



Three different styles of Danish paper binding.

DANISH PAPER BINDINGS: MORE THAN MILLIMETER

MARK J. ANDERSSON

FOR TEN YEARS AS A BOOKBINDING INSTRUCTOR, I taught what I believed were “millimeter bindings” to students. During the past ten years, though, I have learned a great deal more about the specific features and characteristics of these historical bindings, which turn out to be rather different from what I thought I knew. Part of the problem was that I had never seen a genuine millimeter binding—at least, not one created by one of the professional Danish binders of the first half of the twentieth century. I had only seen pictures in Henrik Park’s book, *Danske Bandtyper*; and pictures, it turns out, don’t always do a subject justice! ¶ In 2013, I bought my first example of a millimeter binding made by Henrik Park. Since then, I have purchased many dozens more of the extant. After examining and comparing these volumes—along with extensive research in Danish publications—I have gained a much different understanding of what they are. For one thing, they cannot all be lumped into the category of “millimeter bindings.” They might be more properly called Danish paper bindings, of which there are four distinct versions: 1) paper bindings; 2) Sandgren style bindings; 3) Rubow bindings; and 4) millimeter bindings. ¶ Here is what I have learned.

Mark Andersson was raised in a household where you didn’t dog-ear pages or write in books. After teaching high school social studies, he moved to Boston in 1986 where he mainly did darkroom work—printing, housing, and duplicating glass plate negatives—and overseeing historic homes for an archive. At the archive, he was asked to repair a few books. Following the instructions in a particularly unfortunate manual, he repaired several books using bad techniques and lost sleep because of it. That insomnia led him to attend North Bennet Street School (NBSS), from which he graduated in 1992. He then returned to Seattle to work for the University of Washington until 1998, during which time he spent a year in Sweden on a Fulbright Scholarship at the Carolina Rediviva Library. He returned to Boston to teach at NBSS until 2007, when he moved to the outskirts of Tucson to build a house and establish Panther Peak Bindery where he currently teaches the occasional class and enjoys retirement.

—MARK ANDERSON

PRIVATBIND IN DENMARK

FOR CENTURIES THROUGHOUT THE WESTERN world, it was traditional to publish and sell books with sewn text blocks in paper wrappers. Purchasers would take their new text blocks to binders to be covered. The Danes called such books *privatbind* or private bindings. The introduction, in the 1960s, of laminated paper-covered books with adhesive-bound text blocks pretty much ended the era of *privatbind* books.

Historically, binders made their livings providing full and half leather bindings to regular customers, though paper bindings provided a more affordable option for less wealthy patrons. Denmark, however, has a history of making cheaper paper bindings. Economic upheavals in the early 1800s led to national bankruptcy (the *Statsbankerotten* in 1813) and made leather bindings unaffordable to most of the population. The response of Danish binders was to make paper bindings in the style of leather bindings. Mirror bindings, where a section of the leather covers were dyed a different color, or where a piece of colored leather was inlaid, were instead made using paper as both the covering material and as an onlay.



Paper mirror binding. *Skoleferier*, Copenhagen 1806.

Of course, paper bindings were made before the early 1800s and continued even after Denmark's economic recovery in the years following national bankruptcy; but it appears likely that the economic difficulties contributed to the prominence of paper bindings in Denmark, making them arguably more common than in other European countries of the time.



Paper mirror binding. *Sophia*, Copenhagen 1809.

FOUR TYPES OF DANISH PAPER BINDINGS

SO WHAT ARE THE VARIATIONS and distinctions among the four main types of Danish paper bindings? The first is the paper binding in which the covers are, of course, paper—with no leather or vellum. These speak for themselves and won't be elaborated on below. The second—the Sandgren style binding, named for August Sandgren —uses vellum or leather at the head and tail of the spine and hidden vellum tips on the corners. The third type—Rubow bindings, named for Jørn Rubow — makes use of vellum or leather along the head and tail edge of the boards and spine. The final type, millimeter binding, utilizes leather or vellum on the spines, exposing just one millimeter of either material along the shoulder edges of the boards. The corner tips are made of hidden vellum.

The progression and development of the latter three bindings span most of the first half of the twentieth century, each having its own creator and distinctive history. The following sections give a brief history of each binding and describe a typical example as well as a variant of that style.

