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DESIGNER BOOKBINDERS NEWSLETTER **NO 184** WINTER 2018



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'The view from Ascona' Suzanne Schmollgruber

"Suzanne Schmollgruber is the Director of the Bookbinding and Design department at the Centro del Bel Libro in Ascona, more information on Suzanne's responsibilities and activities within the school can be found here

<https://www.cbl-ascona.ch/en/home>

As the youngest of 5 children, born in the French part of Switzerland, and growing up in Austria, I was very lucky to have a jeweller and watchmaker for a father. I would find myself in his workshop, imitating gestures, and I would love to try and make all sorts of tools and materials, learn new skills and discover the attention to detail in a playful way.

I was 18 when I visited my first bindery, this was completely by chance, it was such a revelation, I was fascinated by everything I saw in that workshop. All my plans and priorities suddenly changed. all of a sudden, I enrolled on a very typical Swiss apprenticeship. I learned to work quickly, to repeat an infinite series of bindings, boxes, structures and cases. I finished my exams, but somehow became very frustrated and bored, life was changing again. I decided to travel and try something else.



I'd heard about the Centro del Bel Libro, so I decided to try one course and see how it went? The French binding, I wanted to learn how to make it properly, at least once, and then I would find something more interesting.

A sort of enlightenment happened when I saw Edwin Heim teaching. I was so inspired by his course, the respectful way he treated books, his refined skills and his professionalism, that my only thought was "This is it! - C'est ÇA que je veux faire!!! - That's what I want to do".

I got the opportunity to stay and study at Ascona for a whole year, taking all the courses, meeting students and teachers from all over the world, practising techniques in detail, with time and an absolute amazing master's support. After all the rushing, hurrying and eventual frustration I'd experienced from my years as an apprentice, I finally experienced what I was intensely looking for and this for me was like a balm for the soul.

Little by little, I started to collect and buy tools as well as other bits of equipment, all very small in size, but, I needed to be able to build up my workshop at home.

After exactly one year of full immersion in paradise, I moved to Basel where I worked in different binderies. I shared my life and my workshop with a violin maker. I learned to work with wood, something I really loved. My workshop was almost complete when I felt a strong need to discover new horizons.

I was 25 when I moved to Barcelona. I moved my whole bindery and started from scratch, working mostly for artists, graphic designers, architects, museums and exhibitions.

In the beginning it was not easy making a living. But I remember that people were curious about what I was doing and wanted my work and that was a great motivation. All the time I was thinking about looking for a part time job, I was fortunate, I had the chance that, one way or another, work came in and I always made bookbinding a priority.

During the last three years of my time in Barcelona, a friend of mine Marta, who's a social worker, created a bindery for young people with disabilities. At the time I had serious health problems of my own, and Marta hired me to teach these young people. This gave me the opportunity to guarantee a regular income, as well as the time to be able to take care of my own health. The human enrichment during this working experience was enormous and gave me the courage I needed to make ends meet.

In Summer 2004 I met Sabino, who later became my husband. He came to Barcelona from Milan for a vacation, and it was only a year later I moved to Italy. I packed up my whole workshop and started all over again, keeping clients and courses in Spain, France and Switzerland. My professional life in Milan was tough and in complete contrast to my more enjoyable and successful years in Barcelona. But even this was useful.

At the end of 2009 a letter from Ascona arrived out of the blue. I read that Edwin would soon retire and would I like to apply for the role? I never thought about it, but Edwin really encouraged me to apply, so I sent my CV certain they would never ever hire me. Not me!!!



Kylin Lee Acherman at the workbench, Kylin has been a guest teacher for many years.

But I was wrong.

Here starts the scary part. When I saw the course programme I had to prepare I just wanted to faint. I still remember sitting with Edwin in front of this endless course list, repeatedly saying "how can I do all of this?" His simple Zen like masters answer, with his super calm voice, which still resonates with me today, "not all together, just one at a time, one after the other!" he said. Edwin spent hours and hours supporting me, explaining the minutiae, what felt like the millions of details, techniques and experiences. I felt a huge responsibility while he was handing over his little child - the school - on a silver tray. I absolutely would not have made it without his permanent help and support.

Each week a new technique was on the programme. I spent the first 5 years, every night and weekend preparing, studying, repeating, sweating and trembling.

Today, after eight and a half years, I am still sweating and trembling before each course, a sort of stage fright, but at least I am starting to handle it now. Experience has turned me into a calmer person and more trusting in my abilities. I'm not an expert, but a sort of allrounder. I feel as much like the student, because I am still learning, it's how I handle the process. I think of the Centro del Bel Libro like a platform of sharing knowledge. People from all continents come with their own background, creating together their very own personal and unique experience, needs and interests, technically and artistically.

Last summer I had the opportunity to be invited by the Designer Bookbinders President Lori Sauer, to her wonderful bindery for a residency as part of the BINDING re:DEFINED programme. Again, I felt so scared, it actually turned out to be one of the most important highlights of my year! I met fantastic people with great motivation and that's a dream for teaching. Thanks to this experience, I am here writing my story, grazie mille Lori and Designer Bookbinders!

The Centro del Bel Libro also has had many Designer Bookbinders students, visit and do the courses, as well as many Designer Bookbinders as guest teachers within our programme, and that's a privilege!

A colleague told me that if we have a privilege we have a duty. My duty is the greatest pleasure I could ever imagine: sharing what I love to do!

How will our craft evolve? I think that we more than ever need to make the difference by pushing our work towards detail and high quality. The future of our craft is change. Then let's be ready for change. The only thing we really need, for whatever we choose to do, is to follow our passion. Mine is just binding books - the most sexy work in the world!"

Suzanne

