

Pase from The Prosress of Poesy (1916)



By Meredith Santaus

In the fall of 2022, Bromer Booksellers simultaneously acquired four illuminated manuscripts designed and executed on vellum by Alberto Sangorki: *Lady Godiva* (1911, pp. 8-9), *Guinevere* (1913, pp. 10-13), *The Woodman and the Nightingale. And To Night* (1916, pp. 14-15), and *The Progress of Poesy* (1916, pp. 16-19). All have been bound by Rivière & Son, *Lady Godiva* in gilt morocco, *Guinevere* in a grandly jeweled binding, and the other two in morocco with superb relievo panels. The selection represents six years when Sangorski was at his most prolific, and when the demand for such items arced from a peak to, in the wake of World War I, a significant trough. The books as a collection offer a glimpse of the course of Sangorski's artistic maturity and, with it, a suggestion of his reactions to the efforts of his peers. And Sangorski's work not only engenders direct comparisons with a small galaxy of contemporary bookmakers but also reckons with the broader Arts & Crafts movement, from calligraphers to painters. We can, from these books, construct something of a stylistic biography of Sangorski, and consider more generally and more incisively his contributions to the development of the modern book and its art.

Sangorski produced his manuscripts at a period pivotal both in his personal life and in the rise and fall of the fortunes of high-craft artwork and, concurrently, of the ideals of the pre-Raphaelites. The 1911 *Lady Godiva* arrived just a year, perhaps less, after the falling-out between Sangorski and his brother, Francis, which led to Alberto's exit from his affiliation with Francis' Sangorski & Sutcliffe bindery and Alberto's transfer of allegiance to Rivière. While Alberto would, throughout his career, remain at a remove from the scene, a fringe player, Francis was strongly buffeted by the prevailing winds of the Arts & Crafts movement. Francis had attended, along with his partner George Sutcliffe, the London Central School, and what he learned he passed on to Alberto, in what Robert Shepherd in his *The Cinderella of the Arts* calls "a little technical training...upon the cutting of a quill pen and the manipulation of gold leaf"; otherwise, Alberto appears to have been almost completely self-taught. These pre-1910 and pre-Rivière forays into book decoration quickly blossomed into a thoughtful and skillful artistry, begotten out of competition with Francis and then brought to maturity by the inescapable influences of medievalism, romanticism, and idyllic craft. *Lady Godiva, Guinevere, The Woodman and the Nightingale. And To Night,* and *The Progress of Poesy* together reveal that that maturity was complex, that Sangorski was beholden to, but not a wholehearted believer in, the influences set before him. Sangorski's books reveal cautious attempts to hold in balance the craftsmanship that defined pre-Raphaelite bookmakers and the devotion to conceptual art that would, with the rise of Modernism, overshadow them.



irst, Alberto Sangorski's calligraphy, and more broadly the aesthetic of his mise-en-page, which we can better understand when considered in juxtaposition to Francis'. Francis' affinity for his tutor, Edward Johnston, was unmistakable in his own manuscripts; in *Hand and Soul* (c. 1908) Francis' calligraphic hand riffed on Johnston's "Modern Half Uncial." And no wonder, since that was Johnston's "educational hand since 1900." Francis' penchant for rudimentary copying hardly buttressed any attempted calligraphic individuality. Alberto, however, demonstrated a deft hand and penchant for risk. The text of *Lady Godiva* boasts swirling descenders and extravagant serifs at the ends of lines. The letterforms themselves maintain a consistency startling to discover in a calligrapher relatively new to the craft. Faults lie in the occasional squashed diphthong, and perhaps an overall mismanagement of line length, but by the time Alberto completed his 1916 *The Progress of Poesy* he had overcome both.

In this later project letters are more regularly, and more tightly, spaced. He still favored stricter margins over fuller lines, but he proved his awareness of the necessary balance of the two by creating borders that closely hugged his text, even at points grazing it. Unlike Francis, Alberto directly referenced historical medieval lettering, not its latter-day

reinterpretation, and did so without sacrificing his own style. His script was evocative of Bastard Anglicana without being a deliberate copy. Likewise the overall layouts of his pages and the stylings of his borders echoed 15th-century medieval manuscripts, particularly English and French ones, without being obvious mimics. *Illuminated Books of the Middle Ages* by Henry Noel Humphreys and Owen Jones would have been readily available and probably inescapable for Albero, its lithographs providing considerable references.⁵

This ability to craft the evocative, to suggest without subjection to the object of that suggestion, cleaved Sangorski away from his peers, even those whom he evidently admired. It was a phenomenon most obvious in his miniatures. Sangorski openly replicated the work of other painters, especially when an iconic text was met with equally iconic imagery; he duplicated John William Waterhouse's depictions of Ophelia and Holman Hunt's dramatic imaginings of the Sermon on the Mount in his manuscripts, with appropriate citations at the colophons. As it stood, Sangorski had arrived at the tail-end of the pre-Raphaelite era, and thus his overall aesthetic heavily borrowed from Academicism and Neoclassicism. Their tropes were the tropes of Alberto Sangorski: diaphanous drapery, figures in tragic motion against wooded or watery backdrops, couples in the act of clinging to or departing from each other. But it is interesting to also consider what Sangorski refused to copy. In *Lady Godiva*, a text by that time well-imagined and well-represented, the frontispiece portrait of the heroine offers an original perspective both on her positioning and her placement within the city of Coventry. In *Guinevere*, Sangorski glaringly ignored the prevailing imagery of Edward Leighton and James Archer, adhering to only the sensuousness and scale of the former and the Catholicism of the latter without actually reproducing any of their works.