THE HISTORY OF SANDGREN STYLE BINDINGS

AUGUST SANDGREN WAS BORN IN 1893 in Hobro, a town of about 2,100 people on Denmark's Jutland Peninsula. He completed his apprenticeship as a

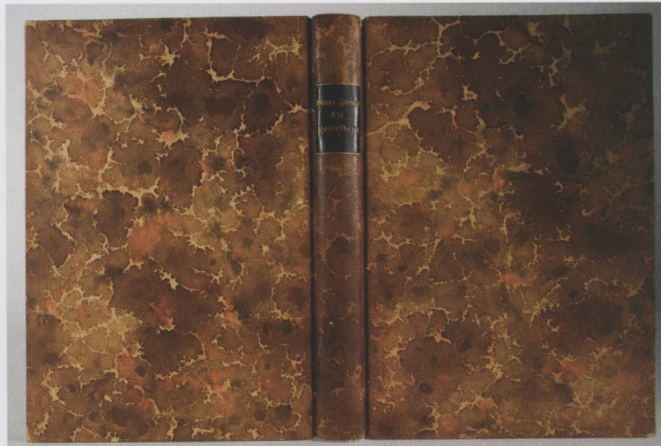
bookbinder in 1912, after which he lived and traveled in Europe, working and training in Switzerland, Holland, Belgium, and Italy. Following the outbreak of the First World War, Sandgren was sent back to Copenhagen but made a detour to Berlin where he studied and worked until the war ended. The severe economic problems of post-war Berlin convinced Sandgren and his German wife to return to Copenhagen in 1919.¹

In 1920, he took over Oswald Janner's thirteen-year-old bindery.² Sandgren owned and ran this legendary bindery until his untimely death in 1934. During his final fourteen years in Copenhagen, he attained considerable renown in Denmark, which continues to this day. He is to Denmark as Cobden-Sanderson is to England. Though most of his work was in full and half leather bindings, he also felt the need to make paper bindings for customers who couldn't afford the high prices he charged for leather bindings.³ To make these paper bindings more durable he introduced the idea of adding vellum to the head and tail of the spines, and hidden vellum tips on the board corners.

As strength was the purpose of this style, Sandgren mainly used vellum. I have examined two examples in which he used cloth but have not yet seen any instance in which he used leather, which would have been less durable than vellum or cloth.

ELEMENTS OF A SANDGREN-STYLE BINDING

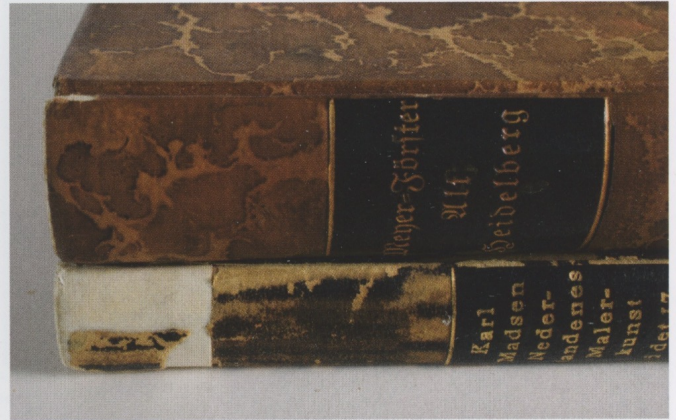
THE BOOK IN THE PHOTOS is typical of the Sandgren style binding: paper with minimal elements of leather



Ult Heidelberg, 1902. Binding undated.

or vellum. Sandgren was known for making his own marbled, printed, or paste paper designs, and it is likely that he made the marbled paper for this cover. The signature elements of his bindings were the vellum at the head and tail of the spine and the nearly invisible vellum corners.

Damage on the spine of the lower book shows that the vellum extended over 20 mm into the spine of this volume.



All of Sandgren's bindings have the vellum extending about 10 mm or more onto the spine.

It is difficult to see how far the vellum goes into the spine below, but only 1 mm is exposed.

