Rare Skills for Rare Books: Book Conservation Education

By Consuela "Chela" Metzger
Lecturer - Book Conservation at the
Kilgarlin Center for Preservation of the Cultural Record
at the University of Texas at Austin

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Involved in bookwork?
Doing the work you love?
Graduate School -- best way to pursue passion?
Do you believe in education?
Influence of Art Conservation on Library Conservation
The first conservation grad program in world was NYU—

Pulling thread through the skin
Conservation has no hood color
Weaving Endband
7/99
Passionate about books

AT Endband, head
7/99
Form meets function

AT Opening, head
7/99
Passionate about collections of books!
Passion for collected cultural heritage
William Harnett -- “Job Lot, Cheap”
1878

HUMILITY IN THE FACE OF OLD BOOKS
Humility in the face of decay

* As in all organic things decay…
Accounting would have been more practical
Different Economy

* Pursuing the work you love is not always “practical”
Me before formal education

I want to be a bookbinder.
Proud Librarian first
Bill Anthony took my first teacher as an apprentice.
My first teacher Mark Esser started bookbinding program at North Bennet Street School.

Pamela Spitzmueller
19 – fl. 1975–
Student 1978–83.
First binding lessons from Gary Frost and Joan Flasch at the School of the Chicago Art Institute (see Chart I); worked in the Newberry Library Bindery 1976–83.

David Brock
1953– fl. 1977–
Apprentice 1978–84.
First binding lessons from Gary Frost and Joan Flasch at the School of the Chicago Art Institute (see Chart I).

Mark Esser
1950– fl. 1979–
Apprentice 1982–86.
First binding lessons from Joseph Newman at Harcourt Bindery; worked in the Newberry Library Bindery 1980–81 while taking classes from David Brock.

Consuel A. Metzger

North Bennet Street School
my second teacher Tom Albro at Library of Congress had British training
Paul Banks who started graduate library conservation program had German Bookbinding influence

Texas Program Has Some German Influence

Founded, later moved to Texas
Paul Banks, Like Mark Esser and other educators, influenced many
My third teacher, Maria Fredericks started her career working under Paul Banks at the Newberry library.
So did Gary Frost, a major influence on my ideas on books.
So did Pamela Spitzmuller, whose creativity in conservation and art is so generous.
I never met Paul Banks, but he built a library conservation education structure.

*Paul Banks examining a book carefully at the Newberry.*
Craft Traditions
Historic Building Conservation connects to craft skills
Historic Musical Instrument
Conservation connects to craft
Historic Furniture Conservation connects to craft
Preserving a craft that allows you to enter intimately into the physical life of a book.
A simple problem?
Broken Structural Supports
Original supports rigid and sad
Disbinding—leaves a scary pile of paper, changes book forever
Sewing using original holes and pattern

*Soladad Abarca, now a photo conservator in Chile
New sewing, like a new frame on the uninhabitable house
The hope of reversibility with paste and long fiber-paper next to the original pages
Linen lining as a flexible primary layer, help attach boards firmly
New material as structure for supporting replacement decoration
Replacement decoration, using the original colors
Leather lining on spine to control the book opening, and allow the re-use of original spine.
Opening after one leather lining
Invasive Treatment
Where do I hide new material?
Is it appropriate to remove original material?
New leather pasted onto spine
New leather put under original leather
Traditional practice
Remove part of new leather to inset original leather.
Mixture of old and new
Original spine rather stiff, and can’t be adhered to a book spine that moves too much.
New and old materials re-integrated
Detail of old and new together on the spine
The spine has a controlled opening, so original spine will not crack when used.
Christopher Clarkson’s words

- “European bookbinding tradition does not form a good foundation to build or even graft book conservation education” 1978
REALLY??
Clarkson was responding particularly to pre-1500 books put into 19th century style bindings...harming text, destroying the historic voice of early books.
William Minter

• Surely, one who has studied philosophy or medicine could not just step into book conservation. One has to start somewhere. Maybe a European trained bookbinder would have trouble with book conservation because of the strict traditions that seem to be demanded.

* Apprentice Trained Under Bill Anthony, now in private practice
William Minter part 2

• Most American binders and book conservators do not have a strict tradition to follow, we can easily pick and chose from the variety of styles and techniques that are available around the world. **We are not forced by tradition to bind a book in any particular manner.**
“I may have to stand by the wisecrack about finding another basis (than bookbinding) for conservation training; I think I mentioned taxidermy. Or was it dentistry? Fly-fishing? I simply don’t know what other kind of training would ground one in the processes of bookmaking.”

*Head of Conservation, Boston Athenaeum, North Bennet Grad*
“He is talking about the kind of training necessary to work on early books, but the reality is that most conservation work is going to be done on 16th-20th century materials”
“The problem hasn’t been that hand bookbinding practices are antithetical to conservation principles, it’s that there is a tendency for those with structured training, especially structured training that lasted for years, to embrace the idea that their way of doing something is correct.”
“I remember graduating from NBSS and feeling like I knew a lot. I’ve spent the last twenty years discovering how little I know. Actually, I know more now, but I have a greater appreciation of how enormous the field of bookmaking really is. My knowledge expands, but the topic is infinite, and being entrusted with the care of historical artifacts is very, very humbling.”
“30 years on, are we any closer to Clarkson's dream of book conservators educated in historic bookbinding structures? .... The easiest form of binding to teach and for the student to learn is the traditional European craft technique. It is what is most commonly taught and is easiest to learn in the short time that is allowed most students in formal programs.”

* Field Officer, NEDCC. Library conservation program grad
“My program training tried to teach historic structures but the limitation of time was too much to cover the wide history and the conservation decisions associated with them.

