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Florentine bookbinding and restoration

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THESIS SUMMARY

Florence, Italy is a hub for art and literature. These two disciplines come together in the tradition of bookbinding, which is alive and well in Florence. A city that appreciates its own rich culture, Florence maintains many traditional practices and crafts, such as bookbinding and metalworking. The Florentines preserve more than just practices, though. The numerous museums in Florence work to physically protect and store pieces of art, artifacts, and documents. All of this preservation was challenged in 1966, with the flood of Florence’s Arno River. The flood destroyed countless manuscripts, books, and pieces of art. With this devastation, a new age of restoration was born.

Though in many ways, Italian bookbinding shares a history similar to that of the rest of Western Europe, Italy has developed its own characteristics and traditions in the bookbinding trade of the past and the present. Similarly, paper restoration practices in Italy are much like that of the rest of the world, but that may not be true without Florence. The 1966 flood of the Arno River changed the practices of paper restoration from a craft to a science, which is now studied and discussed globally and not secretly passed from master to apprentice as before the flood.

My goal in creating this thesis project was to explore traditional Italian bookbinding and restoration by considering the impact of the 1966 flood, including restoration techniques that emerged. I chose to do so in a traditional, hand-bound format, a process I was first exposed to in a University of South Carolina Honors College course, and a process that I continued to explore in Florence. Having spent a semester studying abroad in Florence, I wanted to include specific aspects of my
time abroad in my book, including materials purchased, techniques learned, and interviews performed while still in Florence.

The final products of this project are a book and a paper. The 112-page hand-bound book, with content created by hand, serves as an artistic representation of the goals of this project. While there is factual information included in the content of the book, it serves more as a physical manifestation and summary of the topics covered than as an academic text. The 25-page paper, which details the history of Italian bookbinding and restoration and describes and catalogues the process of creating the book serves as the academic aspect of this project.

In completing this project, my belief that traditional techniques are alive and well in Florence was confirmed. I spoke with artisans who prove that. I also learned how one event, like a flood can change the course of history, and even of a seemingly unrelated history. While natural disasters have some obvious effects like infrastructural damage, there are less often considered effects as well, like damage to art and culture.
INTRODUCTION

I imagine it is not hard to believe that there are not many arts-type majors in the honors college. After starting freshman year, I knew one other honors student with my same major, and she switched majors after our first year. My best friends were biochemistry, math and mechanical engineering majors, so I found my passion for art getting pushed aside quite often. Not surprisingly, my excitement was astronomical when I found out that I could get honors credit for a hands-on art class: The Art of the Book. In the class, we created four hand-bound books in a variety of materials. In addition to the books, we had a hand in creating many of the materials, like decorative papers. Having been out of it for a while, I loved being back into creating. By the end of that class, I was quite sure that I would be making a book for my thesis project.

It was not until spring of my junior year that my thesis idea fully came to fruition. I was spending the semester in Florence, Italy, which was the realization of a goal that I had for quite some time. Italy had always been a dream, but Florence in particular was such a center for art and literature and culture that I spent every day reveling in its rich history. I learned about the flood of the Arno River in 1966 and was heartbroken to learn how many beautiful documents, artifacts, and art pieces were damaged. I was similarly excited, though, to learn of the efforts made to restore everything that was damaged. In such a culture-rich city, the strength of the restoration efforts was necessary, and it is an interesting study of what strategies can develop from necessity.

I also had the opportunity to take a bookbinding class in Florence. I happened to be in my study abroad program’s office when the director was
considering setting up a bookbinding class for our program participants. When she asked whether I would be interested, I replied with a resounding, “yes!” and told her my history with books. A local bookbinder and shop owner, Erin Ciulla, ran the workshop for us, and I loved having the opportunity to create a book again. It was in this workshop that I realized what I really wanted to do for my thesis: create a book, tying in my study abroad trip and Italian influence.

Once the inspiration struck, I could not let it go. I went back to my program director to see if she could offer me guidance. She gave me the contact information for the woman who ran our class. She also got me in touch with a local restorer who specialized in paper. I set up interviews with each of them, and my thesis journey officially began.

