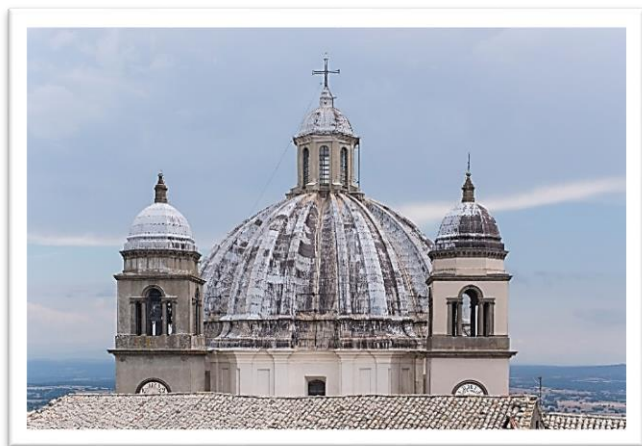


A Review of the Montefiascone

Book Conservation Summer School

Xiaoping Cai

The charming hill top town of Montefiascone, perched above the Lake of Bolsena in Northern Lazio, is known primarily for its two weeks long wine festival each summer and the white Est! Est!! Est!!! But there is no doubt that its popularity is increasing among the world of book conservation. Each year book conservators, librarians, archivists, historians and others interested in the history and the structure of the book from all over the world will gather here to participate in the Montefiascone Book Conservation Summer School, which is held at the Barbarigo Seminary.



The beautiful view of Montefiascone. Photo by Scott Naauao.



The decoration on top of the fountain for the wine festival. Photo by Scott Naauao.

Cheryl Porter, a UK-based Australian book conservator, is the director of the Montefiascone Project. Since 1987, Cheryl has endeavored to restore the poor state of the library collection in the Barbarigo Seminary, many of which were damaged during the Napoleonic War and then again during the Second World War. Realizing the importance of the library, Cheryl organized volunteer groups of conservation specialists to visit the library and restored the library collection to its former glory. To raise fund for the conservation project, an international summer school has been established and this runs in parallel with the conservation work. Prestigious conservators around the world started coming here annually and giving courses. The courses are fee-paying but the tutors work voluntary, and the revenue raised is entirely used to fund the conservation project of the library.



Due to the poor condition of original room of the Barbarigo Seminary Library, all of the library collection now has been move to another room with better environmental control. Cheryl Porter, the Monte project director, is talking about the collection in the library.



In the Barbarigo Seminary Archives, Cheryl show us a huge size of archive.

The programme, now in its 25th year, has developed into a well-established international training base for conservators, bookbinders and art historians to learn traditional bookbinding techniques and how to recreate historical processes. This year, I was fortunate to receive the “Nicholas Hadgraft Scholarship” from Conservation by Design. This generous stipend allowed me to attend all the four course this year, so that I can indulge myself in exploring traditional bookbinding technique, book history and conservation issue in such a peaceful place.

As usual, the programme was kicked off by Cheryl Porter's course “Re-creating the Medieval Palette”, an overview of the history, chemical science and re-creation of pigments used for illuminated manuscripts by artists throughout the medieval era. The curriculum of this course contains an ideal combination of lecture and hands-on sessions. In the lecture session, Cheryl went through the cultural, economic and technical context of colour manufacture via a lot of practical examples. Unlike the diversity and richness of modern synthetic pigment, the common ingredients in the medieval pigments were much simpler, such as earths, minerals, plants and insects. And the choices of different pigments to be used in medieval manuscripts varied by geographic locations, time periods and materials available. Besides, the lectures also paid a special attention to the original recipes of those medieval pigments and their chemical properties, which is very useful for conservators to understand why inherent deterioration has occurred and which method should be used to conserve them. After the lecture session, we usually made and paint out those colours we just learned by using original recipes, imitating the traditional process of grinding minerals and boiling organic matters. Through practicing these historical techniques and observing different outcomes and textures, it leads to unique insights into how and why did those medieval illuminator use those pigments. A time tunnel was built for us to go back to medieval era to experience illuminators' work.



