A Bookbinder’s Journey: My analog and virtual life in the book arts.

Peter D Verheyen
A Bookbinder’s Journey:
My analog and virtual life in the book arts.
In the beginning, or how I changed course in college.

- Work-study job at JHU in conservation; full apprentice program, Martha, Joanna, Nora, Nancy, Lena, ...
- Take advantage of ANY and ALL opportunities for more
- Encouragement and invitation to participate in program activities
  - Something I have tried to “pass forward”
- Opened whole new world, generous atmosphere of sharing...
A semester abroad, and a lab with a view.

- A semester ahead = semester abroad
- Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg
  Haunted galleries as a toddler, now back
- Introduction to apprentice system..., and a pedantically charming book
Books, boxes, decorated papers, and traditions.

• While allowed to assist with treatments and other activities, most time spent learning the German terminology, basics of binding, box making, decorated papers.
• VERY interested in further experiences in Germany and apprenticeship system
• Visited other binderies in area and talked with apprentices in the museum
  • Who are you?!? Why are you visiting?!?
• Started copying names, address, phones of binderies from PHONEBOOKS at the post office. No internet!
Returned to live under the stairs like Harry Potter.

- Still had to graduate – 1 semester to go
- Already building infrastructure to continue work on my own
  - It doesn’t take a lot of equipment... to get started and keep nascent skills going
  - Just do it! Early and often
- Began applying for apprenticeships in Germany after return
  - Hand written letters (expected) and resumes. Could have photocopied latter, but alas
  - Short notice flight for interviews

SUCCESS – Bindery in artists’ colony founded 1931

- Return to familial roots with 7 generations of master shoemaker before first to study grandfather (judge)
Sewing the book.
Apprenticeship:
Lehrjahre sind keine Herrenjahre.

Peter D. Verheyen, Susan Garretson Swartzburg 1010 Lecture. Fall 2019

- Apprentices are not their own masters..., i.e. paying my dues.
- Still a rigid medieval system
- Regulated by state and guilds with learning outcomes and ongoing assessment
  - Dual system of learning/working in shop and trade school
  - Introduction to business practices
  - 3 years, generally 5 years before able to test for Meister
  - Required to open own shop and train apprentices
Earning my chops, building skills, learning to “work.”

- In artist’s colony
- The work was library binding at scale and by hand
  - Not glam or what I expected
  - Skills and chops developed by merciless repetition
- Fortunate to be familiar with batch work and tools from wk-study
  - Batches much larger and pace dictated by Meister
- Started at bottom sweeping/sorting and worked way up from there

- SU colors – who would have known?
First exhibit binding and jury forms with “honest” critique.

When not doing the work (aka library binding at scale by hand) apprentices worked on the finer points of binding.
Finer points also reinforced at trade school (Great equalizer as shop experiences varied greatly)
More work with leather, vellum, edge treatments, tooling...
Also machine course with hugely big cutters and folders
National apprentice competitions a thing since late 1920s
• Set book, originally that years apprentice journal (*Buchbinderlehrling & Falzbein*)
First parchment bindings, my favorite material.

World completely analog so eagerly awaited print journals and bought books.
Networking, write a letter, buy stamp, mail...
• Very hard at time (and still) in Germany
• Sharing “optional”
• Trade secrets even if all documented
• Steal with eyes...
Sources of info – shop, trade school and Bindereport, official trade pub
From here to there...
Industrial Germany to Ascona, Switzerland.

Following my apprenticeship exams I was able to spend 4 months in Ascona building on the foundation of my apprenticeship to learn conservation techniques for a wide range of materials and structures...
Developing and refining skills for the conservation and restoration of rare books and materials.

Centro del bel Libro, Ascona, and a Mellon Internship at the Folger Shakespeare Library Coursework in:

- Chemistry
- Paper conservation
- Leather, parchment, medieval binding structures

Important as jobs are in private practice and academic libraries...
The journeyman years and working in trade bindery conservation studios, private practice binding/conservation studio, and academic library labs...

