

Lacunose

An Artistic Invention

By Paul C Delrue

Background

I completed my first lacunose binding in my Chester workshop in 1985. The binding was the biography of Blair Hughes-Stanton. I had over many years been experimenting with leather in the form of leather pictures. My work up to this point had been mostly illustrative, whereby I used many leather onlays to express myself. I had always thought of this approach as somewhat similar to 'painting by numbers' which can often appear rather childish. For a long time I had wondered how I could achieve a more naturalistic effect when working in leather.



One weekend, I had forwarded the Hughes-Stanton book up to the covering stage. I then decided, in a flash, to do something I had long wanted to do, which was to apply a piece of leather directly on top of the millboard. I used paste and PVA to apply the leather. I then overlapped some more pieces of leather and I puckered others in a random fashion. When I'd finished and achieved the overall effect I wanted on both front and back covers, difficulties emerged in that my montage, whilst pleasing to the eye, was structurally impractical. I felt so uncomfortable with what I had done that I decided to sleep on it. Fortunately the next day was Sunday, a very quiet day as usual. Looking at the book anew, I thought the best way for the boards to open and close would be to give the whole thing a sandpapering, something I had never dared to do on a binding until this point. I started off with a rough sandpaper and ended with a smooth one. The sandpapering on the Hughes-Stanton occupied me all day. When the leather began to lift a little it became obvious I should apply at intervals a very watery PVA. I quickly appreciated that no further sanding could be done until the watery PVA had dried. Near the end of the day's laborious sanding and PVAing, I noticed the most wonderful effects that the various leathers had, and to my surprise the book began to function beautifully – the opening and closing, the headcap and the turn-ins proved most satisfactory. The next day, I added some blind decoration directly onto the cover and in four weeks time it was snapped up by Prof John Burton of Bristol. It was my first ever lacunose binding, since when I have completed dozens more using this technique.

Up to this point the technique had been known as 'Sanding and PVAing'. It was only when I bound another book ten years later that a friend from Liverpool University decided that we really must put this technique together in a single name, and he called it 'lacunose' meaning 'furrowed' or 'pitted'.



The Technique

The following is a summary of the procedures (and pitfalls) of this marvellous technique which I hope will encourage others to try it.

Choose Your Leather

Using very good quality leather is essential for this technique. I personally find that Harmatan leather works better than any other for lacunose work. Harmatan's skins have rare and brilliant colours hidden away inside them – colours which are only revealed through sanding. Every piece of leather reveals different colours when sanded.

Preparation

Best results can be achieved for the beginner by practicing on a piece of board rather than directly on a binding.

Pare thinly some pieces of leather – initially whatever scraps of good leather you can find – preferably using a binders paring machine if one is available. Usually I would pare the edges to nothing with a paring knife.

Apply the leather directly onto the board (including turn-ins) with a 50/50 paste/PVA mix.

As you apply the pieces, vary the pattern of application, overlapping some pieces, puckering others, putting some directly on top of others. Interestingly, the hornier the leather, the more interesting the results.

After covering, wait at least an hour to dry in the press or under a light weight.

Sanding

Begin sanding tentatively with a rough grit paper. When the leather begins to thin, it will start to lift away from the board. At this point apply a coating of watery PVA, about 1/4tsp in 1/2 cup of water. Let dry for 1 hour.

Sand again with the next finest grit sandpaper (good quality wet & dry paper is recommended).

Apply watery PVA again, let dry then sand again.

The number of times you repeat the process will vary depending on the look you are going for and how pleased you are with the patterns emerging.

If you are unhappy with the design, you can apply new leather pieces and continue (this is especially helpful if you want to hide completely a shape or colour that does not work).

Pressing

Pressing between sandings is not always necessary, but can achieve the effect of compacting the leather layers already applied, making way for possible applications of new pieces.

After you have done the panel and are happy, put the completed lacunose panel in between formica boards overnight under light pressure. This imparts a wonderful sheen to the leather.

When pressed the surface will be very smooth to the touch, with interesting pits and furrows below the surface.

Headcaps and Turn-ins

Before the lacunose process begins, the headcaps are covered in the usual way as if for a full binding. Leather pieces are then applied up to, but not over, the caps. Leather pieces can be applied over the turn-ins and corners during the lacunose procedure. The board edges and turn-ins are sanded and PVAed along with the boards.

Variations

After the final pressing, any blind or gold tooling can be carried out. The lacunose leather can be as dark as you want, or, with extra sanding (and less PVAing) you can lighten the tones.

If you want a lacunose panel as part of a conventionally covered binding, or as part of a larger design, apply the thin layers of leather to a piece of archival aid paper taped to a board, and then drop it into the binding as a panel.

If carried out with care and patience, lacunose gives a result that is successful and pleasing, and gives the book an atmosphere that no other design approach can achieve.

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