



QUESTIONS

for Richard Homer

Book Conservator / Education: Bookbinding Program at North Bennet Street School / **Years at CCAHA:** 15

How did you get into book conservation?

I was the editor of my high school's literary arts publication, which combined my interests in art and English. But I didn't have the focus to create as an artist or a writer. Bookbinding—and, to a greater degree, book conservation—allowed for a fusion of various intellectual and material disciplines, and channeled my interests by linking them to pre-existing needs.

Where did you first train as a book conservator?

I have a diploma from the North Bennet Street School bookbinding program. The program focuses on a variety of historical book structures and offers plenty of hands-on experience making models, repairing books, and learning conservation principles.

What is the best part of being a book conservator?

The broad array of work. We have books come to us from families, large institutions, and collectors, so we get to work on items from many time periods with different needs and we meet with a great mix of people with a range of concerns.

What are some of your favorite projects from your time at CCAHA?

Some of my favorite projects have been full of problem-solving, which can be quite rewarding. Other projects are special because the material itself is amazing—a joy to handle and examine. I was especially happy to be able to treat a set of three 18th-century volumes by Sir William Hamilton, the *Campi Phlegraei*, which detailed the eruptions of Vesuvius in the 1770s. The volumes include many dramatic, hand-colored engravings of volcanoes, and only slightly less-dramatic views of the excavation of Pompeii.

What is the most challenging project you've done at CCAHA?

A couple of projects spring to mind. An art museum brought in a small book that had belonged to a Dada artist. It had been printed in Germany in the 1920s, which means that it was made with poor quality paper that was extremely brittle. The artist/author had collaged the outside of the book, but, during treatment, we had to think carefully about how to repair the binding without compromising the artwork on the cover. Another particularly challenging project was treating the gigantic elephant folios of Audubon's *Birds of America*. We had to use a number of non-standard tools and techniques to complete our work.

What is the most surprising aspect being a book conservator?

When people think about book conservation, I suspect they often visualize the work that is needed on the cover of the book—reattaching covers, repairing the spine, and so on. But we often have hundreds of pages within the book to treat as well. So in addition to being book conservators, we are often acting as paper conservators. The multitude of mends throughout the leaves of the book can often take significantly longer than the more noticeable improvements on the binding.

Where do you see the field of book conservation heading?

It is clear that digitization is providing increased accessibility to a large body of material that would have been either too fragile or too rare for most people to enjoy. Book conservation needs to adapt to these changes by increasing respect for the book as an artifact without completely closing off the possibility that people will still want physical access to books. The culture may become more starved for a different tactile experience than stroking glass. So the balance between preservation and accessibility is still an ongoing concern in book conservation, even though technology has reshaped that concern.

—AMY HEUER