

The Book as Art: Conserving the Bible from Edward Kienholz's *The Minister*

ABSTRACT

The most successful conservation treatments are developed with meaningful discussions between the stewards of objects and the conservators charged with treatment. It is the combination of the curator's and conservator's point of view and expertise that makes conservation work. The greatest challenge for me in accomplishing this goal is recognizing the personal bias that I bring to conservation. Bias can be defined as an inclination or outlook, one-sided, lacking a neutral viewpoint, not having an open mind. In conservation this often means an initial preference for treatment that is based on a partial perspective. Conservators often focus on the physical characteristics of objects when proposing treatment but it is imperative that as a profession we have the flexibility to include the perspectives and expectations of curators, librarians and other stewards of objects when developing treatment proposals. The conservation treatment of a Bible from an art assemblage by Edward Kienholz illustrates how bias can easily affect our treatment proposals. In this paper I'll briefly describe the artwork and condition of the Bible, look next at potential bias using two other bound objects, pointing out how a conservator and a curator might have differing viewpoints on treatment, and in conclusion, look at the final treatment of the Bible.

INTRODUCTION

In May 2014 the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo New York contacted the Northeast Document Conservation Center (NEDCC) with a project to conserve a 20th century Bible that is part of an artwork by Edward Kienholz in the Museum's collection. (Fig. 1) An American artist, Kienholz first began constructing art assemblages in the late 1950's while living and working in Los Angeles. He was involved in the avant-garde art scene and a pioneer in what would later be

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Fig. 1. Edward Kienholz. *The Minister*, 1961, collage, 149 x 67 x 96.5 cm. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, New York. Charles W. Goodyear Fund, by exchange and Gift of Mrs. George A. Forman, by exchange, 2013. #2013:10a–c

TREATMENT PROPOSAL

Following initial discussions among the book conservation staff of NEDCC, a very minimal treatment was proposed using fittings that could be placed loose on the binding to hold the text block in position. Since the Bible rests on a slanted surface, the text block would slide down against the lectern ledge and out of position relative to the cover unless a spacer was placed against the lectern ledge. While some polyester film strapping might need to be used to hold the text block in place, the fittings would be toned to be as unobtrusive as possible. This seemed to be an ideal approach that would involve little, if no, intervention to the Bible itself.

When this treatment was proposed to staff at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery Holly E. Hughes, the Godin-Spaulling Curator and Curator of Collection and Laura Fleischmann, the Senior Registrar for the Collection both pushed back against this proposal. They did not want any additions to the artwork that would be visible to viewers, no matter how discreet or unobtrusive. Their preference was for a treatment strategy that would reattach the text block to the cover allowing the Bible to sit on the podium as before with no change in appearance. Discussions amongst the book conservation staff at NEDCC showed that there was some hesitation against what was perceived as a more invasive treatment proposal. Some conservators felt that the Bible was part of an artwork and so needed to be treated differently from other bound volumes, that the Bible was somehow special simply because it could be defined as “art.”

TREATMENT BIAS

This is one type of bias that can easily creep into our conservation approach. It is important to remember that the Bible from Edward Kienholz’s art assemblage is an object that has context and needs treatment. It is no more or less important than other bound objects that book conservators work on. The context, or story of the object, as well as the physical condition, should both be critical components in determining the conservation treatment. In this instance, the aesthetics of the piece are a critical part of the context, and therefore, the treatment. The fittings might be less invasive to the Bible but potentially more invasive to the artwork.

