INTRODUCTION

> *If I were asked to say what is at once the most important production of Art and the thing most to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful House; and if I were further asked to name the production next in importance and the thing next to be longed for, I should answer, A beautiful Book. To enjoy good houses and good books in self-respect and decent comfort, seems to me to be the pleasurable end towards which all societies of human beings ought now to struggle.*
>
> William Morris

It was in 1973 that the artist Susan Allix, a graduate of the Royal College of Art in London and an awardee of a Prix de Rome scholarship in Rome, arrived on the bibliographic scene with the making of her first book, *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It was an immediate success and the beginning of a career that has now reached its fifty-first year. During this time she has produced seventy-seven books, and in doing so has created a new genre. It is to mark the semicentennial of her work that this book has been written, providing an outline of her life and work, an appreciation of her aesthetic, and a *catalogue raisonné* of her books.

Allix's books combine elements both of Artist's books and Fine Press books. When she commenced her book-making, there was almost no one else producing such work, and it is no exaggeration to say that she was a pioneer. In the next decades, interest in the book as an art object began to flourish, as it did, to a lesser extent, in fine press printing. By the end of the century, 'Book Arts' courses had been introduced into the curriculum of numerous art schools and universities, exhibitions of books had become commonplace, and many others were working in the genre. Allix though remains unusual in combining the aesthetic of both the Fine Press and Artist's book, and unique in one other particular sense – for even today there are few if any other book-makers who create their books *in their entirety* as Allix does. She is responsible for every aspect of the making of her books: she designs and creates the striking and beautiful images, designs the typography and

prints letterpress, binds her books often in complex and spectacular designs, mixes her own pigments, writes some of the text, makes the containers, on occasions has included her own hand-made papers, and has created several new letterforms.

Her work can be conceptualised as having six main dimensions: time – spanning millennia and cycles of nature; space – experienced as structure, materiality and physicality; location – exploring the artistic potential of many countries and places; words – taken from numerous diverse sources, poets and writers; images – using a range of techniques and designs; and finally meaning – experimenting with often complex, subtle, and ambiguous ideas. She is an artist and printmaker at heart: 'I am concerned with visual things, so I see books as full of colour and form in a pictorial sense as well as through the images created in my mind by the words, and through the sculptural qualities a book possesses. In my work I try to achieve a combination of these elements into a single, whole experience.' (Allix 2004)

Her books are made with intricate sophisticated craftsmanship. She has a versatile portfolio of techniques for creating intaglio and relief images including etching, linocut, aquatint, mezzotint, woodcut, collage, pochoir and stencilling, watercolour, drawing, and airbrush. She often mixes methods in the making of a single image, and this complex combination of techniques in one image is a notable and another highly characteristic and possibly unique feature of her work. She uses many decorative and printing papers inside the book. Her bindings are equally complex employing different types of leather, added silver and other metals, found objects, magnets, cloth, board, and paper. She is a colourist who, by making up her own pigments, produces colours of deep intensity and feeling. Many of her books have a sculptural and three-dimensional quality, and some stretch the definition and meaning of a book to its limits.

The themes of her books include the relationship of time and space, travel, the cycles of nature and transience of beauty, and the ancient world. Some texts are literary and scholarly, with a penchant for the antique, the classical, architecture, and poetry, and some are written by Allix herself. The books have a restlessness and a quality of surprise and adventure. She is always experimenting and has an intense dislike of repetition and of 'being in a rut'. As a result the books are variform and heterogeneous.

The seventy-seven titles were created in small editions and in her fifty years her output has totalled more than 1,250 hand-made books, over one third of which have found their way into public or university collections, with the rest held by private collectors, several of whom have a large number of her works. In addition she has made nine children's books for her family, and has produced remarkable bindings for thirty-eight other works. Hugo Worthy stated that Allix was 'the greatest

book-maker of her generation', a startling claim but one that is surely entirely justified.

