

Can't Judge a Book Without its Binding

Introduction

The nineteenth and twentieth century publishers' cloth bindings scattered throughout a research library's circulating collection are often preserved arbitrarily. These fragile books are significant both as artistic works and as integral components of the book they were originally designed to protect. Yet, over the past century, sanctioned library repair and rebinding practices are responsible for destroying the covers and the sewing structures of at least half of these historic bindings. Recently, research potential for books retaining original publishers' binding has gained recognition, but future scholarly use of these increasingly scarce three-dimensional objects will be thwarted if libraries do not take steps to actively preserve them.

Throwing Out the Baby with the Bath Water

The role of research libraries is to collect and preserve in perpetuity material needed for scholarly research. This charge is universally acknowledged and must be broadly interpreted, as fields of research shift and foci change. A thorough study of Herman Melville, for example, requires access to every edition of each of his published works. Comparing subtle changes occurring between different editions can lead scholars to better understand the author's editorial role in the text's evolution. Further, the quality of the materials used in the book's production provides evidence about the publishers' intended market and the way each book would have been received by contemporary readers. Pirated editions, often lacking a publication date, can be

attributed to a specific decade by connoisseurs gleaning clues from the physical cloth, stamping media, and design elements of the binding. Rather than being redundant, retaining numerous copies and editions, both locally and collectively across the country, provides otherwise inaccessible information for scholarly comparison.¹

The field of material culture has blossomed in the past two decades as a methodology for documenting the undocumented, including the evolution of technology, and lesser-known stories of women, minorities, and the working masses who often left few if any written records upon which to base historical research. As evidenced by this growing field, some scholarly research is as physical as it is textual, and libraries, as storehouses of both types of information, must recognize the utility of their three-dimensional holdings and care for this material accordingly.²

Society trusts museums to collect and protect significant artwork and historically significant objects: the paintings of John Sloan and Dante Gabriel Rossetti; the ceramics and embroidery of Walter Crane; the furniture and textiles of William Morris; the drawings of Aubrey Beardsley; the posters of Will H. Bradley and Blanche McManus; and outside the museum walls, the architecture of Augustus Welby Pugin, Bertram Goodhue, and Stanford White. That these same renowned individuals also designed publishers' bookbindings is seldom recognized by the very libraries entrusted with their long-term care. More precariously, often bookbindings from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are not yet considered rare. Undervalued, they are generically at risk of being destroyed by a library's prevailing rebinding and repair policies (paradoxically, the institution's intrinsic preservation approach) before their artistic or historic

significance is fully accepted.

Repair policies in both the U.S. and Europe habitually disregard the potential scarcity of bookbindings housed in general collections as well as their potential aesthetic or research value,³ and bibliographic databases do not track the physical descriptions of “non-rare” books. Most research libraries hold material that could easily be included in historical surveys of Impressionism, Art Nouveau, or Art Deco. However, the bindings that could illustrate histories of master engravers, designers and typographers such as Frederic W. Goudy, and, books designed by their own author, as with artists John Leighton, Christopher Dresser, and James McNeill Whistler,⁴ are often rebound with little concern for the historical connection. Were a museum to discard a frame Rossetti or Whistler designed for one of their own paintings, the museum community would consider the loss as irresponsible and brutish; preserving the artist’s intent is a broadly held tenet of professional practice. The idea of preserving the original intent of an author, publisher, designer, or manufacture prevails in libraries only once a book is classified “rare.” The broadest representation of Victorian book making remains in the open stacks, accessible for loan and subject to current patterns of rebinding that can clear-cut a collection within a generation or two. While libraries are not museums,⁵ no other institution has the responsibility to retain the cultural treasure trove represented by original publishers’ bindings, be they cloth, paper, leather, or early synthetic compositions.

The Survey

Since there is no online record defining whether a book retains its original binding, in 1996, Liz

Call, a library school student under my supervision, conducted a survey to determine the loss rate of one such bookbinding 100 years after its publication. *A Singular Life* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1896) was designed by Sarah Wyman Whitman, the first professional woman binding designer and a major, although as yet largely unsung, figure in the women's movement.⁶ This particular binding is unsigned but is typical of the work Whitman produced during her reign as principal binding designer at Houghton Mifflin from 1880 until her death in 1904. Of the 45 copies of *A Singular Life* identified in OCLC (the largest U.S. bibliographic database) and interlibrary loaned for examination, only 49% retained Whitman's original binding. Today, ten years after Call's survey, it is hypothesized the loss rate has increased significantly.

