

Past's Present: Artist's Books by José Oliveira

CATARINA FIGUEIREDO CARDOSO

CLP | *Universidade de Coimbra*

Abstract

José Oliveira is a book artist who takes inspiration from the history and evolution of the Western book and of Western writing. His artist's books take the form of codices, scrolls and *leporellos* and embody the beliefs, grief and hopes of their author. They ask us about our conceptions of the book and the nature of reading. They are evidences of their author's resolute rejection of contemporary techniques applied to books.

Keywords: Book; Artist's Book; Book Forms; Writing; Reading.

Resumo

José Oliveira é um artista do livro que se inspira na história e na evolução do livro e da escrita ocidentais. Os seus livros de artista assumem a forma de códices, rolos e *leporellos*, e incorporam as crenças, mágoas e esperanças do autor. Interrogam as nossas conceções sobre o livro e sobre a natureza da leitura. Constituem testemunhos de uma recusa evidente das técnicas contemporâneas do livro. **Palavras-chave:** Livro; Livro de Artista; Formas do Livro; Escrita; Leitura.

1. Introduction

José Oliveira is a book artist. He is also an artist of other arts: a concrete poet, a musician, a performer. A self-taught visual artist who studied sociology and anthropology but not painting or sculpture, he has taken from those arts the knowledge he needed to conceive his books, book-sculptures and other book-related works for the past 20 years. Working with books in multiple ways, José Oliveira has also produced bookworks in the sense defined by Garrett Stewart as “something done to a book, done with it and others like it, or done in place of it” (21). That is, he makes book-objects and book-sculptures as well as proper books.

In this essay I will deal mostly with Oliveira's books: I will not consider his bookworks. In order to differentiate books from his other work on books I will begin by defining what a book is. And because Oliveira creates artist's books, I will also offer a working definition of what an artist's book is. I will start with his books as embodiments of abstract concepts related to forms and structures of the book, and then examine in more detail the techniques and genres that we find in his artist's books.

2. Book Forms

Book format is the cherished art form for José Oliveira expressing his art. His books are mainly codices, but he has also produced scrolls and leporellos. Oliveira uses each format with specific aims: to enhance the difficulty of reading, to puzzle the reader, to establish cultural connections. Oliveira uses the typographic and bibliographic conventions to disrupt reading as an active element in the emergence of perceived form. His books are artistic objects that combine self-reflection on their condition as books with self-reflection on their condition as artistic objects (Portela, 2013b: 96).



Figure 1. *Arundel*.

Arundel (2003) is a good example of the shuffling of references used by Oliveira. *Arundel* is composed by a leporello and a box. The leporello literally sorts out of the box (Figure 1). The box has the shape of a codex, and the back cover of the leporello is pasted to the inside of the box, in what corresponds to the inside back cover of the codex. Blank pages painted in old oak alternate with pages covered with the characteristic Oliveira logograms, mainly inspired by hieroglyphs and runes.

In this work Oliveira plays with concepts close to the idea of *the book*: the box has the conventional and familiar format of the codex but when we open it we find a leporello. We realize and accept that the leporello is just another form of book but when we unfold it we find some pages inscribed with signs, while others are entirely painted in one colour. Blank pages are painted yet no verbal or visual sign is extractable from them. The pages inscribed with signs have a familiar look: signs are aligned in rows and columns and they do look familiar; we have the reminiscence of hieroglyphs, of ancient alphabets, and at the same time we sense they don't make any sense (Figure 2). They are symbols of signs that in their turn are symbols of sounds and of ideas, that is,

phonetic and logographic symbols (Robinson, 2013: 8). This is a characteristic of Oliveira's work: a recurrence of seemingly old languages and scripts which are graphic evocations of lost civilizations embodied in archaizing books.



Figure 2. *Arundel*.