I first met with Nenad Jovanovic, a Florentine restoration expert. He owns his own restoration shop, through which businesses, museums, libraries and individuals contract him for assistance in restoring and preserving pieces. While he has experience in several types of restoration, he specializes in paper. Often he works with books, though sometimes paper art comes through the shop.

I then met with Erin Ciulla at her book shop. Erin began studying bookbinding in her native Canada. She then travelled to Florence, where she became an apprentice in a bookbinder’s workshop. After the shop owners decided to sell, Erin took over and now lives in Florence running the shop herself. She uses many traditional techniques and materials, but adds a modern flair.

As part of my interview with Erin, I asked her about Italian materials. I knew I wanted my trip abroad to do more than inspire my thesis; I wanted my experience to be part of my project. Of course, Italian leather was the first thing I asked about.
Erin directed me to a leather shop in the Florence suburbs. I also knew I wanted to get decorative papers while I was still in Italy. Marbled and decorative papers are characteristic of Italy, and where better to get it than Erin’s own shop? Back in the United States, I supplemented the rest of my materials: paper for the main content and thread for binding. More than just a thesis, I knew this project would serve as a reflection on a life-changing semester.
HISTORY OF THE BOOK

The book, as I suppose may be expected, has a long and somewhat complicated history. The first form of the book developed along with the first writing system in Mesopotamia. There, etchings were made on clay tablets, which could be joined together to make a book. Natural substances such as clay, wax and stone were the most common forms of writing surface, though they did not work well for a large volume of text (Kallendorf 41). Papyrus scrolls were almost ubiquitously used for large works. Papyrus is a paper material made from the papyrus plant, which is prevalent around the Nile basin, giving cause to the fact that papyrus scrolls were first seen in ancient Egypt (Marks 29). Though a large scroll seems far removed from the book as we know it today, the Egyptian book includes many characteristics we would recognize today, including “writing in columns, illustrations to accompany a text, and rubrication for headings, titles, and colophons” (Kallendorf 41). We also find familiar characteristics in ancient Hebrew scrolls, such as word spacing and justified margins (Kallendorf 42).

We can credit much of what we recognize as a book to the ancient Romans. Like much of the ancient world, the Romans initially developed books on the papyrus scroll model. Later, stacked notebooks were developed with wooden tablets and were used for schoolwork or taking notes, primarily. As Kallendorf explains, “Before the end of the 1st century AD, the Romans began replacing the wood with parchment, and Martial indicates that standard authors were available in this format in his day” (49). Parchment, a translucent material made from treated animal skin, became common for its strength (Marks 29). Papyrus was weakened by folding and sewing, so parchment replaced it as the writing surface used in the
codex format. Papyrus was sometimes used, though, and was folded and sewn into leather covers (Pearson 246). The prevalence of the parchment codex can be linked to the rise of Christianity, as it became the preferred form for recording Christian texts (Kallendorf 49). By the end of the ancient period though, even pagan texts were being recorded in the parchment codex form, which is the basic model for books as we know them today (Kallendorf 50).

One of the earliest sewing techniques for binding, which we still find today, was developed in North Africa. Coptic binding, as it is called, uses a chain stitch to link together groups of folded pages, now called signatures (Pearson 248). Coptic binding spread from the Mediterranean to Northwest Europe, and is used in the earliest known English binding (Marks 32). This style was widely abandoned by Europeans in the 9th century, when the flexible sewing technique was developed. In this model, signatures are sewn to outer supports, which are attached to covered boards that serve as the book covers (Pearson 246). In Europe, the covers were usually wood boards wrapped with leather. In the 16th century, the wood was replaced with pasteboard, which developed into the paper-based cardboard commonly used today. Around the same time, the vellum that was being used was replaced with paper for the inside pages (Pearson 248).

