

“You have got to think how

PUT

to put the touch of art on this thing

THE

that is going to be produced

ART

at a level price,

ON THIS

which allows for no handwork.”

Beginning in the 1880s, Sarah Wyman Whitman forged a new approach to book cover design using simple yet elegant forms, carefully chosen cloths and a distinctive lettering style. She was responsible for a significant number of Houghton and Mifflin covers throughout the 1880s-90s. Possibly in reaction to the rather overwrought covers that were the norm in the 1870s and 1880s, Whitman reduced book decoration to the essential. Although she designed "special" editions in vellum with gold stamping, the majority of her work for the mass market employed two colors of cloth and a single color of ink for stamping. The production costs for Whitman's book covers were probably quite low when weighed against their effectiveness as advertising tools. Quite a few of the books Whitman designed were written by close personal friends, among them Sarah Orne Jewett and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Correspondence between Whitman and publishers testifies to her involvement in the entire process of bringing a design to the public, as well as to her desire to faithfully represent the author's vision. Through her artistry and success, Sarah Wyman Whitman inspired many young women to enter the field of book design.

“Ten years ago you would have found book covers,

PUT

which represented a combination of bad

French art mixed with Japanese art,

THE

scrolls and arabesques

mixed with a bit of a Japanese fan,

CONTENT

the suggestion of a sun, a stork, or strange diagonal lines,

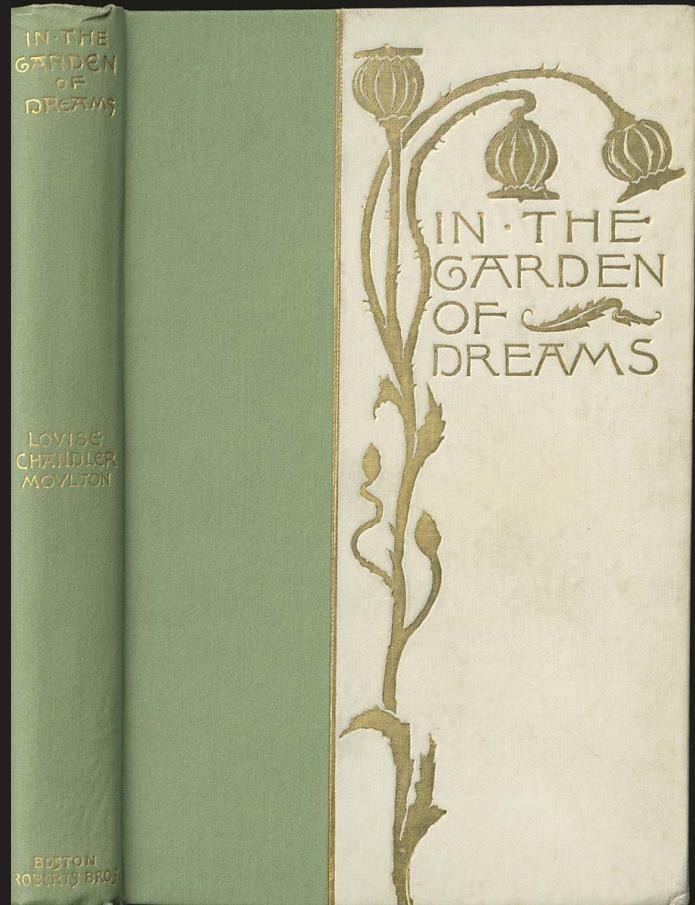
ON THIS

so beautiful in pure Japanese art,

but so fatal and terrible on a book.”