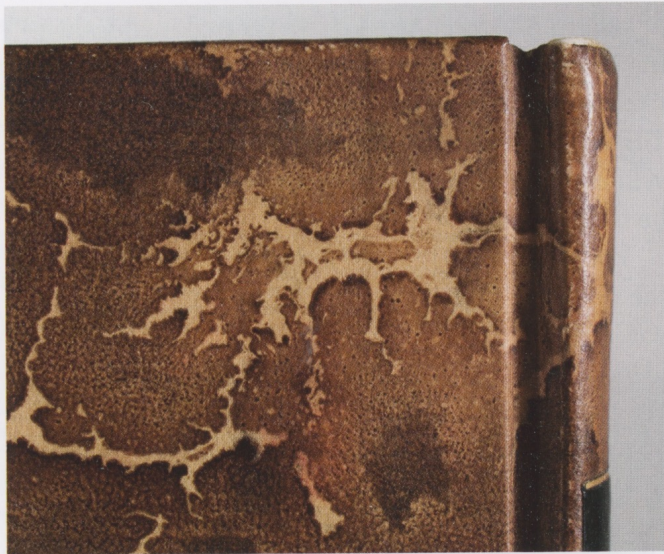


The paper exposes 1 mm of the vellum and covers the face of the board.

On the boards, paper covers all the vellum on the board faces, but a small amount of vellum is exposed along the board edges and turn-ins adjacent to the spine.

The vellum on the boards extends about 5 mm on the edges.

The corners are another distinguishing element of Sandgren's bindings. Again, the paper completely covered the face of the board, and only a small amount



Detail showing the board face is completely covered by the paper.



Boards open to show inside of upper spine and boards.

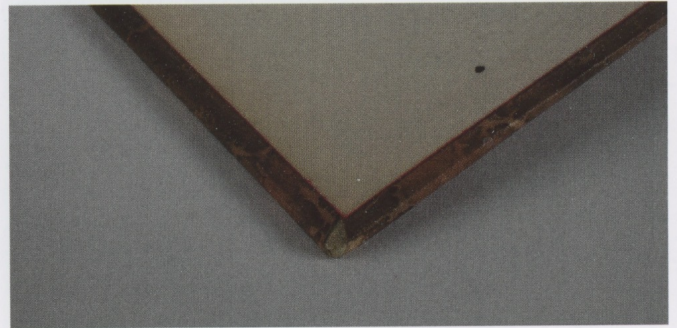
of the vellum was shown on the inside of the board at the corners.



Detail of vellum corners showing vellum exposure inside and outside of boards.

Another distinguishing factor of Sandgren's style are the turnins, which are trimmed to about 7 mm.

The squares are about 3 mm. On this example, the title was gold tooled on a leather label. As in this photo, most of Sandgren's endpapers were some version of off white.



The turnins of Sandgren's bindings tend to be about 5-8 mm, and he mainly used white or nearly white paper.

Naturally, a few variants to Sandgren's style evolved over time. The most common differences between modern bindings in this style and those originally made by August Sandgren occur in the use of leather and the exposure of leather or vellum along the board edges.



A common variant with these bindings is the exposure of the leather or vellum on the board edges. V. Asholt binding, undated.

Also, the corners might be more prominent either on the face or inside of the boards.

A more interesting variant is the extension of the leather to include the title or date.



Corner on a Jens Juul-Lassen binding showing a completely different inside corner from Sandgren's original style.



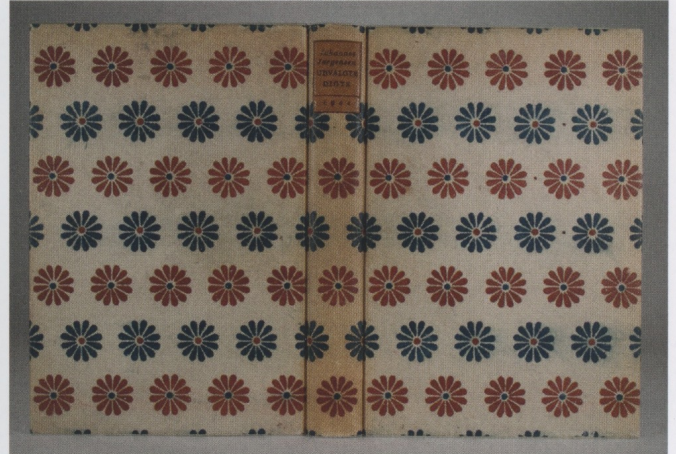
This unsigned binding of Victor Hugo's 1793 has expanded leather at the head and tail for the author on top and the title below.

