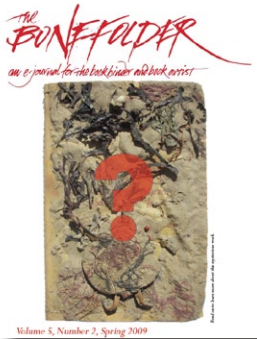
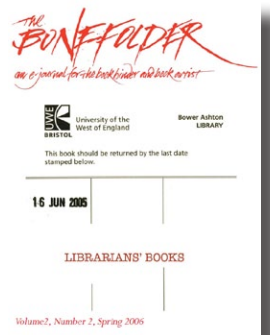


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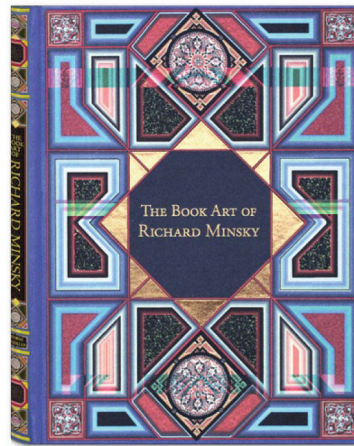
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Bound for Glory, the Book Artistry of Richard Minsky

Minsky, Richard. *The Book Art of Richard Minsky*. New York: George Brazillier, 2011. ISBN-10: 0807616060 (hardcover). 136pp. \$31.97.

Reviewed by Miriam Schaer



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It's no exaggeration to say that Richard Minsky's bindery is also his soapbox. Across a nearly half-century career, and counting, Minsky has produced a steady flow of bound volumes infused with anger, wit and passion. Expertly crafted, they transform workmanship into artistry by the ideas they embody and the propulsive energy of their maker.

Along the way, Minsky also became Johnny Appleseed to a growing community of people and organizations devoted to *book arts*, a term Minsky, himself, is credited with coining. In 1974, he founded the non-profit Center for Book Arts in New York, an organization of which (full disclosure) I am a long-time member, and the model for many other centers for the arts of the book.

A natural evangelist, Minsky has taught book art classes, curated book art exhibits, exhibited his own book arts, contributed to book art scholarship, challenged art world orthodoxies, outraged traditionalists, and founded (online) a Book Art Museum. *The Book Art of Richard Minsky* arrives as a timely, handsome, well-deserved retrospective of his most interesting, most photogenic works.

The Bound and the Beautiful

Book Art in America author Betty Bright sets the stage with a crisp introduction and clarifies the distinction between "art books" and "book arts" which, after Minsky, should nevermore be confused. Following Bright, Minsky himself takes over as



tour guide to the Minsky oeuvre. A long section engagingly recounts his early years before tapering off into short takes on individual projects, most notably *The Bill of Rights*. Notes on additional works follow, anticlimactically ending with a CV.

Completed in the shadow of 9/11 and the ensuing threats to civil liberties, Minsky's *The Bill of Rights* consists of 10 volumes, one for each of the first 10 amendments to the constitution. The work's overall tenor can be seen in its treatment of the Second Amendment, concerning the right to bear arms. The amendment is represented by a Minsky-bound edition of *Gathering Storm: America's Militia Threat* by Morris Dees and James Corcoran, its cover enhanced by such interior quotes as "America is quickly moving into a long dark night of police state tyranny." Other amendments are similarly treated. The series is angry and impassioned.

Members of the Center for Book Arts will be familiar with pieces of the Minsky saga, as it's long been absorbed into the Center's creation myth: his boyhood in Queens, his discovery of letterpress printing in junior high, the death of both parents at early ages, his close relationships with his grandmother and sister. All this had an enormous impact on Minsky, and imprinted on him the importance of living at full throttle.

Other parts of the story will be less familiar: how he studied fencing and sang in the Brooklyn College choir, loved music and dance, applied for a job at the CIA to avoid being drafted and sent to Vietnam (hey, it was the Sixties), graduated with an economics degree, withdrew his CIA application, and transferred to Brown University to begin graduate studies in economics. (Believe me, this is not how most people become book artists.)

At Brown, he discovered the university bookbinder and bindery, which he duplicated in his tiny dorm room. The romance was on. Economics became a girlfriend left behind. But not entirely, and Minsky acquired an MA in the subject before transferring, under scholarship, to the New School in Manhattan, where he credits Prof. Horace Kallen's *Philosophy of Art* course with changing him "from a bookbinder to a book artist."

Weary of Nixonian America, Minsky headed to Europe in 1971. He visited master bookbinders, binderies and book conservators, and performed with a traveling folk-rock band, before returning to Queens where, with a loan from the Small Business Administration, he opened a bindery and book repair shop. His formal career had begun

Those who have known, studied or worked with Minsky will be unable to read of these events without hearing his voice. Those newly encountering Minsky will find his voice an

easy companion, and wish only there were more of what in London is referred to as the naughtier bits.

Épater la Bourgeoisie

The Minsky works that receive the most attention share a progressive sensibility and a commitment to civil rights. Volumes like *Chemistry in Warfare* (1993), with its gas-mask cover; George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-four* (2003-2006), a prescient take on the surveillance society; and *The Bill of Rights*, bristle like leather-bound agitprop with the metaphors of outrage. Minsky's desire for action traces back to his family. Both parents moved in political circles. His father created *The Religious News Service* to promote religious tolerance, and his mother worked for the Anti Defamation League and with the League of Women Voters. Minsky, himself, performed for a time with an anti-Vietnam performance troupe.