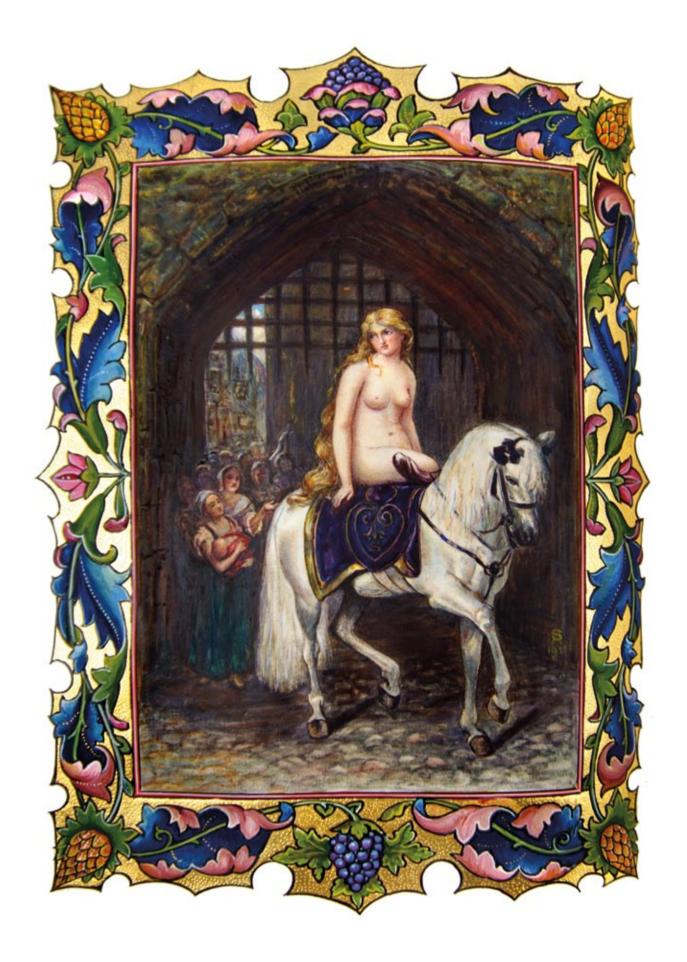
In his outright reproductions (i.e. Waterhouse and Hunt) Sangorski exacerbated, even caricatured, the narrative of copying, but with credit where credit was due. By setting his work as a copy of a copy and then alternatively painting original compositions of well-trod scenes, he cast into high relief the inconsistency with which his peers approached the epoch they so revered.

Whether he took seriously to heart the 1910 lawsuit Sangorski & Sutcliffe levied against competitor W. T. Morrell, or obsessed over the competition and jealousy that estranged him from his brother, or saw through the veil of righteousness obscuring the realities of Art Nouveau—or probably some admixture of all three—Alberto Sangorski built his career on pushing the technique, or art, or craft, of copying as far as he could.⁶ He copied miniatures. He refined his text for *Lady Godiva* over time, so that the 1911 copy presented here marks a unique moment in his calligraphic mastery. He revisited and reused designs for the jeweled bindings that held his work. His 1913 *Guinevere*, for example, parallels his 1913 *Romeo and Juliet*: seed pearls as cover titling, clusters of rubies, elaborate strapwork, plaquettes of gold and silver, the rear cover dominated by a coat of arms.⁷

Perhaps ironic to the situation, but no doubt earnestly meant and executed, was Sangorski's insistence on stating in many of his colophons that the work at hand was unique and would not be duplicated. He sealed each one of those statements with his signature, which he also applied by means of his monogram on his larger miniatures. Sangorski did not draw a distinct line between craft and concept; he held in balance the elements of a book—in this case its calligraphy, illustration, and binding—and its conceptual whole. The *work*, he announced, was unique. Such a pronouncement set him at odds with the ideals underpinning the pre-Raphaelite aesthetic, ideals that demanded the primacy of those disparate, crafted elements.

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he incredible, unique bindings enclosing Sangorski's manuscripts bring into focus, likely for the first time at that level of luxury and in that moment in the revival of the handmade book, binding equal to the contents of the book, and thus the book-object as a complete and thorough work.⁸ Douglas Cockerell might be amenable to, even proud of Sangorski and Rivière's penchant for elaborate bindings for elaborate books. In his *Bookbinding and the Care of Books*, Cockerell called for binders to rely, in the main, on simple and sturdy techniques, but as a rule "there should be a certain similarity between the general get-up of a book and its binding." Thus he conceded that what he (perhaps dismissively) called an "all-over gold-tooled pattern" was "a legitimate method of decoration for exceptional