THE HISTORY OF RUBOW BINDINGS

THE RUBOW BINDING TOOK ITS INSPIRATION from Sandgren's technique. Henrik Park documented the origins of this style—the only binding of the three for which the origin story has been recorded, probably because Park was giving credit to someone else and the millimeter binding was his own creation. Park had studied under the esteemed Anker Kyster and took over his bindery in January 1939, a few months before Kyster's death in April. Park was just twenty-one at the time he took control of the bindery.⁴

In his article on bookbinding written for the Norwegian Field Museum, Henrik Park describes how museum curator Jørn Rubow asked him if Sandgren's vellum on the spine could be made to run the whole length of the head and tail of the board edges. This took place during the Nazi occupation of Denmark, which began in April of 1940. Park tried it out and

named the style a Rubowbind (Rubow binding) much to Rubow's embarrassment, which Park put down to Rubow's "modesty." He felt these bindings were easier to make than Sandgren's and he thought they used materials more efficiently, which mattered during the occupation.⁵



Upvalgte Digte. Rubow bindings by Henrik Park, 1945.

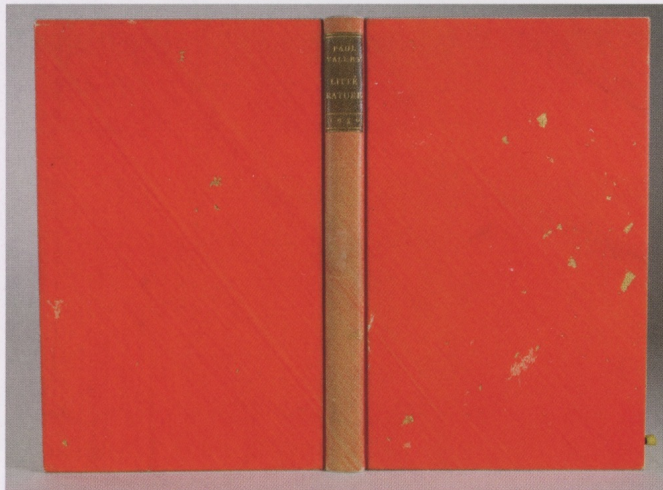
Park was one the few binders who both signed and dated his work. The Rubow binding he made in the photo is from 1945. It uses a decorated paper with about 1 mm of vellum appearing on the board edges. The small vellum exposure is a trademark of Park's Rubow bindings.



Detail of Park Rubow, showing the 1mm vellum exposure.

The Rubow bindings I have examined are mostly covered in decorated paper, which in this case refers to paper with printed designs. Of the fourteen examples in my collection—dating from 1940 to 1951—only four have paste paper on their covers. Three of those four

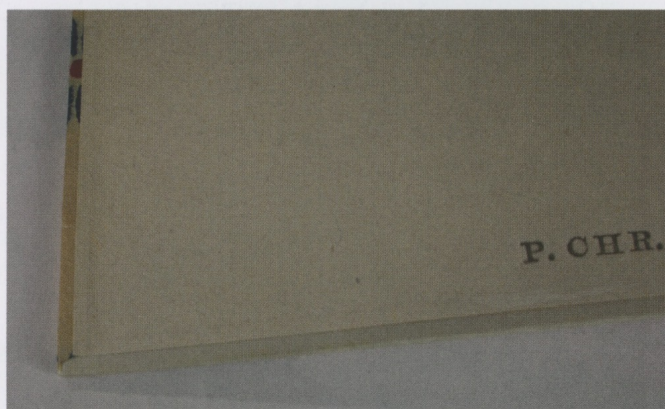
have designs of colored paint made by angled brush strokes. None are geometric patterns.



***Litte Rature*, a 1949 Park Rubow binding. Angled brush strokes with gold leaf flecks.**

The endpapers are, again, mainly off-white. The vellum extends onto the boards about 7mm and the turnins are trimmed to 5 mm.