- Monastery Hill: “Venerable” German trade bindery with conservation studio in Chicago
- William Minter: Leader in field, able to take on greater roles, focus on finer points with amazing clients and treatments. Learned most.
  - Audubon, Chaucer, Ortelius, … for collectors and institutions
  - Focus on complex single item treatment
- Yale, Cornell (and back to John Dean), Syracuse (Design and lead first lab)
  - From single item to collections-based at high level
  - Reduction in treatment complexity over time due to “more product, less process” trends in libraries
    - Rehousing and minor treatments at scale rather than fewer full treatments
- The internet is “born”… in 1993ish
Conservation, preservation, and book arts in an increasingly digital, online world.

- Able to apply acquired skills in digital to conservation and preservation work.
- Completed MLS, move towards digital, admin, program dev.
- Brought in work-study students and interns – shared as was shared with me...
- Shared book arts with students, including full semester class
- Got online with Compuserve in 1989, CoOL, founding Book_Arts-L 1994, GBW national exhibits (incl online) & Web 1994
  - Professionally isolated in Ithaca..., missed communities I had in Baltimore, Chicago, New England...
  - “Real time” shop talk, sharing of info, conversations
  - Early adopter with good mentors (Walter H and Peter G)
    - CoOL and Exlibris not best venues for book arts... ;-

Conflicts and challenges with being early adopter
Resistance from the more traditional print-first
Opposition to open access
...

Peter D Verheyen; Susan Cameron Swartzburg '60 Lecture, Fall 2019
While conservation was primary job, and home studio enabled private work..., Binding for exhibit and pleasure was a:

- A creative outlet
- Kept skills sharp(er)
- Allowed for experimentation
My studios in Chicago and now.

From under the stairs to shared dining room to everything I need, but too many books...
Not a lot of equipment really needed, but nice to have:
- Acquired over decades as $$ allowed and need dictated
- Board shear
- Stamping press
- Still using benches... that I built with father in late ’87

Independence from employers
Flexible and now chopped down to allow me to continue to work
My first internationally exhibited binding that traveled to Paris as part of a larger juried exhibit

First invitational “set book” exhibit organized by famous Czech binder Jan Sobota, then at SMU and artist Ladislav Hanka
Bound two copies of same text, got to keep one, other to press
My first involvement in creating and editioning an “artist’s book” The only accordion books I ever made. Edition of 10 regular books, with 3 unique bindings.

- Collaboration with Thorsten Dennerline, VPA MFA student
- Bound several editions for Thorsten
Classic German paper-covered case binding with leather trim.

First fish

- Eel-skin leather trim at head, tail, and along fore edges; title stamped in black on spine. 18 x 13 x .7cm. Bound 2003.
- First prize binding
  - In the "Cased Binding" category, was awarded the Harmatan Leather Award for Forwarding in the Society of Bookbinders’ UK 2003 Bookbinding Competition.
Something fishy this way comes
Set book show organized ARA Canada
US participants took books on tour after the show with SUL first stop
• Karen Hanmer initiator (Also GBW exhibits chair)
• Experiences as exhibit chairs made it easy
• Built on contacts developed over years
• POD catalog
Vassos’ papers (a part of them) and some original artwork in SCRC
Vassos was first bibliophilic obsession and acquired all his illustrated books in all known variants
Design based on illustration in book
Another set book exhibit
Simple paper case binding using a variety of paste-papers
Another set book, GBW where author was member
Narratives from private practice bookbinders in the US about their life experiences in the field
Visible structure
Bound for a Chicago Public Library “One Book” shared reading binding competition. (One of several titles)
Runner up in category
Names drawn from McCarthy’s list
• Includes several with papers in SCRC
Dos-a-dos limp vellum tacketed binding model, bound 2011.

Interpretation of, *Mandatorum Exitus, 1589, Lelio Buccapadulio Camerari*, a 1579 Italian limp tacketed ledger style binding. Interpretation is based on a ledger created by the Canonici Sancti Petri. In my interpretation of this binding I included vellum fragments and leaves that show expenses and income for my own private binding "business" that were printed in a typeface based on a 1601 Florentine manuscript written by an anonymous clerk.

