



Peter and Donna Thomas. This real accordion book was made in the spring of 2016. The images and text were digitally printed on Peter's handmade paper and then hand-colored by Donna. Peter: "I bought the Hohner accordion at the Cotati Accordion Festival. It was so beautiful, but no longer could be played, and thus a perfect candidate for becoming an accordion book."

THE ACCORDION AND THE BOOK

by Peter Thomas

A bit over a decade ago, I had the idea to make an accordion book. The book would use the accordion keyboards as covers and the bellows would be cut along the vertical ends, so that when pulled open, it would look like a *real* accordion book! I play the accordion and couldn't pass up the opportunity presented by the visual pun, but the real purpose for making the book was to address a point of confusion among book artists: whether a folded paper book should be called an "accordion book" or a "concertina book." From playing both musical instruments, I knew that an accordion is rectangular and a concertina is hexagonal. So I made my first real accordion book in tandem with a book made out of a concertina to physically explain why, unless a book is hexagonal in shape, the correct term is *accordion* book.

That first accordion book was followed by another, then another, creating a series. I don't know exactly how many Donna and I have made so far. After one sells, we make another. As a series, the works are tied together by structure, text, and image. A collection of photographs rotates through the series – old favorites reappearing, new images being presented for the first time. The texts have, for the most part, been explorations into the history of the accordion and of the accordion book, and I try to add new text with additional book. Oddly (but then again perhaps not), a history of the accordion book has not been previously published, so finding information has been hard, and finding more for each new book just gets harder. The latest version of my accordion / accordion book history starts on the next page.



This page: Three views of a one-of-a-kind artists' book by Peter and Donna Thomas, made from a vintage accordion with the trade name Fratelli Giovanni. The accordion body is wooden with an intricately carved grill and mother-of-pearl keys. The title page is hand-lettered and decorated by Peter's wife, Donna Thomas.

The Accordion

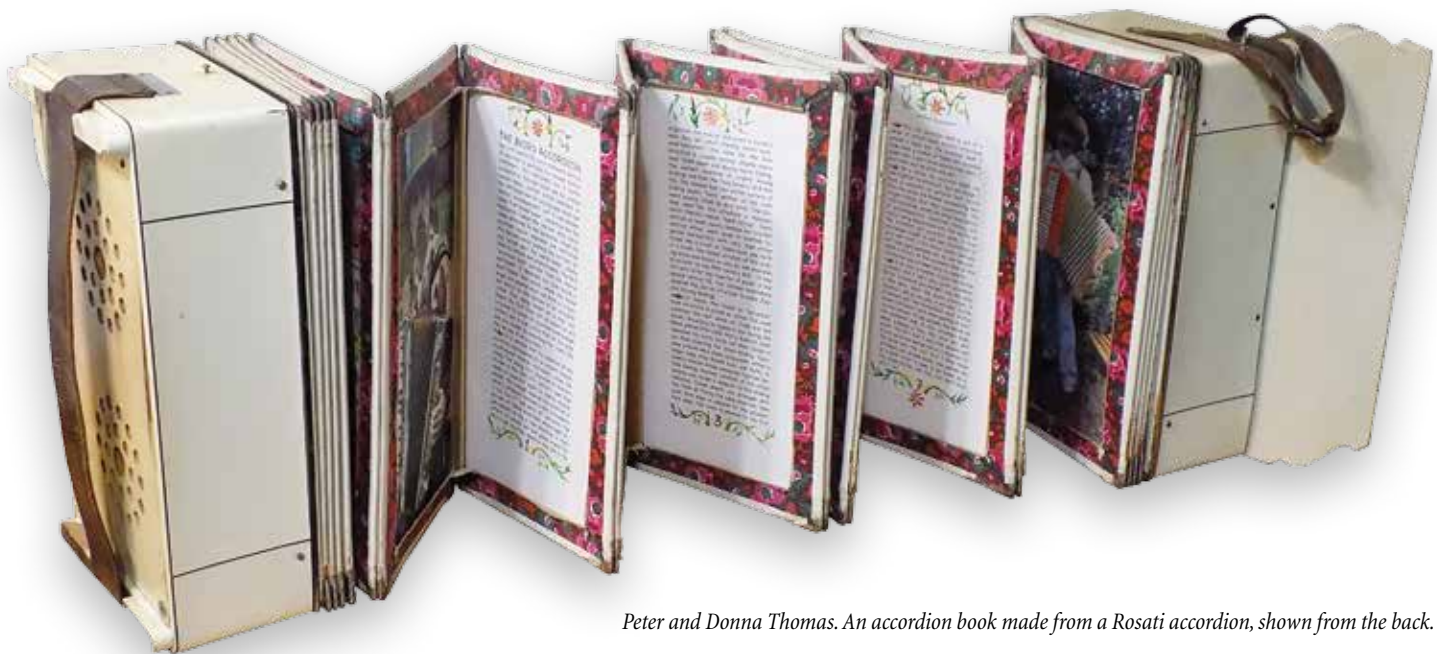
The word *accordion* was first used early in the nineteenth century to describe a small, portable, box-shaped musical instrument. It had a button keyboard on the right-hand side for playing melody notes, another button keyboard on the left-hand side for playing bass and chordal accompaniment, and folded paper bellows connecting the two keyboards together. Metal reeds, attached to the keyboards, were mounted inside the bellows. When buttons were pushed while the bellows were being expanded and contracted, air was forced past the metal reeds, causing them to vibrate and produce sound. The term *accordion book* borrows from the musical instrument. It describes any book having a folded, rather than sewn, text block, where the pages are pleated – folded back and forth in a manner similar to the bellows of an accordion, rather than being folded as a map – and are viewed by expanding the book like an accordion.

