

*A Stitch in Time: Repairing the  
Original Sewing Structure on Bound Materials*  
2. Sewing Repair: A Minimalist Approach

ABSTRACT

In the context of large special collections libraries such as at the University of California at Berkeley, a phased approach offers a practical strategy for conservation treatment on individual items. Minimal repair or enclosure can be performed to hold a book together; when and if use makes that minimal repair inadequate a more extensive repair can be considered. Determining strategies for invasive repairs are a joint curator and conservator decision. The book is analyzed to determine the cause of failure, the context for future use and the desired outcome of each book. Examples of such treatment decisions include: (1) leave the book in its broken condition (not resewing) and protecting the parts; (2) re sew the sections as fascicles to facilitate display (for an Ansel Adams photographic album); (3) reinforce rather than replace existing sewing.

---

Library preservation at the University of California, Berkeley, is concerned with protecting and extending the life of library materials. The Conservation Treatment Division works on materials from the special collections libraries: the East Asian Library, the Music Library, the Environmental Design Library, and the Bancroft Library. The Bancroft Library houses materials that exist in a multitude of media and formats: CD-ROMs, video tapes, audio tapes, reel-to-reel tapes, DVDs, maps, posters, photographs, books, manuscript letters and papers, vellum documents, and papyri. The context for the type of treatment undertaken is that special collections materials do not leave the library buildings and are used, under supervision, in special reading rooms.

---

Presented as part of a panel discussion moderated by Ethel E. Hellman at the Book & Paper Group Session, AIC 32nd Annual Meeting, June 9–14, 2004, Portland, Oregon. Received for publication Fall 2004. Color images for this paper are available online at <http://aic.stanford.edu/bpg/annual/>.

We treat around three thousand items, both flat and bound, per year. Grant projects can prioritize the items treated, as there is often a need for preparation for a digitizing or microfilming component. For example, in order to be able to be filmed, rolled material needs to be humidified and flattened. Each year's work differs as incoming materials vary and their use can depend on current classes and research topics. New acquisitions might need to be treated before they are cataloged and/or shelved, and loose items need to be housed to enable them to be shelved.

Special collections materials are used on-site only; they do not go home in a backpack or get read in the bath. Because of their controlled environment conserving these materials can have a general collection approach as well as responding to the individual material's need. These needs vary enormously according to the type and condition of the materials. The materials sent for repair are identified by a variety of criteria: patron use, new acquisitions, curatorial review. What can or should be done physically is the responsibility of the Special Collections Conservation Treatment Team. The general treatment to most special collection material is a phased treatment of minor repair and housing, where boxing is part of the treatment.

When these materials are used again, and deteriorate further, then a more invasive treatment may be considered. This "use approach" allows for materials to be sent down to the Conservation Department that have been identified by Bancroft staff, both in Bancroft's processing and acquisitions divisions and at the public service desk in the reading room. These materials are given a cursory review by the curators and archivists. However, when the condition of the material requires extensive invasive treatment, more comprehensive curatorial input is sought. The decision to treat an item or a collection of items is made in collaboration by the conservator and the appropriate curator. The condition of the item, its value within the collection, and the amount of use the item gets, are all factors to be considered. An appropriate treatment is then decided upon and carried out in the Conservation

Treatment Laboratory. This includes both a physical and chemical approach. Conservation is particularly concerned not to re-create conditions for further deterioration and to make sure that there is no inherent vice in the new materials, e.g. leading to embrittlement; conservationally sound and compatible materials and structures are chosen.

Our sewing repair approach is one of minimal intervention at first. I have isolated sewing repair today at the American Institute for Conservation annual meeting to try and deal with some of the specific issues. But when reviewing our treatment philosophy, I continually found that it was more complex and involved than just sewing repair. The type and condition of the text materials, the type and condition of the binding, and the context of use and value were all part of the whole and influenced the decision-making path. When the sewing is too deteriorated then resewing is considered, if the artifact is judged important enough to remain as close to the original as possible.

The original sewing is the physical information that we are saving. We keep the original sewing stations and evidence of the original sewing in place. The question for conservators is: should we reenact the damaging historical condition so that it can cause further breakdown? We certainly don't want to contribute to further deterioration of the object. These are some examples of questions the practitioner might ask, which might inform the treatment decision:

- How to contain the pages: what type of sewing and sewing support?
- Does it need to fit back into its present binding?
- Is it the sewing that is not working; maybe it is the physical and chemical condition of the pages or thread that is causing the breakdown? The actual physical location of the sewing can damage the pages, e.g. over-sewing, or side stitching.