Through serendipity, the survey also revealed that *A Singular Life* had been produced in at least three cloth variants – green, blue, and grey. The prevalence of this publishers' practice is not yet well understood and cannot be without exhaustive data from numerous original bindings drawn from different publishers and different time periods which even now may be lost. The lack of appreciation is not isolated to Whitman's works, but more broadly encompasses original publishers' bindings in circulating collections, a circumstance integrally tied to the culture of librarianship and a topic that warrants some disclosure.

Book Repair, A Nonissue

Repair of circulating collections has long been a matter of little interest to the library profession. Training for new aspirants was frequently inappropriate and occasionally detrimental. E. W. Browning (second director of the Library Binding Institute) observed that book conservation

theory was almost complete lacking in U.S. library school curricula in 1950.⁷ This irresponsible approach to collection care, according to Pelham Barr (creator and first director of the Library Binding Institute), often left crucial decision-making in the hands of an “inexperienced assistant, whose only training” was on-the-job learning picked up from the “good or bad methods employed by [their] predecessor.”⁸ As such, decisions were randomly made about which books to retain in original bindings and which to rebind. The pragmatic necessity of balancing a predetermined budget overshadowed the entire operation.

Lacking Barr’s insight into responsible collection custody, most library administrators during the 1940s and 1950s frequently situated their institution’s in-house bindery “in the basement or one of the not-so-respectable corners of the building.”⁹ This “out of sight, out of mind” legacy still prevails in some libraries today.

A more progressive discourse on preserving the collection’s physical integrity was actually in play 50 years earlier. In 1903, for example, librarian Walter Powell (of Birmingham, England) advised:

Before sending an old work to be rebound, it should be carefully considered whether it actually needs rebinding. Even if the side is off and the back is loose, is it beyond repair? . . . is there sufficient character in the old binding to make it desirable to preserve it? . . . In such cases the old binding can be “restored” by removing the old back, re-backing the volume, and then pasting on the old back again. In this way, the “style” and “character”

of the old binding are preserved, with the strength, or almost the strength of a new one.¹⁰

In fact, the professional library literature during this period was rife with debate about whether to repair books in-house or send them for commercial library binding. The crux of the argument invariably focused on issues of thriftiness and patron access.¹¹

Published lists of tools and machinery needed to establish an in-house bindery occasionally included a whimsical admonition: “Often a little attention given to a book when it first shows signs of wear will postpone [by] many months the evil day when it must be withdrawn to go to the binders.”¹² The design value of original publishers’ bindings was commonly mentioned in late-nineteenth century book reviews, a fact noted by Brander Matthews in his 1895 classic, *Bookbindings old and new*.¹³ Yet, seldom did the need to preserve original publishers’ bindings for their own sake warrant mentioning, and the fate of this material was often a matter of happenstance when preservation did occur. If a book were repaired in-house, its publishers’ binding might be retained (albeit with significant modifications), while books sent for commercial rebinding invariably lost their original cover.

Much of the early-twentieth century preservation dialog stressed the economics of durability rather than the historicity of the collection. For example, in 1910, librarian George Stephen (St. Pancras, England) called attention to the “steadily deteriorating . . . quality” of publishers’ raw materials and workmanship, and urged book manufacturers to reform irresponsible practices he felt would inevitably consume “a disproportionate part of the library income.”¹⁴ Once the

purchased book did require repair, Arthur Bailey (Wilmington Institute Free Library, Delaware), believed “resewing and recasing” (that is, saving the original binding) constituted “a mistaken policy” because he feared a “recased book will not wear as long as it should.” He held out, however, that

since recasing often preserves an attractive cover, the possibility should always be considered when such books come up for binding. Furthermore recasing may be done by girls in the library at a very small expense.¹⁵

In 1903, Cyril Davenport (Superintendent of Bookbinding, British Museum) documented the practice of retaining original bindings at the British Museum Library, a national library where slightly less than one-in-five books were recased.¹⁶

By 1910, the American Library Association found it necessary to publish a guide for “librarians who are entirely inexperienced in the work of mending and repair.”¹⁷ Authored by Margaret Wright Brown (Iowa Library Commission), this extremely influential manual (republished four times by 1921), described recasing as an option. Unfortunately, the instructions for executing the technique were too sparse to offer much help to inexperienced practitioners. Other bookbinding manuals – the most famous being Douglas Cockerell’s *Bookbinding and the care of books* (first published in 1901 and still reprinted today) – offered elegant instructions for tradesmen working in well-equipped binderies but, because the craft is best learned experientially, remained obtuse to the average librarian.

