

Montefiascone Memories

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On the first morning, we met at Il Café, the social hub for the next three weeks of the Book Conservation Summer School. This School was born in 1992, 25 years ago, to fund and run parallel to the Montefiascone Conservation Project. The Project has been running in Italy for thirty years and was started to save the valuable library collection of Seminario Barbarigo. Both draw people from all over the world, evidenced by those that attend the School.

15th Century Italian Binding

At Il Café, amongst cobblestones and coffee we were introduced to our course tutors for the second course of the year (the first that I was attending). We also met our fellow students (bookbinders, researchers, conservators) from all over the world (England, Estonia/Finland, France/New Zealand, Germany, Mexico, Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, United States of America, and of course Australia). This was just the students for week one! The next five days were spent working (and sweating!) alongside each other; sharing tools, tips and tricks, as well as personal bookbinding and conservation stories.

We traversed the small winding streets from the café to Seminario Barbarigo, the historical 17th century seminary that was still in use. In a room up the stairs, under a phenomenal coffered painted ceiling we set up our temporary bookbindery. Travelling sewing frames and impromptu book weights were some of the ingenious contraptions we utilised.

The aim of this week was to complete a model of Cicero's Topica from the late 15th century written in a humanist hand (held in the Cambridge University Library collection, CUL Add. 8445) staying as true as possible to the original methods and materials. Course tutors Jim Bloxam and Shaun Thompson were the experts that studied and analysed the original 15th century Italian binding that we would be recreating over five days (under their careful guidance!). Alison Ohta introduced us to the historical context of the binding and analysed the Islamic influences that impacted on the binding features and decoration.

Day 1: After setting up the temporary travelling sewing frames that Montefiascone is known for (clamps and a well placed metal rod), we sewed our textblock using slitted alum tawed calf skin supports with packed straight sewing. Then the endbands were created with a core of rolled calf skin.

Day 2: Next we shaped the wooden boards (English beech)- by planing, sanding, chiseling and filing to create a cushion form with channels for the

sewing supports and endbands. It was then secured to the textblock with brass nails and a healthy amount of EVA.

Day 3: Starting with 10 separate pieces of material (brass, leather and parchment) we folded, adhered, shaped, filed, polished, pared, nailed and joined them all together to end up with two fastening pieces. The book was covered with goatskin leather, leaving the spine un-adhered and was placed under weight to dry.

Day 4: We stamped the detailed central motifs (replicas of the original) in a press, creating a blind impression. Then lapis lazuli and shell gold pigments (suspended in gum Arabic and water) were applied to flood these recesses with colour.

Day 5: We spent hours building the detailed decoration of the covers with small 'arc' and 'bar' hand tools. These were repeatedly cold pressed into the leather to create intricate, blind tooled knot work designs. Hot tools were then used to do the blind tooling on the spine. Lastly, we attached the clasp with some well placed brass nails.

After a week of toiling in forty degree heat, interactive demonstrations, informative lectures and the occasional playing of the grand piano in the room we were done! We received our certificates for the course with suitable aplomb and celebrated with a group dinner of tasty food and good Italian local wine.

14th Century Italian Ledger Binding

I was fortunate enough to be able to attend more than one course. This was the second of three for myself. The aim of this week was to complete a cutaway model of The Secret Ledger and Memorial Book of Pep degli Albizzi from the Newberry Library Collection. The cutaway was to show the beautiful structure, layers, and book innards. Course tutor Scott Devine, assisted by Stacey Devine, took us through the personal history of the book itself, it's context with other Italian ledger bindings and the precise, painstaking method to produce the structural and decorative tacketed binding with no adhesive. The ledger, gifted to Pepo degli Albizzi in 1339, was a luxury item used as a record of personal finances and family affairs (the last entry was dated 1360!). It is one of the earliest extant examples of Italian ledger binding, which is durable and non-adhesive. Again, we were joined by a diverse range of students from all over the world (Australia, Canada, France/New Zealand, Mexico, Netherlands, Switzerland, Ukraine, United States).

Day 1: After learning about the structure and history of Albizzi's ledger, we experimented with lac and Brazilwood dyes. We painted these dyes on to pieces of alum tawed sheepskin to match the rich pink/red colour of the original binding. These pieces formed the cover and attachments.

Day 2: First we sewed the textblock on dyed, slit alum tawed supports with 'all along' sewing. Next the endbands were created with a flat, un-dyed alum tawed core that curled during sewing. We created a vellum wrapper and laced the sewing supports through it. The final task was pasting our laminated over together (dyed alum tawed, paper and un-dyed alum tawed skin) with wheat starch paste.

