engaged the senses and encouraged the pleasure of handling and looking. These qualities were testament to the considerable hours of thought, preparation and application of skills.

Book Arts is a rather different specialism to my usual sphere of work, but I was impressed by how some entrants presented pieces that were technically and materially exacting, whilst presenting a playful and creative dynamism.

It was wonderful to meet with and collaborate with my fellow judges Ali Strachan and Sue Doggett. Special thanks to Mylyn McColl for so perfectly arranging and hosting the event at the beautiful Daffodil Barn.

Christopher holds a BA Hons in Conservation 1993 and MA 1997, from Camberwell (University of the Arts London, UAL). Between the two courses he was employed with English Heritage on the conservation of photographs, followed by Perth Museum Scotland on the conservation of flood damage photographic material. The identification and the conservation of photographic material remains an area of great interest. After the MA focusing on books an independent conservation workshop was developed with work for collections and private clients, including the College of Arms, and the National Trust. During this time Christopher was fortunate to be involved with the conservation surveys for the St. Catherine's Foundation at the library of St Catherine's Monastery, Sinai, 2002-3.

Heading the conservation department at the College of Arms Library in London since 2004, he has organised the provision of annual student placements there since 2005. Teaching and lecturing from the 1990's onwards Christopher was also an Associate Lecturer for the conservation courses at Camberwell, University of the Arts London (UAL) from 2001 until the courses there closed in 2019.

Work at the College of Arms is extremely practical, and bench based. This enables ongoing research projects evaluating the craft and technology of well used, working book structures and materials. The conservation and display of parchment documents is also a specialty. The focus of the conservation department is the repair of the working, historic manuscript book collection, however, the centuries old process of creating coats of arms and research into genealogy is on-going at the College so the growing library reference collections also require new, bespoke, bindings. The College of Arms is one of the few institutions to continue traditional, manuscript, forms of record keeping, requiring the skills and crafts of papermakers, parchment makers, scribes (calligraphers), heraldic artists, and binders.

A Judge's Tale

Our day in Daffodil Barn was enjoyable and very well organised by Mylyn and her team, so before anything else is said, many thanks go to them. They had already done a mammoth amount of work before we even arrived. When we did rock up, we found all the books laid out in categories, not to mention tea and buns! After the introductions (it was lovely to meet you Ali and Christopher) we familiarised ourselves with the extremely long list of awards to be given. The judging is made easier by the system of using a range of criteria which is applied to each book and then a numerical system to place the books into a basic order of merit. This helps to foreground the books which the judges agree should be in line for a prize. I found having to award points for specific criteria very helpful for the most part and when it came down to the final decisions, the discussion was based on the marriage between concept, functionality, use of materials and overall craft skills (put very basically). There are always books that do really well in one criteria and not so well in another and the overall aim of the judges is to find the book which has the highest merit across all criteria. Because of this it may not always be obvious why one book was chosen over another – and this often boils down to the judges' privilege of being able to freely handle the books over an extended period of time and in some cases, to be able to see what an entrant has said about the concept of their work. Sometimes the decisions were easy and sometimes more complex, but you can be sure that we discussed each nominee fully in order to reach our decisions. Inevitably, you will see work that you recognise, particularly when you are a teacher, as I am – but when this happens, our professional judgement, alongside the application of the points system for specific criteria are applied fairly and without bias. Similarly, sometimes it was felt that there wasn't a book which fully met all the criteria to an appropriate standard for named prizes and so this year, two prizes were not awarded. I was surprised not to see more cloth bound entries and wondered why. Is it seen as a humble basic or beginners' medium? On the surface it may seem less exciting than other media so it would be interesting to see someone experimenting with cloth, pushing it out of its workaday reputation – maybe next time. To sum up, it is of course, an honour to be asked to judge a competition. We get the chance to see and handle a wide range of books in a multitude of styles, representing an array of concepts, personal interests and enthusiasm,

as we did that Sunday in Daffodil Barn. This is the pleasure. The pain, although it is obviously not so great as to cause actual discomfiture, is that the role comes with a high level of responsibility. Judges go into competitions with the aim of choosing the right books to win the prizes, those that are considered to be the best fit for each category on the day. They are also very aware that for every book chosen to win a prize, there will be many that will belong to disappointed entrants – this is hard. There may also be the inevitable murmurings wondering how the judges could be so blind as to not notice a, b and c or ‘you’re not fit to referee’ – we’ve all been there. As a many-time competition entrant myself, as a student and a professional, you always hope that you’re in with a shout but at the same time, you have to be prepared for a disappointment. We just have to remember that not winning doesn’t mean that our work has no merit – but rather, we made a book, we met a deadline, we’re in the show and we’re in the catalogue. We’ll try again next time. For the winners, it’s a high of course, and that is to be celebrated. What is to enjoy however, and what is the ultimate win for everyone, entrants and visitors alike, is seeing all the books together in the exhibition and marvelling at the inventiveness, skill, effort, thoughtfulness, playfulness and joy that abounds in the entries as a whole. Doing bookbinding is complex and often frustrating. It takes many hours to learn, let alone master – if one ever does. So to then put yourself out there to be judged, is both daunting and brave and I congratulate all the entrants on sharing their work. I hope you will all feel inspired to keep binding, to keep making mistakes, and to keep learning – like we all do, whatever level we are working at!

Sue Doggett is an artist who creates hand-made books and bindings. Her creative interests include surface design, women’s history, sewing as drawing, the role of craft practice, memory, ghosts and the history of magic. She gained a first class honours degree in Visual Studies and Art History from Oxford Brookes University in 1985 and an MA in Design from Brighton University in 1998. She received the World Craft Council Award for Contemporary Craft in 1994 and was elected a Fellow of Designer Bookbinders in 1996. Sue has lectured and led workshops in book arts in the UK, Europe and the USA and is currently co-ordinator of bookbinding and calligraphy courses at The City Lit in London where she is also a bookbinding and book arts tutor. As an exhibiting Fellow of Designer Bookbinders, Sue works to public and private commission including the Man Booker Prize for Fiction and she is the current editor of ‘The New Bookbinder’ the International journal of DB. Her work is represented in public and private collections in the UK, Europe and the USA.