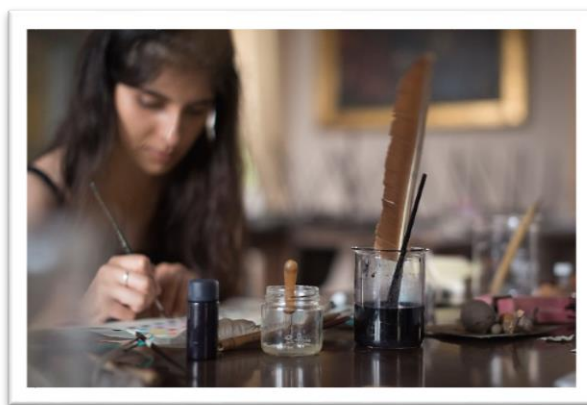
Non-organic pigments.

Different brands of red earth mixed with gum.



Organic pigments.

Fresh made red lake from madder and the raw materials: madder root and chips - is where the colour comes from.



Puneeta Sharma, currently an intern at Chester Beatty Library, is writing with fresh-made iron gall ink. Photo by Scott Naauao.

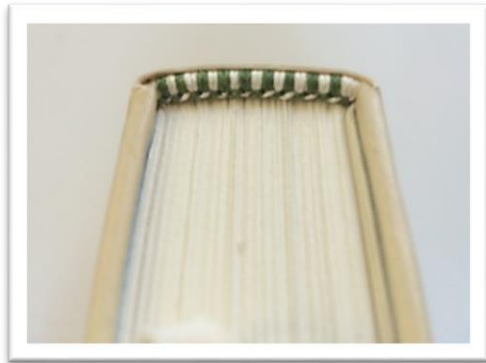


Different types of gall-nuts, and the traditional ink container and pen. Photo by Scott Naauao.

For the rest of the other three weeks, course topics vary widely in subjects and time periods, but they all focus on the most popular and widely debated issues and represent the most recent development of research in book conservation. It happens that this year is the 500th anniversary of the death of Aldus Manutius, an Italian humanist scholar and printer who founded the Aldine Press in Venice. To honor these events, two courses were designed to focus on this period, the "Italian Stiff-Board Vellum Binding with Slotted Spine" and "The Rylands Fountainebleau Aldine".

The course "Italian Stiff-Board Vellum Binding with Slotted Spine" was offered by Scott W. Devine, the Marie A. Quinlan Director of Preservation and Conservation at Northwestern University Library (NUL). This course was based on a research project by conservators from NUL, in which they had explored the relationship between manuscript and print culture in Renaissance Italy and tried to unlock the secrets behind a recycled vellum manuscript via multispectral imaging and x-ray fluorescence (XRF). In this course, we used the Northwestern Hesiod as a case study and explored the methods and techniques of

recreating it. The Northwestern Hesiod is a copy of *Hesiodou tou Askraiou Erga kai hemerai* (the Greek poet Hesiod's Works and Days), printed by Bartolomeo Zanetti in Venice in 1537. This binding style was used in Venice c. 1490 – 1670 and often characterized by the use of recycled vellum manuscripts applied flesh side out. The binding features sewing supports covered with alum-tawed patches; the vellum over the patches is cut away, creating small slots which allow for greater flexibility in opening.



A bead on the front secondary endband made up with green and white silk thread.

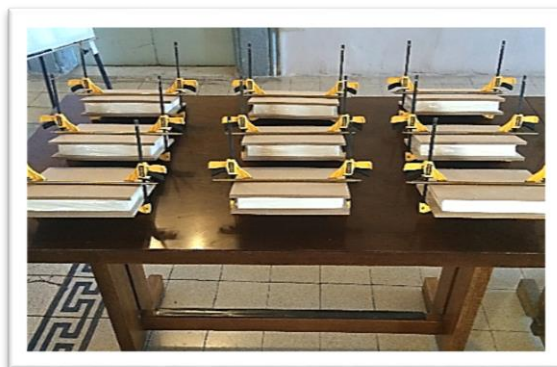


The text block is sewn on three split alum-tawed supports and the spine is lined with parchment.



Finished model, completed with ties on head, tail and fore-edge.

With the great work that NUL conservators have already done, we not only got the chance to explore the structure and materials used in this book, but also learnt more about its content. This helps us to form a better understanding of how this kind of binding style fit into the larger economic and social context of that time. Following a well-organized practical process, the instructors engaged students in discussions about how the bindings might have been created and why they chose a specific material. Along with the discussion, we did some excises in making pasteboards by using modern materials to understand the creation of the original one five centuries ago.



The well-organized bookbinding kits provided by Northwestern University Library.



Our tutor, Scott W. Devine is demonstrating the final step: pasting down the endsheets.