Day 3: We used cotton thread dyed in two colours to create a decorative and structural stitch around the edge of the cover. We then fit the cover to our textblock and vellum wrapper, securing it with the sewing supports.

Day 4: The day was all about tacketing. Using alum tawed skin cut into 4mm widths we fed them through holes punched into the parchment wrapper and then the laminated cover. This created a secure, non-adhesive binding akin to the original. Decorative tackets were also used to secure the fastening strap.

Day 5: After some more time spent finishing our tackets we were then done with our cutaway model. This left us time to explore Seminario Barbarigo's Library and Archives collection to examine other examples of Italian ledger bindings, see their variations and development.

We had a mid week group outing to Lake Bolsena to escape the heat and finished the course with another certificate ceremony and food.

Conservation Ethiopian Binding

The third, and final course for Montefiascone was taught by Dr Nikolas Sarris and Marco di Bella. Both have travelled multiple times to Ethiopia as part of a conservation project. During the course they imparted their accumulated knowledge, enabling us to produce a traditional Ethiopian binding and satchel, based on their observations of hundreds of Ethiopian manuscripts. Also, we created an additional conservation Ethiopian model binding based on a treatment they undertook of a large Ethiopian manuscript. Again, we were joined by a diverse range of students from all over the world.

Day 1: We sewed the traditional Ethiopian model, securing it to the boards through multiple drilled holes in the boards. The sewing structure was four sewing stations in two pairs, with an unsupported chain stitch. No needles were used- just stiffened linen thread fed by hand through pre-pierced holes.

Day 2: Next was the conservation variation on the Ethiopian structure, developed by Marco and Nikolas. It had the same sewing structure, except now the sewing was also going through a spine piece (made from parchment and alum tawed skin laminated together). This protected the spine folds and supported the book during opening, whilst using no adhesive.

Day 3: We experimented with both a traditional Ethiopian braided leather endband and a Coptic endband on the conservation model. Then covered the traditional binding with vegetable tanned leather- mine was a beautiful

red adhered with wheat starch paste. We used brightly coloured woven textiles to be our doublures.

Day 4: We started our traditional Ethiopian satchel made from parchment. The lid, the strap, even the material used for sewing was all parchment. These satchels are used to carry to books in Ethiopia, and to store them. Hung from a hook from walls, the satchels keep the books well away from pests such as mice, and safe in case the rooms flood with water.

Day 5: We finished the satchel then proceeded to do decorative blind tooling on the dampened leather covers. The tools we used were brought back from Ethiopia. We finished the endbands on the traditional model and were done!

Summary

The Montefiascone Book Conservation Summer School brings people from all over the world, raises awareness for the amazing medieval library collection, creates an international network and disseminates vital skills and knowledge. The School was not only about the weekly courses, but also learning about the history of the collection and the conservation project. We were fortunate enough to get tours of the Library collection and the Seminary by Cheryl Porter who created the project.

During this magical time in the beautiful medieval town I worked with materials I had never used before, learned diverse individual approaches to the same task, was guided through complex techniques, met so many people and created an international network. I walked away with four bound books and a satchel that I would never have dreamed of being able to bind before my time at Montefiascone. These memories will last me a lifetime. However, I hope these are not my only ones. Like so many before me I have every intention of going back to Montefiascone. Once the courses were over I returned to whence I came, bringing with me new skills and knowledge to utilise and share.

Acknowledgements

I am from Australia. Opportunities in bookbinding are limited. Going overseas to learn from international experts and being part of such a prestigious school is an even rarer opportunity. There are many people I must thank who made this possible.

Cheryl Porter for all her support before, during and after the course. It was lovely to find another Aussie on the other side of the world.

Tutors and helpers: Jim, Shaun, Alison, Scott, Stacey, Marco and Nikolas- I am in awe of your knowledge, skills as well as your ability and generosity in imparting it to others.

Thank you to Marco and Julie who encouraged me to apply and told me stories of the fantastic Montefiascone experience.
To the other students that shared their learning and time with me- thank you and I look forward to seeing you all again.
My workplace, the Australian National Maritime Museum that supported my attendance of Montefiascone.

To Conservation by Design and the panel that selected me- thank you for giving me the opportunity of a lifetime.
Finally, I want to acknowledge Nicholas Hadgraft who is still impacting so many lives even after his passing. I cannot tell you what this experience has meant to me personally and professionally. Thank you.