The invention of the accordion was inspired by an ancient Chinese, mouth-blown musical instrument called the *sheng*. The sheng was first displayed in Western Europe in the late seventeenth century. It used free reeds in resonator pipes to create musical sounds, and this concept led to the invention of several different harmonica-like instruments. The success of those

inventions encouraged organ-makers to try a new direction in their efforts to create low-cost pump organs for small-town churches; this, in turn, led to the creation of the accordion. Most historians credit Cyrill Demian, of Vienna, as the inventor of the first accordion. In 1829, he patented an instrument where the left hand operated a button keyboard and the right hand moved the bellows. He called his invention an *Akkordion*. The word is based on *akkord*, in this case referring to musical harmony, with the suffix *-ion* thought to derive from the word *clarion*, a sort of medieval trumpet.

In some countries the accordion's name is a variation on the word harmonica (for example, *harmonika* in Bosnia and *harmonikka* in Finland). In Italy it is called a *fisarmonica*, said to be derived from *physharmonica*, the name given by Anton Haeckl to his 1818 invention that combined harmonica and bellows to make an instrument resembling the modern hand-held harmonium. Other countries have unique names; for example, in Sweden it is called a *dragspel*, where *drag* means pull and *spel* means play. The accordion also has nicknames: in English it is sometimes called a "squeezebox," and in Germany it is sometimes called a *schifferklavier* (sailor's piano). Sometimes the accordion is mistakenly called a concertina, or vice versa, but the words are not interchangeable. Though the





Peter and Donna Thomas. An accordion book made from a Rosati accordion, shown from the back.

concertina is also in the aerophone family, it is typically smaller, shaped as a hexagon rather than as a square or a rectangle, and its buttons are organized differently.

The Accordion Book Structure

Accordion books, like musical accordions, can also have different names. For example, German binders call accordion books *leporellos*. In German dictionaries, *leporello* is defined as “a fan of folded paper.” In the 1787 opera *Don Giovanni*, with music by Wolfgang Mozart and an Italian libretto by Lorenzo Da Ponte, Don Giovanni’s servant is named Leporello. In Act 1, Scene 2, Leporello sings what is now commonly known as the “catalogue aria.” In this scene, Leporello takes a book from his bag and pulls out a long folding strip of paper that lists all of Don Giovanni’s romantic conquests. (I find it interesting to speculate which came first; was the servant named after the book structure or vice versa?) The term concertina book is used by some English speakers to describe an accordion book. Perhaps this originated in England, where the concertina was more popular than the accordion. (That name, to me, is a misnomer when applied to rectangular-shaped books, as concertinas are shaped as hexagons.)

