

THE USE OF LINEN AS A BOOK COVERING MATERIAL

by William Minter

A problem frequently faced by the conservator is that of a book either without existing boards, or with badly-deteriorated covering leather, but with the sewing largely intact. Traditional rebacking -- "saving" the original covers -- or recovering in new leather is not always desirable or economically feasible, especially with our questions about the long-term stability of modern bookbinding leathers. Commercial bookcloths, available in a limited range of colors, weights, and of dubious strength or permanence, are for the most part not suited for conservation rebinding.

Recovering books in specially prepared natural linen, retaining existing sewing, offers an attractive alternative. Linen is durable, relatively stable, and is available in a number of different weights and weaves. It can be molded over existing raised bands and colored for different applications. A book recovered in linen can be attractive, and look at home with leather bindings of the same period. I have experimented with a number of different types of linens, adhesives, and coloring agents, and have found what I believe are effective combinations. Linen is available in a wide range of weights and weaves; choosing a linen of appropriate strength and appearance for the volume's size and weight is important. Linen also varies according to its treatment during manufacture, and is marketed using the terms "raw," "natural," bleached, unbleached, "boiled and washed," and others. Such variations in

treatment may very well affect the longevity of the material. Further research is needed, and I am attempting to pursue this matter.

Procedure

The linen is sized with a mixture of wheat starch paste and methyl cellulose. Starch pastes have been used traditionally, but I have found that when used alone they tend to produce a stiff, inflexible cloth. The addition of an equal part of methyl cellulose to the sizing mixture provides the required flexibility.

Acrylic artists' paints (such as Liquitex) have been used successfully as colorants for the cloth. Pigments in acrylic media (at least the more permanent ones) resist fading better than most fabric dyes, and using paints rather than dry pigments avoids health hazards, grinding, and general mess.

The procedure for preparing a piece of linen for book covering is as follows: mix wheat starch paste and methyl cellulose in equal proportions. Take a small amount of this mixture (approximately 3 tablespoons) and add several "inches" of acrylic paint. Mix this concentrate thoroughly, and then add gradually to the main paste/methyl cellulose mixture as needed. Test the blend by applying to both sides of a small sample of linen, and allow to dry -- speed the operation with a hair dryer.

To apply the color evenly to the entire piece of linen, lay the cloth on a sheet of polyester film (such as Du Pont "Mylar") larger than the cloth. Paste out the surface with the mixture as uniformly

as possible. On completion, turn the cloth over on the polyester, and repeat, again trying to apply the mixture as evenly as possible, and making sure that the cloth is firmly adhered to the polyester. The use of a squeegee or brayer will help distribute the size more evenly. Brush strokes, uneven application, or unmixed pigments will show upon drying, especially with darker colors. Allow the newly-sized linen to dry on the polyester. The polyester will strip away, leaving a shiny "ferrotyped" surface on the underside of the cloth which provides an effective barrier against adhesive penetration when the book is covered.

The piece of linen can now be handled like a piece of leather. It can be pasted out, turned-in, and molded like leather. The cloth can be burnished for greater smoothness or sheen if desired, using the same techniques as for leather. After the book is covered, a gold stamped or tooled leather label can be attached to the spine. Black lines (using carbon paper or candle flame and a heated line pallet) can emphasize the raised bands or panels.

Summary

Linen has many of the properties we as conservators look for: it is strong, durable, workable, flexible, and attractive. It is far superior to most of the commercially available book cloths, and has a character that is appropriate to older, or perhaps less valuable books. The use of conservator-modified linen book cloths provides an effective alternative to traditional rebacking and rebind-

ing techniques for certain categories of books, and has decided advantages in cost and reliability of material.

Mr. William Minter, private book conservator and co-inventor of the Minter-Malosh ultrasonic encapsulator, has recently moved his practice to more spacious quarters. However, when he is not busy as the newly-elected Chairman of the Book and Paper Group, Bill can still be reached by writing him at his old address, 1948 West Addison, Chicago, Illinois, 60613.