



The Aesthetics of Book Conservation By Gary Frost

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Of all the artful approaches to the book, the art of the book conservator is particularly obscure. It is an enclave art with a peculiar finesse for the handle and appearance of historical craft work and a stylistic sensitivity to cultures and book environments across time. To add to its strangeness, the creativity of this art is suppressed by prescribed treatment practice and, contrary to artistic convention, the practice promotes its own invisibility and anonymity. Finally, it is probable that this strange art is crucial to the treatment outcome while it secretly inspires the book conservator.



In her book, *No Longer Innocent: Book Art in America 1960-1980*, Betty Bright refers to the work of the book conservator as a "byway in book art". Her reference is to art works informed by the practice of book conservation and made by book conservators, but there is an even less apparent artistic genre inside the practice of book conservation which is that of artful book conservation treatments.

I have often imagined that there can be deliberate recognition of artful book conservation treatments and some definition of an aesthetic to guide practice. Its an alluring prospect because exemplary book conservation work looks beautiful and handles wonderfully and provides a quietly exciting experience.



Does an art of book conservation align with any of the categories so extensively described in Betty Bright's wonderful book? The heritage of book production arts are involved, but ambiguously. While the book conservation field values the regimes of craft apprenticeship, it is also suspicious of commercial methods. Likewise relations with aesthetics of the private press, the deluxe book publication and the array of multiple and unique book works produced by artists, are a mixture of respect and irrelevance.



On one theme there is deep accord. When Bright concludes that the question underlying the history of artists' books

is, "Why the book?", the book conservator is ready to respond. For the book conservator each book examined and each treatment completed extends an understanding of the inexhaustible resource of qualities and aesthetic challenges posed by the book format. Add to this the interpretive future of a given book as it passes from the hands of a book conservator, across into the hands of the reader.

Betty Bright concludes her book with this graceful expression; "Imagine the absorbed reader at the point when a turning page reaches the height of its arch. At this pause, the reader inhabits a space of emotion and intellectual readiness, one full of question, possibility, and anticipation." The book conservator imagines this episode multiplied and sees the book itself as the live mechanism that conveys conceptual works across time and cultures and through the hands of all its readers. This power of imagination of the book conservator is an artful contribution to the art of the book.

Four Aesthetics

I remember specific statements of book conservators, seemingly made off-hand. I am beginning to realize that these were expressions of a fundamental aesthetic approach to the work. Let's take these at face value to derive working expressions of an aesthetics of book conservation.



"I am involved in conservation to preserve the unique character of an age." Chris Clarkson ¹

"Authenticity cannot be restored." Paul Banks ²

"Don't let it get lumpy. Don't fidget, do everything directly." Don Etherington ³



"Make it flow!" Peter Waters ⁴

Unique Character

"At its best, craftsmanship in conservation is not simply a skillful use of tools and materials, but a knowledge and sympathy for the volume and the period of its production." Familiarity must breed the opposite of contempt in the book conservator. The book conservator meets each book with an expectation of some message.

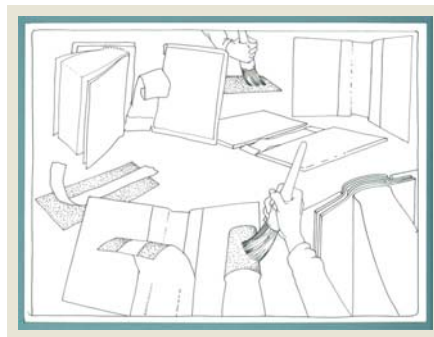


The book conservator meets each book with an expectation of some message from a past era and from an ecology of the world of artifacts. This is a twist on the theme of the paratext and it does extend the aesthetic performance of books. The book conservator looks for the evidences of deteriorations, survival and vintage scenes embedded in the artifact as an inherent content. The book conservator's forensic also extends to signage of previous makers of the book, literally re-watching the motions of stitches, folder scores, gloving of covers or deft snipping of corner miters. The careful book opening and closing manipulations of the book conservator are somewhat slow motion because of this quiet, small drama.



The classical "before and after" contrast reveals the character of the treatment. Following treatment the appearance is where much of the outcome is assessed. The intent is an elegant ordinary appearance with a timeless quality. Such an aesthetic of the ordinary conveyed by an attractive yet omissive appearance is an inviting artistic challenge. The unremarkable appearance of one binding among others goes unnoticed though all but one dates from the 17th century.

Don't Fidget



Decisive speed exemplifies experienced craft work. The practice needs only a few tools; a bone folder, sanding stick and cutting out knife and the book conservator will work gracefully and accurately with an elegant, syncopated speed.