Though practical and necessary, bookbinding is more than just a means to hold together and protect a book. In many ways it was and is an art, since, as Pearson explains, “Before mechanization was introduced in the 19th century, all bookbindings were individually handmade objects and the choices exercised in deciding how elaborate or simple a binding should be became part of the history of every book” (Pearson 246). The care and decisions put into bindings helps develop
an understanding of the cultural context in which a book was bound. The styles included in the binding provide clues to the status of the book’s owner, artistic taste of the time, level of technology and even trade routes (Marks 7). Political climate could even be reflected in the way a book is bound, since the trade of certain materials could be disrupted by war or dispute (Marks 11). Styles of bookbinding tended to be similar across Europe, though countries developed their own variations, qualities and techniques. Italy and other artistic hubs influenced Holland and France, which in turn influenced England (Pearson 251). Italy’s influence in the bookbinding sphere is most notable in the time of the Renaissance.

The existence of the Italian Renaissance in itself affected the bookbinding industry, as it called for increase in the study of classical texts and consequently created a higher demand for books (Marks 10). The Medici family, an influential family through much of Italy’s history, but particularly in the Renaissance and in Florence, has been associated with fine bindings (Marks 9). Catherine de Medici, one of the most pervasively known Medici, purchased from a bookseller who was a binder by trade and employed a secretary who was a well-known book collector (Marks 17, 23). Toward the end of the Renaissance, marbled paper, which is still commonly made in Florence, was frequently used in end leaves. Other decorative papers gained popularity soon after, and Italy became and still is one of the most important manufacturers of decorative paper, along with Germany and France (Marks 34-35). Though marbled paper has roots elsewhere in the world, Italy has developed distinct colors and patterns (Ciulla).
THE 1966 FLOOD OF THE ARNO RIVER

The Arno River is to Florence what the Tiber is to Rome, what the Thames is to London and the Nile to Cairo. The Arno runs through the middle of Florence, and it is physically and metaphorically central to the city’s identity. It marks the separation between Florence’s two major neighborhoods, serves as a landmark for directions and acts as the central, pulsing vein for much of the activity in Florence. It makes sense, then, that the extreme flooding of the Arno in 1966 caused extreme devastation.

The Arno is 241 kilometers (149.75 miles) long, while the basin covers about 8830 square kilometers (approximately 3409 square miles). Most of the river sits in the Tuscany region of central Italy, the region of which Florence is the capital. The area of the Arno basin reaches a summer minimum rainfall in July, and two maxima—in November and the end of winter. The rainfall patterns and geography of the area make it “prone to frequent flood hazards, with high levels of risk due to the vulnerability of a unique artistic and cultural heritage” (Caporali et al. 177).

Though the Arno had flooded several times in the centuries prior, with the first recorded flood in 1177, the flood on November 4, 1966 was the most devastating to Florence. Over the 24 hours beginning November 3, around 180 millimeters (approximately 7 inches) of rain fell, and the river level rose to 11 meters (approximately 36 inches). The destruction that followed was not only a result of the rain, but also of a combination of wind and air pressure disturbances, which were rare and problematic in their simultaneousness. Additionally harmful was the high amount of rainfall in the preceding months, which was 150-300% over average in October that year (Caporali et al. 182-184).
With the aforementioned precipitation and meteorological conditions, the flooding of the Arno was inevitable, and its devastation was widespread. According to Caporali et al, “About 3000 ha [approximately 11 square miles] of Florence was flooded. The water level reached 5.20 m [approximately 17 feet] in some points of the town.” The heavy damage to infrastructure resulted in 17 casualties and job loss affecting 18,000 people. Devastating, too, was the damage to Florence’s artistic history and culture. Caporali et al provide a low estimate of artistic works damaged, stating, “1500 works of art, 1,300,000 volumes of the National Library were damaged” (Caporali et al. 186).
RESTORATION

Though nearly any type of restoration or preservation has its own set of challenges, the restoration of books and paper can be exceedingly difficult, particularly in the context of flooding, such as that of the Arno in 1966. Book materials tend to be extremely susceptible to water damage. Books dated earlier than 1840 absorb water to an average of 80% of their original weight. ("Disaster Planning" 3). The paper of the book, once saturated with water, tears, swells and distorts, and will continue to swell until the moisture is removed (Buchanan 247). "Moisture is," as Max Schweidler says in his seminal book The Restoration of Engravings, Drawings, Books, and Other Works on Paper, “the greatest enemy of paper” (170).