In *Aegyptian Piece n° 0.34* (2009) an Egyptian reminiscence is even clearer and it is mixed with the Chinese tradition (Figure 3). In this work, Oliveira inscribed a Chinese hanging scroll with “makeshift signs based on primitive writings and stamps with hieroglyphs” (description by the author). The characters are grouped in four blocks, each headed by the name of a cardinal point in English. But a connection between each section's title and its respective ensemble of signs is not discernible. However, Oliveira's intention in creating this piece is clear: it was created for the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Fourth International Biennale for the Artist Book in 2009. It is significant that, for commemorating one of the most mystic libraries in Western imagination, Oliveira has used as medium a book with undecipherable signs, a very resistant paper scroll inscribed with ostensible hieroglyphs arranged as if they were referring to the cardinal points. Although we have the bibliographic indication that the four English words head texts, and assume that these four words are the titles of chapters, and that the meaning of the texts is related with their headers, in fact we don't know.



Figure 3. *Aegyptian Piece n° 0.34.*

Both *Arundel* and *Aegyptian Piece n° 0.34* are proper books in their own right. Actually, “book” is a convenient term for any recorded text: the word for book is traceable to “bark”, and originally could signify the surface on which a text was written, and hence all recorded texts (Suarez SJ and Woudhuysen, 2013: xi-xii). A book is a space of storage: it stores words, numbers, images. It materializes ideas, it renders tangible thoughts that otherwise would rely only on the person who conceived them.

When asked about what is the concrete rendition of a book, the immediate idea that comes to mind is that of a book as a codex: a set of handwritten, printed, illustrated or in other ways inscribed sheets, fastened together by one side. As Michael F. Suarez SJ and H.R. Woudhuysen eloquently put it in their introduction to *The Book: A Global History*, “the book’ label is an unfortunate one. Even when perceived as an archetypal part of a larger whole, the Western codex, much less the printed book, is not really an adequate emblem of many manifestations of text” (xii). Manuel Portela, in *Scripting Reading Motions: The Codex and the Computer as Self-Reflexive Machines*, reflects on the essential features of the book:

It is an ensemble of interrelations between thematic and material concerns that make up a discrete entity, whose structure, in its codex form, is conventionally composed of standard-size pages fixed in a rigid sequence. (...) The relation between this material syntax and its thematic and conceptual content is what may be described as the semantics of a specific codex form” (95-96).

What is at stake in the book is not its format alone (codex, leporello, scroll, tablet, loose sheets) but what it conveys: it is a form understood as the signifying organization of material (Moeglin-Delcroix, 2012: 4). The book has an ordered sequence of pages. Such a characteristic implies two things: the spatial unit of the page or of the double spread viewed simultaneously, and the length of time where this space itself is understood and located, which means that the page has not the autonomy of a painting, but appears and disappears, in turn, when it is prescribed by its position in the sequence (58-59).

This means that, if it is a codex, we must be able to open it and leaf through its pages. We must be able to roll and unroll a scroll, or have space enough to have it fully unrolled in the way that old Chinese scrolls are presented in exhibitions, or some contemporary scrolls are hung on walls. Or we must be able to stretch and unstretch it if it is a leporello. And we do these material operations to see what is inscribed on the surface of the book. Blank pages of a codex, a blank scroll, a blank leporello, are not books: they are note books, stationery, paper scrolls.

As so many other authors of artist’s books, José Oliveira does not restrict himself to the codex form; we have seen he uses scrolls and leporellos. Conversely, in his bookworks, he uses codices and other formats

historically close to artist’s books: boxes with objects including sheets of paper with writing or drawings, sculptures using books as one or more of their parts, or books that cannot be opened.



Figure 4. “No(w) title (blind book)”, 2008.

The bookwork by José Oliveira called “No(w) title (blind book)” is a tridimensional art work using a book as its main component. A double spread is open and the pages are attached to the cover. An acetate sheet is also attached to the covers but from the outside, creating a transparent and stiff curtain in front of the double spread. The pages have transferred drawings and the text on the acetate sheet has been photocopied. The front cover displays the title. This work looks like a book, reminds one of a book, has text and images, and yet is not a book. It cannot be opened and perused. It can be read and viewed, but only from the outside; only the fixed pages, the acetate sheet and the title on the cover. It has the form of the book but it is devoid of the content of a book.