- Got to know organizers online via *Bonefolder* journal
- Kept in touch
- “Translated” parts of catalog from Swedlish to English
- Suggested participants from North America.
Fish, fishing, and fish food...
First exhibit with Designer Bookbinders UK
- Concept similar to “my” first exhibit as organizer, Fine Printers Finely Bound, Too (1991)
THE fine binding group
All fine press books
- Multiple binders interpreted same text
- Images under parchment
- Salmon leather spine
Something different...

Richard Minsky’s "material as metaphor" and the “means of production!”
A headcap for my binding efforts.

Remember that charmingly pedantic book I mentioned...?
Pulled many threads of “life” together
Translated the *Pressbengel*, a charmingly pedantic dialog between a bibliophile and bookbinder, into English in 2008-9.

- Describes the German tradition of bookbinding in the early part of 20th century
  - Written to explain bookbinding to bibliophiles...
- Son of Court bookbinders who was said to have “disappeared” in 1933
- Contacted by genealogist who believed she was related... Found my translation online
  - Also led to bilingual history and bibliography, OA in SURFACE
- *Pressbengel* also translated into Japanese based on my English translation (2015)
- Research process for 2nd ed would not have been possible without Google Books, online digital collections, listservs
- Process shared via online communities (lists, blogs, “social”)
- Brought *Pressbengel Project* blog to life and sustained
Ernst wrote about much more than just bookbinding, but in several articles he wrote about fish skin for bookbinding.

Could I do that?

“Fips” and his eels were an inspiration.

Initially trained in bookbinding later becoming a writer, editor, publisher, particularly the arts of the book and graphic arts but also economics and political topic

- Served on the editorial board of the Berliner Volkszeitung and Deutsche Export-Revue.
- Worked as an antiquarian bookseller of fine press books

“Fips und die Aalhaut” a very basic description of making parchment from eel by an apprentice in 1937

While much literature is available online, the “best” is still only available in print, often in foreign languages.

Learn at least one more language and be savvy with online translation tools. ([Multi-lingual bookbinding dictionary](#))
Ernst’s article on fish skin as a binding material with photos showing preparation process and examples.

Skin could be tanned like leather or made into parchment

- Parchment easier (and my favorite material)
- Salmon... tasty
Completed salmon parchment above
The next batch from rock bass below
Small fish = small books...
REALLY, really strong (fold and tear strength)
Tested by Tim Barrett at University of Iowa Center for the Book (UICB)
Binding on the 2017 fine press edition of my translation of Ernst Collin’s *Pressbengel* Salmon parchment spine with paste paper and photographic medallions by (John Hans.) Schiff

The black and white photos in this presentation were taken by John Hans Schiff in the late 1920s in Germany and are from the same set as those used in the book.

All threads together
Time to nerd out a bit...

What I do in my day job with library/institutional data

25 years of Book_Arts-L postings

- 84k+ posts
  - 6770 distinct posters
- 3 mil + visitors, of these:
- 263K Bonefolder issue readers
- 417,069 Pressbengel Project pageviews (2009-)
- 483,323 Bonefolder Extras pageviews (2011-)

Decline attributed to increase in alternatives (FB, Insta, ...)

- But, still going strong, especially with more substantive and esoteric topics.
- Still waiting to be replaced, alas...
Parting thoughts:

Take lots of notes / Build reference collection
Chase your dreams.
Nurture life-long mentors and allies.
Find your niche and develop it.
All work is a struggle, especially the arts.
Get comfortable with ambiguity.
Have regular reality checks.
Develop and sustain a personal brand.
Share your work, and process, and story.
Get involved in the community.
Take risks, e.g. exhibiting work.
Pass it on, teach, mentor, …

Fish leather, Ernst Collin, and much more
http://pressbengel.blogspot.com/