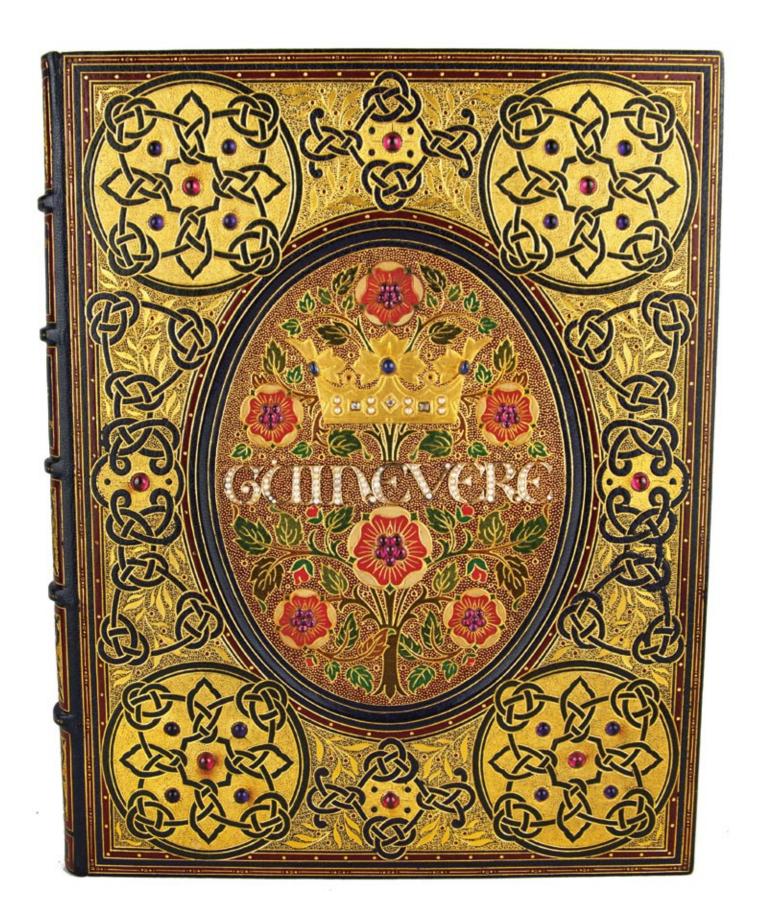


Froncispiece from Lady Godiva (1911)

books." But to Cockerell and that galaxy of bookmakers among which he was a relatively minor star, the partner-ship between the "general get-up of a book and its binding" fell secondary to the very enterprise of the getting-up. Where Cockerell lauded the practical—*Bookbinding and the Care of Books* identifies itself as a handbook for binder-archivists—his mentor, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, waxed philosophical. His *Ideal Book or the Book Beautiful* exemplified from the very first sentence Cobden-Sanderson's thesis: "The Ideal Book is a composite thing made up of many parts & may be made beautiful by the beauty of each of its parts." The most beautiful, and therefore artistically successful, books were those whose parts communed harmoniously and symmetrically. Cobden-Sanderson, Cockerell, and their contemporaries and collaborators arrived at concept only through craft, craft being the target activity.

Enter Alberto Sangorski, who saw that Cobden-Sanderson and his ilk were hung up on an intrinsically material vision of the arts. Sangorski's joust with that vision relied on first, his mastery of his own craftsmanship; second, his enlistment of the Rivière & Son bindery; and third, a will to holistic concept. That Sangorski had mastered calligraphy, illustration, and design remains evident, but it is significant that he did so by using equivalently supreme materials. Both Cockerell and Cobden-Sanderson bemoaned the quality of the paper and leather, among other things, that made up publications en masse. The very first paragraph of Cockerell's *Bookbinding* described the general situation, comparing early modern "bindings that can be made, that will adequately protect books" to contemporary "bindings that are made, that fail to protect books." By associating himself with and entrusting his work to Rivière, Sangorski gained access to the best set of materials: Levant goatskins and calfskins, quality vellum, oils, and inks. He was falling into line with the prescriptions of Craft. And yet, by the same token, he was not. His affiliation with Rivière directly opposed Cobden-Sanderson's negative attitude toward binderies. The latter determined that bookbinding, being an art form, was best left to the "true craftsman," the single figure as auteur. Conversely, by taking the reins of artistry while slackening his hold on craft—that is, by letting others contribute to the execution of craft—Sangorski dispelled the notion that the best work would only originate from the lone figure tied to the treadmill of repetition and mastery.

This last point, that a coherent ray of vision emanates from these books, is perhaps the most crucial. It is the inflection point between art and object and the fluidity between the two, the center point of the spectrum between craft and concept. Sangorski's work embodies this spectrum, and at the pole of craft we find the flags of his forebears and many of his contemporaries. Within his lifetime, though, the winds would quickly change in the opposite direction; Modernism cared less about technical perfection than about conceptual expression. Materials themselves were simply tools, and in some instances, especially as the century progressed, came to signify the commodification and monetization of art. But Alberto Sangorski, through material, surpassed material. Before our current discussions around concept and craft, Sangorski married the two. In the genealogy of the book arts, he sits at the intersection of branches that stretch away from him, growing tangled and bearing fruit.



FRONC COVER OF Guinevere (1913)

¹ Sangorski's work is often cast in this framework of reaction, mainly to the contemporary efforts of his younger brother, Francis Sangorski, the post-1910 bindings of Sangorski & Sutcliffe, and particularly, if anecdotally, to the fortunes and misfortunes of "The Great Omar." See Robert Shepherd's *The Cinderella of the Arts* (New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2015) and Stephen J. Ratcliffe's *Hidden Treasures* (Privately published, 2008), which, in their discussions of modern jeweled bindings-cum-manuscripts, both platform Sangorski & Sutcliffe as the key enterprise and set Alberto Sangorski, Rivière, and others as foils.