In addition to the issues that arise from wet paper, the other materials of the book are equally adversely affected. As Buchanan explains, “Wet leather and vellum swell, split, and may turn black. Glues wash out, boards and covers disintegrate.” (247). Additionally, most materials will begin molding quickly ("Disaster Planning" 3). While air-drying in many ways in the safest, and certainly least expensive, method for drying papers, it is certainly not without its faults. Some papers will wrinkle, coated papers will stick together and most papers will mildew without extreme care and supervision (Buchanan 247-248).

It is similarly problematic that, historically, bookbinders do not tend to think about preservation and longevity when choosing and treating their materials. Asks Schweidler regarding binders, "And how many members of this noble trade have come to me after it was too late" (35)? In terms of restoration efforts, bookbinders
are most helpful in terms of their technical, trade-specific skills, such as re-sewing a damaged book that has compromised binding (Jovanovic).

Though much work had been done in terms of the preservation and restoration of paper works prior to 1966, the flooding of the Arno still serves as a “key event that changed the history of restoration” (Jovanovic). With the flood and the damage the water brought with it, came urgency. With so much damage to infrastructure, documents, and livelihood, each affected realm was faced with a lot to fix and little time to do it, which, at least in the case of paper restoration, resulted in some chaotic and subpar work. As library conservation officer Sally Buchanan explains, “In the aftermath of the Florence flood in 1966, in the frantic need to dry massive numbers of valuable items, several experimental drying methods were tried—most proved unsuccessful” (241). One such method was the introduction of sawdust to dry books. While successful in extracting moisture from the pages, the sawdust also introduced acidity and additional damage and deterioration issues (Jovanovic).

As the restoration efforts after the flood continued, the substandard and sometimes destructive techniques were replaced with newer and more effective ones. Techniques commonly used in restoration today were developed in the aftermath of the disastrous flood of the Arno River (Jovanovic). It was also after the flood that a key shift occurred in restoration as a practice. In the 1970’s, restoration began to shift from a specialized craft to a studied science, and the science is still continuing to develop as certification programs become more and more involved (Jovanovic).
MY BOOK

When creating my book, I wanted to follow the model Erin Ciulla employs in her Florentine bookshop, Il Torchio, which is to take traditional elements and combine them with modern, personal choices to create a unique piece. For the form of book, I thought it would be fitting to model mine based on the book I made while in Florence during a workshop that Erin led. Our books had paper covers, which were canvas-backed marbled papers that Erin had made in her shop. We used a combination of Coptic and longstitch techniques. A chain stitch runs horizontally along the top and the bottom of the spine, while a long stitch runs vertically for added support and decoration on the spine. I employed the same sewing techniques, but varied the decoration on the spine. I chose purple thread in a practical sense because it matched well with my paper, but chose it symbolically because purple is a color commonly associated with Florence.
My book varied from the one I created with Erin in materials as well. Instead of the paper cover she provided us with in her workshop, I chose to use leather for my cover. Italian leather, and Florentine leather in particular, is world-renowned, so it seemed like an appropriate choice. Erin guided me to a shop called Alpel where she frequently purchases leather in Scandicci, a suburb of Florence. Though I was prepared with the necessary Italian vocabulary, one of the shopkeepers spoke English, and I was able to get the exact piece of leather that I wanted.

Though I had decided not to use marbled or decorative paper on the cover, I knew it was too important to Italian bookbinding and artisanship to leave out altogether. I purchased two different papers Erin had made in her shop and decided to use them to differentiate content sections within the book. I opted not to
purchase the paper for the main content until I returned to the United States, though
the final paper choice was not without Italian influence.

I chose an off-white drawing paper for my main content pages. I decided on
off-white instead of a pure white because I wanted a neutral, traditional color for the
paper, but still wanted it to be warm and have a sense of antiquity. Drawing paper
was to me the obvious choice of paper type. It is substantial, soft, and personal. Its
weight implies longevity, which is a theme of this project. I spent much of my free
time in Florence sketching, so using drawing paper was a convenient way to tie in a
personal aspect of my time studying abroad.

