Restoration Bookbinders

by Ruth Walker

The task of conservation and restoration bookbinding is to use as much of a worn original binding as to accurately and sympathetically return a book to its original condition, balancing structural strength with period fidelity.

Replacing a spine that has separated at the outer joints by laying down an unobtrusive spine that is installed under the board materials, with the original spine glued back on this new spine, is probably the most common restoration, either in cloth or leather.

Design bookbinders concern themselves with decoration, exotic materials, and innovative designs compatible to text content. By contrast, restoration binders let the original binding dictate what style will be used to repair a book. For instance, a book from the 1700s will not be restored in the style and manner of a late Victorian binding. This emphasis requires an ability to know and execute diverse techniques expertly.

Careful study of earlier bookbinding techniques and materials, and printing history, are the main concerns. Constant search for new leather and paper sources lead to many adventures, and telephone calls, among restoration binders. Matching existing endpapers in older books can be a delicate matter.

Restoration bookbinders pride themselves on being able to make a crumbled leather or cloth book as structurally sound as possible without confusing collectors, bibliographers and historians. When little, or none, of an original binding exists, restorers create a new one that is historically accurate to what the original might have been like.

Restoration work can be full of surprises and requires steady nerves. A book's sewing can disintegrate when the old glue is removed, meaning potential complication in either materials or time management. When restorers visit among themselves, they talk about their latest dilemmas, and even the most experienced are reduced to blank stares and panic, especially when working on rare and valuable books.

Since the emphasis in restoration is on utility and permanence, rather than decoration, considerable expense goes into acid free materials, vegetable tanned and dyed leathers, unbleached linen thread and cloth, and reversible adhesives. Restoration is labor intensive so this kind of work is reserved for books that have significant historial value, such as a family Bible, or for books that have an established market value in consideration of their historical importance.

[Ancient Book-binder.]