



What can a bookbinder do in the 21st Century?

Ben looks back on twenty years of bookbinding and shares key lessons about running a business that he has gathered along the way. From supplier to the hospitality industry to inventor of bookbinding structures to pioneer of online teaching to innovator in the rare book world, Ben's story has been one of dedication, autonomy and relentless exploration, providing answers to the question "What can a hand bookbinder do in the 21st Century?"

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Ben was born in France in 1983. He is well known for his contributions to the field of innovative book structures with bindings such as the onionskin, elbum, planel, tue-mouche and the most recent, the pixel, to name but a few. He operates a boutique bindery specialising in presentation solutions for books, manuscripts and more. Ben fell in love with bookbinding whilst studying illustration in Strasbourg. What was first a hobby quickly turned into a burning passion, resulting in him leaving illustration to study bookbinding and conservation at the Centro del bel Libro in Ascona, Switzerland. Two years after leaving, Ben was asked to return to teach a class on his own bookbinding structures, making him the youngest ever instructor in this internationally renowned school. The years following his formal training were devoted to acquiring work experience. For five years Ben worked in various companies in Germany and the UK, undertook internships and travelled the world to meet mentors.

Ben first established himself as a self-employed bookbinder in London, under the name Elbel Libro, a tribute to his place of training in Switzerland. Together, he and Kieke Schaaper worked for stationery brands, the hospitality industry (hotel and restaurant menus), ran an independent print and bind service for a while and gradually made their way to the rare book world, in which they still mostly operate today. In the meantime, Ben continued teaching locally and across Europe. In 2014 he and Kieke travelled to the US and taught at various art centres from North Carolina to the West Coast. Around that time, he was the first to conduct a successful online course using Skype and soon after began publishing instruction manuals under the imprint 'bookbinding out of the box'. Today Ben continues his research and services to the rare book world and is available as a consultant around his areas of expertise: binding and presentation structures, boxmaking, edition binding, foil blocking, lean manufacturing and workflow optimisation. Ben and Kieke live in rural Alsace with their son, Maxime.