Materials purchased in Florence: leather and handmade papers.
Once all of my materials were selected, I began constructing my book. First, I tore my paper and folded the sheets to create my signatures. I opted to tear the paper instead of cutting it because torn edges give a softer, more natural feel, which I desired over the harshness of a cut edge. I made the dimensions of the book four inches by six inches, so it would be large enough to hold content, but still small enough to be personal and engaging.
Before I sewed the book, I wanted to add content, so I wouldn’t have to worry about having difficulty writing because of folds or being sewn into a mistake. While I knew I did not want every page to have content, I also knew that I was creating a book and not a journal, so I did not want the pages to be blank. I decided to include primarily quotes from my research, focusing on my interviews with Erin and Nenad. I also wanted to give background information about each of them, so I have a few pages with some of their biographical information. The organization of the book is similar to the organization of this paper, and each of the seven signatures serves as section. The content list is as follows:

1. Introductory pages
2. Information about bookbinding
3. Information about Erin Ciulla and Il Torchio
4. Sketches of and information about the Arno and the 1966 flood
5. Information about Nenad Jovanovic
6. Information about book restoration
7. Quotes from my time abroad

Though I considered printing information or pictures, I ultimately decided that adding the content by hand best served my purposes. Since I spent so much of my free time in Florence sketching and hand-lettering, it made sense for me personally to continue that in my book about that time. It also helped to enhance the handmade, personal feel that I wanted the book to have.
Italian Bookbinding & Restoration

There are so many possibilities with books.

"After that to a bookseller and bought for the love of the binding those books." - Samuel Pep

All bookbindings are handmade, individually chosen, and the choices are based on the binding style, the condition of the book, and the history of every book.
Purcell 21

"don't think: books are just covers & spines & pages that are "bound" — on axis"

"TORONTO"

"Star, degree, bookbinding internship"

"FLORENCE"

"year-long art program — scholarship at IL SORRENTO"

"Angeli del fango"

"November third & fourth 1966: The Flood of the Arno River"

"the Angel of the Mud"

"don't need EVERYONE to like EVERYTHING"

"FLOODING of the Arno was a key event that changed the HISTORY of RESTORATION"
Nenad Jovanovich

"If you are always a true connoisseur," Nenad Jovanovich.

"You must take care of the process because you are preserving your history.

"We restore to maintain information."

"1970s... Revolutionize the field of art conservation and moved it from a craft to a specialized profession."

"In our field, one may not create the new, but brings the old into order."

"The Florence Revolutionize the"
I primarily used pen for the content, because I prefer it, because it is permanent, and because I usually write and hand-letter in pen. I did, however, include some pencil drawings, because I usually sketch in pencil. The quotations I chose represent a mix of factual information and general opinion and philosophical statements. Some pages include decorative lettering, while others are simpler in design, depending on the content. Once I completed the content, I began sewing.

Sewing proved more difficult than I had originally hoped, primarily since I have not sewn a book in over a year. Additionally, I have not sewn leather before, so it took some trial and error to find the right tension for the thread to ensure the book was secure, but that the stitching did not pull at the leather. However, I am overall satisfied with the book I was able to produce and am proud of my project.
CONCLUSION

Florence is known as one of, if not the, birthplace of the Italian Renaissance. The Renaissance culture still thrives there. Art, history, culture and literature are embraced whole-heartedly through the abundance of libraries, museums and artisans still active and popular in Florence today. Though Florence is becoming increasingly modernized, it still maintains its centuries-old buildings, artifacts and practices.

This project was completed in order to reflect Florence and its care for artisanship. Florence was a wonderful home and host to me for several months as I studied abroad, and I wanted to honor it by creating something particular and accurate to its care and craft. Given that this project really started to form three years ago, when I took The Art of the Book, it has become a very personal project for me. In addition, my time in Florence and the things I learned there have become permanent and important parts of my life, so the topic itself is personal. With the inclusion of sketching and hand-lettering in the content page, the book also reflects a wide variety of my interests.

I am grateful to this project for allowing me to relive my study abroad experience in a productive way and for giving me the opportunity to learn more about a subject that I was previously interested in and about which have now become increasingly passionate.
REFERENCES