One of the more radical answers that we have arrived at is on occasion to allow the condition of breakdown to stay as it is and not see the book as needing to be re-sewn. One

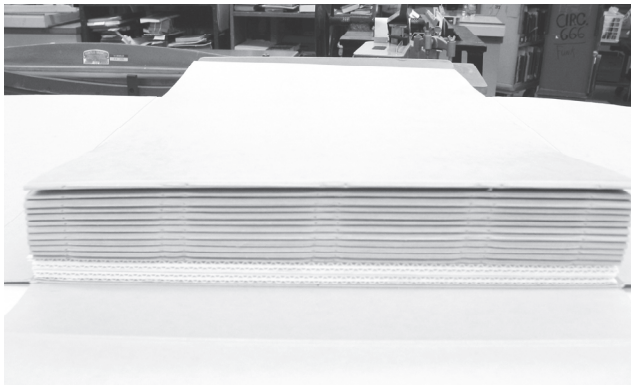


Fig. 1. Ansel Adams photographic album: signatures sewn into individual fascicles

example where we have applied this approach is caoutchouc bindings. There is only adhesive holding the single pages together so the present chemical and physical condition of the paper or binding does not allow or require the "repair of the sewing." We would create a three-flap wrapper around the leaves, place this inside the existing binding and then place it all inside a box. This is in keeping with the treatment approach to other single sheets that are housed in an archive and used by patrons. Contrary to what book conservators would have everyone believe, not everything in a library needs to be bound! However, we do have to come up with a housing that allows the item to be used by the patron, to give it physical support while being handled.

Another example is an Ansel Adams photographic album (figs. 1–3). We disbound the book and sewed the sections into individual fascicles (folders) using the original sewing holes. They were then housed in a box alongside the original binding. In the meantime, because the binding was causing the leaves to break down, these individually sewn fascicles will put less strain on the paper, the sewing,

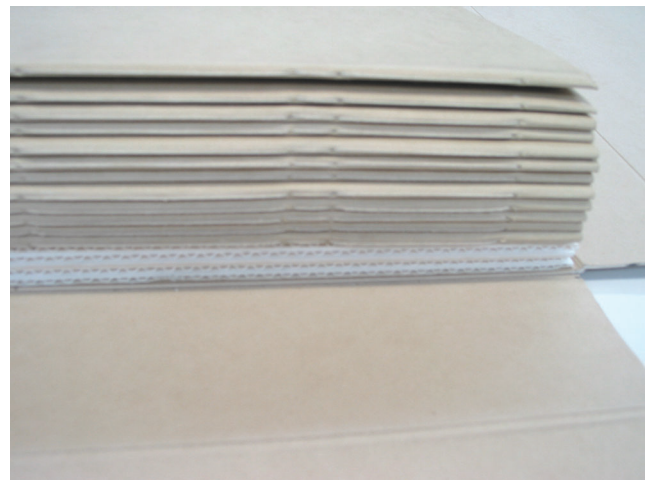


Fig. 2. Ansel Adams photographic album: original sewing stations



Fig. 3. Ansel Adams photographic album: individual fascicle

and the photographs. Thus the original pages will last longer and may be handled and displayed more easily. The idea is that it can all be reversed and the volume put back as it was.

Another approach to repairing the sewing is to reinforce the sewing where possible (figs. 4–8) and to use spine linings and a hollow to hold the book spine rigid so as to prevent further breakdown of the sewing. This is only possible if the paper in the volume is strong enough to flex without breaking. The binding is attached with an inner Japanese paper hinge and then boxed to protect it from wear and tear and allow it to be handled by a patron. In our library we use housing as part of the treatment. It serves as an outer binding and so replaces the need to repair the binding or make it strong again.

GILLIAN BOAL  
Hans Rausing Conservator  
University of California  
Berkeley, California  
gboal@library.berkeley.edu

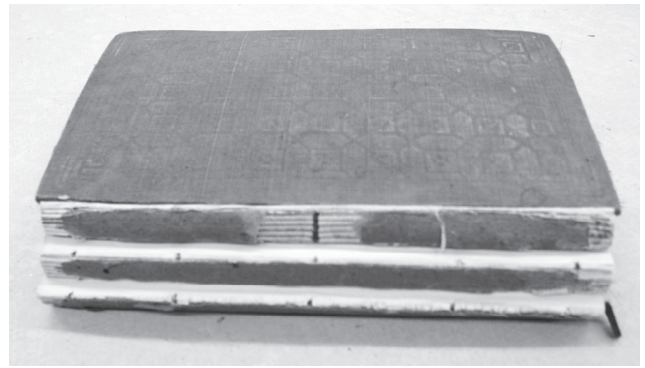


Fig. 5. Reinforce sewing: reinforce individual sections



Fig. 6. Reinforce sewing: clean spine and re-cord sawn-in cords



Fig. 7. Reinforce sewing: line spine with Japanese paper and paste



Fig. 8. Reinforce sewing: Japanese paper hollow

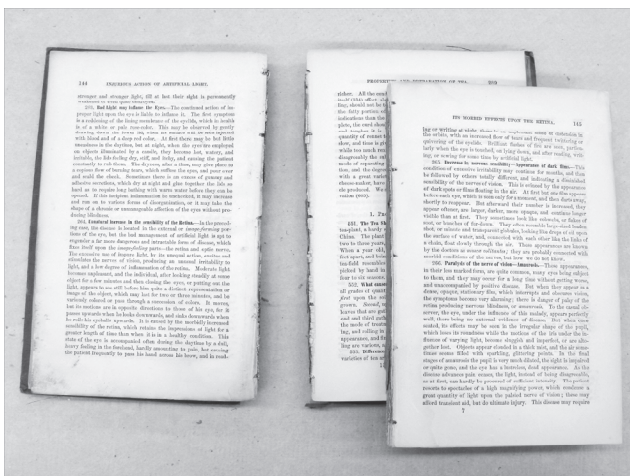


Fig. 4. Reinforce sewing: text block broken