A slight variation of the Rubow binding appeared in a surprising way. In 1940, the year Rubows came

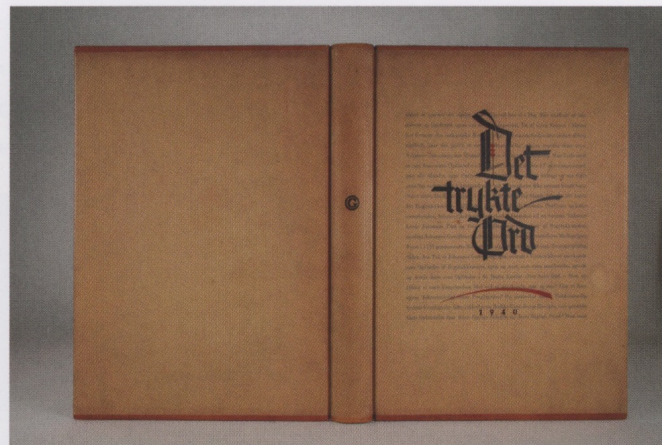


Turn ins and endpaper in *Upvalgte Digte*, Park, 1945.

into existence, a group called the Grafisk Cirkel produced a book in this style. That others jumped so quickly on the Rubow bandwagon shows the speed at which these ideas spread.

The variant in this binding is a common one: the exposed leather on the binding is the width of the square.

In other words, the paper on the cover is the same height as the text block.



***Trykte Ord*, (*Printed Words*), binding by A. Andreassen, 1940.**

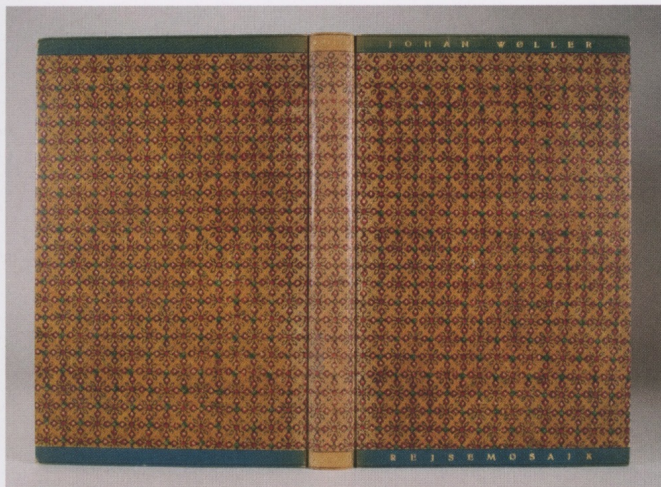


***Trykte Ord*, showing the alignment with the leather exposure with the size of the text block.**



Andreassen and Park Rubow bindings showing the different leather exposures.

Park himself made another more interesting variant in 1943. In this binding, he extends upward and downward the “rails” (as he calls the leather or vellum running parallel on the board edges) to create room for the title and author on the top and bottom edges.

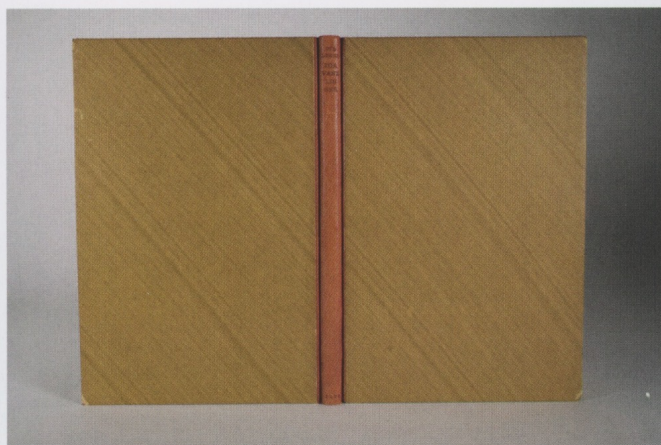


Rejsemosaik, Rubow variant bound by Henrik Park in 1943.

MILLIMETER HISTORY

MILLIMETER BINDINGS ARE THE MOST COMMON and well known of the three types of the Danish paper bindings that include minute amounts of leather or vellum. These bindings are a direct reaction to the shortages of materials created by World War II. They are the simplest and easiest to make of the three bindings described in this article. These bindings generally have only 1 mm of exposed leather on the board edge along the joint.