Bookworks don’t fulfill the role of books: to allow the stored words, numbers, or images, the materialized ideas, the tangible thoughts encased in their surface to be accessible and deciphered by the reader. Garrett Stewart calls this avoidance of the book’s primary function demediation: “[D]emediation (...) names the undoing of a given form of transmission, now blocked or altered, in the medium of its secondary presentation” (1).

José Oliveira plays with and transfigures these assumptions. In “No(w) title (blind book)” we face an apparent conventional book, even with readable printed text (an extravagance for Oliveira) but it is not a book.

Conversely, in the *Ghazal* box (2005) we find unreadable objects that are proper books and readable objects that are not books.



Figure 5. *Ghazal*.

The *Ghazal* box (Figure 5) contains only scrolls that are presented as old scriptures: the inside of the cover bears a label with the name of the work; it is an old label, like those used in museums and libraries to identify and classify old precious objects. It is composed of two rolls of printed pages; the pages are glued to form the rolls. We can read the outside of the rolls (the portion of the pages that is visible) but we cannot open them and read their inside. The three scrolls can be fully opened but they are also hermetic in another sense: with the exception of some icons for animals or ordinary objects, their aligned and beautifully scripted signs are undecipherable. They remind us of hieroglyphs, but without a Rosetta stone they are as opaque as those sophisticated counterparts were before their decipherment (Figure 6).



Figure 6. *Ghazal*.

Is *Ghazal* a book? Yes, it is a book that performs the relation between the material and the conceptual inherent in all artist's books. It is composed by three scrolls that can be opened and display basic bibliographic characteristics: aligned signs to be read from the left to the right of the woodrollers, and from top to bottom of the page, thus combining the reading movements of both scroll and codex structures. They are stored in a box, as a way of protection. This box has the function of a binding or cover: to protect the more fragile pages, both from material deterioration and from the profane or by other reasons prohibited) gaze. The work comprises also the two glued rolls. If they were isolated, I would classify them as bookwork, because they cannot perform basic functions of a book. But they are integrated in *Ghazal*, with a specific function: to remind us that first appearances can be misleading, that the fact that we can recognize signs as words with meaning is not the full component of reading, and that we can read even when we see traces that we relate to letters or words that are completely undecipherable. They will never be deciphered because they don't have a codified relation between signifier and signified. As a pre- or anti-Saussurean counterpoint, Oliveira doesn't make a writing system of his signs. Their only function is to make present to us both the strangeness and the conventionality of reading as a naturalized action, to make us aware of the fundamental nature of reading: linking written signs to sounds and ideas.

3. *Concepts and Traditions: Artist's Books and Books by Artists*

An artist's book is a book entirely conceived as an art object, the content being consubstantial to the format in ways that foreground the book as a medium. This definition assumes that the book is a medium, in the sense of a specific artistic means of expression as determined by the creative methods involved and the materials used and in the feedbacks among formats, visual structures and other signifying layers. An artist's books' bookness manifests itself in "the specificity of their material form as books, the fact that as a signifying space they cannot be reproduced or translated into other media" (Portela, 2013b: 80).

There are two main trends in the critical analysis of artist's books: the conceptual artist's book from the 1960s and the traditional artist's book that takes its sources from the Western tradition of the book as an art and prestige object. This latter sense extends from illuminated manuscripts to the illustrated incunabula, passing through the *livres de peintre* of the end of the nineteenth century, arriving at the one-of-a-kind books made by famous artists or book artists that put all their skills in the rendition of virtuous painting abilities, rich paper and astonishing bindings.

The francophone world is neatly divided between these two trends. On one side we find Anne Moeglin-Delcroix and her strict conception of artist's books in their 1960s conceptual pureness (2012), accompanied by Leszek Brogowski (2010) and Marie Boivent (2008). For Moeglin-Delcroix, an artist's book is a book whose form and content are reciprocally determined by the artist, a multiple work printed with industrial techniques on common paper, in unlimited editions or at least in print runs.