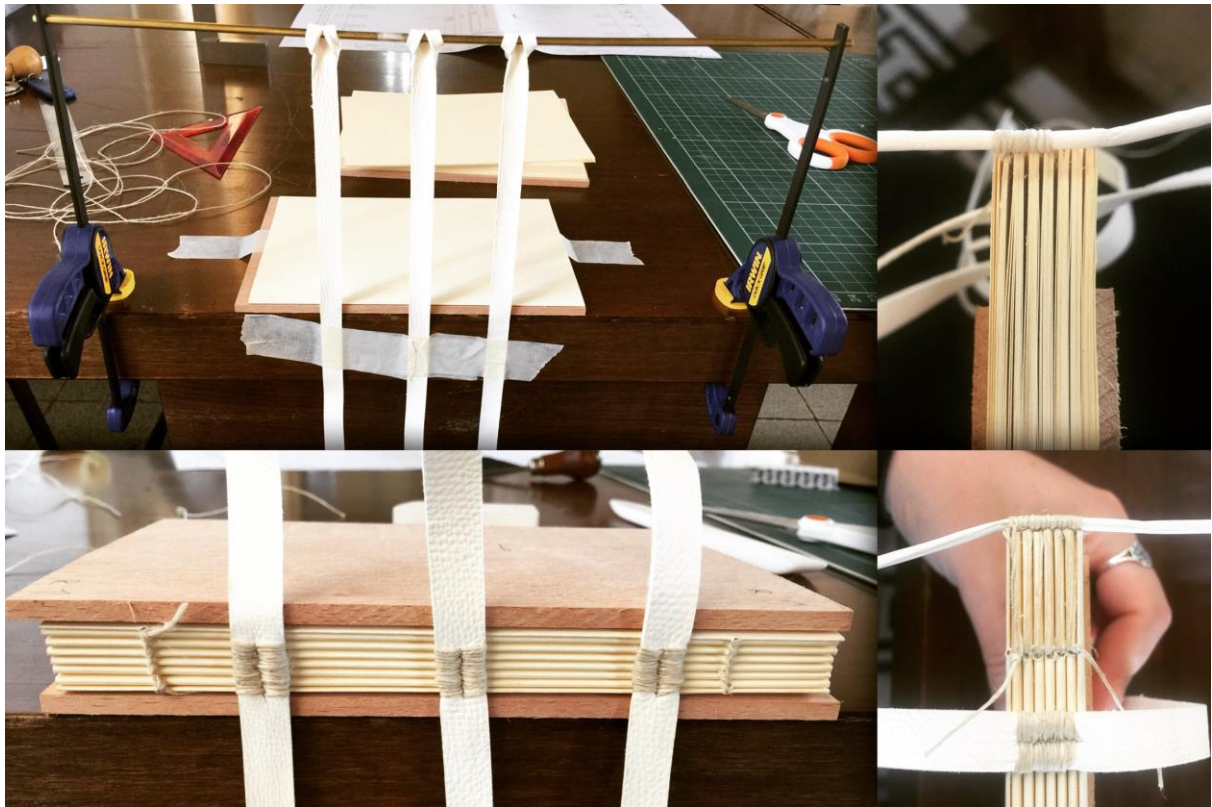
Photography



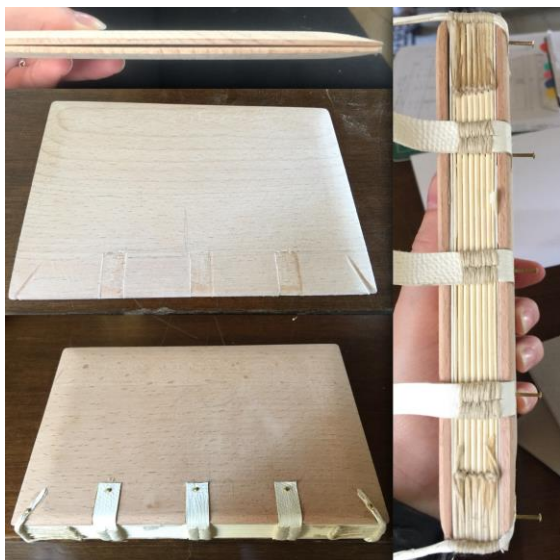
1: View of the historical Seminario Barbarigo where the library collection used to be stored.



2: The room that served as our temporary bindery for the next three weeks.