At the time they were first exhibited, many Minsky bindings were characterized as outrageous or scandalous, but chiefly within the conservative world of bookbinders. Always interested in pushing boundaries, Minsky doesn't seem to have thought twice about binding Thomas Pettigrew's *A History of Egyptian Mummies* (1973) in linen strips, as if mummifying the book itself, without the owner's permission. Fortunately, he loved it.

Minsky adorned *The Birds of North America* (1975), submitted to a Guild of Bookworkers exhibition at Yale, with pheasant skin, so the first thing the reader sees is a dead bird on the cover. This reportedly caused a conservator to scream on opening the package. Looking at the book now, it's hard to see what the fuss was about, especially in light of Damien Hirst's formaldehyde-fueled career. Among the interesting aspects of Minsky's work is his attraction to unorthodox materials, such as the rat skins he tanned and applied to Patti Smith's *Babel* (1979), and the mystery skin covering Barton Lidicé Beneš' *The Dog Bite* (1970).

Personally, I find *The Geography of Hunger* (1988), creepier than the rest. The edge of the binding, embedded with teeth, creates a mouth on the fore edge that makes it look as if the book could bite off one's finger. Bits of food labels on the outer edges, make one feel the book has already chewed up a meal and is about to spit it back out.

Many Minsky books are off-the-shelf editions re-bound from his perspective. Usually strategic about the books he binds, he often selected hot-button titles and subjects along with binding materials certain to engage readers in a dialog about their content. Minsky decorated George Plimpton's *Fireworks: A History and Celebration* (1992) with live fireworks and a box of matches; *The Biological Time Bomb*



(1988) with explosives, batteries, electrical tape and a timer; and *Nineteen Eighty-four* with a miniature hidden video camera and embedded LED monitor so the reader sees on the cover his or her own image staring back above the warning “Big Brother is Watching You.”

Many volumes were bound deliberately to provoke or make a statement about important issues. For *Holy Terror: The Fundamentalist War on America's Freedoms in Politics, Religion and Our Private Lives* (1988), Minsky foil-stamped on Nigerian goatskin a picture of himself as a TV preacher surrounded by the flames of Hell. *Laying Waste: The Poisoning of America by Toxic Chemicals* (1988) sports a hypodermic needle, crack caps and a phosphorescent death head.

When Minsky develops a book from scratch — writing, illustrating and binding both the covers and their content — the subject is often sex. In *Minsky in London* (1980), the artist's sex life shares the stage with instructions on tanning rat skins. *Minsky in Bed* (1988) explores the former subject further, continuing a long tradition of artists and writers who have harvested their exploits as artistic fodder, from Casanova and Henry Miller to Tracy Emin's tent installation, *Everyone I Ever Slept With 1963-1995*.

Minsky's twist was to do it in the style of incunabula. Sculpted brass knobs, called bosses, shaped as a copulating couple, protect *Minsky in Bed's* leather covers from coming in contact with any reading surface, while handcuffs chain the whole apparatus to a brass bed rail. Other Minsky projects stretch the very idea of a book. He bound Erica Jong's *Sappho's Leap: A Novel* (2003) in the form of a scroll, and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Philosophy of Umbrellas* (2008) as a Tyvek umbrella to commemorate the late Judith Hoffberg, editor and publisher of *Umbrella*, long an important resource for information about artists' books.

At heart, however, Minsky is a traditionalist. His works include numerous traditional bindings, like the ones for *Cook's Voyages* (1968) and Tom Phillips' translation of *Dante's Inferno* (1980), as well as many blank books and guest books bound in exotic leathers with Art Deco and other historically inspired cover designs. And nearly all his books use traditional codices, even when attached to a bed, an electric chair, barbed wire, or linen wrappings. The form of the codex, even if not fully intact, is almost always recognizable.

Minsky has also called attention to earlier era's bindings with compendia like *American Decorated Publishers' Bindings 1872-1929* (3 volumes, 2006-2010) and *The Art of American Book Covers 1875-1930* (2010), which revived interest in a number of important book cover designers. Many were women, who were encouraged to find employment

creating designs for book covers and other objects of the new industrial age, and who have otherwise been written out of the history of the decorative arts of the period. Their stories are an important addition to the history of artists' books, and publishing.

The Book Art of Richard Minsky deserves a place on every book arts shelf. It brings us up to date with, and up close to, the career, still active, of an essential book artist. The photographs are clear, bright, inclusive and abundant. Minsky's vision is no less.

Miriam Schaer is a Brooklyn-based multimedia book artist, and a Lecturer in the Interdisciplinary MFA Program in Book and Paper at Columbia College in Chicago. She has exhibited steadily and extensively in solo and group exhibitions, and her work has been mentioned in a long list of articles and reviews. She is a recipient of a NYFA Artists Fellowship and her work has been included in the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series at Douglass Library, the oldest and longest-running exhibition series dedicated to showcasing women artists in the United States. Her work can be seen in many public collections including Arts of the Book at Yale University, The Mata & Arthur Jaffe Collection: Book as Aesthetic Object at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida, The Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture at Duke University in Durham NC. Her work can be seen on-line in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for the Feminist Art Base at the Brooklyn Museum, and at <<http://www.miriamschaer.com>>.