While the history of the accordion began in the seventeenth century, the history of the accordion book is actually much older. Ancient accordion-folded books have been found in many parts of Asia, including China,

Japan, Korea, Thailand, India, and Burma. In China, where the *sheng* originated, the musical instrument is called a *shou feng qin*, which literally means “hand-wind-instrument.” The name for the book structure is *jingzhe zhuang*: *jingzhe* means “neat-folded paper” and *zhuang* means “binding.” The earliest examples of *jingzhe zhuang* bindings are from the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE). The Chinese had two earlier systems of binding books. Texts written on silk cloth were usually rolled up as scrolls; the Chinese word for this structure is *shoujuan*, which literally means “hand roll-up.” Texts written on wood, usually bamboo cut into thin vertical strips, were laced or knotted together horizontally with cord, then either rolled like a scroll or folded back and forth in a stack. The folded variation of this binding style is known as *jian du*, and examples date back to the fifth century BCE. It was not until after the invention of paper, in the second century CE, that Chinese bookmakers adapted the *jian du* structure to make *jingzhe zhuang* bindings. A miniature *jingzhe zhuang* (10 x 14 cm) was found at the Dunhuang archaeological site in Western China, and thus made before 900 CE, it is the oldest-known miniature accordion book.

In Japan, the accordion-folded book structure is called an *orihon*. The word combines the root words *ori* (fold) and *hon* (book). According to legend, it was during the Heian period (794–1185 CE) that a Buddhist monk squashed his sutra scroll and then folded it up, thus inventing the *orihon* binding. Japanese *orihons* were made using paper: either a single

Peter and Donna Thomas. Front and back views of the same Hohner accordion book featured on the first page of this article.



long strip folded back and forth, or several smaller strips connected together before folding. Another variation of the orihon binding was called a *sempuyo*. In this binding, individual folded sheets are arranged with the folds all facing the same direction, and then each fore edge is adhered to the adjacent fore edge. The cover is adhered to the first and last pages of the text block, but it is not attached to the spine. Because of this, the *sempuyo* is often called a “flutter book”: if it is dropped or blown by the wind, the pages will flutter but remain attached to the covers. It is said that monks used such books medicinally, believing that the breeze created by moving the pages of the holy sutras could heal an injury.

In pre-Columbian Mexico and Central America, the Aztec and Maya made books with folded structures. These books are commonly called *codices* (singular: *codex*). Mayan codices were written in hieroglyphic characters, called *glyphs*, on *amate*, a paper-like material made from the bark of a certain type of fig tree. Written pages were pasted together and then folded back and forth to create an accordion-folded book. Unfortunately, the Spanish invaders destroyed most of the original codices, and though we have original text blocks there is no example of an original binding. There is a Mayan glyph for codex, *juun*. It looks more like a hamburger than a book, and because of this, opinion is divided among scholars; some believe the text block was glued to wooden covers, and others believe that the text block and covers were wrapped together with leather cords.

It is unknown when the first accordion book was made in Western Europe. The oldest extant example was handwritten, in Cyrillic script, in 1330. This manuscript, known as *Canones et carmina sacra quae . . .*, is now in the Netherlands’ Leiden University Library. While there were other examples of accordion-folded manuscripts, the binding structure did not carry over to early printed books. Although there were over 30,000 distinct editions printed during the incunabula period (1450–1500 CE), no known incunabula has an accordion structure.

Other than the *Canones et carmina*, the earliest accordion books made in Western Europe that I have discovered are miniature books that were printed and bound to be sold as souvenirs. As far as I know, none of those books include a printed date of publication, but some have the publisher’s name (for example, the *Recollections of . . .* series printed in London by J. Newman & Co.) and others have a traceable provenance, so we know they were made in the early to mid-1800s.

The Real Accordion Book

We may never know who made the first accordion book, or when it was made, but at least we do know when and who made the first real accordion book: *accordioning* to respected book arts historians, it was in 2002 when Peter and Donna Thomas took Peter’s old 12 bass piano accordion, cut the bellows so they functioned as accordion-folding pages, inserted paper panels printed with text and image into the bellow pages, and thus created the first real accordion book. 🎶



Peter and Donna Thomas.
 Top: The pages of a real accordion book, showing the text. A version of that text forms this article.
 Middle and bottom: Two views of a different accordion book, made from a Francesco accordion featuring a blue, mother-of-pearl finish.