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Binding as conservation: practices, evolution, and challenges for the future

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Library of Congress Binding Program Overview
The Preservation Services Division

The Division provides after-market binding for library materials; business support services for contracted preservation services; and development and maintenance of the management information systems and technologies required for effective operations of preservation activities across all Preservation Directorate Divisions.
Preparations and Processing Section (PPS) is processing collections related to Binding contract services.

These included vendor issues with staffing shortage, rising supply and fuel costs, hence the LOC number of shipments and of bind-able units per shipment had considerably reduced.

To manage backlogs, Contractor Officer Representative and staff arranged for alternative options such as re-housing, palletizing, expansion of “soft serve” materials, with the final option year of the contract shortened, and a new multi-vendor IDIQ solicitation submitted.
PPS completed the fifth of a five-year commercial binding contract. The commercial binding contract serviced library binding for 47,782 monographs and serials, an increase of 30% over the same production period in FY22. During FY23, PPS staff prepared 73,222 items for commercial binding. PPS staff processed 25,417 items for commercial binding via telework.
PSD prepared 73,222 items for binding and assessed a further 129,623 items reviewed through the quality assurance process after binding was complete.

A shortened 4th option year (six months) for the Commercial Bindery came to an end and we began a new 2-year contract. The accelerated timeline was needed to accommodate the rising cost of commercial goods such as fuel and paper products.
PPS oversaw library binding for 129,937 volumes. PPS assessed 113,476 items of which 37%, 42,778 consisted of deferred binding. Quality assurance is a critical component of all of PSD’s programs and 118,730 items were reviewed through the quality assurance process after binding was complete.
General Collections Care Section (GCCS), is a production-focused conservation team within the Preservation Directorate. That means GCCS focuses on producing a large quantity of preservation repairs and housing enclosures for the biggest piece of the Library’s collections – its general collections.

In GCCS, the focus on preservation means staff work to retain the integrity of artifacts and the information they contain in order to keep them accessible. This work falls alongside the work done in the larger Conservation Division, which prioritizes actions to stabilize the physical integrity and original state of a collection item.
Together, these sections provide care for the Library’s vast and diverse collections.

Last year, GCCS performed over 5,000 repairs and created over 15,000 custom housing enclosures. GCCS completes general preservation repairs, from paper mending to re-casing books, or making new cases for items. Most items needing repair come via staff members locating and reshelving items for research, reading rooms, and from the Congressional Loan Office.

Using automated box-making systems, GCCS staff will measure and create a custom box, portfolio, or envelope for items that need more stability on the shelves; staff members will choose the housing enclosure type and material depending on the needs of the item, the preferences of the division it belongs to, and storage needs.
These photos demonstrate a more complex repair that a GCCS technician completed for a Congressional Loan – these are items requested by members of Congress or their staff that have turnaround times as fast as two days. This repair was completed in about one week, including removing the original cover and adhesive, creating a new adhesive binding, building a new case to mimic the style of the original, and using the hot press to craft the gold leaf spine label.
At the Library of Congress, bookbinding is both an ancient and a modern practice. In the Conservation Division, staff in the Book Conservation Section perform conservation treatment on special collections materials, including books from as early as the 12th century to as late as the 21st century.

LOC book conservators make considerable efforts to respect the integrity of a book as an object and try to retain as much of the original as possible. Sometimes keeping an original binding is neither advisable nor possible. Many books have been rebound or repaired over their lifetimes, often multiple times.
For example, when making decisions about treatment it may make sense to remove a 19th or 20th century replacement binding from a much older book, if the materials such as the covering or the boards are poor quality, and the style of binding doesn’t match the time period when the book was originally written or printed.

In such cases, LOC book conservators may choose to bind the book in a new binding that closely replicates the materials, techniques, and style of its original binding. We place a great deal of importance on the quality of the materials, sourcing and choosing paper, thread, boards, leather and cloth that are traditional and appropriate while also meeting the LOC standards for permanence.
Functionality is a priority, and the conservators will use their considerable skill to ensure a new binding will not damage original materials or fail prematurely. The style of a new binding is also important, as it should enhance and be congruous with the time period and design of the original.

For that reason, LOC conservators are also skilled in decorative practices such as gold and blind tooling. With collections from around the world and from every era, LOC conservators continuously seek out training and build skills in a variety of bookbinding styles from all cultures and times.

Lacing sewing supports through channels in wooden boards covers
Understanding the nuances of bookbinding is also essential to the repair of existing bindings; the knowledge of how structures and materials interact is crucial when introducing new materials to old.

Given the significance and the artifactual value of the special collections at the Library of Congress and the importance of retaining the skills to perform treatment on them, the Conservation Division values the education of upcoming conservators who will learn these traditions and skills and carry them into the future.

Hand-working new structural endbands
The Conservation Division maintains a robust and decades-long intern program to help train new conservators in the practice of traditional bookbinding within the field of conservation.
Resewing on raised cord sewing supports using a sewing frame

Gold stamping labels for the spine
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THANK YOU