This book has been based on around 150 hours of interview and discussion with Allix, during which time we have together examined sixty-eight of her books, and looked at many photographs and bindings, and her personal archive of sketchbooks, correspondence, trial proofs and pages, as well as her children's books. In addition, dealers' catalogues and published articles and books which feature her work have been reviewed. Allix is a private person whose emotional and personal life is revealed through, expressed in, and encoded by her art, and so her books are the primary focus here but personal details are also briefly touched upon. She also created over the years a small number of prints and paintings, not sold and essentially only for personal use, and these are not considered further here.

She is extremely articulate about her work, and thus where possible I have used her own words to convey the nuance, technique, and meaning of her work. Where quotations are taken from published work I have provided a reference; where no reference is given the words are hers, taken verbatim from our conversations, or as quoted in dealer's catalogues (a favourite device of bookseller Joshua Heller for instance), or in her written prospectuses.

The first five chapters concern Allix's early life and training in Guildford, London, and Rome; the start of her book-making and her early books; her books since 1990, made in her current studio in north London; a consideration of the nature of her books and the elements of her aesthetic; and the distribution and location of her books. The *catalogue raisonné* details her entire oeuvre. The section 'University and library holdings' lists the books I have identified in public collections and the bibliography provides pointers to works referenced in the main chapters. This book is accompanied by the private publication by Allix of a photographic catalogue of her books (Allix 2023), and the two can be with profit read together.

The purpose of both this book and the photographic catalogue is to celebrate Allix's work of the last fifty years. She continues to make books, and the assessment in this book should be seen only as a milepost or triangulation point in a continuing career.

I am very grateful to Susan Allix for allowing me access to her studio, for her help in the writing of this book, and for providing the images. She has opened her archive and collections to me in a most generous and free-spirited manner, and has given me an extraordinary amount of time and shown great patience as I have researched her oeuvre and striven to understand her technique and aesthetic. This has been a privilege for me and without such assistance, freely and graciously given, no book would have been possible. Martyn Ould of The Old School Press has also

been a pleasure to work with and he and Angela Ould have been responsible for the quality of the design and production of the book. My thanks also to Ben Blossom, a superb art and architectural photographer, who prepared many of the images for this work with immense care, matching colour and design.

I hope this book, incomplete as it is, does provide some context and some idea of the beauty and meaning of Allix's books, and makes clear the immense nature of her achievement.

Simon Shorvon
London, July 2023

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MARMALADE SANS SERIF

Origins and family

Allix is a noble and ancient name said to have originated many generations ago in Orléans in France. In 1846 a Monsieur Prudent Emile Allix was sent out by the French government to India where he married Madame La Fogue, then living in the salt lands of Pondichéry (Pondicherry), a French outpost in India, where the French and the English had fought bitterly in earlier years. Whether any distant relatives were involved in the battles is not known (curiously, though, there were also Allixes on both sides of the Battle of Waterloo!) but by the late nineteenth century peace had been restored. Monsieur and Madame Allix had two children, one of whom, Emile Allix, then a lieutenant in the French army, married Helen Carey, the daughter of a one-legged Irish doctor working for the East India Company. They had two children, Charles Emile and Harriet.

The family settled in Hyderabad where they became friends with the large English family of William Ward Marrett, the second of a three-generation architectural dynasty and Chief Engineer to the Nizam of Hyderabad, where his buildings, bridges, and dams can still be admired. Then Lieutenant Allix and his wife both died in a hunting accident, orphaning Charles Emile and Harriet. The children were taken in by William Marrett to live with his own family of ten children. This was a happy twist of fate for, when gaining his majority, the young Charles married Ethel, one of the four Marrett daughters, and in 1913, out of this pairing, Susan Allix's father Harold Marrett Allix was born (also a twin and one of four siblings). Thus, it was there in India that Allix's French–English heritage was cemented, and India retains a fabled place in her heart, as we shall later see.

Amongst the architectural works of William Marrett is the Saroornagar Palace, intended as one of the royal residences of the Nizam Mahboob Ali Khan. Whilst construction was under way, it is said that the Nizam, visiting the site, was bitten by a snake and thereafter pronounced the palace unsuitable to inhabit. The building work stuttered to completion in 1903, and, on the death of Queen Victoria in 1904,