² Shepherd, Cinderella, 41; Stephen Ratcliffe, "Cover Note," The Princeton University Library Chronicle 72, no. 2 (Winter 2013): 265.

³ Dante Rossetti, *Hand and Soul* (London: Sangorski & Sutcliffe, c. 1908). Boyle 263.

⁴ Edward Johnston, The House of David, his Inheritance: A Book of Sample Scripts 1914 A.D. (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1978), 31.

⁵ Henry Noel Humphreys, Specimens of Illuminated Manuscripts of the Middle Ages, from the Sixth to the Sixteenth Century (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1849).

⁶ The lawsuit in question had to do in part with straightforward theft—Sangorski & Sutcliffe accused Morrell of erasing their name from the inside cover of their book and replacing it with his own—and in part with the nature of intellectual property once it had been reproduced and marketed. Shepherd states that Sangorski & Suttcliffe "threatened to stop allowing magazines [to reproduce] photographs of their books." (*Cinderella*, 37). The 1910 schism between the Sangorski brothers appears to have occurred because of a similar argument over attribution, though concrete evidence to the specific event remains out of reach.

⁷ A brief history of jeweled bindings and their purpose is William M. Voelkle's "From Gems to Medieval Treasure Bindings," Fine Books & Collections 16.1 (Winter 2018), 53-55. In it, Voelkle makes astute observations of the links between jewels and Christian self-fashioning. A resource particularly pertinent to the present essay is Anne Bromer's own presentation on "The Great Omar" and other jeweled bindings of its period.

The Studio 61 (1924): 146, cited in Ratcliffe, "Cover Note." The Studio reported in 1914 that Sangorski himself designed the binding of the aforementioned Romeo and Juliet (whose similarity to the Guinevere tips Sangorski's hand there as well), a weighty claim and one that in the present day opens the door to perceiving an individual philosophy coursing through and cohering the Sangorski/Rivière collaborations.

⁹ Douglas Cockerell, Bookbinding and the Care of Books (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1910), 30-31.

¹⁰ T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, *The Ideal Book or the Book Beautiful* (Hammersmith: Doves Press, 1900).

¹¹ Cockerell, Bookbinding, 18.

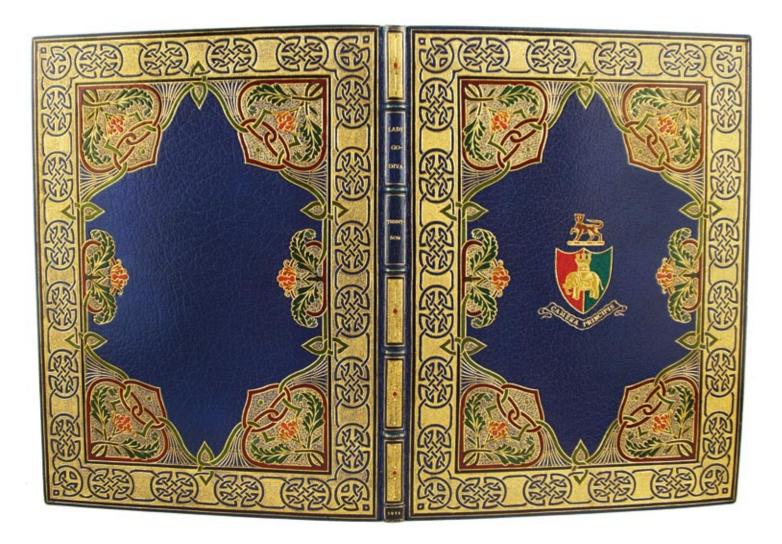
¹² Shepherd sums up Cobden-Sanderson's crusade well in *Cinderella*, 133-137.

Lady Godiva by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1911)



ctavo. 8ff., + 8 blank leaves. A unique illuminated manuscript by Alberto Sangorski, who applies his signature to the certification at the colophon. At the outset is a delightful miniature exhibiting an impressive depth of field: at center is Lady Godiva depicted, as legend and artistic convention usually have it, entirely nude, and gazing up at her are various representatives of Coventry. The image has Sangorski's monogram and the date of 1911, and around it swells a finely illuminated border in burnished gold and an array of colors. Calligraphed in red and black with six large illuminated initials, several flourished borders, and both title page and first page of text with floral adornment, the latter being especially finely decorated.

Bound by Rivière & Son in an impressively finished binding of full blue morocco, with covers bearing a symmetrical design of a gilt frame with a heavily pointillé ground, black inlaid morocco rules, and interlaced strapwork. Within the frame and surrounding central panel are inlaid floral corner pieces surfeit with further pointillé and cleverly intertwined with frame strapwork. The central panel of the upper cover shows the inlaid coat-of-arms of the City of Coventry: a cat above a red and green shield with an elephant bearing a castle on its back at center, and the motto "Camera Principis" below. Spine in six compartments, two with gilt titling and remaining four with gilt panels bordered in black morocco with a gilt rule. Gilt rules to edges and gilt pointillé with strapwork to turn-ins, supporting cream silk doublures and flyleaves. Odd and very minor abrasion to morocco inlay bearing the date situated at the spine tail, endleaves starting to fray, else a fine and devotedly English example from the Sangorski-Rivière collaboration. A.e.g. Housed in a silk-lined box. (Hauck 665, Lahey 60).



