

Fig. 1a

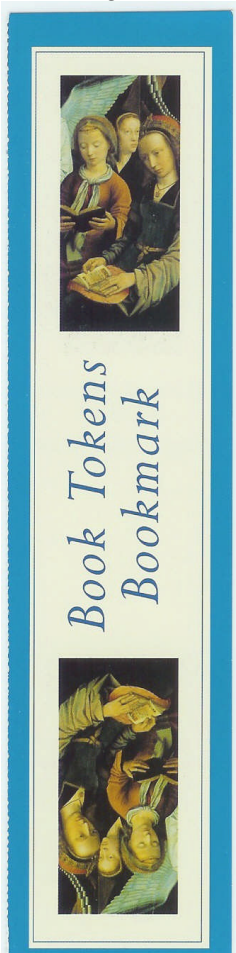


Fig. 1b

## Bookmark History On Bookmarks<sup>1</sup>

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*an occasional paper of The Bookmark Society*

The surviving medieval bookmarks that have so far been located consist of cords, bands or leather strips connected at the top with a knot, or other simple 'anchor', such as a wooden bar, which rests on the upper edge of the book. They have been described in various publications, among which the most recent and detailed are the article by L.Swales and H.Blatt<sup>2</sup> and K.H.Steinbeisser's book<sup>3</sup>. A more decorative style came into being for the nobility and the rich during the late Gothic age and the Renaissance. The anchor took one of several forms: a textile 'button', for example of silk; a gold or jewelled disc; a small rectangular cushion; finally, a gold, ivory or, less sumptuously, bone bar. Few of these luxury objects still exist today but they can be seen in many paintings, engravings and sculptures of the 14th – 16th centuries found in European and American museums and galleries. They are also described in French, Spanish and English royal documents from the same period. As regards the cords and bands, they were usually finished at the bottom with a knot, tassel, bead or hem, and red or black seems to have been the colour most often used in their depiction. This year Georg Hartong has displayed in an exhibition in Rheinhausen library small metal hangers, such as medallions or crosses, which he understands were used to decorate the ends of such bookmarks. His examples were found in excavations in medieval French sites.

Since world-wide travel to museums and galleries is not feasible for most people, we have to rely mainly on reproductions of works of art for our knowledge of early bookmarks, even if only at third hand. Bookmark collectors may perhaps find that they have such pictures in their own collections. One example is the bookmark issued in 1998 attached to the Book Token folder No. 722 (*fig. 1a*). The original picture was painted c.1509 by Gérard David (*fig. 1b*).

It is now held by the Musée des Beaux Arts in Rouen (France), but was painted for the Sion Carmelite convent in Bruges and is entitled *La Vierge entre les Vierges* (The Virgin among the virgins). The complete scene depicts the Madonna and Child surrounded by virgin saints, five on each side, plus two angel musicians and a man and a woman in the background. The latter may be the donors, perhaps even the artist and his wife. A group of three of the RH saints is reproduced on the Book Token card and bookmark, namely and from left to right: St Godelieve, St Cecilia and St Barbara. They are identifiable by their symbols: a neck scarf for St Godelieve, who was strangled; the organ for St Cecilia, the patron saint of music; and the tower in St Barbara's headdress, alluding to her confinement in a tower.





Fig. 1c

Bookmarks may be recognised in paintings either by an anchor at the head of the book, or by knotted or tasselled cords or bands emerging from between the pages at the bottom. In many paintings the strategic points of a book are frustratingly concealed either by the angle from which it is painted or by the hand which is holding it. Fortunately this is not the case in David's painting. Indeed, we are lucky enough to find two differing styles of anchor on the Book Token bookmark (see *fig. 1c* for an enlarged detail) but less fortunate in that they are reproduced on a very small scale on the card. St Godelieve is reading from a book with a circular disc or button resting on the top of the pages. Her bookmark in this reproduction and in those I have found on websites is not clear enough to determine its composition. St Barbara's book, in contrast, is headed by a bar ending in two knobs giving it the appearance of a miniature dumbbell. Again, the quality of the reproduction does not allow one to determine whether the bar is made of wood, metal, ivory or bone, but it is possible to distinguish cords wrapped around it.

