

Treating 5000 Books at The Pierpont Morgan Library

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The East Room of The Pierpont Morgan Library is its main show room, visited by people from all over the world who come to see "Mr. Morgan's Library". The books that line the walls are not just books, they double as furniture, and any treatment of them must take this fact into account -- no phase boxes or cloth bindings. They are also rare books, though admittedly not the jewels of the collection. Dating from the 16th to the 20th century, the East Room books were in large proportion rebound in 19th or 20th century trade bindings. Big city air pollution, as well as the inherently poor leather and the bad binding practices used at the turn of the century, have combined to rot the covers; thus many books have their boards off.

I was asked for an estimate of the cost of repairing the damaged books in this room, and the impossibility of even guessing at a figure prompted the present survey and refurbishing project.

During August the library is closed to the public, so this is the only time in the year when we can work in the East room for an extended period. In March '82 I started to work out the sequence of operations, design the survey form and select the products for refurbishing.

Tony Cains first alerted the binding community to Hydroxypropylcellulose -- Klucel G. -- at the 1980 Cambridge Conference. He was using it as a consolidant for red rot and to clean bindings non-aqueously before oiling. As a rule I don't use new products until they have been in use long enough to have proved themselves harmless, but I

needed a consolidant for the many bindings with rotten leather, and Klucel G. looked heaven-sent. Isopropanol was selected as the solvent, because it was the least hazardous to our health. The recommended solution is 1%, but I found 1 1/2% more satisfactory.

The U.S. Government leather dressing has always seemed to me to be too liquid. Having worked on several of our incunables to remove oil staining caused by over oiling, I was particularly concerned about this aspect of any dressing we used. As the Library of Congress had not, to my knowledge, published the results of its research into 13 or more dressings being tested, I turned to my colleagues for help. It was Chris Clarkson who told me that he was using a 50/50 neat's-foot oil and anhydrous lanolin, with some Carnauba wax to make it more viscous. By dissolving 2oz. of neat's-foot oil, 2oz. of lanolin and 1/2oz. of Carnauba wax together, I achieved a salve of about the consistency of saddle soap, which proved easy to apply but not so liquid that it could penetrate to the paper through rotten leather. This, and its simplicity in comparison with other formulas containing nine or more ingredients, were the deciding factors in my choice.

Once the consolidant and the leather dressing had been decided on, a working plan was needed. The physical handling of books is hard work, and they have to be replaced in the original order on the shelves, so it is important to plan for both minimum handling and efficient return of the books to their original places.

Working through one case as a trial run all the books were flagged in numerical order, from the first book on the top shelf to the last book on the bottom shelf, and these flags remained in the books until they were all replaced on the shelves. Then, and only then, were the flags removed.

I worked out a sequence of operations that consisted of flagging all the books in one case, dusting each book

as it came off the shelf, and moving the books to a work table. At this table, survey slips were filled out for each book; those that did not need treatment, cloth bindings for example, were set aside, and odd items such as pamphlets were pulled out to be put in pamphlet binders or to have their old pamphlet binders replaced. All the leather books were treated with Klucel-G. and, after the isopropanol (in which the Klucel G is dissolved) had evaporated, they were oiled. They were then allowed to stand for two hours before being buffed with paper towels to remove residual oil and, after a final sorting for bookplate replacement, mylar wrappers, and other minor repairs, they were returned to the shelves.

The books in need of minor repairs were taken to the bindery. The leather bookplates in use for many years have done untold damage, staining through several leaves, in some cases even to the text pages. It is a time-consuming task to replace them, so only badly stained books could be handled at this time, but our survey will record all those that still have leather bookplates. Mylar wrappers were placed around books with boards off, and the Mylar was held in position with double sided-pressure sensitive tape. This tape has since proved to be a hazard when removed, (it tends to adhere where it's not wanted) and in any case it does not hold well, so we are now using Velcro dots in stead.

With the help of the Columbia University School of Library Service I was able to find student help. I planned on having six people working on the project at all times - four students and two staff.

On Monday, August 2nd, the preparatory stage completed, we began work. The elegant East room was transformed -- dust sheets were laid down to protect the carpet, the polished wood tables were covered with cardboard and plastic, extra chairs and tables were moved in, and a block and tackle was set up to lower books from the first

tier. The fumes from the isopropanol had to be extracted, and as none of the East room windows could be opened, that left the chimney as the only outlet. An improvised hood, constructed by maintenance was fitted up into the ornate chimney, a work table placed in its cavernous mouth, and two fans arranged so as to drive the fumes up the chimney.

It is amazing how hard it is to keep track of large numbers of books, so Carolyn Horton's "heavy labels" -- pieces of card with various categories of problems inscribed on them -- proved invaluable for directing the flow and keeping track of what had been done to each book.

The tables were arranged in a U-shape, which gave a good work flow with minimum handling of the books - survey write-up, Klucel G, oil, then onto carts to be reshelved or moved to the bindery for minor repairs. Small adjustments in handling were made as we went along, but on the whole everything worked out as planned. At the end of five weeks we had completed 42 cases and filled out 4720 survey forms (sets were written up on one form, so we actually handled more than 5000 volumes), about one third of the books housed in the East Room.

In the aftermath, the only disappointment was that I had not thought through the problem of retrieving the information gathered in the survey. When faced with 4720 pieces of paper to search through, finding a category of damage becomes a time-consuming and frustrating task. About this time the Library installed a word processor. It took several months for it to dawn on me that here was the answer to my dilemma.

The project will be continued in August '83, but with several changes. The survey form has undergone many revisions and is now organised to collect much more information. Klucel G will only be used on books which need a consolidant, because I have noticed some smearing where a book has been varnished, and because of doubts among conservators about its long-term effects. We will work more

slowly because accuracy is essential for information retrieval on the word processor.

Filling out the survey forms is exacting, and all the furbishing work is repetitive, yet for the survey to be useful and the furbishing to be of value, the standard of workmanship must be high. But there are compensations for the tedium of the work. Although the books were not the greatest treasures in the library, there were many exquisite bindings and some extraordinary items that lent spice to the work, and I think we all constantly felt that the very next box we opened would contain an overlooked treasure.