A firm date for the origin of millimeter bindings has not yet been established. I asked a reputable, long-time book dealer—Søren Vangsgaard of Vangsgaards Antikvariat in Copenhagen—about the earliest examples he has seen. Looking through his records of the hundreds (probably thousands) he has sold throughout his career, he found examples of



Forvandlinger, millimeter binding bound by Henrik Park in 1950.

millimeter bindings beginning in 1941. That may be as close as we can get to an original date.

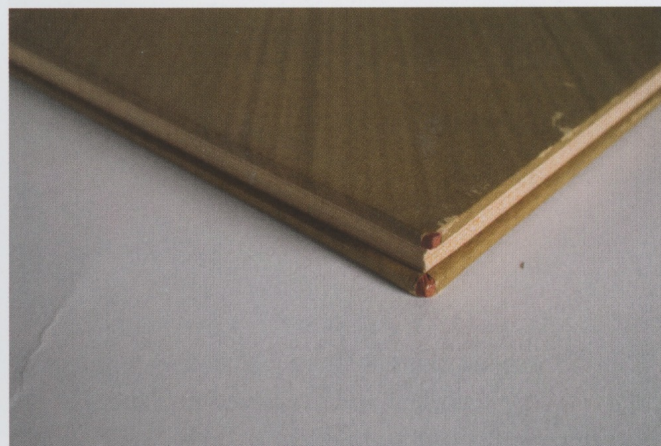
The millimeter binding shown was made by Henrik Park in 1950. It uses a very common Park paste paper pattern: angled brush strokes. This binding also shows its original DNA—Sandgren style bindings—in having its corners hidden from the outside of the boards in exactly the way Sandgren did them.

In addition, the turnins are trimmed to about 5 mm. In this example, the title is blind tooled. There are also headcaps.



Forvandlinger, showing exposure of leather on board face, head cap, and joint.

Headcaps were common in these three types of Danish bindings when leather, rather than vellum, was used.



Forvandlinger, corners.

Compared to the other two styles, there seem to be fewer variants of millimeter bindings. Some have slightly exposed corners. Some ignore the strict

condition of 1 mm of leather or vellum along the board edge. The increase beyond 1 mm may be due to the renewed supply of leather available as Europe recovered from World War II. These “millimeter plus” bindings can certainly be as beautiful as the originals.



***Titelbladets Historia*, millimeter variant by Jens E. Hansen, undated. Showing more exposure of the leather on board face.**



***Titelbladets Historia*, detail of spine and boards.**

CONCLUSION

THERE ARE ALMOST AS MANY VARIANTS in the styles of these bindings as there are binders making them. Having looked at and examined hundreds of these bindings two things are clear.

First, though the techniques and craftsmanship are not compromised in any way, these are bindings that were made as a budget option.

Second, the bindings run the gamut from breathtaking to rather plain. These are trade bindings made for clients and profit. Some have gilt edges,

but virtually none have sewn endbands. Most have untrimmed fore edges and tails.

In my collection, paste papers are used on 34% of the bindings. Papers that were most likely decorated (or not) outside the binderies account for the other 66% (marbled, printed designs, and undecorated paper covers). It is obviously easier to buy paper than to design and create it oneself.

That such beautiful bindings can emerge out of economic and political clouds, or even from the desire for profit, shows how pressure sometimes creates diamonds, beautiful books, and fascinating bindings.

All photos by the author. All of the books depicted belong to the author's personal collection.

NOTES

1. Oswald Janner, *Bogbinder August Sandgren* (Copenhagen: Sandgren Klubben, 1949), 12.
2. *Ibid.*, 13.
3. Gustav Strand, “August Sandgren - Mennesket og Bogbinderen” in *Bogbinderen August Sandgren* (Copenhagen: Forening for Boghaandvaerk, 1952), 37.
4. Mikael Kristensen, *Bogbindernes Blå Bog* (Copenhagen: Dansk Forening for Bogbind, 2010), 309.
5. Henrik Park, “Bogbind” in *Nordenfeldske Kunstindustrimuseum Årbok* (Trondheim: F. Bruns Bokhandels Forlag, 1951), 82.