

Amy Sacker, Boston Book Designer

by Mark Schumacher, Reference Librarian

Editor's Note: *University Libraries employees are often very engaged with research and inquiry in a variety of subject fields. Among those is Reference Librarian Mark Schumacher, whose article follows. In the Summer 2008 issue of Style 1900: Antiques & Interiors, author Anne Stewart O'Donnell profiles book designers and artists, reproducing a number of Schumacher's photographs of illustrations, and points out "his infectious enthusiasm for all things Amy Sacker" which has been "a continuing inspiration."*

In the late nineteenth century, book design in America was evolving, as single-color, embossed covers gave way to more colorful designs reflecting the aesthetics of the Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts movements. One region of the country where women book designers and other female artists were particularly prolific was the Boston area. It is in this setting that Amy Maria Sacker (1872-1965) developed her considerable skills, designing book covers for several local publishers, including Joseph Knight, Estes & Lauriat and its successor, L. C. Page & Co. She also designed numerous covers for Little, Brown, Houghton Mifflin, and other publishers, beginning about 1900. Beyond her work as a book designer, she was also a respected illustrator, a painter, and excelled in jewelry, basketry, leatherworking and other decorative arts.

The Boston area was home to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and later the Society of Arts and Crafts, where Sacker met many of the leading female artists of the day, including fellow book designers Sarah Wyman Whitman (1842-1904) and Marion Louise Peabody (b. 1869). Anne O'Donnell, Executive Editor of the journal *Style 1900*, has described in considerable detail the interactions among these artists and craftspersons, as well as Sacker's preparation of a new generation of artisans through her teaching at the Cowles School before

opening her own School of Design.

Sacker's work is interesting to me for a variety of reasons, some purely artistic, some more historical. I enjoy the fact that her covers display a wide range of styles, from pure Art Nouveau, as in covers for Elwyn Barron's *Manders* (1899) or Mary Crowley's *A Daughter of New France* (1901), to a so-called "poster style," using clean lines to present a scene, as for Julia Dorr's *In Kings' Houses* (1898) or Willis Boyd Allen's *The Pineboro Quartette* (1898). Other individual titles, such as *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* (1901), show a definite eastern or oriental influence.

Another aspect of her work that interests me, but

which is quite hard to research, concerns the re-uses and variations one finds in her work. I have found one particular design, for instance, on at least twelve different titles. Her designs appear on later editions without her monogram, or redrawn, or blind-stamped instead of in color. Minor changes and simplifications of the original design occur frequently, without apparent reason. Cover designs are used later for books with nothing to do with the image. For instance, a sedate young couple reading on a bench for an Alcott novel later appear for a book called *Their Canoe Trip!* Unfortunately, the primary documentation, including contracts with illustrators and book designers, seems no longer to exist. Calls and e-mails to Boston libraries turn up no good leads.

Most of the work I have done on Amy Sacker's work can be seen on my Sacker web site available at www.library.uncg.edu/depts/ref/staff/mark/SackerHomePage.htm. There you can find images not only of her covers, but also her book illustrations, some of which are quite striking (eg., *Little Daughter of Liberty* (1899)) and her often stunning bookplates. There I also thank the many people who have helped with this project, including Amy's grand-niece Fran Rogers. 

