

## LOOKING TOWARD DEVELOPING STANDARDS IN RARE BOOK CONSERVATION

The purpose of this talk is to initiate a dialogue and to begin gathering our thoughts together in relation to establishing a framework for the formation of standards of excellence relative to the conservation of bound materials.

### (S-1) "Aspects of Standards"

In the book conservation field, we are dealing with a long tradition of techniques and changing standards. So when trying to establish standards of excellence in our area of specialty, these traditional methods have to be studied and assessed so that traditional but inferior techniques which are currently being practised can be eliminated. Although not suggesting change for change's sake, if people encounter a better method, hopefully they would want to change.

(S-2) Stonyhurst Gospel: 7th-century binding showing remarkable state of preservation.)

(S-3) An early binding structure with a flat spine and with thongs laced in the board edge and a tab endband.)

(S-4) A group of paper covered bindings ranging from the 16th century through to the present.)

(S-5) A group of limp vellum bindings - 16th century to present.)

(S-6) A group of alum tawed pigskin bindings - 15th to 17th centuryies.)

(S-7) Early 18th century bindings showing the problems created when there is a lack of lining on the spine and a poor sewing structure as well.)

(S-0) Blank slide)

I would like to begin with the premise that any standards advocated should be explained and understood and until they are clear and accepted, accreditation for conservators of bound materials should not be implemented. This attitude toward standards will ease some of the frustration that seems to be expressed whenever this subject comes up for discussion. Standards are important in

setting conditions and guidelines within which to work, rather than as an ultimatum to produce carbon-copy results for every situation in every workshop. Standards are and will remain essential, but they should be seen as a source of usefulness, not as the basis for trauma or nervous breakdown.

First, what do standards mean? They can be separated into two main categories. S-8 One is the creation of standards of excellence relative to the techniques and materials used in the practice of our craft. The other is that of philosophical and ethical judgements based on historical models and the broader intellectual, cultural setting of which we are now a part.

These philosophical and ethical considerations should have input from rare book librarians, historians, and curators. With their special knowledge and expertise, some guidelines could be formulated to be used as a base from which we in conservation can make a more valid judgement relative to treatment of materials.

The first of these categories, high standards regarding techniques and materials, may be the easiest to define. The best available materials should be married to a set of techniques which have been tried and proven and which have endured the test of time.

(S-9) This is a 16th-century full pigskin binding. This slide shows that the material is still flexible at the joint. Date - 1601.)

(S-10) Early vellum manuscript covered in  $\frac{1}{2}$  alum-tawed goatskin and oak boards and has vellum fly leaves.)

The careful choice of materials is, of course, something the field of book conservation particularly has to be concerned with as we tend to add to and embellish original materials much more than most other specialties

of conservation. In many instances, we will actually break down a structure to its bare bones (i.e., the text block) either because of poor original construction or damage caused by outside forces or because of the previous use of damaging materials.

- (S-11) Short series of slides showing a book which had to be completely pulled and rebound using quality materials as it was damaged throughout by mold. Justices of Peace. Date - 1541.)
- (S-12) Deterioration caused by mold after some water damage.)
- (S-13) Leaves laid out and ready for leaf casting.)
- (S-14) Leaves after casting.)
- (S-15) Book sewn on a concertina guard.)
- (S-16) This shows the same book with the boards pulled on.)
- (S-17) Finished book showing the amount of leaf casting which was done throughout the book.)
- (S-18) This is the finished binding showing blind tooling and the typical characteristics of pigskin.)
- (S-19) This is a 19th-century blank book showing advanced deterioration of reversed calf.)
- (S-20) Remnants of the same book.)
- (S-21) Rebound in a similar style.)

There are signs that certain manufacturers are at long last listening to our pleas for high quality materials and I, for one, feel optimistic that this situation will continue to improve. The current availability of alum-tawed pigskin and archival quality paper for paper-cased bindings is proof of the benefit derived from conservators and manufacturers working together to produce highly successful products.

- (S-22) Showing quality material being used in the covering of the Kelmscott Chaucer produced by Hewits & Sons in Edinburgh.)
- (S-23) This is a slide of the inside cover of a paper binding showing its similarity to the heavy hand-made paper currently being produced by Dieu Donne for paper cased bindings.)

Unfortunately, the continued supply and quality of these materials is not under our control. We must rely on the manufacturers and their honesty in consistently keeping to the published formulae and the methods of manufacture.

When possible, we should try to support them so that they will continue producing and developing new archival products. But there are certain materials we may never again be able to purchase, such as the high quality Irish sewing cord or long lasting calf skins which have similar qualities to those used in the 16th century.

(S-24) This is a 16th-century binding illustrating superb quality calfskin. Opera Toscane Date - 1532. Lyons.)

The correct application of these materials in all of the various technical configurations is of course another aspect of standards. For example, the technique of using strong thick cord for sewing supports in flexible sewing and then cutting one cord off to ease the lacing-in and openability of the boards should be frowned upon.

(S-25) Example of this technique which sadly seems rather common in many bindings of this period. Date - 1541.)

(S-25a) Showing the cords broken.)

The same is true with the practice of paring leather very thin so that it is easy to work with.

(S-26) Example of leather pared so thin that it is like paper around the edges of the boards.

(S-27) Another example of thinly pared leather, this time at the joint.)

To do this is to bastardise the whole reason for using strong materials in the first place. Techniques should be used in conservation binding practices that will allow the full benefit and strength of the materials to be realized.

