

Better books abide

‘See’, says Herman van Waarden as he opens the book. ‘That’s how it should be. The endpapers are lying nice and flat, open. With a lot of modern books, the endpaper – and sometimes even the half-title page – open straight away with the cover. I call that the self-reading book. It’s because of the way they’ve joined the interior and the binding together. That didn’t happen with me. It’s all about these details.’

The little book Herman is using as an example, is one he recently bound himself. Although his bookbinding business, Boekbinderij Van Waarden, stopped trading four years ago, Herman is still making books. Beautiful books. After the business was taken over by Wilco, he stayed on for a year in the role of consultant. Since then, he’s been working as a freelance bookbinder. Under the name Bindwerk in de Nok (‘Bindings in the Attic’ – he has a finishing press in his attic at home), Herman is following in the footsteps of his great-great-grandfather Johannes Alexander van Waarden, son of a bookbinder who in 1840 founded Boek- en Bijbelbinderij [Book and Bible Binders] J.A. van Waarden. ‘I sometimes come across his name in antiquarian books, from the days when he started out, in an attic on one of the Amsterdam canals. It’s really special to still see that. Books abide.’

Herman’s grandfather, also named J.A., expanded the business. ‘He was an artistic character. But he also had good business sense.’ Grandpa also had one son, also called J.A. ‘My father wasn’t a bookbinder, that really wasn’t his passion. He might, I think, have made a good lawyer. Or preacher. But he carried on the business, out of a sense of duty, and did so with great dedication.’

Of the next generation, it wasn’t Herman’s eldest brother who took over the bookbinding business: ‘They gave him the initials J.A., just in case. But he took a different direction entirely. My brother Theo was the one who chose to carry on the business.’ Herman also had other plans: ‘I wanted to study to become a vet.’ But it didn’t work out. So, at the age of 18, he started work at the bookbinders ‘as an emergency stopgap’.

‘I had no ambition to become a bookbinder. If I’d trained outside of the graphics industry, I’d never have become a binder. Maybe there was some kind of providence in play: Theo got the T for Technical. And Herman got the H for Handel [Dutch for trade or business]. If you were to see us together, you’d never guess that we’re brothers. We’re totally different characters. Which is why it worked out for us, together.’ Together, they were the fifth generation to run Boekbinderij Van Waarden.

Niche market

Herman was soon setting new standards. ‘Back in those days, there were two binders who stood head and shoulders above everyone else. Wöhrmann in Zutphen, and Van Bommel in Amsterdam; they were the best in the business. This is the seventies I’m talking about now; we were in the centre of Amsterdam. The Provo movement was getting going, there were squatters everywhere. And new printers were springing up, like Raddraaijer, and Jan de Jong and his publisher De Buitenkant. I regularly spoke to Rob Stolk – he really went his own way. He opened my eyes more and more to the niche market for better books. At that

moment I decided: that's the direction I want to go in. All the way to the top, past Wöhrmann and Van Bommel. I don't want any compromises on quality at all: we will make the client's dream reality.'

He set the bar high. 'I wanted to make bindings with really thin card in them, like Van Bommel did for Van Oorschot's Russian Library. In the Netherlands, 2 millimetre thick card was standard, but he used card that was 0.5 millimetres thick. This meant it looked like a flexibound book, although it actually has a shoulder so that the book lies open nicely. I wanted to do that too. And I was able to, eventually. That was a victory.'

Herman gave himself and the business five to ten years to grow into the top binder he had in mind. In 1992, they left Amsterdam: they built a new building in Zaandam, designed by Theo. 'Suddenly, we were taken seriously. There was even an article in the trade journal *Graficus* that said that the Van Waarden brothers are 'guys with vision', because we had chosen the niche of the hard cover at a time when soft covers were all the rage. In reality, we didn't have much choice: we had our hands full with the orders we had.'