Sadly, from the late 1920s through the early 1990s, serious book repair training that would have included recasing was almost nonexistent in the U.S. Librarians interested in learning to repair books largely gained their one-on-one experience from itinerant bookbinders employed by one of the large library vendors. These men offered regional on-site instruction at host libraries using the limited tools, materials, and guidebooks sold by their respective companies. For example, in 1928 Gaylord published *Bookcraft: On book repairing for schools and libraries*, with a title page depicting the U.S. divided from North Dakota south to Texas, the two territories covered by their traveling binder/salesmen.¹⁸ Similarly, Joe Holler, retired regional manager for Demco, is said to have “personally conducted book repair workshops for more than 20 years,” probably from the late-1960s through the early-1990s, but what occurred previously is now undocumented.¹⁹

During the 50-plus years library vendors employed this marketing strategy, their repair techniques emphasized strength required for heavily circulated public library books. Vendors made no claims about the appropriateness of these solutions for permanent retention collections, and inevitably, a research library’s decisions about how to repair were entrusted to the “inexperienced assistant.” When applied to artistic or historic bookbindings, these techniques often proved damaging over time, but no alternative source of instruction, short of apprenticing oneself to a bookbinder, was available to U.S. librarians during most of the twentieth century. Despite their shortcomings, these crude repairs often retained the original boards and spine, leaving modern conservators something to salvage. The same cannot be said for books routed to a commercial library binder.

Library Binding

In the first years of the twentieth century, England's Royal Society of Arts established a blue-ribbon Committee on Leather for Bookbinding to identify the cause of leather bookbinding deterioration (termed "red rot"). Included among the luminaries comprising this 20-member committee were Cyril Davenport, Douglas Cockerell, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, Sarah T. Prideaux, and Joseph Zaehnsdorf.²⁰ Among its published findings, the Committee included a "Suggested Recommendation for Ordinary Library Binding," a specification so exacting it came to forever demarcate library binding standards in England from the mass produced approach practiced in the U.S.

Rebinding – which includes the replacement of a book's original cover and, until recently, the loss of original sewing – was widely seen as the answer to weak publishers' materials and structures breaking down. During the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the rapid development of free libraries opened the door to new approaches in commercial binderies that emphasized durability. Techniques in this developing field of "library binding" differed, but the few who understood the craft recognized that certain profitable shortcuts would have long-term, deleterious effects on books. In response, the Committee on Leather for Bookbinding rigorously endorsed repairing the backs of damaged sections ("guarding") before resewing through-the-fold to prevent stress to the text in use. The Committee also prohibited overcasting,²¹ a speed trick advocated by Cedric Chivers in his patented (1885) "Duro-Flexile" binding. Duro-Flexile included overcasting damaged sections, a time-saving step that eliminated guarding but subsequently caused stress when the text was opened completely to the fold.

Chivers followed Duro-Flexile binding with a patent for hand oversewing in 1904, a technique that came to define American library binding for most of the twentieth century.²² To clarify the significance of this development, “oversewing” differed significantly from his previous use of “overcasting” in that every section of the book was opened to its center and pierced with a series of holes parallel to the fold. Sewing thread was stabbed through each pre-holed section as well as through the gutter margin of the two previous sections until the entire text was similarly stitched.²³ This process limited the text’s ability to open, but technique was strong and inexpensive which explains its popular following. No longer did the individual characteristics of a book need to affect the repair approach employed. Every damaged book – regardless of size, structure, or paper condition – could be treated identically by technicians instead of trained binders.

The low markup inherent in library binding required an enormous flow of material to generate substantive profits and, being tremendously ambitious, Chivers, in addition to his shop in Bath (England),²⁴ opened an American branch in New York City in 1905, and relocated this facility to Brooklyn the following year to accommodate expansion.²⁵ By 1908, Chivers’ American operation employed 80 people and serviced approximately 500 libraries from coast to coast.²⁶ To manage operations on both continents Chivers sailed between England and the U.S. at least 120 times during the 18 years he operated his American plant.²⁷ Always suave and charismatic, Chivers is reputed to have set foot inside more U.S. public libraries than any American then living.²⁸

Chivers marketed his services by exhibiting and presenting papers at regional and national library conferences in both England and the U.S.; his two principle publications are self-published, professional talks.²⁹ The 1909 work, *Paper of lending library books*, bears scrutiny. This work erodes reliance on traditional rebinding methods by contending that oversewing is stronger than traditional through-the-fold sewing, and therefore more appropriate for repairing contemporary (1890-1910), poor-quality book papers. This position is diametrically opposed to the conclusion reached four years earlier by the Committee on Leather for Bookbinding and, while it would help make Chivers a wealthy man, it also provided the intellectual underpinning for broad U.S. acceptance of oversewing.