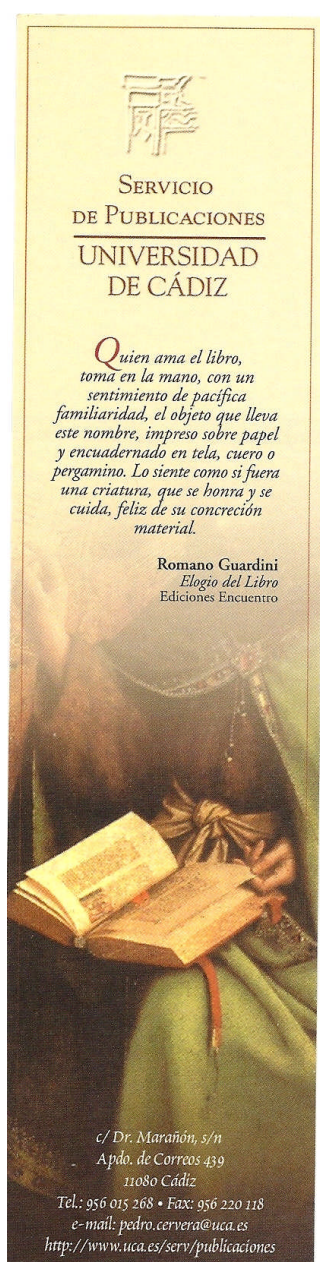


Fig. 3

A third bookmark is included in David's painting but does not appear on the bookmark. St Catherine, who is seated in the LH group of saints and may be identified by the wheels in her crown, is reading a book with a bookmark of the bar type to mark the pages. David also depicted a bookmark in a delightful *Virgin and Child* to be seen in the Prado Museum. Here there is a book lying on the windowsill with a bar bookmark at its head that terminates in a white ball at each end, possibly a pearl.

Another work of art that includes several bookmarks, four in number, is the altarpiece in Ghent cathedral, which was painted by Jan van Eyck with his brother Hubert in 1432. In English it is often entitled *The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. This is the subject of the bottom row of 5 panels seen when the polyptych is open. The upper row of 7 panels shows Christ in Majesty flanked on the left by the Virgin and on the right by St John the Baptist. On the left of the Virgin a group of holy women are singing from a choir book resting on a wooden desk. On the right of St John there is a group of female instrumentalists. The outermost panels feature Adam and Eve. The Virgin is holding an open book at the head of which there is a cluster of pearls serving as an anchor for the cords or bands, which are not shown. St John is doing likewise and has a bookmark anchor of the same type. Van Eyck's Virgin appears on two Spanish bookmarks: one (*figs 2a and 2b*) issued by the Lemus bookshop in La Laguna, Tenerife, and the other by the Publications Department of Cadiz University. The latter reproduces only part of the figure of the virgin. Similarly there is only a partial view of St John on its reverse (*fig. 3*). In both cases the book and the bookmark are highlighted.

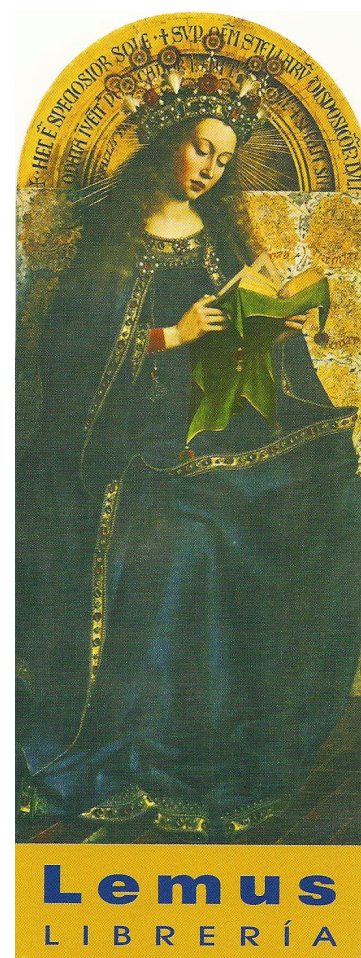


Fig. 2a

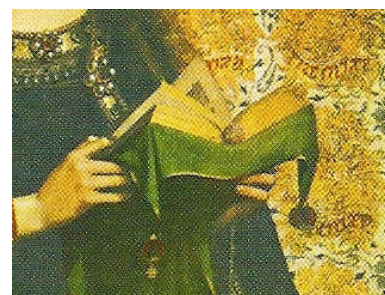


Fig. 2b



The round, pearl-cluster anchor of the third bookmark in the van Eyck polyptych is to be found in conjunction with the choir book from which the female choir is singing. The fourth bookmark, also a pearl cluster, can be discerned when the right wing of the polyptych is closed. This reveals a panel with the Virgin receiving the Annunciation. As is frequently found in other representations, she is shown kneeling at a prayer desk bearing a book. Unexpectedly, however, a bookmark is not indicated in this book but one appears in a book on a shelf in the background. At least two more paintings by Jan van Eyck incorporate bookmarks. They are *the Annunciation* (1434-36) in the National Gallery of Art in Washington and *The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin* (1435) displayed in the Louvre. Both these paintings show bookmarks with pearl anchors similar to those in Ghent. David and the van Eycks are far from being the only artists from the Low Countries to feature bookmarks in their works during this period. Whether the paintings are reproduced on modern bookmarks remains to be determined.

