

## Confessions

This is a journal of my experience as a bookbinder and an admission of how I've come to do what I do. Time, failure, and repetition are necessary ingredients in my approach. First I try the standard method. If it fails, I try it again. Then if it still doesn't work, I will rethink it. Whatever doesn't work well should be improved or fixed. Whatever can't be done just needs to be done differently. For me, each project is new and challenging because I am continuously rewriting the rules.

I do not work for or with anyone I don't like or don't trust. This is not a luxury, but rather, a safety measure. Working with people who can't understand what you are trying to do is never profitable or satisfying. Working with someone you don't understand can be costly. When the client will not be satisfied, you cannot do satisfying work.

Many years ago, I had a student who excelled in detail work. He was so much the perfectionist that his work looked artificial. I was beginning to feel uncomfortable having him in my bindery: his questions seemed invasive and he was behind in reimbursing me for materials he used. Then F.B.I. agents visited me to explain that he was stealing rare books from the Princeton University Library, removing their bindings, and rebinding them to disguise their provenance before selling them. They wondered if I was somehow involved, but I managed to convince them I was not part of this scheme. Princeton righted the wrong discreetly. A security van pulled up in front of the young man's dormitory when he was not there and cleared his room of hundreds of books that belonged to the Library. The thief and his girlfriend, a bulbous-looking young woman who secreted the stolen books in the folds of her voluminous skirts, vanished, only to turn up a few years later in the Chicago area, where they were finally apprehended.

Sixteen years ago, Gus Hedberg, a secondary school English teacher, walked into my studio to inquire about having a presentation volume made up for The Lawrenceville School's awards

ceremony. The job was done. Twelve years later, he returned with books of his own that needed repairs. Every time I completed a group of bindings, he would bring more. We'd talk about books and argue about politics. Gus hung around my bindery long enough to acquire some rudimentary bookbinding skills. Together—his advice, my hands-on—we embarked upon the dictionary project described in the chapter “For the Love of Samuel Johnson.” Though he may not have scored many victories in our political discussions, he has snagged some serious book collecting bargains because now he knows how damaged books can be fixed. While writing this book, I shamelessly used his books as guinea pigs to test out my repair techniques.

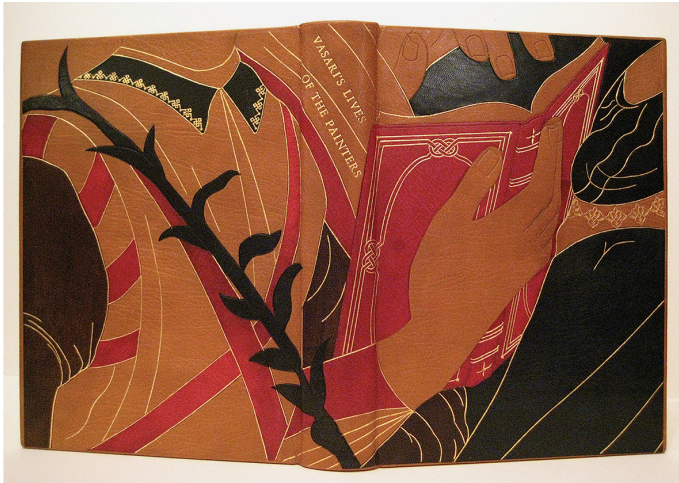
In my mind, there are two bookbinding components: design binding and repair binding. Design binding is a process during which technical ability, historical binding precedents, contemporary art influences, and some editorial comprehension combine to create a uniquely appropriate covering for a text. Repair binding is my inclusive description of restoration and conservation binding, which in combination can fix and preserve books for continuing use.

My ideal is a synergistic relationship between these two categories of bookbinding, where techniques—old and new, tested and untried—realize design and design dictates techniques. When I design a binding, I don't always know how I am going to make it work. I will experiment with the engineering of decorative ideas until I find my solution. When I fix an old binding, I try to find techniques that will not interfere with the original design while making those repairs as strong as possible.

I was once asked to teach an elementary-school group about bookbinding. The children were so bored by the entire notion that I felt I needed to wake them up to the excitement of my profession. I brought three books into the classroom: a paperback, a standard cloth-cased hardback, and one of my (practice) leather bindings. I specified that they would have five minutes to try to destroy all three by rough handling (including throwing and violent page turning, but excluding scissors and ripping). The teachers were horrified at the chaos that ensued. But at the end of five minutes, the properly bound book survived almost unscathed while the other two littered

the floor. And I had the full attention of that class.