In 1920, Los Angeles library binder W. Elmo Reavis invented the oversewing machine, effectively mechanizing this stab-sewing process and dramatically increasing library binding's efficiency.³⁰ In preparation for oversewing, spine folds and original sewing were trimmed away, effectively converting books into generic, single-leaf objects. In 1923, the American Library Association's Committee on Book Binding, in conjunction with the Library Group of the Employing Book Binders of America (of which Reavis was a member), defined the first U.S. standard for library binding, stating:

Oversewing either by machine or hand is entirely practical for nearly all library binding, including books and periodicals, estimated by various binders at eighty to ninety per cent of the entire output.³¹

Once adopted, oversewing remained the national standard promulgated by the Library Binding Institute for 63 years until 1986. The 1981 edition of the *Standard for library binding* clearly specified, “Oversewing shall be used on all volumes with suitable paper provided that the sewing does not infringe on the print.”³²

European research libraries did not fall into this pattern of mass oversewing, largely because commercial hand binderies continued to meet the specification defined by Douglas Cockerell and the Committee on Leather for Bookbinding in 1905. An explanation for America’s love affair with mechanization, a phenomenon that affected numerous fields, was proffered by the architect and U.S. émigré Walter Gropius in 1960, who contended:

Increasingly, patterns of taste dictated by purely commercial considerations win acceptance, and the natural feeling for quality and appropriateness is dissipated in the giddy tumble from novelty to novelty.³³

From a research library perspective, it is abundantly clear that American librarians mistakenly adopted oversewing as a panacea because of its strength. However, as acidic book paper becomes fragile over time, oversewing causes text leaves to crack about 3/8" away from the thread due to the stress of pages acutely opening against the sewing’s fixity. Books afflicted with this “guttersnap” are usually impossible to repair, having little or no remaining margin. Although identified as a serious problem in 1967 by Matt Roberts (Chief, Circulation Department, Washington University),³⁴ challenges to oversewing’s market dominance proved futile for the

next two decades. The damage it caused became conflated with the “brittle book crisis” of the 1980s and the consequences of this aspect of America’s “giddy tumble” were glossed over.

Notwithstanding, in his later years even Chivers recognized oversewing’s pitfalls. In 1925, three and a half years before his death, the then-Mayor of Bath was invited to address the Royal Society of Arts (whose Committee on Leather for Bookbinding had rebuffed him 20 years earlier). During this lecture he confided:

These methods were the best which at that time could be contrived, but presently complaints began to be made as to the durability of some of my bindings. Pages broke away from the sewing . . . Indeed I frequently lose contracts for Library binding because of my refusal to follow the instructions of a specification which under other conditions I personally drew up.³⁵

Chivers’ acknowledgment of the damage caused by unbridled library binding didn’t go far enough. Another serious trade-off that is now apparent is that throughout the 20th century, the indiscriminate reliance on rebinding in the U.S. and Europe has caused the wholesale discard of vast numbers of original publishers’ bindings.

Preserving General Collections

If some percentage of historical bindings in research libraries are to be preserved, the question arises – how much will it cost to repair them? Clearly, the answer is part of a larger question:

what long-term benefits can be achieved by implementing – or upgrading – a book repair program, with retention of publishers’ bindings just one aspect of a competent, fully integrated approach? Some repairs are simply cost effective to carry out in-house. More critically, having a certain level of technical expertise on-staff opens up otherwise unachievable options for the library. Customized treatments can provide varying degrees of reinforcement to accommodate varying requirements for fragile or older books receiving limited use.

Only about 15% of the total number of books passing through a research library’s repair shop are historic bindings requiring rebacking. This preservation technique, however, is impossible to implement without sufficiently trained staff to undertake the work. Outsourcing to private conservators is a limited option but one that is usually too expensive for circulating collections. The bottom line is, a library needs to decide whether it is willing to commit the requisite resources to appropriately maintain its older book collections for as long as they will be needed.³⁶ Without this commitment, the all-too-common, one-size-fits-all alternatives will assuredly and indiscriminately continue destroying some of the best parts of the collection, as they have these many years.