All the bookmarks mentioned so far have been recognizable thanks to their anchors. The other form of indisputable pictorial evidence is a group of cords or bands emerging from between the pages. In this case one cannot determine whether they represent a true, independent bookmark or simply form part of the book's binding. Perhaps the best-known painting with this element is Giuseppe Arcimboldo's fantasy portrait of a librarian (1566) whose face and body are composed of books. It is preserved in Skokloster castle in Sweden. Since this canvas presents books in a particularly striking fashion it is a very suitable image with which to decorate a bookmark advertising a bookshop, publisher or book fair. I have three relevant examples in my collection. The first advertises a fair for new, secondhand and antique books held in 2006 in the Basque region of Spain. The second, reproduced on a larger scale, was distributed in France and Belgium by the chain of booksellers Maxi-Livres (*fig. 4a*). The third is a small detail reproduced on the bookmark of the Opar bookshop in Madrid. In Arcimboldo's picture no less than twelve pink cords dangle from the book that serves as the librarian's hair (*fig. 4b*).

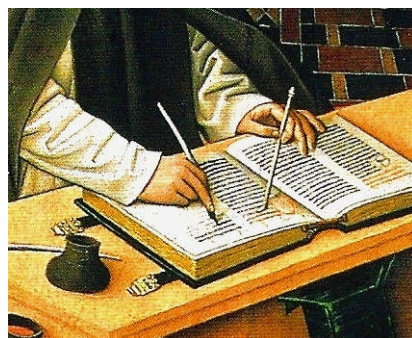


*Fig. 4a*

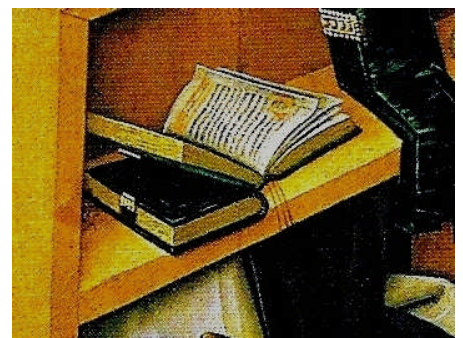


*Fig. 4b*

A painting by the *Maestro del Parral* (Master of the Parral monastery, active 1480 -1490) in the Lázaro Galdiano Museum in Madrid shows St Jerome in his scriptorium surrounded by a number of monks. Part of the picture is reproduced on a bookmark issued by the museum (*fig. 5c overleaf*). St Jerome is working on a codex that has at its head a metal bar with red cords wrapped round it (*fig. 5a*), while on a shelf of his desk there is an open codex from which three red cords are hanging (*fig. 5b*).



*Fig. 5a*



*Fig. 5b*



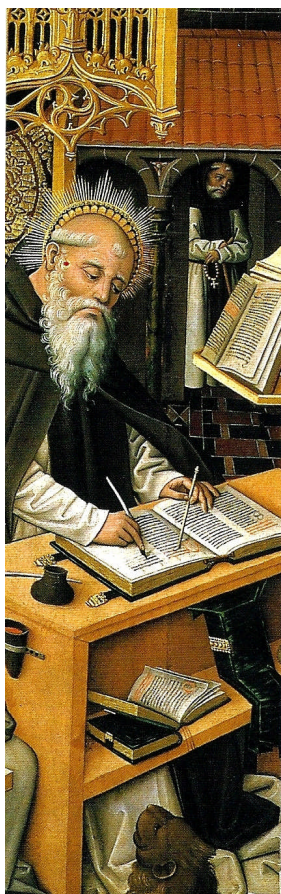


Fig. 5c



Fig. 6a→

Fig. 6a is another Spanish example of a bookmark that reproduces part of a Renaissance painting featuring cords dangling from between the pages of a book. This painting is displayed in the Museu d'Art in Gerona. The bookmark was issued by the museum and has a calendar for 1999 on the reverse. The picture, showing St Ursula, was painted c.1520-25 by Joan de Borgonya, born in Strasbourg but active in Spain. The saint, recognizable by her symbol of an arrow, holds in her left hand a closed book with four red tasselled cords (fig. 6b below).