Guinevere by Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1913)



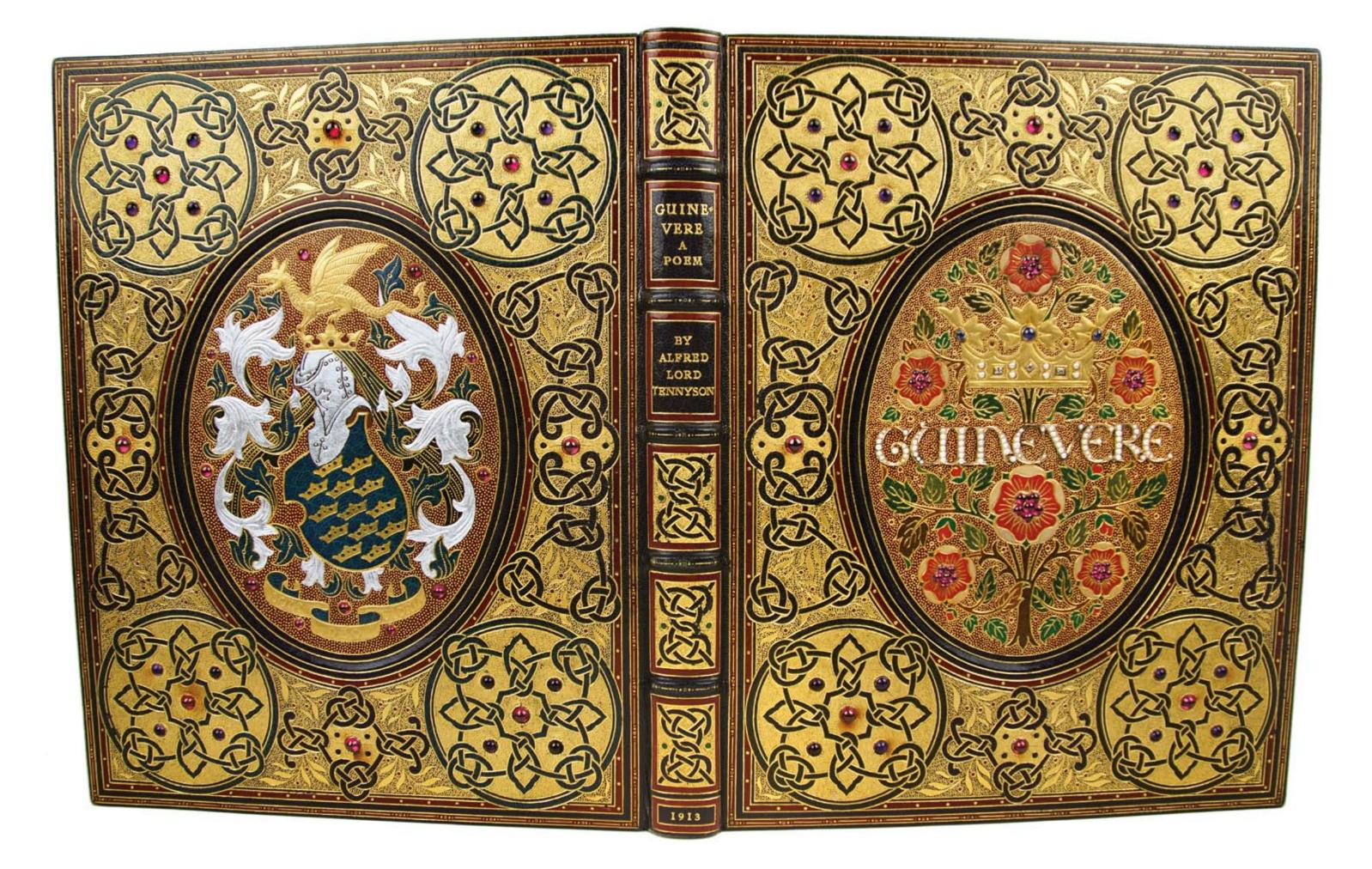
arge quarto. 34ff., + 3ff. at both front and back. Signed by Alberto Sangorski. A unique manu-✓script on vellum, designed, illuminated, and hand-lettered by Sangorski. A triumph of early twentieth-century British book craftsmanship and artistry, this seminal work boasts a robust, complete artistic vision. Begun in or around 1912 (according to the frontispiece portrait of Guinevere, which Sangorski dates along with his "AS" monogram), the manuscript perhaps represents Sangorski's response to his brother Francis's extravagantly jeweled Rubaiyat, which sank with the Titanic in April of that year. Alberto Sangorski was notably dissatisfied with that production, feeling that such an elaborate binding had been wasted on a printed text. By contrast, he has here created a vibrant presentation of Tennyson's Arthurian poetry. A pictorial title page displays at center a faithful miniature portrait of the author, surrounded by cherubim, a female nude, and a bat, as well as titling in gold and floral borders. The frontispiece shows a contemplative Guinevere at Almsbury, where, after Arthur's death, she became a nun, a part of her story reflected in the dragons, coats-of-arms, and miniature of nuns at Mass rendered in the illuminated border. Then follows the poem's text calligraphed in red and black inks, on pages always illuminated and glimmer-



ing with one or more initials. Three additional full-page miniatures, also signed by Sangorski, punctuate the text, and each exhibits a similar border to that found at the frontispiece. One half-page miniature and eleven border miniatures, plus those five previously mentioned, bring the total to seventeen miniatures, all protected by cream silk guards.