On the other side we have the rich and influent tradition of the *beau livre*, *livre de peintre*, *livre de luxe*, born in the late nineteenth century with the Parisian publishers who made highly crafted books that joined a writer (or a traditional text) and a confirmed painter who illustrated it, many times for a bibliophiles' association. Yves Peyré in *Peinture et Poésie: Le Dialogue par le Livre* makes yet another distinction, the dialogue-book (*livre de dialogue*): a book created by a poet and a painter. To differentiate the dialogue-book from other painter's books (*livre de peintre*) the poet and the painter should work closely to integrate the respective works on a new work of art (Peyré, 2001: 6).

Johanna Drucker comprises both traditions in her *The Century of Artists' Books* (2004). Drucker's definition of artist's books is descriptive and comprehensive, encompassing a large range of books, from the 1960s strictly conceptual pamphlets to unique books, as long as they function as books. Conceptual books are the main examples, but the chapter "The Artist's Book as a Rare and/or Auratic Object" presents a famous work of art such as Duchamp's "La Mariée Mise à Nu par Ses Célibataires Même (The Green Box)" after Tatana Kellner's *50 Years of Silence* and followed by Christian Boltanski's *La Maison Manquante*. (97-100).

The 1960s saw the birth of conceptual art and of the conceptual artist's book. The development of this art practice led to a reflection on the book as a medium. The implicit or explicit knowledge of the bibliographic codes and of the expectations associated with these codes started to be perceived as essential elements in the material and conceptual operations that make the medium present to itself (Portela, 2013a: 19). The conceptualization of art was reflected not only in conceptual artist's books produced as multiples (using letterpress, offset, and other printing techniques), but also in one-of-a-kind books based on similar conceptual strategies. Unique books can also be conceptual works of art, but they have their roots in a more explicit and self-conscious way in the tradition of the 1600-years-old codex: the handwritten text, the painted page, the precious binding, the book as an object of luxury, a display of wealth, of prestige, of the high cultural achievements of its owner, of its *commissioner*.

José Oliveira marries both trends in his books: they are simultaneously conceptual and traditional. They continue to question the bookness of a book sometimes resorting to the craftsmanship required to make a sumptuous art object.

Let's take *Códice Aléria 1463-1480/Codex Aleria 1463-1480* (2010) (Figure 8). Here, we find simultaneously the book and its protection, in the sense that the cloth that protects book and cover is embedded in the cover. Oliveira draws his inspiration from Jaume Huguet's "The Consecration of St Augustine" that depicts the cleric at the left of the saint reading from a book with the same configuration, the cloth close-fitting its format (Figure 7). Huguet's masterpiece is dated 1463-1480, hence the title of Oliveira's work. The pages contain silvery crosses and other motifs that remind us of the halos or auras associated with the iconography of saints. With the exception of cloth and paint, the other components of the book were made by Oliveira, namely the cardboard for the cover and the paper. Therefore, Oliveira constructed a book whose exterior alludes to its interior in a symbiotic way: the cloth protects the content and simultaneously exhibits it, stressing its auratic and sacred nature, at the same time it is cover and ostensorium (Figure 9).



Figure 7. Jaume Huguet’s “The consecration of St Augustine”, detail.



Figure 8. *Códice Aléria 1463-1480.*



Figure 9. *Códice Aléria 1463-1480*: the cover fully opened.

Codex Disio (2001) originates in the same kind of self-reflexivity. “Disio” or “Desio” means desire and nostalgia, and is a materialization of both states of mind. The book is heavy and big; it measures 68(w) x 87(h) cm. Holding and handling it is further complicated by a rope that cuts through the book from the first to the last page (Figure 10). It is a thick rope that runs in eyelets and is prevented from slipping with a big knot at each end. Eyelets hold the rope at the upper half of the pages. The bottom half of rectos contains the text. It is disposed in white and light yellow stripes that protrude from the light brown handmade paper. This text is not written in a known alphabet; it is again composed by small drawings halfway between hieroglyphs and runes. We can only guess at their meaning. The versos are painted in a dark red (Figure 11). In the central spread we see a text written in continuous rows (Figure 12). The only intelligible text is written in the seal that hangs from the gutter, “Vir mitis” (gentle or mature man). These words belong to a motet composed by Johannes Ciconia c. 1410 in honor of Cardinal Francesco Zabarella, “*Doctorum Principem/Melodia Suavissima/Vir Mitis*”.

