The Art of the Artist's Book
By Samantha J. Cairo, Former Coordinator, Special Collections

Books are, and ever will be, one of the most useful and glorious creative works of all time. As a form, they have been around since roughly 200 CE, and will likely continue well past the age of the Internet and digitization. There is something almost awe inspiring about holding a book whose text speaks to you through the ready access of its portable availability. I do not recall my very first encounter with a book, but I do remember the first time I made one. Perhaps it was not the masterpiece I had envisioned when I began, but when it was completed I could not have been more proud of my alphabet book than if I had painted the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. I was only two years old, but at that tender age, I still realized how much fun books were to make.

There were other attempts over the next few years in which I tried to recapture the "brilliance" of my first experience, but each newly made "book" never quite became the masterpiece I envisioned. Then, five years ago, I took the job of Coordinator of Special Collections in WMU's Libraries, and began again in earnest to create books.

My incentive to "make a book" was partially developed during a period when I was working on a master's degree in Medieval Studies at the University. While earning the degree, I had many opportunities to examine "real" medieval masterpieces. I was also inspired through my job in Special Collections, which required repairing and caring for old books. Moreover, I had the opportunity to examine rare editions and unusual formats and shapes. Further, there were dozens of catalogs of all kinds of rare and unusual books; each provided a wealth of ideas about making a book. As a result of recreating a medieval manuscript, but in actuality I knew that such a creation was a far greater task than I could accomplish without practice. So I started small.

The first book I attempted to create in my newly discovered world was Pinocchio the Difficult Dachshund, a simple book. It was bound in a case binding like any other book you'd buy in the store with the exceptions that I used decorated paper for the cover, drew all the illustrations myself, and executed my own calligraphy. However, this simple description doesn't reflect the fact that creating this Pinocchio was a lot of work, although the finished product was worth it all since it became a "labor of love."

After a couple of other attempts that used a binding similar to my first creation, I decided to venture out into more unusual binding structures. Although I did not change the simple pamphlet bindings, that is, single signatures sewn without covers, the next books, specifically The Song of the Flame, Elixir, and Noel, were "shaped books." The top of the pages for The Song of the Flame were designed as if flames were rising off the book, every page of Elixir was a different shape, and Noel folded out into the shape of a star. Each of these was fun and fairly easy to construct; each led the way to more ornate and complicated work.

The time eventually came when I wanted to create something more complex than anything I had done before. The end result had to be beautiful; it had to be worthy of what I could do. The Mermaid's Tale was just that. The lines of the poem were calligraphed in waves; the paper inside the book was various shades of blues; the inks used were moss, silver, and bronze; and the cover was illustrated with paper cutouts of waves, silk ribbon, and beads. It was an arduous as well as ambitious project, but I was determined to create something new for the calligraphy show that I was entering. The only flaw of the book was the binding. The binding chosen was an Asian design called a hemp leaf design. The end result looks fantastic, but has one major problem: the board for the covers. Because the material selected was too stiff, the book doesn't open very well under the hemp leaf designed binding. Alas, my attempt at beauty was a success, but the book itself less a success than I wanted. Still, every book bound in the past five years has been a learning experience. I can readily attest that quite often you learn more from your mistakes than you do from your instruction manual.

Finally, after a few years of experimental book making, I attempted the medieval manuscript that I had first aspired to create. A class on the History of the Book taught by the late Dr. Thomas Amos, Professor of History and the Head of Special Collections in the University Libraries, gave me the opportunity. For his class I recreated a leather bound manuscript, complete with 12th century calligraphy, and an embossed cover. It was not the illuminated manuscript I had first dreamt of making, but it was a good "effort" and has prepared the way for the more complex "medieval" manuscript that will come.

I have learned many valuable techniques and discovered new ideas from each attempt at book making. I have seen catalogs of artist's books for sale and I have examined each unusual book that Special Collections has purchased over the years. Catalogs and other artist's books have been the most influential force on my work. I see a design and think, "Wouldn't it be better if ..." or I am inspired by other random visual occurrences. Sometimes a text demands a particular format; sometimes you have to find a text for a format just discovered. The problem is, though, once you start making books, you always have another idea for a new and different creation. But, as with all creative efforts, each new effort challenges me to start anew. After all these years, I can hardly imagine a better way to spend my free time than "making books." Or, if I were to quote another artist, it might be Henry James who said:

"It is art that makes life, makes interest, makes importance, for our consideration and application of these things, and I know of no substitute whatever for the force and beauty of the process.

—Letter to H.G. Wells, 10 July 1915

[Samantha Cairo left her position as Coordinator in Special Collections in October 2005, and is now living in California.]