

Review of Montefiascone Book Conservation Summer School 2007

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The small hilltop town of Montefiascone may continue to be a well kept secret from the many tourists that flock to its neighbouring Orvieto each year, but there is no doubt that its popularity is increasing among the avid group of book conservators and students that transform the town every August. At the head of this group is the Australian conservator Cheryl Porter. Since 1987, Cheryl has endeavoured to restore the poor state of the collection in the library of the town's Seminario Barbarigo, much of which was damaged during the Second World War. Shortly after this, Cheryl organized a group of conservators to begin repairing the books and manuscripts that would soon become the heart of a thriving conservation summer programme attracting students and professionals worldwide.

The programme, now in its sixteenth year, continues to offer classes taught by conservators from the most prestigious institutions around the world, introducing new techniques and insights into some of the oldest materials, and donating all proceeds to the conservation of the seminary. Kicking off the programme each year is Cheryl Porter's course in "Medieval Painting," a look into the history, chemistry and re-creation of pigments used in medieval manuscripts. The course is a favourite among old and new conservators alike, and many returning students continue to take part in it. The course offerings for the rest of the summer vary widely in subject and time period, but they are always aimed at the most popular and widely debated issues in book conservation. In 2007, for example, in addition to "Medieval Painting," the courses offered were "The Armenian Manuscript," "Arab Bookbindings in Spain," and "Nag Hammadi Codices," taught by Julia Miller. As a result of such variety, the programme is both timely and intense, attracting some of the most ambitious conservators and students each year.

For the past four years, one space in particular has been reserved for the winner of Conservation by Design's "Nicholas Hadgraft Scholarship." To many of those returning to Montefiascone each year, Nicholas Hadgraft was a familiar name and face. His enthusiasm for the town and for book conservation was unmistakable and has been commemorated by the scholarship now given in his name.

A more than generous amount, the stipend allows one student every year to study whichever course or courses they choose in the setting that Nicholas so enjoyed. Being fortunate enough to receive the scholarship last year, I had the opportunity to study two courses over a two-week period, “The Armenian Manuscript,” and “Medieval Arab Bookbindings in Spain.”

“The Armenian Manuscript” was co-taught by Caroline Checkley-Scott and John Mumford with excellent lectures on the history of Armenian Catholicism and culture by Dr. Vrej Nersessian. With Dr. Nersessian’s in-depth lectures starting off each day, an inspired and eager class then worked furiously to create an historical model of the seventeenth-century manuscript belonging to the Wellcome Trust Library in London.

Having led the class from start to finish, the instructors engaged students in discussions as to how the bindings might have been created, and how several different versions of the distinctive raised end-bands may have been made. In five long but exciting days, all fifteen students made it from the beginning sewing stages, past triple-cord end-bands, and into the blind-tooling that finished the replica, taking away invaluable knowledge to enrich their own work.

In the final week of the programme, Ana Beny, a Spanish freelance conservator, kept up the pace with her course on “Medieval Arab Bindings in Spain.” In elegantly presented lectures, Beny covered a vast area of cross-cultural influence on medieval bindings. Discussing some of the earliest approaches to conservation held by Islamic binders, she illustrated the importance of such influences in the re-creation of an Islamic manuscript. Given the degree of cultural exchange common to such bindings, many techniques were covered in this course that merged both Western and Eastern practices. To conclude the course, after studying visual examples from Beny's lectures and from books she provided, the class finished each binding in their own adaptation of Islamic design.

The Nicholas Hadgraft Scholarship offered by Conservation by Design made it possible for me to study on both these courses and to experience the beauty of the tiny hilltop town of Montefiascone. Certainly, the annual wine festival, boasting the town’s famed “Est! Est! Est!” wine, the broad sunsets over Lake Bolsena, and the many friendships made there had much to do with Nicholas’s enthusiasm for the programme.

Thanks to the scholarship that afforded my study, my experience was equally inspiring, confirming me in my ambition to pursue a career in book conservation. Undoubtedly, my acceptance to the MA Programme in Conservation at Camberwell attests to the reputation of the summer programme and to the scholarship offered by Conservation by Design. I am sure that as Montefiascone continues to grow in popularity and the summer programme continues to grow in stature, the Nicholas Hadgraft Scholarship will become even more coveted, appealing to a wide range of students and conservators alike.