

The Book Repair Program at the University of Michigan Library: An Institutional Profile

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Our unit serves the Graduate Library, Undergraduate Library, and eighteen divisional libraries housed at various locations on three campuses in Ann Arbor.

In the early 1960's Book Repair was part of Bindery Preparations – a unit that primarily prepared books for the commercial bindery. Our section repaired or rebound what was rejected for commercial binding. Our job was to make the books look as much like a commercially bound book as possible – we even used the same book cloth! At that time our work was mostly making new cases and we bound about 400 books a month. We were classified as clerks mainly because the University did not know how to classify us or the work we did. In 1976 the AFCSME Union discovered us and we were made a union shop; wages increased and new classifications were developed.

In 1981 Margaret Byrnes was given the task of forming a preservation department. She went to Yale to learn the basics of preservation. In 1982 Book Repair was separated from Bindery Preparations. We moved to a new location with more space and Martha Little was hired as the head of the “new” Conservation and Book Repair Unit which consisted of Ann, Annette, and Martha.

Martha not only had the task of “re-educating” us in conservation procedures and applications of treatment but she also designed the new lab from the floor up. We had weekly classes on different binding styles and methods and began using archival quality materials. As this happened and with new equipment coming in steadily we thought we had died and gone to Heaven!

Martha (actually the three of us) interviewed and chose Maria Grandinette as the new conservator in August of 1984. By that time, we were doing many kinds of treatments and our treatment emphasis shifted away from our traditional recase (i.e., new case binding). Decisions about changing techniques or developing new techniques were almost always made in “brainstorming” sessions which were attended by all. Once a consensus was reached on something, it usually became policy. This is still the case today.

In the spring of 1985 Len Muir was hired as a bookbinder and Julia Miller was hired as a conservator; that gave us three full-time book repair staff and two full-time conservation staff. Students have worked with us since the early eighties. They work approximately 40 hours a week. In 1986 Martha left the Library for Santa Fe and Maria eventually was selected and hired officially as head of the unit. Ursula Freimarck joined us as a volunteer in 1986. Ursula works two days a week and she specializes in “pad binds” and sew-in pamphlets. Leyla Lau Lamb was hired in conservation in 1991. That's all of us now.

In February 1989 the unit moved once again into a new and even larger area. The new lab was planned and designed by all under the direction and guidance of Maria. The lab is not located in a library. It is about one mile from central campus.

Book Repair and Conservation activities are well integrated. We share the same space and use most of the same materials and equipment. We are supervised by the same person and our budget for materials, equipment, and student hours is also shared. Other areas of overlap and collaboration include: sharing ideas for special treatment problems or projects, working as a team in time of disaster, making decisions about changes in how the lab functions and is organized, making decisions for ordering materials, tools and equipment, sharing responsibilities for routine equipment maintenance, participating in staff and user education, and participating in tours.

For practical purposes the bookbinders' workstations are arranged in one area of the lab to accommodate our work more easily. The same is true for the conservators' workstations. For example, our workstations are closer to the processing and receiving area which is better for our work-flow. However, everything generally is shared and used by all.

Work is identified for treatment by staff at the libraries. They usually decide on and send work to one of the units of the Preservation Division: the Brittle Books Replacement Unit, Bindery Preparations and Microfilming Units, or the Conservation and Book Repair Unit. Staff are assisted in decision making by using established criteria. New staff members are invited to Book Repair for orientation sessions. Most work is selected for treatment when damage is discovered as the book is used. The Book Repair Unit has been involved in two grant projects but most of our work is not grant funded.

Once work is selected it is placed in a tote and sent to our unit. The Library has its own central mail service with pick up and delivery two times a day to Book Repair. Each piece (except pamphlets) is accompanied by a book repair form. The form asks for basic bibliographic information and a choice of treatment. One of the most popular treatment choices made by staff is "perform appropriate treatment." Annette reviews the materials when they arrive. (While any Book Repair staff member could make the proper treatment decision, for the sake of expediency, it's better for one person to do so in most cases). She makes all the final treatment decisions unless she feels unsure about something and then other members of the unit are consulted for a solution. Most 19th century materials are reviewed by Annette and Maria. In other special cases, for instance, the treatment of a collection of odd sized pieces of contemporary mail art, Maria would consult with the staff member who will perform the treatment.

After the treatment decision is made the item is shelved by specific treatment on appropriately labelled and dated shelves in the Processing and Receiving Room. The number of items requiring each treatment is recorded on a chart. At weekly staff meetings we assess what needs to be done in order to maintain a one month turn-around time and we assign the work accordingly.