3: Using a travelling frame to sew our textblock, then applied endbands.



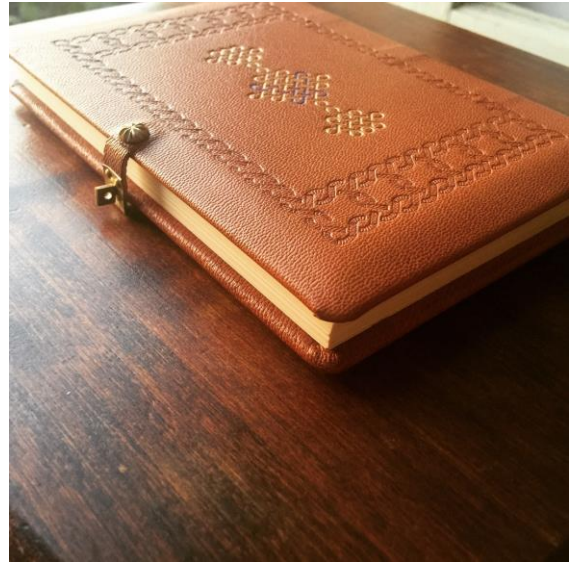
4: Shaping and attaching the wooden boards to textblock.



5: Covering the book and creating the fastening.



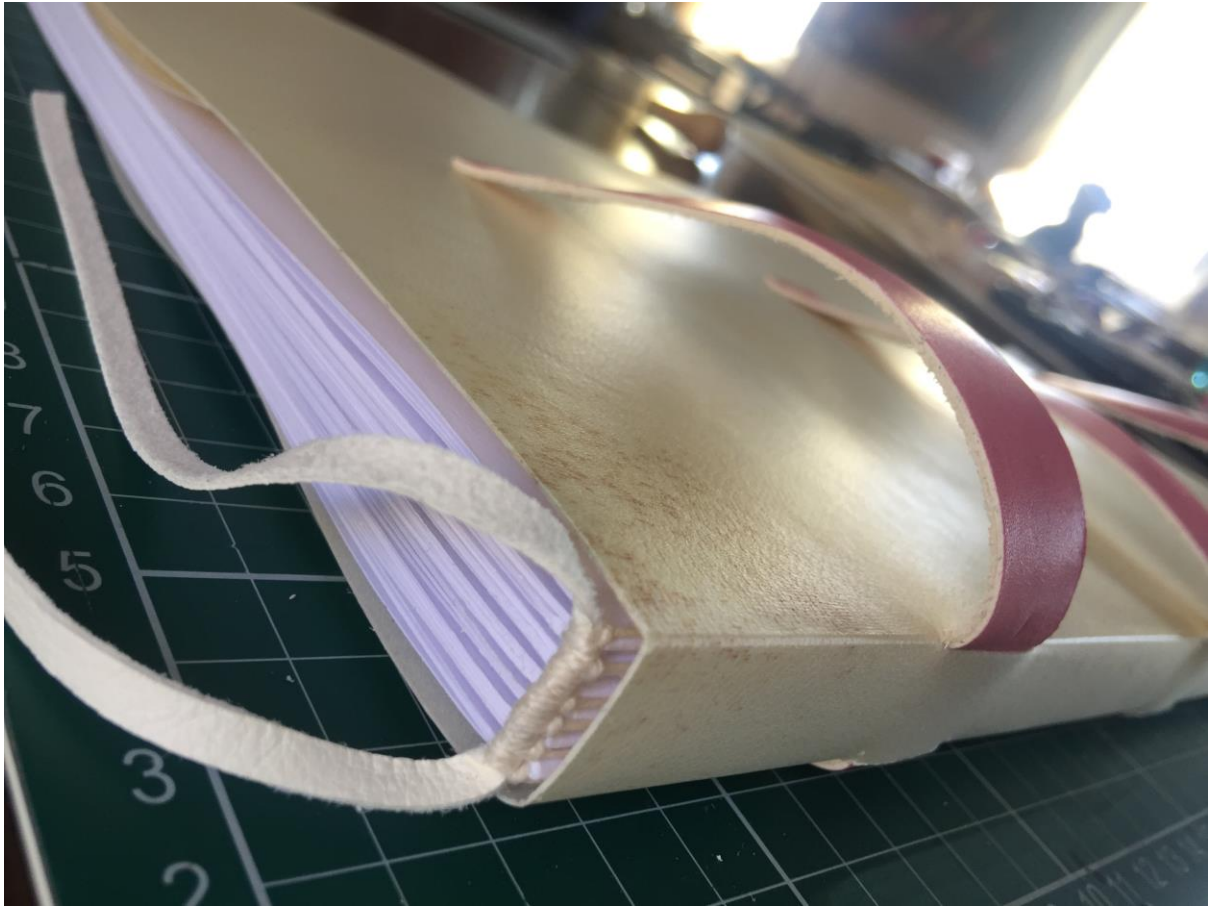
6: Blind tooling the covers using a template.