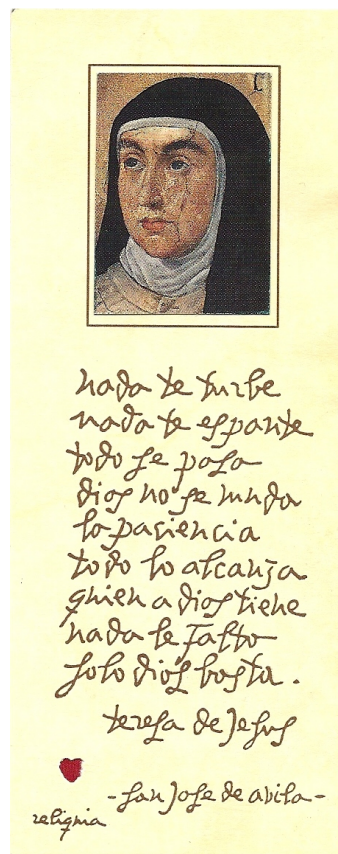


Fig. 7

Fig. 8 →



While on the subject of 16th-century bookmarks, it might be worth mentioning the frequent appearance on bookmarks of Saint Teresa of Avila's 'bookmark'.<sup>4</sup> The original bookmark is simply a religious poem written on a piece of paper that was used by the saint to mark her place when reading. The modern bookmark reproduced as fig. 7 shows a portrait of the saint and a facsimile of the poem. The text itself, translated into English by Henry W. Longfellow among others, has been set to music by several composers including Edmund Rubbra.

Before the invention of printing, texts were reproduced in manuscript codices and were a luxury accessible only to the nobility, the rich, eminent churchmen and religious establishments. As such, they became an accessory displayed in portraits of highly-placed people or holy figures and might be accompanied by a correspondingly valuable bookmark. This exclusivity disappeared with the wider distribution of books reproduced in larger numbers by printing presses. It is not perhaps surprising, therefore, that bookmarks made by craftsmen, as opposed to slips of paper and similar makeshifts, seem to disappear almost entirely from portraits and other works of art after the Renaissance. There is thus a gap in the history of bookmarks on bookmarks until the 19th century.

The bookmark reproduced in fig. 8, issued by AFEDA (the Spanish bookbinders' association) a few years ago, shows the head of a book with a



green bookmark anchor in the form of a spindle-shaped silk cushion. The binding and bookmark could mistakenly be attributed to the Gothic era. The book, however, was bound in France by Dufour during the second half of the 19th century (post 1874), when a historical style of binding was fashionable. Attached to the anchor are two, long, green bands folded in half to yield four markers. These end in green, pear-shaped hangers consisting of a stiff core covered with needle-weaving. The bookmark appears to be contemporary with the binding. The book, a missal, belongs to the royal palace library in Madrid (RB xiv 2915), where a few similar bookmarks from the 19th century are to be found. A charming example accompanies a book (RB xiv 2922) bound in neo-renaissance style in 1878 on the occasion of the royal marriage. It has an anchor in the form of a small, curved, silver cylinder decorated in relief with a fleur-de-lys

and arabesques. Attached to this are four separate white moiré ribbons ending in silver fleur-de-lys hangers.

There has also been a revival, or perhaps merely a continuation, of the heart-shaped bookmark that clips on a page. Such items were hand-made from paper, card or parchment in the 16th-18th centuries sometimes using second-hand materials such as playing cards. A greater variety of materials, as well as industrial means of production, have been used for more modern examples from the 19th century onwards, e.g. silver (*fig. 9*), celluloid (*fig. 10*) and thick card (*fig. 11*). *Fig.12*, datable to the mid-20th century, reproduces a bookmark showing what had already become a classic form of card bookmark many decades earlier. Twinings 21st-century bookmark (*fig. 13*), for its part, confirms with its illustration of many, coloured bookmarks (surely not just differently-coloured, blank strips of paper) that bookmarks are widely available and widely used<sup>5</sup>.



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



Fig. 12



Fig. 13

The closing example (*fig.14*), which should be familiar to nearly all readers of this article, represents bookmark history not because it is a woven textile example but because it refers to The Bookmark Society and the development of such a phenomenon as bookmark collecting.



Fig. 14

### *Notes*

1. In this article 'bookmark' refers strictly to detached objects made for the specific purpose of marking a place in a book. Strips of used paper or parchment (recycling is not a modern invention) are excluded, as are ribbons, etc., attached to a book's binding. When a painting is being described, the word 'book' may refer to a book (printed) or a codex (manuscript) since in most cases it is not possible to see whether the text is printed or handwritten. Similarly the word 'band' is used to cover both tapes and ribbons.
2. Lois Swales and Heather Blatt: 'Tiny textiles hidden in books: toward a categorization of multiple-strand bookmarkers' in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol.3, 2007, pp. 145-179
3. Karl Heinz Steinbeisser: *Lesezeichen sammeln*, Antiquariat Steinbeisser, Ingolstadt, 2006, passim
4. Also discussed in Joe Stephenson's article: 'St Teresa's Bookmark', *Bookmark Society Newsletter*, Spring/Summer 2005, p. 13
5. The text on the bookmark may be translated as follows: *The best moments of our life are written in the tealeaves and in books.*