CONTENT

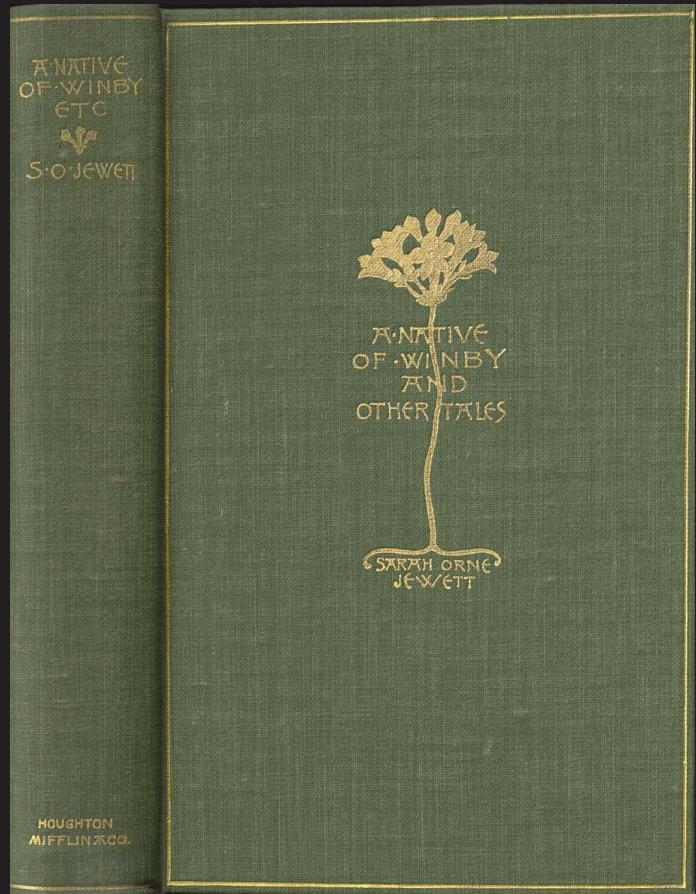
Hearthrobs is visually overwhelming. The disparate compositional elements overlap in a design that is one motif away from a chaotic mess. It appears as if at least eighty percent of the available space is covered in designs, which range from a stork in a medallion to abstract ornament that juts from the edge in harsh diagonals. The text is nearly swallowed by the decorative elements that surround it; moreover, the ornamentation does not appear to have been rendered with much sensitivity or technical skill. Ultimately, the viewer is left to contemplate the significance of the stork and tree branch, which feature so prominently in the covers design, yet do not appear to have any relationship to the content of the work. If not aesthetically pleasing, designs like the one for Heartthrobs of Authors reveal that publishers, if only for a moment, were more interested with the novel effect of new technology than principles of good design. The lack of connection between the cover's imagery and the book's content and the crude composition of discordant design elements suggest that a trained artist did not execute the design for Heartthrobs.



1890, light green and white cloth, gold stamped lettering, line border, and thistle.

CONTENT

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1893, pine green cloth, gold stamped lettering and stemmed mayflowers.

“Letters were the most beautiful embroidery

PUT

in the world because it was

THE

an embroidery that spoke.

To any one who learns

LETTERS

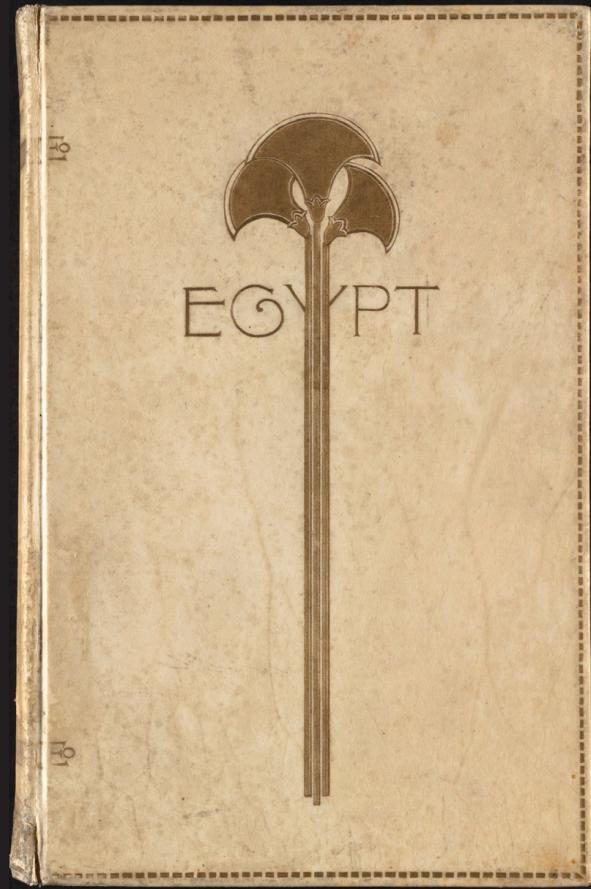
to love it, it is the enduring pleasure

ON THIS

to decorate by letters.”