Books are made to be handled; and a well-built book can improve with age and use. I don't believe in white-glove book handling, even for rare books. My repairs are intended to keep a book functional as well as beautiful. My decorative bindings are meant to be read. The hands shown here are derived from Sandro Botticelli's painting of the *Madonna of the Pomegranate*. They hold a book bound in sixteenth-century style on volume one of the Limited Editions Club's 1966 edition of *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters* by Giorgio Vasari.



There are a few things the binder should not do. My rule is Don't Do Anything You Can't Undo. This sounds more restrictive than it really is. You can spit on your books, but don't blow your nose on them. Nasal discharge will stain leather; saliva usually will not. Old leather blackened by dampening and hard pressing cannot be lightened or restored. A chemical reaction involving the leather's inherent acidity, moisture, and pressure has occurred. Pages trimmed of their margins cannot be regrown. Burnt leather cannot be unburnt. I'm hard-pressed to list legitimate bookbinding techniques that can't be reversed. Today's adhesives are usually water soluble; they are irreversible only if used on materials that cannot be dampened. Sewing can be unsewn; leather can be

removed; paper can be repaired. But all these reversals take time and cost money in materials. If the binder adheres to good binding techniques and devotes the required time and thought to each step of the process, he or she probably will do no irreversible harm.

When you consider how much time it takes to bind a book properly, no compromise is to be made on materials. Always use the best materials available, whether paper, leather, glue, or cloth. Poor quality leather will be very difficult to tool. What you saved on the price of the leather, you've more than spent in time wasted. Cheap usually means acidic or short-lived. Bargain paper, which is often acidic, will probably deteriorate. Any resultant acid migration (the moving of acidity from the culprit to adjacent material) could damage surrounding materials. Shoddy components are time bombs waiting to detonate.

It is a luxury to work within a craft where mistakes can be undone. It's a constant editing process. At each step of a binding or rebinding I assess my work and decide if it is good enough to continue. There is a direct continuum in bookbinding. One step gone awry cannot be disguised by later manipulations. It will show despite the binder's ingenuity. So I have learned to redo anything that disappoints. There have been several nights when I have been unable to sleep, disturbed by the knowledge that the book I just covered in expensive leather did not turn out as planned. It doesn't open easily; there is a strange lump halfway down the spine; I've managed to plant an ugly scratch in the middle of the front cover. When I look at it the next morning, if it is as bad as I remembered, I will remove that cover, detaching the boards from the text block without breaking the bands or cords, then redo to eliminate the blemish that kept me up at night. I cannot begin to explain the sense of relief that the new beginning provides.

There is no simple equation in which good materials and careful procedures will inevitably add up to fine bookbinding. Technique and concept don't always marry happily. So this book suggests caution as much as cleverness. I am assuming that the reader has already a good knowledge of how to bind and unbind a book. I assume that the binder who reads this has solved many problems and is educated in conventional methods. Obviously this is not an

A-to-Z manual of bookbinding. There are many fine step-by-step guides available. Instead I explain some of the ways my binding techniques deviate from standard and some of the peculiar fixes I have developed for books in need of repair.

When I am in doubt, I do consult my library. I browse through books about the history of bookbinding when I am designing a period-style binding. Paul Needham's *Twelve Centuries of Bookbindings 400–1600* (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library and Oxford University Press, 1979) is an excellent and inclusive catalogue. *Six Centuries of Master Bookbinding at Bridwell Library* (Dallas: Bridwell Library, 2006), the catalogue of an exhibition curated by Eric Marshall White, has detailed photographs and descriptions of bindings. Princeton University Library has an extensive binding catalogue online. Terminology is made clear in Jane Greenfield's book *ABC of Bookbinding* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 1998). And the words are set in context in Geoffrey Ashall Glais-ter's *Encyclopedia of the Book*, Second Edition (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 1996).

For more complete instructions on book restoration, I turn to Bernard C. Middleton's *The Restoration of Leather Bindings* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1972); I back this up with his *A History of English Craft Bookbinding Techniques*—my working copy is the supplemented second edition (London: The Holland Press, 1978). Just to show how little things change in the bookbinding field, I do consult Douglas Cockerell's *Bookbinding, and the Care of Books*, first published in 1901. I have the first edition but prefer to work out of the fifth (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons Ltd., 1953). Jen Lindsay's *Fine Bookbinding A Technical Guide* (New Castle, Delaware: Oak Knoll Press, 2009) gives meticulous step-by-step instructions for binding a book in leather.

Bookbinding is a life full of volumes and people who love these volumes and expect the care and conservation of these books to be acts of devotion. To satisfy this clientele, a binder needs more than skills and techniques. He or she needs to think about all the elements involved and figure out how best to combine the people and the books and the mechanics. It's not just what you do, but how you decide to do it.