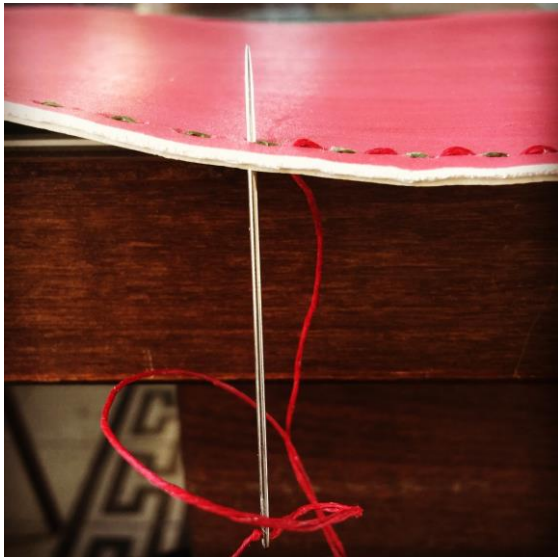
7: Completed 15th Century Italian binding.



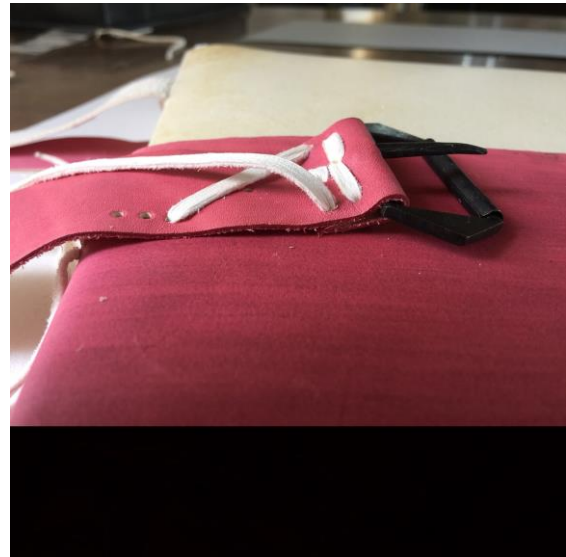
8: 15th Century Italian binding class with teachers and completed books



9: Textblock (with completed endbands) laced in to parchment wrapper.



10: Stitching the laminated cover.



11: Process of lacing through the tacks to attach the



12: Completed cutaway 14th
Century Italia



13: Historical example of
tacketing in Seminario



14: 14th Century Italian ledger binding class with teachers and completed books.



15: Sewn traditional Ethiopian model with link stitch.



16: Sewing the conservation Ethiopian model through the



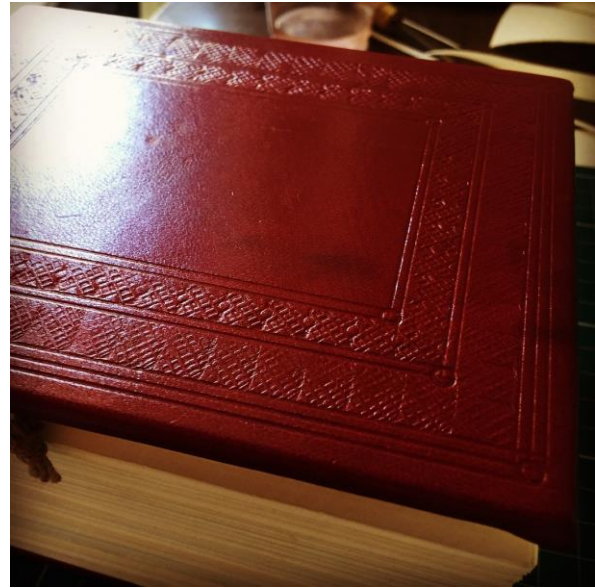
17: Traditional Ethiopian endband with plaited



18: Covered traditional Ethiopian model with textile



19: Parchment satchel to carry and store book in.



20: Hand tooling decoration on traditional Ethiopian