

Hollie Drinkwater

Francis Mathew Stationers' Company Scholarship Montefiascone Project 2019



Sewing the textblock of my limp Romanesque binding

Introduction

In May 2018 I was generously awarded the Francis Mathew Stationers' Company Scholarship to attend one week of the Montefiascone Conservation Project 2019 - a four week study programme aimed at bookbinders and conservators. The study programme

takes place every year in the medieval town of Montefiascone, located on Lake Bolsena, 80 miles north of Rome. I attended Élodie Léveque and Cédric Lelièvre's workshop on how to make a luxury French Romanesque limp binding, which took place between 5-9 August 2019.

Montefiascone



View of the lake from outside the Seminary

The workshop took place in the Seminary located on the highest point in the town, overlooking the lake. Built in the late 17th century, the building still functions as a Seminary today, educating priests and the local community, alongside playing host to the Conservation Project workshops.

One of the main features of the Seminary is its library, consisting of over 5,000 volumes. After suffering from flood damage in the 1980s, the Seminary sought advice on how to maintain the library and restore the damaged book collection. Cheryl Porter, a book conservator and consultant on the project from the outset, set-up a programme through which students from Camberwell College of Arts could volunteer to assist in the conservation of the library and its collection through cleaning and basic repair. The four week workshop programme has developed out of this legacy and now runs on a yearly basis.

The Workshop

Having heard of the programme's excellent reputation for offering hands-on, practical workshops on historical binding techniques from colleagues and students in the field, I knew that this was a project I would one day like to participate in and that I could greatly benefit from in terms of improving my hand skills and my historical binding knowledge.

As I have a background in Medieval Art and have little experience of making limp bindings, I opted to undertake Élodie and Cédric's class on making a limp Romanesque binding. This binding is based on the historical model MS1704; a luxury romaneseque binding of a theological text with a limp leather cover, probably made in Troyes between 1220-1230. Based on historical sources and their own experimentation, both tutors also developed a fascinating technique for transforming parchment into alum-tawed skin; alongside making our binding, we would follow this technique throughout the week to create our own samples of alum-tawed skin, a material believed to have been used to form the lining of the present model.

DAY 1



My completed textblock - herringbone sewing on split alum-tawed tapes

Day 1 consisted of sewing the textblock of our binding using split alum-tawed tapes and a herringbone sewing technique. This was only my second time sewing a textblock using the herringbone method; this textblock consisted of 24 sections of paper to be sewn together, allowing for ample opportunity to hone my technique in this binding method.

DAY 2



Primary endband sewing



Secondary endband sewing

After attaching the lining of our binding to the textblock, it was time to start our endbands. Romanesque endbands are typically sewn around a hemp core and have a primary and secondary sewing. We completed our primary sewing using the plain linen thread that we had previously used to sew the textblock - this sewing was wrapped around the core and tied down into every section of the binding, packed tightly to allow for a solid, smooth base on top of which to sew the secondary, decorative endband. The secondary endband was sewn in a chevron pattern, as on the original binding - the endbands of the original binding were intricately patterned, alternating white, green, yellow and red threads and are an indication of the luxury afforded to this book. This was the first time I had attempted such an intricate endband and I found it challenging at first to learn the pattern and to get into the rhythm of sewing. Luckily for me, we had plenty of endband to practice on as this was a chunky book, and the pattern of sewing soon clicked; once I had understood the technique I could experiment a little with my colours and I tried out a couple of different designs. I very much enjoy sewing endbands and I found it rewarding to master this technique - for these reasons, I think this was my favourite day of the workshop.

DAY 3



Experimenting with fastening designs

Day 3 was focused on fastenings - the flap of the model we were working from had been cut-off at some point during the bindings history, leaving no physical evidence of the original shape of the flap or the fastening mechanism. Based on a number of other surviving models, we decided to use a button and braided loop method of securing our wrap-around cover. Given the great variety of fastenings to be found on limp French Romanesque bindings of the period, our tutors also provided demonstrations of other, more elaborate fastenings for us to try out alongside those to be attached to our model. We used strips of alum-tawed leather to experiment with different designs, and after a number of twists, folds, cuts and pulls, ended up with a rather beautiful button and braided loop, alongside several alternative fastening designs based on historical models, which we could keep as experiments or employ on future binding models.

DAY 4



Sewing the alum-tawed trim to the edge of my leather cover

On day 4 our bindings were starting to near completion - we attached the limp leather cover to its lining, and set about adding the delicate pink-dyed alum-tawed trim to the edge of the cover. Even though the leather of the cover, lining and the trim was soft, sewing through all three layers at the correct angle to achieve invisible sewing on the exterior of the binding, was a technique that needed to be practiced and that required accuracy and patience. Indeed, the leather was so soft that it almost hindered the process of sewing, on occasion splitting if the needle did not penetrate deep enough into the flesh side of the leather. I found this stage of the binding particularly difficult; I hadn't sewing through leather before and my fingers were not used to the force required to push the needle through several layers of the material. I managed to sew the trim with a little remaining to finish at home - I was happy with the trim as viewed from the exterior of the binding, but felt my stitches could have been a little more regular on the inner face, where they were visible on the lining. The tutors provided us with extra pieces of leather on which we could practice our technique further upon returning home.

DAY 5



Left: Parchment (on top) vs alum-tawed parchment/skin (beneath) Right: the tawing bath

On day 5 we finished sewing the trim to our limp leather covers and also completed the final stage of transforming our pieces of parchment into alum-tawed skins. This process is time consuming and we had been slowly preparing, rehydrating and working our skins throughout the week, alongside making our bindings. The purpose of making alum-tawed skins was to attempt to recreate the material that our tutors believe was used to make the lining of the original binding MS1704. The original lining seems too thin to be made of leather, which even if split would probably have been thicker than the lining on the present binding, and would have lost much of its strength. Alum-tawed parchment is thin but still retains its strength and flexibility, making it a likely candidate for the material of the original lining, which remains largely intact.

Once rehydrated in a bath of water, alum salt, flour, eggs and olive oil for several days, the skins should ideally rest for several weeks before being worked. We worked skins which had been previously prepared by the tutors, and took home the pieces of parchment that we had been rehydrating throughout the week, to work and stretch at a later date. We vigorously worked the skins in many different directions with our hands and against a sharp edge, such as a wooden stick, to stretch the material and give it the flexible, smooth quality of alum-tawed skin.

Conclusion



My luxury French Romanesque limp binding

This was an experience with many firsts for me - travelling to another country to undertake a workshop with a group of colleagues I hadn't met before, working from a historical model, using binding techniques I had not previously practiced and visiting a town I had never been to.

The experience overall was hugely rewarding; not only did I return with a binding, I learnt a wide variety of practical binding skills, developed my historical knowledge and made professional connections with new colleagues across an international network. I felt very lucky to be simultaneously experiencing a new culture whilst undertaking the workshop in Italy. I felt as if I was being immersed in a truly authentically Italian experience in

Montefiascone whilst undertaking this workshop. I know that this experience will be hugely beneficial for my developing career, and the practical skills gained will certainly open up opportunities for me for future training and employment in the field.

I would like to offer my sincere thanks to the Stationers' Company for investing in my career in Books Conservation by offering me this scholarship, and to Francis Mathew for funding this opportunity.

Thank you.

Hollie Drinkwater

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