LETTERS

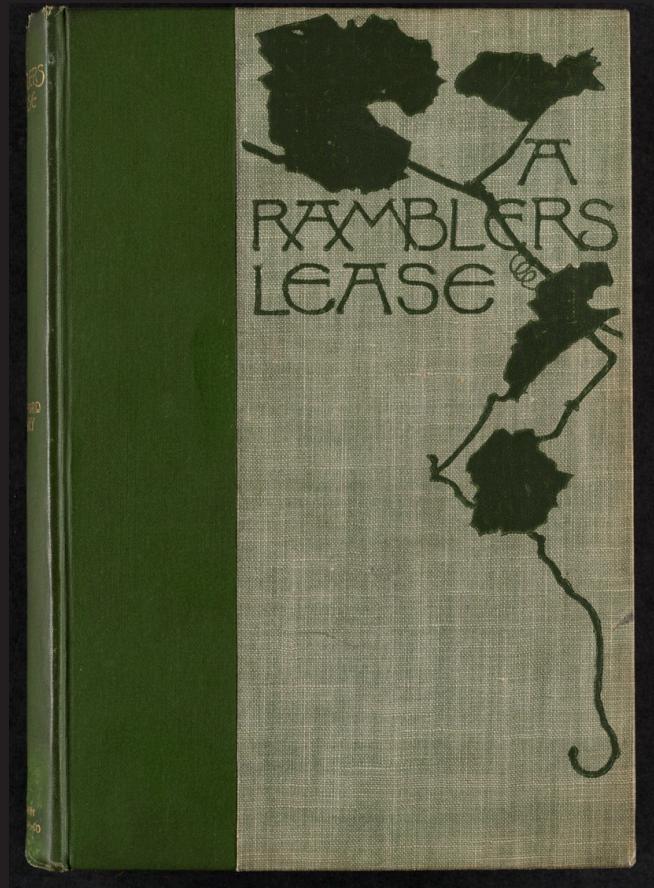
Whitman's letters A, C, E, G, and S can be our diagnostic. In the informal hand, the A is like that used by the German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer, with a cross-bar top. E is mostly a shallow epsilon, though the early letters are nearly C-shaped. The center bar often ends with a trumpet-shaped serif. G is a sort of vortex whose uppermost end sometimes points slightly upward; S ranges in appearance from two labored C shapes to a sleek angled slash that extends below the writing line. In the formal style, look for the usually rather small but sharp serifs. The bowl of the P and R sits high on the vertical stroke and often extends out relatively far; the angle of the descender of the R is shallow and often starts fairly far out on the bowl. The N and M are sometimes very wide, and the middle bar of the E is often longer than the top bar. V is often substituted for U. All her letters are hand drawn and the careful observer will note slight variations between repeats. Dots are often used to separate words. Whitman often overlaps calligraphy and imagery, partially obscuring the lettering.



1892, cream vellum, gold stamped lettering and papyrus.

LETTERS

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1889, three-part binding, dark green and light green cloth, dark green stamped lettering and leaf and vine.