Barbara Appelbaum has made this same point. “A treatment that serves the interests of multiple parties at the same time is a better treatment than one that follows only the initial preferences of the conservator.” She goes on to say “There is, of course, no such thing as a single ‘ideal’ treatment because there is no one ideal post-treatment state for any given object.” (Appelbaum 2015, 5) I think it is significant that Ms. Appelbaum points out “the initial preferences of the conservator” because this is the potential bias I’m speaking about. Our initial conservation preferences are

usually based on examination of the physical characteristics of objects, in combination with our experience, interests and even our skill set as conservators. However, without considering a “post-treatment state” we cannot come up with the most informed conservation treatment. Objects do not exist in a vacuum; in some ways they are living things with a story or stories to tell. Curators, librarians and other custodians of bound objects are entrusted with telling these stories. The conservator can help focus the lens so objects can be seen clearly in their context. We want objects to be seen for what they are but we cannot always know what they are from physical examination alone.

JONSON FIRST FOLIO

While the Kienholz Bible may be a complicated book example because the volume is part of an art assemblage, almost any treatment proposal can be influenced by bias or preference. Recently, NEDCC treated a First Folio of The Works of Ben Jonson printed in London in 1616. The Jonson First Folio was a crucial development in the publication of English literature and drama and served as a precedent for the publication of other works including the First Folio of Shakespeare’s plays in 1623. (Meskill 2008, 178) Unfortunately, the volume was rebound at some point in the late 19th or early 20th century by Riviere, a large English trade bindery. The red morocco leather cover was a standard binding style produced by Riviere, which would have been used on texts from a wide range of time periods and printing locations. Although not very visible in Fig. 5, both boards were detached at the joints, which is why the volume was initially sent to NEDCC for treatment.

The text block was oversewn during the Riviere rebinding and the volume did not open well. More significantly, there

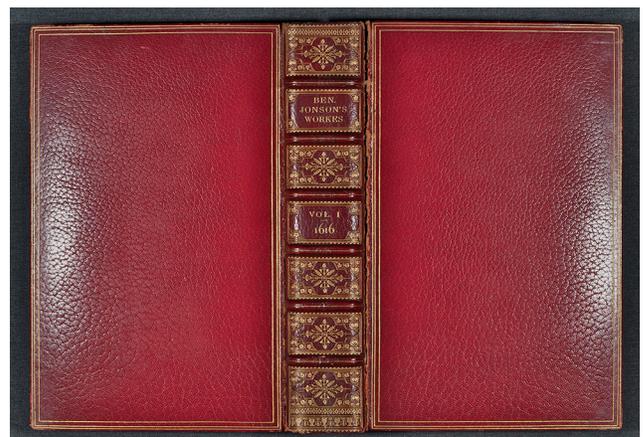


Fig. 5. Before treatment documentation of binding. Jonson, Ben. The Workes of Beniamin Jonson. London: W. Stansby, 1616. Catherine Pelton Durrell '25 Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College

was evidence that the pages had been bleached; there was a slightly gray cast to the paper, the leaves were very flat with no type impression and the pH of the tested pages measured 3.5. For this reason the treatment proposal included disbinding the volume to wash, alkalize and size the paper. The initial preference for the binding would be a period-appropriate binding in dark or medium brown leather with simple blind-tooled decoration and the title tooled in gold.

The volume is part of the collections at The Catherine Pelton Durrell '25 Archives and Special Collections Library of Vassar College and is used in class instruction. The teaching context is not only the production and distribution of Jonson's works in the 17th century, but also the attitudes towards rare books in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was not uncommon for collectors at this time to have their books rebound in a binding that looked expensive but might not have been consistent with the time period of the text production. In addition, a major donor to the library, Rebecca Lawrence Lowrie, gave the book to Vassar in honor of Fanny Borden, an early and distinguished Vassar librarian, so the Riviere binding is part of the College and library's stories as well. (Patkus 2015) By reusing the binding, the volume can be placed in three different contexts, while a period style rebinding would remove two of those, at least in direct connection to the text. One of the goals of the comprehensive conservation treatment agreed upon by all parties was to retain the Riviere binding with an emphasis on having it look consistent with the time period in which it was produced.