The Consequences

Most publishers’ bindings are unlikely to be reclassified into special collections in the foreseeable future. Accordingly, research libraries would be well advised to reappraise the historical and research value of their general collections. As with any good investment, a well-groomed book collection naturally improves with age. Rather than avoiding the problem of

properly maintaining older material in the open stacks, research libraries need to simply address its conservation. Considered a university's most valuable cumulative asset, research institutions need to take a hard, close look at what they have amassed. Responding to a wide range of damage with diverse repair options is a responsible approach that must be adopted if the future research needs of scholars are to be met.

The binding and repair decisions implemented by a research library can either preserve or destroy irreplaceable assets. Often, these day-to-day choices are motivated not by a lack of concern, but by a lack of professional awareness. "Collection development" in the broadest sense should protect a collection from acquisition through its permanent retention or eventual withdrawal, and should be informed by an ongoing evaluative process. Lacking significant attention to this "real" preservation, future generations of researchers will be robbed of historic riches by the profession's complacency.

Underlying this argument is the realization that quality service should not be limited in scope to our current awareness but must anticipate future needs. The motivations for preserving original publishers' bookbindings are simple: 1) these books already belong to the library; 2) their ongoing maintenance demands little more than the appropriate stewardship required to keep a research collection in good repair; and, 3) there is no library of last resort for this material. Refusing to shoulder this responsibility will have dire consequences for diverse groups of scholars because the primary source material needed for their work is now at risk of extinction.

Shades of the Things to Come

A study of the Library of Congress' (LC) collections conducted in 1996 revealed a startling fact. In a random sample of 294 books published between 1830 and 1914 by six prominent American publishers, only 105 (36%) retrieved from the general collection retained their original publishers' cloth bindings. Nearly twice that number – 180 (61%) – had already been library bound.³⁷ While the retention of publishers' cloth bindings in the general collection is clearly not a priority for LC, this prestigious institution is as close to a national library as exists in the U.S., and research libraries follow its lead. It is time to acknowledge that even through well-intended acts of preservation, fragments of our cumulative cultural heritage are being lost, and there is no library of last resort.

Endnotes

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 10. Walter Powell, "Library bookbinding," *Library world* 5 (1 January 1903): 173.
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21. Cobham and Wood (eds.), *Committee on Leather for Bookbinding*: 34

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26. Barbara Buckner Higginbotham, "Cedric Chivers: portrait of a turn-of-the-century binder and entrepreneur," *Technicalities* 15, no 12 (December 1995), 10-11. Chivers is discussed in glowing terms by numerous American librarians in the literature, including: Cornelia Marvin, "Rebinding made unnecessary," *Wisconsin Library Bulletin* 1 (May 1905), 42; Clara Field, "Book repairing," *News Notes of California Libraries* 2 (July 1907): 105; Kirke H. Field, "Binding and other workroom problems," *News Notes of California Libraries* 5 (July 1910): 372.

27. Chivers sold the Brooklyn bindery in 1923 to Karl Schaefer and Frank Barnard, themselves owners of well-established binderies. See Michael Dewe, "Cedric Chivers and library binding," *Library World* 72, no 844 (October 1970), 125.

28. Dewe, "Cedric Chivers and library binding," 1970, 123-127; Harris, 1978, p. 5.

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34. Matt Roberts, "Oversewing and the problem of book preservation in the research library," *College and research libraries* 28(January 1967): 17-24.

35. Cedric Chivers, "Bookbinding," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* (6 November 1925): 1077.

36. Maria Grandinette and Author, "Book repair in the U.S.A.: A library-wide approach to conservation," in, *La conservation: Une science en évolution, bilans et perspectives, actes des troisièmes journées internationales d'études de l'ARSAG* (Paris: Association pour la Recherche Scientifique sur les Arts Graphiques, 1997): 274-80; Author and Maria Grandinette, (eds.), *The changing role of book repair in research libraries*, SPEC Kit 190, (Washington, DC: Association of Research Libraries, Office of Management Services, 1993).

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Linda J. White, *Packaging the American word: a survey of nineteenth and early twentieth century American publishers' bindings in the general collections of the Library of Congress*, masters thesis, Catholic University of America in conjunction with the Library of Congress Preservation Directorate, 1997.