Our repair unit has developed a work-time-study plan this year which allows us to assign work to each binder knowing how long each treatment should take and how many can be completed in an allotted time. For example, recases and reattach cases are combined and worked on in groups of 30; each step has been timed so we can tell how long it will take to complete the entire process. The group of 30 books is worked on over a two week period. It takes 22 hours to complete the first phase (checking-in to completing the endsheet attachment) and 32 hours to complete the second phase (cutting board to final inspection). By studying and acknowledging what we actually do in our work days besides binding we know how much bench time we have and how much work can be assigned. For instance, if when we look to the week ahead we have a big clean-up or meetings to attend, or a student to train, or shelves to stock, we adjust our bench time.

We have a separate room off the lab for pamphlet binding and a part-time student (20 hours a week) who does nearly all of it. We bind 700 to 1,000 pieces per month. Our approach to pamphlet binding is governed predominantly by thickness and margin – monographs 1/4" or less and serials 3/8" or less with at least a 3/8" margin are staple bound in-house. We use ready-made binders from the Library Binding Service. We also use ready-made tyvek pockets for music or other pieces requiring pockets. Most pamphlets are staple bound. A small number of old and fragile or new and beautiful (or new and fragile and old and beautiful) pamphlets are bound by hand.

We use a time quota as opposed to a number quota. We strive to maintain a one month turn-around time for most items. We do handle "rush" pieces with a shorter turn-around time (1 day - 2 weeks, depending on the urgency) and we give reference and reserve pieces priority because they are heavily used. Backlog is handled through a close watch of work as it comes in. When a backlog begins to form the library is notified immediately. We work with the library to readjust the work-flow; a schedule is set up to do small amounts over a reasonable period of time.

The Labelling Unit is a separate unit that is not a part of the Preservation Division. After they're repaired, items requiring call numbers are sent to the Labelling Unit.

How do we decide what part "of the package" to keep and what part to discard? When we look for candidates for rebinding they are first placed into two groups – those books that have their hinges intact and boards strongly attached and those with a broken hinge or hinges. Books that have strong hinges are given a simple spine repair. Books with broken hinges are recased. If the original case is in good condition we use that case. A new case is made when all or part of the original case is missing or damaged. When the joints and hinges are broken we prefer to make a new case rather than repair the case. This decision stems partly from tradition and has developed into our "aesthetic." Of course, there are exceptions to this policy, for example, we would not treat a 19th century cloth stamped binding that way, or rigid paper bindings with unique illustrations. But generally, we can say that we tend to recase rather than repair damaged cases. We may incorporate some of the original binding into the new case, for instance, by pasting the original spine onto the spine of the new case. Information on the endsheets and pagedowns is usually photocopied and hinged into the volume. Bookplates are removed and placed in the new case. Endbands, when they are in good condition are retained.

Everyone can do everything among full-time Book Repair staff, but for the sake of expediency, the work is divided up with the three of us specializing in particular jobs. With Book Repair being unionized we are in job classifications of Bookbinder I, II, and III. We all have been upgraded as our experience, knowledge, and skills have increased. Ann and Annette are BBIII's and Len is a BBII. Our training has been "on the job."

Professional development opportunities are not only available but encouraged for all. We all have attended various bookbinding workshops and lectures held locally. We have also attended the American Institute for Conservation annual meeting and the Guild of Book Workers Standards Seminars. Ann and Annette have given workshops in basic book repair for the Michigan Library Association and the White Pine Library Cooperative in Saginaw, Michigan. All staff attend many library functions. Ann serves on the Library's Diversity Committee.

Although many new techniques have been introduced into our unit, we feel that a very big influence on Book Repair was Victoria Rataj. Mrs. Rataj supervised and was the driving force behind Book Repair for 20 years. She was a self-taught bookbinder and although many of her original structures have been improved upon her basic idea remains. Mrs Rataj taught us that performing a technique well included developing the ability to perform it in a given period of time, and, knowing how long a procedure took would assist you in scheduling work. This is what we are doing today. When the Preservation Division was formed the style of our work changed in response to the teachers who trained our first conservators, Martha Little and Maria Grandinette. The methods they learned from Laura S. Young, Jane Greenfield, Jeri Davis, Hedi Kyle, and Gary Frost, as well as their overall philosophy about conservation and book repair became the standards for all of us. This trend continues through what we learn from discussions and meetings with our colleagues, attendance at workshops, and through the conservation literature. We absorb and adapt.