And so we can say that this book is the embodiment of its title: the frustrated desire of trying to read an unknown language is added to the difficulties of handling a heavy object. This manipulation is further hampered by the thick rope with which we have to negotiate when turning the pages. Finally, the gentleness of the man to which the book is dedicated, or to whom it belongs, may suggest the capacity for endurance of its ideal but ultimately unaccomplished reader: an amiable and tender person, mild and soft, will endure with more patience both the physical handling of such a heavy object as well as the frustration and setback of being unable to examine and grasp the meaning of those characters, words and sentences.



Figure 10. *Codex Disio.*



Figure 11. *Codex Disio.*



Figure 12. *Codex Disio.*

We cannot read this book in the customary way but it is still a book. Bibliographic codes function even when they are not explicitly incorporated in the literary form of the work, and when our ability to read a text is merely suggested as reminiscence of a prior experience. Reading bibliographic codes becomes a conscious and explicit element in the pragmatics of reading: readers are expected to read those embodiments of bookness into the meaning of the work (Portela, 2013b: 96).

Oliveira uses in *Codex Disio* some of the strategies I have already discussed about *Ghazal*. *Codex Disio* is a codex, a more familiar book form than the scrolls of *Ghazal*. This sense of familiarity was already disrupted by the rope that traverses it. The signs inscribed in its pages are not words with meaning and they will not be deciphered. But these features don't place it in the category of a bookwork: we can open it and leaf through its pages and sense the intentions of the author in the disposition of the pages and of the signs in the page. To deny it is a book because its text can't be read, or because of the fact that it has no proper text, would be to reduce the book to just one of its possible components (Moeglin-Delcroix, 2012: 58). It would be to deny more than 50 years of the history of artist's books, arguing that they are not books because they do not have a readable text. It would be to deny the bookness of many works by concrete poets like Ana Hatherly's *Mapas da Imaginação e da Memória* (Lisbon: the author, 1973), to quote just an expressive example.

In fact, artist's books demand a new way of reading: artist's books that host text and image in dialogue, be it in collusion or collision, display two forms of representation, asking for a new type of reader that must transform her/himself into reader-viewer. The idea of an illustrating medium contrasting with an illustrated medium has become obsolete (Oberhuber, 2012: 13, 21). The shape of the book should be something other than a convenient receptacle containing an indifferent content. Artist's books establish a relationship of mutual convenience, of mutual dependence, between the structure of the book and the book's subject (Moeglin-Delcroix, 2012: 57). Form and content are mutually constitutive. Formal structure, haptic manipulation and verbal and visual content are placed in a feedback cycle.

The reader-viewer has actually to physically engage her/himself in the reading act in a "tactilreading" process (Oberhuber, 2012: 21-22). Sometimes, as happens in *Codex Disio*, this physical involvement is particularly strong. But it is inherent to all reading: the feeling of reading is given by bibliographically materialized operations in ways that give readers awareness of their haptic and visual processing of this form (Portela, 2013b: 77).

An artist's book is itself the work: if it has a text, it must be inscribed in the surface of the book, it does not exist outside of it. The same goes for the image: it does not exist outside the book. It is the absolutization of MacLuhan's idea: the medium is the message in the most immediate and

physical assumption, since you hold it in your hands, you scan it with your eyes, you smell it, it has a weight, it occupies a space, it invades your body. It is not just an idea or a thought, it is not just in your head as a disembodied emanation of written signs. It is in your hands, and the mechanics of its physical handling is designed to generate this experience of embodiment.

4. *Sacred books*

José Oliveira's first book was made during the final stage of his mother's fatal illness. It is entitled *Mer-Mère 1933-1995* (1995) (Figure 13). It is a painted book on board, with somber pages painted in a thick mixture of ocher, yellow and black, with crosses and a pair of words in the inside back-cover, which are a partition of the word nostalgia: nost and algia. "Nost" refers to "our" in Portuguese and "algia" is "pain" in Greek; it can be read as "our pain" (Figure 14). "Our pain" seems to me a more adequate etymology for Oliveira's nostalgia than *nóstos* (homecoming) and pain. Oliveira transferred his suffering to the pages of this book, an initial gesture of reification that is a feature of the whole of his work.