“Her radically simple and unified design

PUT

would have contrasted

starkly with the over-gilded,

THE

ornament-encrusted covers

NEGATIVE

SPACE

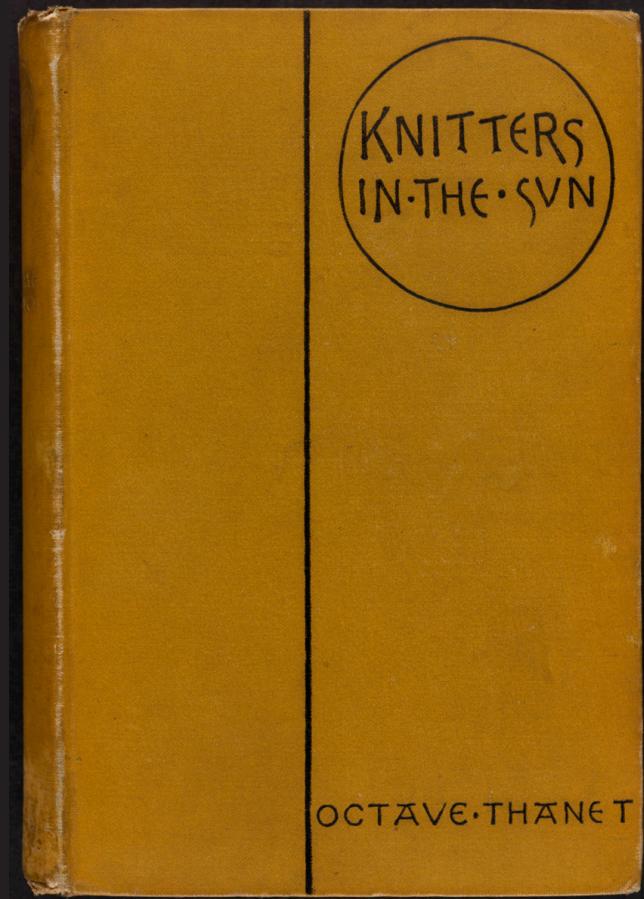
produced for contemporary

ON THIS

American publications.”

SPACE

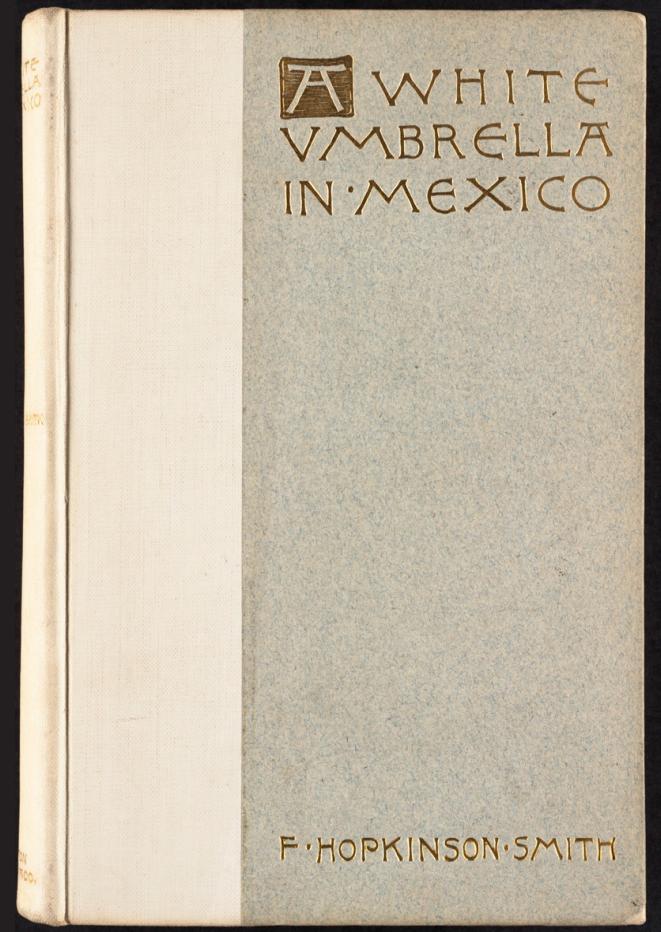
Whitman's design for Knitters in the Sun illustrates that she could make evocative choices with limited financial resources, while still giving careful thought to composition and motifs. For Knitters, Whitman drew inspiration for the cover's imagery from the novel's title. Sarah's placement of a circle in the highest quadrant of the cover and the choice to clothe the book in yellow fabric concisely evokes an image of a sun, hovering above the horizon line. Other than the text, Whitman includes only one other motif. She draws a dark line off-center, which perhaps, evokes the image of a knitting needle or the popular two-color, three-part binding convention. Although Whitman was committed to clearing the Victorian clutter from book covers, Knitters takes her interest in negative space and minimalism to an extreme. Like all her designs, the inconsistencies in her lettering evoke the calligraphic tradition, but more important, illuminate her willingness to embrace the technology that made the mass-produced book financially feasible in the late nineteenth century. Whitman creates the "aura" of a handmade object by mechanical means.



1887, mustard yellow cloth, black stamped lettering within circle.

SPACE

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1892, white and grey cloth, gold stamped lettering.

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