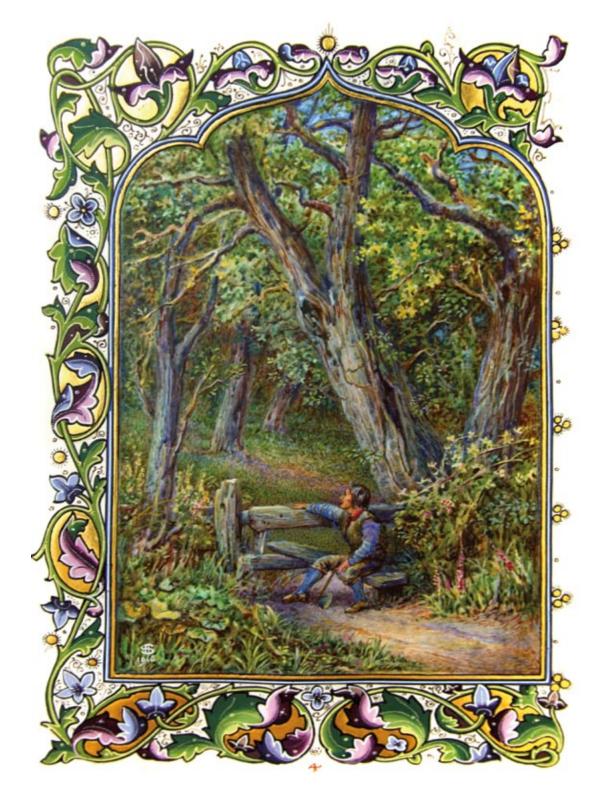
Bound by Rivière & Son with a level of decoration that may be considered a high-water mark of the firm. Full crushed blue morocco is heavily jeweled and decorated in gilt. The upper cover is dominated by a sunken oval panel edged in red morocco, enclosing the title "Guinevere" lettered in seed pearls set in gold, with the background of a rose bush in three shades of green morocco, branches in brown, and six Tudor roses in cream and pink, each with six rubies set in gold. Above the title is a gold plaquette shaped as a crown set with diamonds, seed pearls, and three sapphires. Around the oval is an intricate strapwork design of gilt rules and gilt-stamped vines with red inlaid morocco berries and a remarkable amount of gilt pointillé. All four corners with matching designs incorporating four amethysts and one garnet each, and the four sides each bear a ruby. The lower cover surround—strapwork, pointillé, sixteen amethysts, four garnets, six rubies—matches the upper, as does the central oval border. Within the oval is the crest of King Arthur: the mantling and helmet are silver plaquettes ruled in black; plumes likewise, with blue morocco ruled in gilt; crown, dragon, and motto, "Soli Deo Gloria," as gold plaquettes finely tooled. Eleven rubies surround the crown, which is further emblazoned with three rubies. Spine gilt in six compartments with raised and gilt bands, each compartment with inlaid red morocco borders with gilt rules; two compartments with gilt titling, remaining four with gilt-backed strapwork. Board edges with double rule in gilt. Inner doublures identical, with lush pointillé and extensive strapwork set on brown morocco, with an oval of blue and acanthus leaves of green, blue, and brown morocco. Faced by flyleaves of red morocco with green borders and a frame of strapwork, gilt pointillé, and navy morocco inlaid lozenges and dots. A.e.g. Trace stress at gemstone settings, smallest rubs to lower corners. Housed in a silk-lined dropback box.

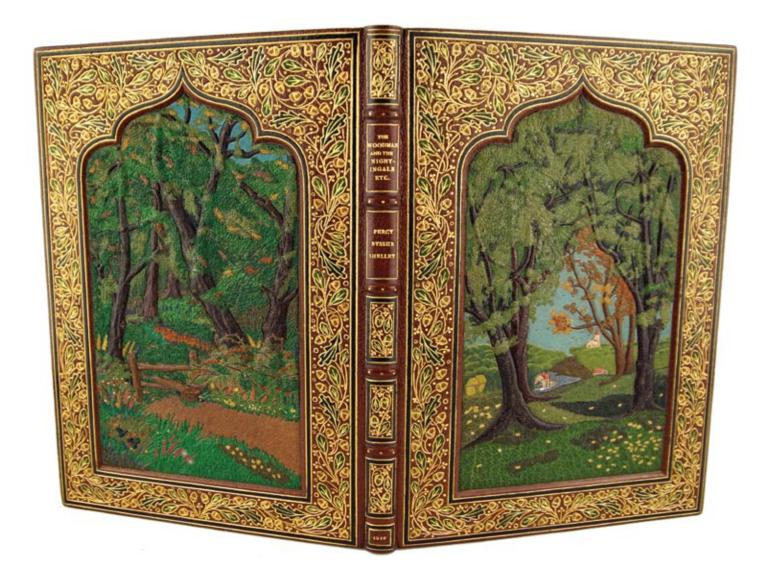
An incredibly fine display of work, one of the best that resulted from the collaboration between Alberto Sangorski and the Rivière firm. (Boyle 337, Elkind 414, Leahy 61). \$250,000