Figure 13. *Mer-Mère 1933-1995*.



Figure 14. Mer-Mère 1933-1995.

Being also a musician and a music lover, many of Oliveira's books have more or less explicit relations with music. We find an explicit relation in *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel/Lessons of Darkness: A Tragedy* (2002-2008) (Figure 15). "Leçons de Ténèbres", literally lessons of darkness, is a genre of French Baroque music which developed from the Polyphonic settings for the tenebrae (Latin for 'shadows' or 'darkness') service, a Christian religious service celebrated within Western Christianity on the evening before or early morning of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, the last three days of Holy Week. The distinctive ceremony of tenebrae is the gradual extinguishing of candles while a series of readings and psalms is chanted or recited. They have been set to music by many composers, of whom the most famous are Palestrina, Tallis, Lassus, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, François Couperin, Ernst Krenek and Stravinsky (cf. "Tenebrae." *Wikipedia*).



Figure 15. *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel.*

In his *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel*, Oliveira transcribes versicles from the Holy Bible, and connects them with dates from the year the book was created: 2002. The pages of the first part of the book all have the same structure: in the upper half, they are painted in light silver and have the versicles stamped with letters from the French company Mecanorma. In the lower half, they are painted with old oak and show dark and disquieting pictures (Figure 16).

By the middle of the book the mood changes. Pages become bright yellow and are occupied by a male figure that bleeds in most of them (Figure 17). The first time this male figure appears, he is accompanied by the phrase “Ora pro Nobis” (pray for us), a sentence present in most prayers to the Holy Mary, asking Her to intercede with Her Son on behalf of the faithful (Figure 18). The male figure is accompanied, in the following pages, by other sentences in Latin, transmitting the (false) impression that they belong to other Catholic prayers. The book closes with a quotation from the title of Francesco Colonna’s famous book *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, ubi humana omnia non nisi somnium esse docet. Atque obiter plurima scitu sane quam digna commemorate* (Venice: Aldus Manutius for Leonardus Crassus, December 1499). The quotation is «Ubi humana omnia non nisi somnium esse docet» (where there is nothing but a dream to teach humans) (Figure 19).

We can see in this succession of citations and their rendition on the pages an ascent of the author from somber thoughts to hope and eventually to happiness. This ascent is made through religion: the terrors of the Old Testament lead to a possible solace obtained by the intervention of the Mother of Christ, and the hope of life in dream, although dream-life is life-out-of-this-world. Oliveira mourns his late mother and seems to try, via the Mother of All, to find his mother in the land of dreams, the only place where he knows he can be with her again.



Figure 16. *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel*.



Figure 17. *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel.*

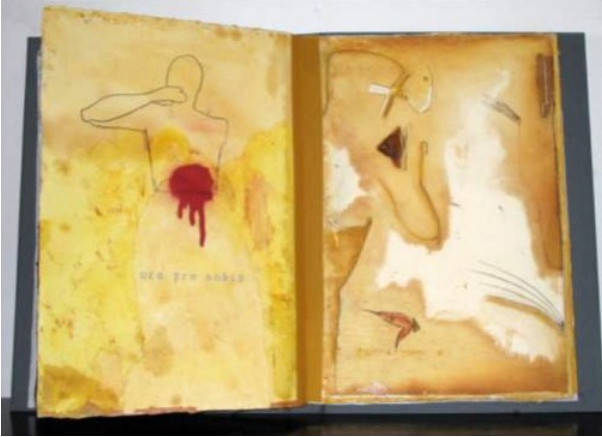


Figure 18. *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel.*



Figure 19. *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel.*

In these two books, *Mer-Mère 1933-1995* and *Leçons de Ténèbres: Ein Trauerspiel*, José Oliveira uses the book for one of its transcendent and mystic functions: an embodiment of the sacred, a presence of the divine, an object of worship due to the nature of its subject.