• Coming from the traditional hand binding track, I can say that it is not the best training for historic structures, if that is all the training you get.”
“We, in this country, need to begin to have the respect for our historic collections to allow the professionals who care for them to have the training they need to do the best job possible.”
“It appears that in 1978 that book conservation was considered a craft, or at least craft was a large part of it. But professionalism was on the rise at the same time; Paul Banks was elected President of AIC in 1978…Did a rise in professionalism necessitate a break with craft tradition in order to escape habits, both in thought and praxis, built up over centuries?”
“Today, conservators have, to a large degree, distanced themselves from that dirty little word—craft-- at least in their own minds. This distancing seems to be the core message in Clarkson’s statement, as a necessary first step.... Sometimes a conservation treatment might closely resemble how a bookbinder might repair a volume; sometimes it might be radically different. “

*Book Conservator in private practice, wide variety of training*
“In another 30 years, perhaps, the field of book conservation will be mature enough to reexamine its relationship to craft. Hopefully some of the craft skills will still be present or rediscovered, and might be reincorporated into some future conception of conservation.”
Priscilla Anderson

“There is not one firm foundation for library conservation, but more a web of intersecting tightropes that we balance upon, leaping from one approach to another as the need arises: library science, historical research methods, project and people management, conservation science and treatment protocols, preventive preservation practice, and the historical craft of hand bookbinding.

* Conservator for Harvard Business Library, Winterthur art conservation graduate, and library degree graduate
“Where three or more intersect, we can just about lie down and get comfortable. But if we teeter on just one rope, chances are that we’ll overlook something crucial and the result will be an unbalanced decision, not to mention an awkward dismount.”
Lessons?

- Bookbinding is necessary but not sufficient as a tool in book conservation.
- Moving beyond whatever formal education you have may be required.
- Look tools from multiple sources to solve library conservation problems.
- Book and Library Conservation are young, changing professions.
IS THIS what library conservators should be doing all day?
Helen Shenton Quote:

• “Wanted: book conservator with Doctorate in Polymer Chemistry, conversant with inter and intranet, with knowledge of historical bibliography from the pre-Christian to contemporary book arts—from the Diamond Sutra to the Great Blue Quran…and by the way—excellent bench skills” Helen Shenton (no date)

* Head of Preservation, British Library
Library Conservation Job description, how much treatment?

• Reporting to the Preservation Librarian for Houghton Library, the Lake Conservator *treats a broad range of rare books and manuscripts.* Examines, specifies treatments for, and treats a wide range of rare cloth-, paper-, vellum-, and leather-bound volumes.
But not just treatment

Harvard Requires:

- **Basic Qualifications:** Graduate degree in conservation required.
- Two years of experience working in a rare book conservation facility or extended, formal apprenticeship under a conservator required.
- **Additional Requirements:** Strong knowledge of the history of book structure
Harvard Further Requires

• and history of bookbinding, printing, writing, and papermaking materials and techniques. Working knowledge of chemistry and materials science; disaster planning, response, and mitigation,
And More Harvard Requirements

- environmental monitoring and control, and commercial library binding technology and management.
- Knowledge of standard word processing, spreadsheet, database, and e-mail software.
TO HECK WITH PASSION?
Rare Skills for Rare Books

• STUDY FOR GRE
• GET EXCELLENT GRADES
• TAKE ORGANIC CHEMISTRY
• GET RECOMMENDATION FROM A CONSERVATION PROFESSIONAL
• GET PRE-PROGRAM CONSERVATION EXPERIENCE
These formal requirements are, like craft skills necessary but not sufficient
DEGREES ARE CURRENCY

+ Student Work  Danielle Fraser, intern, Library of Congress
(Paul Banks had high school only)
Craft wasn’t enough, but what is?

* Original label, Johnson’s Dictionary
I rely on colleagues in paper conservation and preservation

* Broken modern repair, Johnson’s Dictionary,
We must foster more than bench skills in library conservation

- Disasters
- Exhibits
- Digital Projects
- Management Skills
- Preventive care for the ages
- Mentoring interns
- Research
Still, we cannot cover all that needs to be covered

* Removed original spine panel, Johnson's Dictionary
Students need the Field to help them before and after graduation.

Dan Paterson, Library of Congress

Rebecca Elder, private practice Austin Texas

*Student Historical Models
But benchwork remains unique..giving us access to culture in a way we must honor
Internships and Post-grad opportunities are key

Jamye Jamison, Fine Arts Conservation, Cleveland

Decorated paper day!

* Students Work
More Assistant Conservator Positions and Project Conservator Positions
Graduate Programs need to live examined lives
The Shaping of Library Conservation Education

* Student Historical Model, Sarah Norris, intern, Newberry Library
Education is shaped by those who show up

* Students at Work
Today, America has more paths for book education

- NORTH BENNET STREET
- AMERICAN ACADEMY OF BOOKBINDING
- MFA IN BOOK ARTS
- ART CONSERVATION PROGRAMS, ESPECIALLY BUFFALO NY
- U OF TEXAS PROGRAM
There is an education landscape, not monoculture

*1624 Plutarch, work done at Huntington Library
There is a danger of a hiring monoculture.
Young field meets Institutional Degree Culture

1624 Plutarch, work done at Huntington Library
WHAT MAY BE RARE?

• Identification of work that really suits you, given your aptitudes
• The opportunity to pursue that work
• The confidence to see that many paths can lead to competence
• The lucky combination of skills/opportunity and the right historical moment
BOOK BENCH SKILLS?
WHAT ABOUT DEATH OF READING?
The book is dead, long live the book conservator
James Billington, Librarian of Congress Says

• "The preserver, restorer, conserver is the indispensable, the primary living link in the human chain that connects yesterday's accomplishments with tomorrow's possibilities."

* From The Moral Imperative Of Conservation
Thank you—to all who have made this possible

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