A Modern Love
Of Literature

One Hundredth
Anniversary of
Mosher Books

A.M. Todd Rare Book Room
Kalamazoo College
To more widely extend the love of exquisite literary form, it must be shown by example that choice typography and inexpensiveness need not be far apart.

The truth of this statement by Thomas Mosher is given evidence by this remarkable collection of Mosher Books assembled and ultimately received by the College as a gift from the late Robert Athol Huston.

Robert Huston, labor attorney, poet, and bibliophile, began collecting Mosher Books while working in Chicago and attending law school at night. His friend, John Prugh, introduced him to the Mosher Books. Together they would haunt antiquarian book shops, each trying to add new volumes to their collections. Purchasing one volume at a time with the coins he saved each week from his lunch money, Huston's gift now comprises a nearly complete collection of the Mosher Books as well as fine examples of his several privately printed works. Huston's attraction to the publishing efforts of Thomas Bird Mosher was in part his appreciation for Mosher's commitment to bringing fine literature, beautifully printed, within the reach of the common man as well as Huston's own love of literature.

In addition to the Mosher Books shown here, the Huston Collection includes a number of other important literary and historical works including first editions of Marshall's *The Life of George Washington*, and works of D.G. Rossetti, John Ruskin, Robinson Jeffers and Lafcadio Hearn.

This exhibition is made possible through the generous memorial contributions of the friends and family of Robert Huston.

One hundred years ago, bibliophile Thomas Bird Mosher (1852-1923) published his first book, *Modern Love* by George Meredith. Motivated by his "modern love" of literature and fine books, Mosher made his mark on the publishing world by bringing to the American public the fine printing revival which had begun in Britain only a few years earlier.

At the turn of the century, many literary works were unavailable to the American reader. Often, commercially published books were poorly produced and went quickly out of print. Fine books were beginning to be produced by small private presses in England, but these were limited in number. As few as a half-dozen or no more than two or three hundred private press books would be issued, and thus were seldom available to the general public.

As an independent publisher, Mosher could offer the American book lover a chance to own well-made books and titles which were previously unobtainable. Since he was not operating a commercial press, Mosher was unconstrained by the demands of the marketplace, and because the United States was not participating in the International Copyright Convention, he was free to reprint British authors as he liked. Unlike a private press,
Mosher Books were issued in editions of up to 1,225, a number small enough to maintain handmade quality, but large enough to be accessible to the average book lover. Although almost all of his books were published as the Mosher Books, a few were printed privately for gifts or commission. With his press, Mosher brought fine literature and printing to a wider audience; more Americans were given the chance to purchase a quality book at an affordable price, while Mosher was successfully pursuing an occupation that he loved.

British and American interest in fine bookmaking grew out of and reflected a wider arts movement which was emerging in response to a decline in artistic values resulting from the mass production of the Industrial Revolution. An emphasis on human handicraft, quality materials, and beautiful design is evident in the richly patterned fabrics, furnishings, and artwork of the time as well as in the production of fine books. People wanted not only to read books, but to read beautiful books, embellished with ornaments and designs. Aesthetic appearance became highly valued.

The book arts revival was influenced by both the Aesthetic and the Arts & Crafts movements. The Aesthetic volume is characterized by a small, often thin format, simple bindings and ornaments, and a lighter roman or italic type face. The books have a plain yet delicate appearance, whereas the Arts & Crafts tradition, typified by William Morris and his Kelmscott Press, more often exhibited a bold Gothic typeface surrounded by intricate floral borders and ornaments.

Believing the literature that he loved should be presented in a beautiful format, Mosher was inspired by both styles when he carefully designed his fourteen series of books and his catalogues. The small, simple volumes contain original designs by commissioned artists, and each book was handset and handprinted on either handmade paper or creamy Japan vellum. While most of the covers are Japan vellum or antique blue board with minimal designs, others have wrappers with colorful artwork and patterns. In some cases Mosher directly imitated the designs of the Kelmscott Press and other private presses. Whatever design Mosher chose for his books, it was always with the goal of creating the best vessel possible for the literature he selected.
Looking back on the one hundredth anniversary of the Mosher Books, the determination of one man to bring quality books and literature to America is to be admired, and his works continue to instill a modern love of literature in new generations of book lovers.

*This exhibition has been curated by
Leslie M. Parsons '91*