In the third week of the programme, “The Rylands Fountainebleau Aldine” was co-taught by Caroline Checkley-Scott, Stefania Signorello and Julianne Simpson. Caroline and Stefania led practical session of recreating the *Fountainebleau Aldine* and Julianne gave wonderful lectures on the biography of the *Fountainebleau Aldine* and also introduced the background of printing in 15th century. The book used for making our model is an edition of the Greek poet Oppian, published in 1517 by Aldine Press. One of the publishing legacies of Aldine Press is the development of books in small formats that were similar to modern paperbacks. People may think that smaller pocket books may be less expensive, but they could still be decorated luxuriously. Just like the case of this week, it was bound by the Royal Binder for Henri II King of France and used to be part of the Royal Library collection at Fontainebleau. From decoration's perspective, it is a glorious book: bound in full leather in the alla Greca style, a wooden boarded, Western /Greek style binding with claps and bosses, with gold finishing and hand painting. As you can tell, it was a laborious process to finish such a richly decorated book in just five days. However, everyone was so excited and energetic, trying to decorate as much as they could. During the finishing process, I would say the gold tooling and blind tooling is the most difficult part of this book, since any mistake could made it unperfected. But at the same time, it was the most interesting and satisfactory part, and students from various training backgrounds could also share their own methods and tips.



A small exhibition shows pictures of the original book, book models of different steps and various tools used for finishing.



A block which has the same pattern as the original one.



Students with finished models on hands.



The block is used on both sides of the cover, one side is blind and one is gilt.

In the third week, another big event worthy of mentioning was the exhibition and evening seminar on Wednesday, to celebrate the 25 years of the Montefiascone Conservation Project and 500 years of the death of Aldus Manutius. The celebration was held at Barbarigo Seminary, past and current students and teachers, notable Montefiascone figures such as its Bishop and Mayor, historians, artists and local people were all coming to join in the event. In the seminar, there was a series of talks given by Giancarlo Breccola, Nicholas Barker, Prof. Stephen Milner from the University of Manchester, Cheryl Porter and Caroline Checkley-Scott. The lectures were about the Barbarigo origins of the Barbarigo Seminary Library, its condition before conservation project, and history of Aldus Manutius and its connection to Marc Antonio Barbarigo. And after that, an exhibition of the Aldines from the collection of Barbarigo Seminary Library was hosted and participants shared a glass of wine while enjoying the exhibition. It was a great night to remember!



In the seminar, Cheryl Porter is giving a lecture on the conservation and restoration of the Seminary Library collections and building.



The entrance to the exhibition.

In the final week of the programme, the course focused on an early Islamic binding and co-taught by Kristine Rose and Julia Poirier from Chester Beatty Library. It also contains additional lectures from Alison Ohta from the Royal Asiatic Society(London) and Jonathan Bloom, Professor of Islamic and Asian Art at Boston College. Alison and Jonathan are world's leading experts on Islamic arts and it was a great honor to hear them talk about the early Islamic codex structure, decoration and the transition of text block materials from parchment to paper. The book we studied in this course is a 9th century Abbaid Qur'an in

small landscape format from Cambridge University Library. There are relatively few early Islamic bindings extant, and fewer still that remain intact and attached to their text block. Therefore, it was lucky to have this opportunity to explore the bookbinding structure and materials of an early codex which could still provide the evidence. Unlike the way of making a new binding, the reproducing process of a historical book model is more complicated, since the goal is trying to make it as close to the historical condition as possible. In this case, for instance, a special attention was paid to the collation of the text block. This collation is not straight forward, which consists bifolio, single folio with small hooked guard, and singleton folio.



Animal glue is used to keep the raised cords in place.



Finished model, the leather was moulded to form a raised design.



Certificates are awarded by Nicolas Barker, first head of conservation at the British Library.

The Montefiascone Book Conservation Summer School offer a fantastic opportunity to spend the whole month in beautiful and peaceful surroundings. It not only allowed me to have an in-depth study in medieval pigments and three specific book binding structures, but most importantly, it also offered a unique opportunity for conservators to have more interactions with leading experts, to share ideas and to establish friendship for the future, which I would never find in anywhere else.



The class dinner of the last week. On every Thursday evening, tutors and students will have a class dinner together, which is a very good time to know about each other.



The spectacular sunset at Montefiascone.

Acknowledgements: Special thanks to the Nicholas Hadgraft Scholarship offered by Conservation by Design for sponsoring me attending this Montefiascone Conservation Summer School.