

Montefiascone 2018 - Tony King

Each August for the last 27 years, Conservators from all over the world have gathered in the historic Italian town of Montefiascone to take part in the conservation summer school run by the Montefiascone Conservation Project. The project, which is directed by Book Conservator Cheryl Porter was set up to preserve the historic library of the Seminario Barbarigo seminary within the town, which by the late 1980's had fallen into a sad state of neglect.



This collection of approximately 5,000 books includes volumes from the late medieval period onward, including several unique editions found nowhere else, and is recognised as a significant collection for those studying the history of the book as well as being an important part of the history of the town.

Over the years the project has benefitted from the involvement of many Conservators, Archivists and Cataloguers, who volunteer their time to help preserve this important collection. The conservation summer school was set up to help fund the work. Proceeds from the annual program of 4 week-long courses on subjects related to book conservation go towards the materials and equipment needed by the project. Each course is led by a different expert tutor who bases the week around a different subject (normally a specific historical book binding) presenting their research and the theory, and then demonstrating the technique before we students go back to our benches and create models of these historic bindings.

The first two courses were *Re-creating the Medieval Palette* which explored the chemistry, geography and history of the colours used in manuscript art in both the European and Islamic tradition followed by *An Indo-Persian binding* where the participants learnt how to create a Qur'an binding structure dated to around 1600. I joined the summer school for the final two weeks with Jim Bloxham, and Shaun Thompson from Cambridge University Library, who were instructing *A study of sewing techniques in Romanesque book production*. During the week we took an in depth look at the techniques and materials that went into the construction of a particular volume in the Cambridge University collection called Peterhouse Ms 13. This contains Gregory's *Magna Moralia*, dated to the



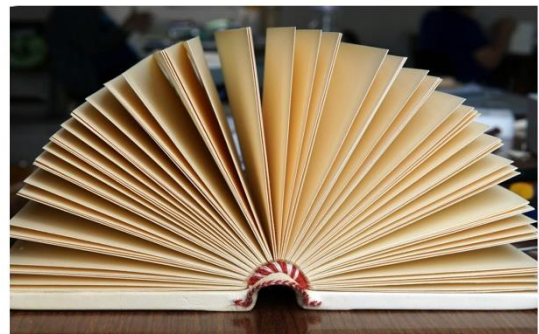
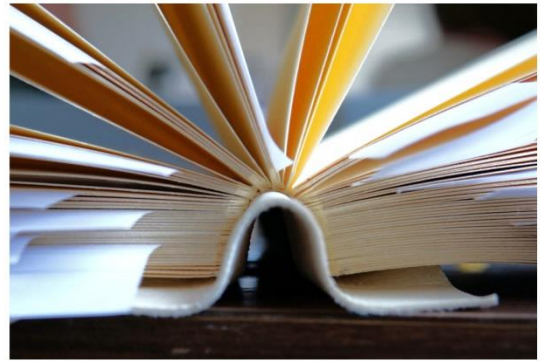
Oak boards attached by pegging sewing supports in place.



The finished Romanesque binding – fanned.

12th/13th century. The specific features that mark this out as a Romanesque binding include the use of wooden boards, gatherings sewn on to supports of slit alum-tawed skin, which are laced through channels cut in the edge of the boards, exiting on the outer surface before entering the board again through slots into which pegs are driven to secure the supports. Getting our books to this stage had already involved three different sewing techniques and there would be at least 5 more to get to grips with before it was complete, this course was not called 'A study of sewing techniques' for nothing!

With each subsequent layer of sewing or linings to support the spine, it was fascinating to see the mechanical operation of the book progress towards the even arching spine developed by medieval binders. This permits the relatively stiff parchment pages to fan open, so they may be read with minimal stress upon the structure. Even sewing around the endbands and tabs, which might be assumed to be purely decorative, served a purpose in creating such an easily opened and brilliantly articulated spine structure. With sore fingers and a sense of achievement and a greater appreciation of the work of the medieval binder, our books were finished with a secondary chemise cover closed by a strap complete with brass clasp.



The progression of the spine profile as subsequent supporting features are added

My second week; *Dirk de Bray and Beyond*, examined varieties of vellum over board bindings using the 1658 bookbinding manual of Dirk de Bray as a foundation from which to consider different techniques for constructing these European vellum bindings. Anne Hiram and Maria Fredericks shared their research in the subject and guided the class through the method as described by de Bray, as well as the binding of several additional models following different methods. Anne encouraged us to embrace the spirit of the 17th century binder and not be too reliant on straight



The small de Bray model sewn onto vellum supports



The small de Bray model sewn onto vellum

edges and squares, instead trusting to our 'eye' to make cuts and position elements of the binding correctly. The de Bray method was to sew the textblock onto long vellum supports, which were tapered to form 'spitsels' that are then laced into a limp vellum cover before the boards are inserted and pasted in place. Thanks to the direction of Anne and Maria, it was surprisingly easy to follow the steps in the manual albeit with the occasional discussion as to exactly how many millimetres were equal to a 'straws breath'.



The finished de Bray model

We then explored a very different variety of vellum binding; the moulded vellum spine where the cover is tightly moulded over the raised bands of the sewing supports, not something easily achieved with vellum due to its stiffness and relatively smooth surface which can make adhesion difficult in some situations. The method demonstrated by Anne and Maria was to completely soak the vellum in water until it was totally softened becoming almost jelly-like before pasting it to the spine of the book and moulding around the contours of the raised bands before firmly tying it up to ensure the vellum adhered as it dried.

Attending these courses was a fantastic experience, for which I am extremely grateful to the Conservation By Design Nicholas Hadgraft Scholarship for making it possible. For me, the experience went beyond the training offered by the summer school program, as spending time with Conservators from across the world in such a collaborative atmosphere was extremely rewarding, and I am certain the experiences and contacts made will continue to inform my work for many years to come.



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