

CURIOSITY IN THE HISTORY OF BINDING FROM THE LIBRARY OF HUNGARIAN WOMEN



During the Fall Festival of Museums we presented a real curiosity from the library of Kata Piroška Boldizsár, commemorating her.

Kata Piroška Benczúr Gyuláné Boldizsár was born 160 years ago, in 1854, and she donated exactly 90 years ago her library founded in 1888 to the National Széchényi Library, as a „gift from an anonymous Székely woman”. The collection entitled Library of Hungarian Women is a separately handled, valuable, thematic collection of the NSZL as of today. The collection has started out as a Hungaricum library, and it aimed to present, in the most complete manner, everything that was created by Hungarian women and what was written about them. We can find many books in the collection written in German, English and French languages also. The collection is unique in

Central-Eastern Europe; its pair can be found only in France.

The peculiarity of the exhibited, beautifully bound book is that the publication was designed by Kata Boldizsár herself, who was the wife of the already world famous painter. She used a psalter as model for the binding and for the ornaments of the gilded edges of the pages. The psalter was bound in Debrecen, in the 18. century, and was in her possession. But the similarities of the two volumes are obvious only to the careful observer, because of the raggedness of the smaller volume. But what are these two volumes, and why do they resemble each other? One of them was published by János Margitai in 1747, in Debrecen, and it contains „one hundred and fifty psalms of king and prophet David.” According to the red, heart-shaped ex libris glued to the end-paper, it belonged to Klara Margitai, in 1754.



The restored Petőfi Almanach

The other, bigger volume was published in Budapest, in 1909, and it is entitled the Petőfi Almanach. The book was published by the women committee of the Petőfi-house, presided by Albertné Apponyi, born countess Clotild Mensdorf Pouilly. Kálmán Dávidházi binder-master bound the book in Debrecen, in 500 copies. We can see a handwritten note above the colophon: „Designed and assembled by K.P.B.”, that is Kata Piroska Boldizsár. Furthermore, we can see another note in the beginning of the volume, under a picture opposite to the title page: „After the original painting of Gyula Benczúr...” Thus we know that the connection between the two volumes is Kata Boldizsár and, not accidentally, the city of Debrecen. Most probably, she was inspired by the small, beautiful psaltery in her possession while designing the binding for the Petőfi Almanach; and the reproduction of the painting carried an emotional value also.

It is worthwhile to mention the bindings themselves, also. The psaltery belongs to the so-called painted parchment bindings of Debrecen, despite that its binding is not made out of parchment, but of leather. Its world of motifs has multiple sources. The binding synthesizes renaissance, Turkish and baroque elements in a uniform style. Its creation is closely connected to the bourgeois culture blooming in Debrecen. These motifs survived not only on bindings, we can see them on table-cloth in protestant churches, on tin pots, on painted wooden ceilings, embroidered dresses and leather objects. We have to mention another source of the motifs on the bindings. Similar bindings, that integrated Eastern motifs also, had appeared even earlier in Netherland. Probably, typographers studying there brought the books to Debrecen. The ornament on the mirror of the binding-plate of the psaltery is a flowery tendril ornament which shoots out of a tilted Italian vase. The mirror is painted white, and serves as a base for gilded ornaments. The motif was built up by a multiple of smaller stamps, then the flowers and leafs were painted later, borrowing an embroidery appearance to the plate.

They painted not only the mirror of the originally brown leather binding, but painted bright red the plate too, living a narrow brown frame between the two of them. They painted red, curlicue lines on the spine, imitating marble surface. The spine was gilded also, but it peeled off almost completely by today.

The Petőfi Almanach closely follows the motifs of the psaltery, but because of the little more elongated shape of the volume, the designer added an extra tendril to the ornament. The ornaments were not made with stamps as in the case of the psaltery, but they were carved on plates. The 500 copies made it possible financially and asked for the simplification of the process. The motifs can be applied much more precisely on the plates, thus the ornamentation will show much more orderly than on the psaltery, where the small inaccuracies, the unevenness of the printing and painting provides the charm of the volume. Kata Boldizsár did not choose accidentally these ornamental motifs on the book. At the time of its creation, the search for the Hungarian, folk past was fashionable, and they connected to this Petőfi's already existing cult also.

The techniques of binding of the two volumes are different in many ways; they carry the marks of their time. The psaltery was stitched on three real ribs; its plates were fixed by gluing to the ribs; and then they were covered with leather. The leather sticks tightly to the spine; it moves together with the spine when the book is opened. While binding the Almanach, they stitched the book also on three ribs, but they sunk the place of the ribs into the sheet, and cut off the endings. They stitched together the binding-plates with a paper board as wide as the spine, with the help of the cover-leather, then they glued into the covered binding the separate body of the book. They imitated the ribs with ribbons of paper glued beneath the cover. Because of the more elongated form of the volume, four „ribs” were placed on the spine.

It is a rare coincidence that three more volumes are in the collection of our library, with very similar bindings. But all three of them can be connected to the two exhibited pieces: one of them belonged also to Klara Margitai, we can see on the inside of the binding panel the same heart-shaped ex libris as in the psaltery, with same year, 1754, on it. The other two volumes stand proof of the fact that they did not let the cliché made for the Almanach go to waste, and they used it to adorn other bindings.

Zsuzsanna Tóth
tothzsuzsanna@oszk.hu