The work should not be "lumpy", tedious, precious or angst ridden. Fidgeting with innumerable surgical and dental tools is an indicator of crippled technique. The book conservator must bring a choreography and spirit of dance to the treatment providing a refreshing kinesiology for the old and tired book

The book conservator's prescribed treatment methods should stifle creativity, but the choice of treatment methods does not. In fact specification is the first step in treatment and that step offers aesthetic as well as technical choices. A less disruptive, more reversible, simple and speedy treatment is easier to apply, easier to practice and easier to achieve finesse in technique.

Authenticity vs. Treatment



Book conservation is justified by balancing the disruption of treatment against damage projected if a physically and chemically vulnerable artifact is continued in use. Certain materials deserve protection from disruption and re-fabrication. When undertaken, treatment processes should be relatively reversible. The story that the book has to offer should be told by the artifact, not by the conservator.

An affectation of our own culture is a preference for clean copy over dirty original. The book conservator must meet this culture bias and others. Advocates for digital surrogates and screen based presentation of print books must be engaged by the conservator whenever the status of the original is in question. This very difficult course must convey the continuing role of the original in the context of digital delivery. Two useful contentions are that all meaning resides in the original and that meaning in the original always awaits further discovery and unknowable future queries.

Make it Flow



The book conservator is a restorer of mobility and without that result the work is ugly. A haptic aesthetic motivates the conservator. With effective transmission of forces and pliant response to handling, the book will protect or conserve itself.

An achievement of supple book action is rather invisible to the library reader, but this characteristic is deliberately achieved by the book conservator. The protective, supple and pliant action enables older books to survive photocopying or scanning, exhibition and general mishandling by the modern reader. A rejuvenated flexibility and a rejuvenated transmission of opening and closing motions aesthetically distinguish the curative conservation treatment of a previously crippled book action. Such action is only partly assured by appropriate structure; thoughtful mending and thoughtful application of adhesive and thoughtful integration of original and supplied materials are also required. The result, when achieved, provides an aesthetic gratification, augmented by a practical satisfaction. The conservator alone may appreciate the result and convey it in the completed repair or rebinding with a pride in its mobility as a crucial result not apparent in outward appearances.



A Fifth Aesthetic of Book Conservation

At first it seems that the book conservator must only preserve the past. But the book conservator must also assure the future. Currently the future of the paper book is being challenged by more than physical deterioration. Books are now also at risk from search engines that dissolve bibliographic integrity, from on-line research methods that side step library classification systems and from information technology and communication agendas that discount scholarly needs.



The book conservator can play only a small part of the advocacy for print in the context of digital communications and screen based reading. But the conservator can play a specific and critical role. The conservator can counter the churn of transmission technologies by clarifying the attributes of print; attributes of legibility, haptic efficiency and persistence that easily identify the traditional book as the most advanced technology for reliable transmission of conceptual works across time and cultures.

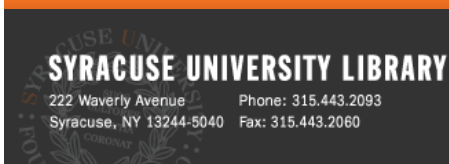
Reference

1 – Chris Clarkson presented aesthetic principles of book conservation through his elegant drawings of books and their structures, through his alluring publications, including the classical film on the production of limp vellum bindings, and through his captivating lectures. Clarkson has defined restorative treatment and the thoughtful attitude needed to recreate graceful mobility and useful pliancy in abused books. His investigation and specification of the limp vellum structure for use in book conservation is a classic of the practice as well as its aesthetic guideline.

2 – Paul Banks' (1934-2000) artistic influence was conveyed from his own instruction in book production and book design at Viking Press and Clark & Way in New York City and in library preservation with Carolyn Horton. He developed his Newberry Library book conservation program within a context of Chicago book production trades and crafts. Important influences were the Extra Bindery at the R.R. Donnelly & Sons Company, the Caxton Club, The Kner & Anthony Bindery and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago which provided bookbinding instruction for art students. Conveying these influences together, he exemplified an artistic complexity inherent in book and library conservation.

3 – Learning and appreciating the skills of trade binding production, Don Etherington crossed a bridge to the world of book conservation to become an advocate for elegant book treatment technique. His series of Standards programs for the Guild of Book Workers exemplifies his aesthetic of synthesis of craft, science and art.

4 – Peter Waters (1930-2003) grounded his aesthetic in classical music and book arts at the Royal College of Art. His work with Roger Powell founded the methods for rebinding of manuscripts. Peter also instilled elegance in such intractable productions as the polyester encapsulation and the computer generated book label. He illuminated an aura of living arts of the book with in an administrative bureaucracy of the Library of Congress.



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