Tears in my eyes

Two years later, on 8 April 1994, the building burned to the ground. But the brothers wouldn't let this set them back: Theo went in search of replacement machines, Herman found temporary premises. By July of that year, the building had been rebuilt, and the machines were running again. 'One of the most beautiful books we ever made dates from those days.' He holds it up: *Orlando Furioso*, a book-lovers edition by Stichting de Roos, printed by Bram de Does on laid antique paper with deckled edges. Measuring just 17.5 by 9.5 centimetres, and 96 pages thick. 'I had tears in my eyes as I sat looking at it when it was finished. That we were able to make such a beautiful little book under those conditions. Such a little gem, it makes life worth living. That was a tipping point in my career.'

In no time, the company could have grown to two or three times its size: 'We couldn't do at least 30 percent of the jobs we were offered.' But Herman preferred to continue to focus on quality, rather than on growth. 'In terms of the figures, we expanded gigantically, but staying within the same small group of people. We stuck with the craft approach, or rather: industrial-traditional, because of course we did use machines.'

Block of granite

Boekbinderij Van Waarden started to make a name for itself and was able to gain a unique position. 'Costs a fortune, but a really good binder', is how Herman sums up this reputation, relativising. 'Customers might not always have appreciated me always sticking to my principles. I think some of them thought I was arrogant. Or, as one customer once said: "You're about as flexible as a block of granite. But I like you anyway."'

This resulted in unique assignments for the binding business. Herman picks up the famous book by Sheila Hicks: 'This is of course the most beautiful book in the world, even though it looks really simple. But how on earth do you create an edge that's roughed like that?' This is, in fact, he immediately adds, a secret kept by Irma Boom, a book designer with whom Van Waarden has frequently worked. He picks up another example of a Boom project: a facsimile edition of a breviary. 'Bound in kid suede, with a hand-made silk headband. With gold tooling, and all the trimmings. Print-run of 1,500. A real prestige object, it went all over the world. A fantastic thing to make.'

Elite level

'I often say: it's not difficult to make a book, but making a beautiful one is. Particularly if you have to make it in series – that's playing at the elite level. It's a very complex process – I sometimes compare it to a field full of mines that can go off in the most unexpected places.' This is why Herman likes to be in direct contact with the designer: 'My point is: the printer translates the client's wishes for me. But ideally, I want to hear it from the horse's mouth. This didn't always endear me to printers.'

In 1970, Herman's father told him: 'You'll just about see it out.' He had seen that the world was changing – and he was proved right: in 2021, Boekbinderij Van Waarden closed down. A takeover by Herman's daughter, who following a detour chose to come into the bookbinding business after all, proved impossible given the state of the market at the time. Renowned printers were disappearing, binders were then also going under. 'Of course, that's a shame, but I take a realistic view', Herman says. 'It is what it is. The increases in scale that are taking over everywhere are taking their toll. Capitalism is based on growth.'

No such thing as 'can't'

Nevertheless, he believes that the better book niche will certainly continue to exist. He picks up a chunky art book, on the Belgacom Art Collection. 'This is interspersed with pages that have a different format from the book itself. And they are floating: they don't line up with the head or tail, because they have to be in the middle, right throughout the book. The print-run is five thousand, so I really didn't fancy doing it semi-manually.' In the end, the production was completely by machine: 'How? If you and the printer are on the same page, you can achieve this kind of result. Then: "There's no such thing as can't".'

Herman sees being awarded The Capital this year above all as an overdue appreciation of the bookbinder's profession. 'The focus on the individual that this award somewhat expresses, that's something I really don't relate to.' Which is why he seizes the moment to direct more attention to the work of the binder – also within The Best Dutch Book Designs: 'There are never any binders in the jury. Even though: it's not only the design that has to be right, but the technical realisation also has to be spot on. Too often, I see productions I'd just about give a seven. It's adequate, but it could be better.'

It's all about the details, Herman explains. 'It's like listening to a record player. You can have a player that cost eighty Euros, and it plays music. Or you can have a player that cost eight thousand Euros, and it plays

music a bit better. That little bit of difference might cost a fortune. It's all about the details that give you the pleasure. And that's what motivates me, still, today.'

Ed Boogaard, 2025

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