The Woodman and the Nightingale. And To Night

by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1916)



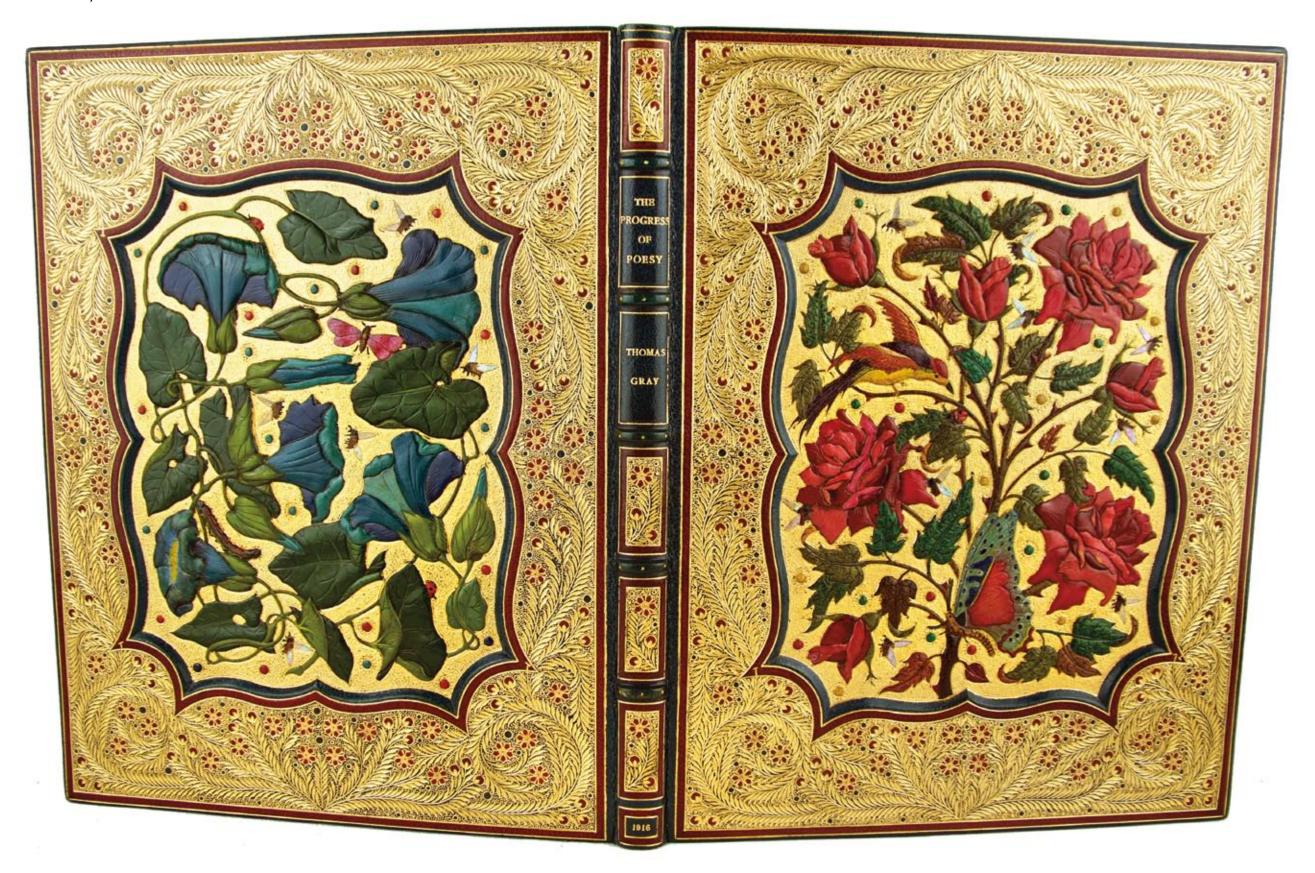


ctavo. 10ff., + 2ff. Signed by Alberto Sangorski at the colophon. Sangorski's unique vellum manuscript suitably echoes the romantic aesthetic championed by Shelley's poetry. Each of the four miniatures emphasizes the influence of nature, either by literally or figuratively minimizing the stature of the human figure (as in the full-page frontispiece depiction of the titular woodman and the sleeping woman at the title page for "To Night"), coopting it into allegory (as in the full-page characterization of night itself as a woman), or eschewing humanity entirely (as in the miniature at the foot of page 13, which shows an expansive evening landscape in which a lone turret stands as solitary evidence of civilization). Added to the sense of the manuscript as honorific to the aims of the Romantic poets are the resplendent title page with lettering in red and gold and full floral border, and further florals adorning every subsequent page. Every stanza bears an illuminated initial, many of which are large and multi-colored. A tight work from Sangorski, unyielding in its exhibition of his talent.