- (S-28) Techniques and materials showing strength and standards of excellence in execution.)
- (S-29) Same.)
- (S-30) Same.)

These techniques should be allied with an understanding of the period of the book so that everything then works in unison, e.g., 16th-17th century book paper makes for a very solid book (S-31) when sewn on single or double raised cords with little or no backing, covered in full thickness leather with no nipping up of the bands, only tying up so that when the book is opened, the boards and the text block flow together and not independently as they tend to do in later styles.

- (S-31) This illustrates the solidity of the text blocks and spines with no backing shoulders. Dates range from 15th to 17th centuries.)
- (S-32) Close up of the spines illustrating the marks from tying up.)
- (S-33) Modern conservation binding showing the technique of tying up.)
- (S-34) 16th-century binding which illustrates somewhat the way the boards and the textblock open in unison.)

But this technique is not applicable when working with an 18th - 19th-century book.

- (S-35) 18th - 19th-century binding which illustrates the way the boards open independently without moving the text block.)

Books of this period have a distinct finished appearance so a different attitude and approach should be taken when conserving them. Neatness, squareness, a rounded spine, sharp headcaps, etc. are stylistic elements of this period to be considered.

- (S-36) This shows a 19th-century binding with a square board edge and headcap.)
- (S-37) Showing nipped up bands and the grain of the leather being kept up.)
- (S-38) Another example of a well-bound, beautifully proportioned binding by Cobden-Sanderson. Prometheus Unbound. Date - 1892.)
- (S-39) Same.)

Techniques can be devised to achieve the style desired without sacrificing the strength of the new material. One such technique is that of setting the boards away from the shoulder to allow the use of thicker leather while still allowing the book to open to nearly 180° without lifting the flyleaf as you open the board. Another technique would be sanding the boards down more than is normally done so that paring of the leather is kept to a minimum while the board edge is kept looking neat and sharp.

This concept is illustrated by the work done on The History of Jamaica, 1774.

- (S-40) A book with fairly brittle paper in single leaves being bound in a non-adhesive binding with a finished look of showing characteristics of an 18th-19th century binding but using full strength archival material. History of Jamaica, 1774.)
- (S-41) Showing linen sewing support with vellum spine piece prior to sewing)
- (S-42) After leaves have been guarded. The completed sewing shows how it is attached to the linen sewing support)
- (S-43) This slide shows the book's openability)
- (S-44) Illustrating that the board is attached by the linen former and shows the shape of the spine edge of the front board)
- (S-45) The finished binding, showing vellum tips and the quality of the leather)

The techniques used and the methods of working to achieve standards of excellence are so varied that examples of finished, or partially finished basic structures should be developed, illustrated, written up in conservation

journals and exhibited so that all of us can judge, evaluate, and decide which are the best methods to achieve the desired results.

- (S-46) Various sewing structures and their relative openability)
- (S-47) The shell of a concertina guard which had to be taken off is shown here with the book which was redone using a variation of the same technique. The sewing needed to be redone because the swelling was too great the first time around)
- (S-48) Concertina guard was removed intact showing that the concept of reversability was successful in this instance)
- (S-49) A limp vellum binding with a non-adhesive structure)
- (S-50) Example of modern paper cased bindings with various sewing patterns which attach the covers)
- (S-51) Same)
- (S-52) Showing a style of turn-ins)
- (S-53) Example of limp vellum bindings that were carried out as part of a training program to help students appreciate the nuances of this style)
- (S-54) Superb example of a conservation binding of an early manuscript)

The finished product in general will tell its own story by the way it opens, the solidity of the book, and the aesthetic harmony of all its parts, e.g., 1) surface characteristics of the paper after treatment; 2) textblock alignment after sewing; 3) openability and flow of the leaves; 4) size of the squares; 5) shape of the boards; 6) endband size in relation to the size and thickness of the book and the squares as well as the

endband's function, whether it is purely decorative or structural or both; 7) thickness of the finished board edge; 8) unblemished and undamaged surface characteristics of the covering material at the spine, joint area, corners, turn-ins, etc.

The following slides illustrate some of these qualities:

- (S-55) Text block prior to treatment)
- (S-56) Leaves after treatment showing no damage to paper surface characteristics)
- (S-57) Textblock alignment not being disturbed even though the book has been completely resewn)
- (S-58) The Kelmscott Chaucer. Even though the paper is rather stiff, with correct treatment of the spine, the book still opens beautifully)
- (S-59) Early bindings showing board shaping)
- (S-60) Early bindings showing board edge shaping)
- (S-61) A modern conservation binding following the 16th century example showing board shaping)
- (S-62) Endband treatment on the Kelmscott and its relationship to the squares and the functional needs of the binding. It was, in fact, laced to the boards)
- (S-63) Various bindings showing board edge thicknesses and treatment variables)
- (S-64) Corner of turn-in showing unblemished surface and neat cornering technique.



- (S-65) Corner of turn-in showing poor technique through either bruising or a polishing iron that was too hot)
- (S-66) Native tanned leather being used on a conservation binding showing excellent covering technique)
- (S-67) Another example of the same but in alum-tawed pigskin. Both of these are good examples of preserving the grain of the leather.)

As Tom Albro points out and I quote: "In a conservation binding as in any other form of binding, the pursuit of excellence begins at the start and follows through with every step, for adequate binding can't be made all right at the end with the covering and the tooling. Every step must be right. What you can see and what you can't see must be carried out with the same concern for excellence, that's the pleasure and the art."