

**THE BOOKBINDINGS OF
RALPH
RANDOLPH ADAMS;
AN APPRECAITION**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649168842

The bookbindings of Ralph Randolph Adams; an appreciation by Arnold Lethwidge

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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ARNOLD LETHWIDGE

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RALPH RANDOLPH ADAMS
From a pencil sketch by Mrs. Adams

THE
BOOKBINDINGS
OF
RALPH RANDOLPH ADAMS

AN APPRECIATION

BY

ARNOLD LETHWIDGE



NEW YORK
PRIVATELY PRINTED
1904

BOOKBINDINGS
OF
RALPH RANDOLPH ADAMS

SOME YEARS AGO Mr. Ralph Randolph Adams, whose bookbindings form the subject of this brief appreciation, bound some books for himself, just for the pleasure he found in the occupation. Soon he found that he could bind a book as well as any professional; so to the enjoyment of making beautiful bindings he presently added the satisfaction of making a living by it. He established himself in the profession of binding books, and has made his way straight to the top.

He was never content to keep to the paths of the average binder. He could produce as substantial and artistic a tooled binding as the next man, and he took much pride in the quality of his work. His inlaid bindings were carefully done, after the methods of his predecessors and contemporaries. But his energy could not stop at that. He continued to experiment and study, with leathers

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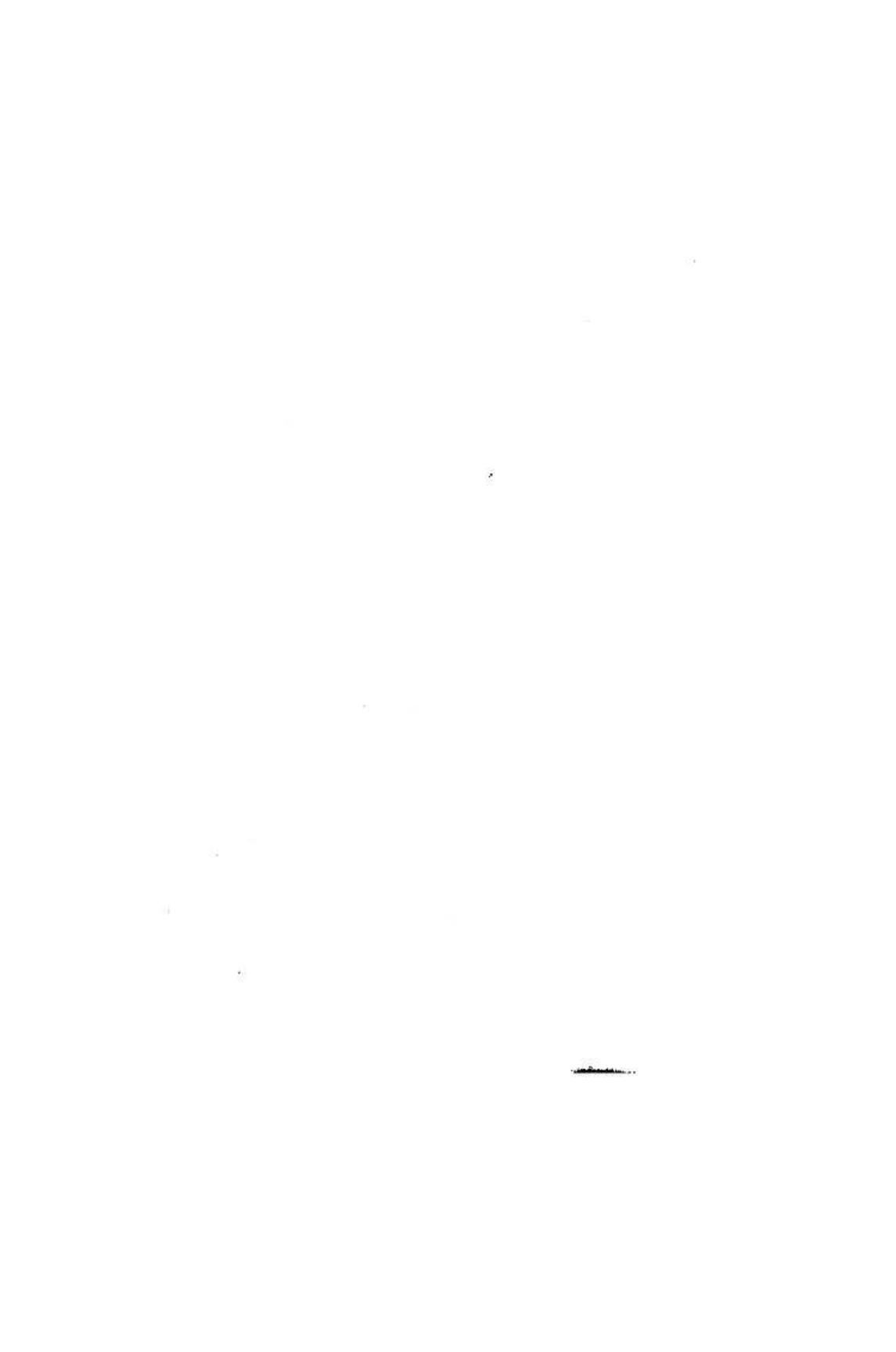
and cements and ideas, getting results that were better or worse, learning from successes and failures. He contemplated the experiences of the early binders, in the use of mosaic. In the old cities of Europe—Venice, Vienna, Florence, Paris—in the youthful days of the binder's art, men had attempted in leathers the mosaic that was so universally used in tiles, precious metals and other decorative materials.

They fitted together their pieces of leather and so formed designs of much beauty; but soon the paste that joined the pieces would lose its adhesive properties. Then the leather, no longer held in place, would shrink. The joints opened, the edges curled, and the book became as sorry a sight as the hypocritical dame who encountered the magic Mantle of Virtue in the old ballad—

When she had taken the mantle
With purpose for to wear,
It shrunk up to her shoulder
And left her back all bare.

In fact, no one, in those days, seems to have hit upon any process for the preservation of leather mosaic work. So the binders got around that difficulty by putting the book into a full leather binding, then paring other leathers thin, cutting them out with scissors, and veneering the design onto the binding. This "onlaid" process has been used from that day to this, by the best binders and





BOOKBINDINGS OF RALPH R. ADAMS

the worst, and is so universally known as "inlay" that one involuntarily connects that term with veneration, rather than with the unused mosaic process.

The onlaid binding has been developed to its highest possibilities, and the master craftsmen, Trautz-Bauzonnet supreme among them, have made of it a thing of rare beauty and considerable durability.

Mr. Adams has done, and is doing, some very handsome bindings with onlaid designs. But he has always recognized the shortcomings of the process,—the loss of the grain and rich color in the pared leather, the tendency to curl at the edges, the lack of sincerity in the imitation mosaic,—and he has for years experimented to overcome the difficulties which have hitherto prevented the perfection of the process of inlaying.

After many experiments, trials and failures, he evolved a method by which the most perfect bindings are turned out. These bindings are built up in true mosaic fashion, of bits of leather accurately fitted together; or the leather that covers the book is carved out in patterns with a knife, clean to the board, the cut-out pieces being then replaced by other pieces of the desired color and texture, which exactly fill the vacant spaces. So perfectly do the