A book can store divine or, at least, sacred messages. When a collection of messages is considered sacred, it is set apart from other types of literature, it is complete, it represents order, unity and perfection. Instead of looking at the book as a sacred object, it might be better to concentrate on the religiosity of its message (Olson, 2013: 19-20). But the metonymic temptation leads us, Judeo-Christian peoples of Books, to invest the recipient with the divine nature of the content, and therefore to worship it, to protect it, to adorn it with the riches and beauties we believe we are bestowing to its Divine Emitter.

The sense of the book as a sacred object leads to a particular kind of artifactual production which manifests in physical form the status of the book as an object. The incorporation of the holy book in the religious ritual is an obvious example of fetishistic practices of preservation or worship of the material form of the sacred book. Parts of books, or even whole books, are used as talismans and buried with the dead. Conversely, the destruction of books is virtually synonymous with the annihilation of the ideas they embody, and even of their authors and owners. The symbolic meaning of the book translates into the mystical value of the book as artifact. The idea of a magical power inscribed into the very letters of the text finds graphic form in the tradition of illuminating letters. The book is a figure of itself as much as it is a figure of the contents it represents. (Cummings, 2013: 95-96).

By investing books, and specifically these two books, with such careful manufacturing and sentimental engagement, Oliveira integrates a noble tradition of book creators, who put in their productions the best resources of their abilities, knowledge, faith, hope and love.

5. Conclusion: a hand-writing artist

José Oliveira is a hand-writing artist. He cultivates the auratic value of the hand-written, hand-painted, hand-pasted. His books are all hand-made, letters, signs and drawings designed and colored on the page, applied with transferable techniques, silkscreened. This is one of the outstanding features of his books: they are artisanal, which means that the materiality, the relevance of apparent materials and of “making” inform their structure and design. Oliveira is not alone in the tradition of creators of handwritten books, although today most of them are clustered in the realms of artist’s books and *livres de peintre*. For some, both writers and readers, it is the initial inscription, not the printed outcome, which represents the perfect embodiment of the imagined word (Love, 2013: 203).

As is well known, manuscripts didn't disappear with print. They lie behind each phase of the history of early printing, as the source for texts and as a model for the printed book's physical appearance. Some of the first types emulated some of the more common scripts, with regional variants and other derived from specific usages. Notwithstanding the prevalence of print since its invention, manual interventions in incunabula led to an increase in work for the craftsmen formerly employed in the production of manuscripts: large capital initials, paragraphs, marks, rubrication, decoration and illustration were added by hand to the set page (Dondi, 2013: 83-84).

The "stigma of print" remained a feature of the literary world even after printing was well established. This stigma existed for women and other authors that didn't want to have their work for sale. The burdens of censorship and the Inquisition, and the religious turmoil in Europe, plus the strict regulation of printing activities and the costs of printing, all worked for a wide maintenance of practices of copying by hand, both for private use and for a cautious circulation of more or less confidential works. There was also a lively exchange of scientific, alchemical and astrological manuscripts in Latin all over the enlightened world (Love, 2013: 197-199).

As we have seen, Oliveira's books are made with most of the techniques employed in the creation of books, except letterpress printing. He also makes use of most book formats: the codex is prevalent, but scrolls and leporellos abound in his production. Many forms of written language are also summoned to his pages, although not in a correlation to the book formats we usually associate with them: hieroglyphs, runes and other reminiscences of ancient writings are present in scrolls but also in codices.

In this as in other respects Oliveira's work is archaic and archaizing. He drinks his inspiration from old sources: hieroglyphs, runes, Gothic letters, Primitive Flemish painters, illuminated books of hours and of music. His works are the product of the hand, of the work of the hand applying the ink and the transfer, shaping the paper, molding the fabric to the board to make the cover. They are the inheritors of 1600 years of history, of the history of the book but also of the history of Western painting, of the perceptions of Europeans facing new cultures and older civilizations and integrating them in their Westerner culture-world.

In the tradition of William Blake and Victor Hugo, we hesitate to say whether Oliveira is a painter or a writer. Naturally he is both.

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