In a relievo binding executed by Rivière & Son, a terrific example of that uncommon style. Relievo binding requires a powerful fly-press, with which the binder can emboss the leather (or, in this case, leathers of many colors). Full brown morocco over boards, with both covers bearing symmetrical designs of inlaid black morocco bordering a frame of gilt-tooled acorns, vines, and oak leaves, all of which are detailed by green and black inlays. On the upper cover, a recessed central arabesque panel depicts in molded and painted leather a pastoral scene of a grove giving way to a mill, hay-stacks, river, and church. On the lower cover, an identical recessed panel displays a path entering a thick wood. Spine in six compartments with gilt titling to two and black-bordered gilt panels to remaining four. Gilt rules and a continuation of the acorn and oak leaf design at turn-ins, green silk doublures. Fine. Housed in a silk-lined box, the upper cover of which is detached. A.e.g. Bookplate of Jerome Kern. (Boyle 305, Kern 1101, Lahey 64). \$65,000

The Progress of Poesy: \(\lambda\) Pindaric Ode

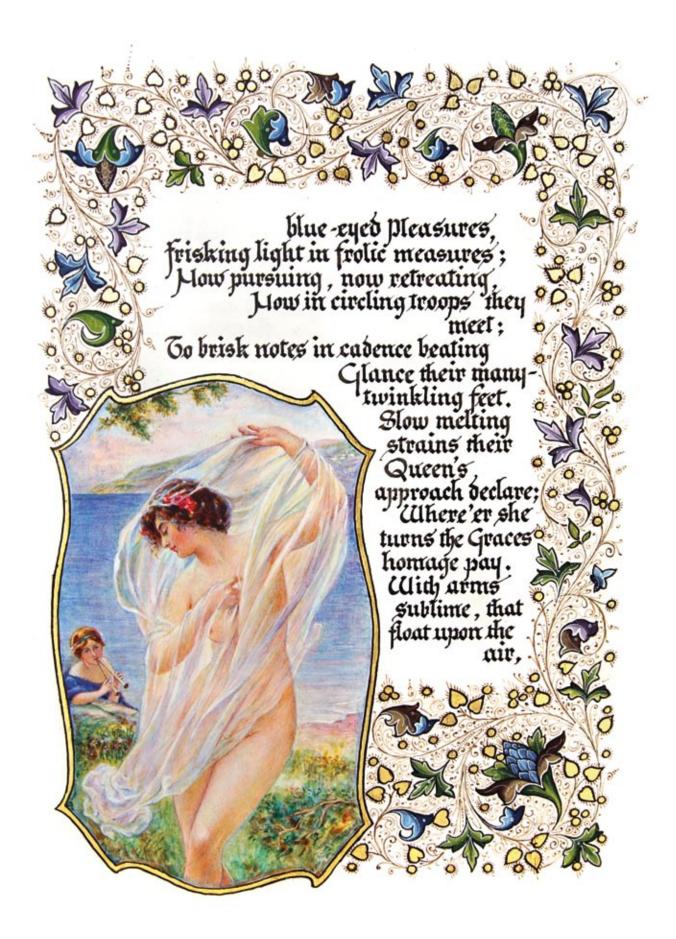
By Thomas Gray (1916)





mall quarto. (11)ff., + 3ff. Signed at the colophon, after the certification statement, by Alberto Sangorski. A unique illuminated manuscript on vellum, in which Sangorski engages with and inserts himself into a genealogy of Neoclassicism. His devotion to the tradition of the medieval manuscript is at once classical and modern, and deeply entrenched in naturalistic aesthetics; the title page features a lush floral border surrounding a field of vines, and a similar border ornaments each page of text. Nine large illuminated initials are intertwined with the greenery, the language itself relying on and supporting the landscape of the page. Sangorski's four miniatures depict scenes of Classical Greek pastoral life, save for the title-page portrait of Gray. These images likewise seat Sangorski himself among the Romantics and Pre-Raphaelites, but also serve the greater purpose of establishing Gray's position as a sort of proto-Romantic. Although that title alone is too simple a reading of Gray's entire corpus, in the context of the specific poetry transcribed by Sangorsk, ithe label bears out, the illustrations underscoring the Pindaric structure foundational to the text. The miniatures offer a further valence to the Romantic heritage Sangorski signals—he has styled them rather obviously after Lawrence Alma-Tadema, being equally devoted to texture, reflective surfaces, and tableaux of ancient Greece. Uncommon to Sangorski's series of manuscripts is the penultimate leaf, which bears a short biography of Gray.

Bound by Rivière & Son relievo-style, in full blue morocco with an inlaid red morocco and gilt-ruled border around a dense frame of gilt floral and leaf designs, grounded in pointillé and punctuated with dots in dark blue and petals in red. The frame on the upper cover surrounds an arabesque recessed panel containing molded a leatherwork design of a rose bush on which alight a bird, a butterfly, and bees with mother-of-pearl wings. The lower cover identically framed around an arabesque recess, this with molded leatherwork showing blue morning glories inhabited by a moth, a caterpillar, ladybugs, and more bees with mother-of-pearl wings. Spine in six compartments, two with titling in gilt and remaining four with borders of red and gilt around gilt panels. Maroon morocco doublures, blue silk flyleaves, edges gilt. Fine. Housed in a silk-lined box. A.e.g. Bookplate of Cornelius J. Hauck. (Hauck 668, Lahey 63).



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Romer ooksellers

607 Boylscon Screec Boscon, MA 02116 617-247-2818 books@bromer.com

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