The binding was rebacked with unbleached airplane linen and Japanese paper toned to match the original leather color. The rounded spine of the rebacked volume is slightly flatter than the spine of the Riviere binding to improve the page opening. (Fig. 6)



Fig. 6. Before and after detail of front hinge attachment. Jonson, Ben. *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson*. London: W. Stansby, 1616. Catherine Pelton Durrell '25 Archives and Special Collections Library, Vassar College

TREATMENT PREFERENCES

Just as book collectors and bookbinders at the turn of the 20th century had preferences, or bias, in how rare books should look, most conservators make assumptions when it comes to conservation treatments. Conservators have preferences or biases based upon background, training, and the fact that they are interested in things like bookbinding structure and history. This can affect not only what they expect to see but also the treatments that they propose. Another important and often overlooked factor that can influence the types of treatment conservators propose is their level of skill or expertise in carrying out one treatment versus another. It is only natural that conservators might have a preference for proposing treatments that they are more comfortable performing, or that they feel they have more skill or expertise performing and will therefore result in what they would consider a more satisfactory outcome. It is important to understand the difference between an initial treatment preference and a comprehensive treatment proposal that takes into account not only the preference of the conservator but the expectations for treatment on the part of the steward of the object.

A VIEW OF ANTIQUITY

The second treatment proposal that I'd like to discuss is more likely to be affected by bias on the part of the conservator as compared with the example of the Jonson First Folio. This copy of the 1677 edition of John Howe's *A View of Antiquity* has extensive damage. The leather covering material is completely detached from the front board and text while the pastedowns are detached from the boards. The original sewing supports are adhered to the leather and no sewing thread is present.



Fig. 7. Front board and pastedown. *A View of Antiquity*. London: Thomas Parkhurst and Jonathan Robinson, 1677. Yale College Library of 1742, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

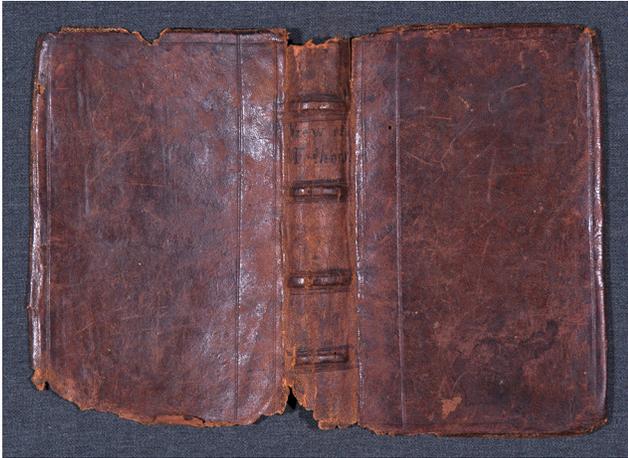


Fig. 8. Exterior of binding. *A View of Antiquity*. London: Thomas Parkhurst and Jonathan Robinson, 1677. Yale College Library of 1742, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

Pages are missing from the back of the volume, as is the back board of the binding. There is considerable staining to the last leaf of text demonstrating that it has been in contact with the covering leather for quite some time. Despite the extensive damage, the leather is quite pliable and the turn-ins, for the most part, are still attached.

The present condition of this book reveals the structure and materials; it would make a wonderful teaching piece. From my initial examination and preference, I would propose to construct a loose filler piece for the missing text and put the volume in a box. This would be non-invasive and allow access to the spine folds of the printed sheets, the board lacing and the flesh side of the leather, all elements that would normally be hidden from view in an intact binding. (Fig. 8) While that would be my initial preference, this volume has a different context within its university—a different story to tell. The book is part of the first documented library of Yale University, accurately recorded in 1742. The collection is shelved prominently in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library as a reminder of the central role of the library in the institution. As with a founding building or other element of historic importance, the collection symbolically fulfills an identity role. For these reasons, the comprehensive conservation proposal calls for the volume to be reconstructed, with blank paper filling in for missing pages. The missing board will be replaced and the leather binding reassembled and attached to the text. This will allow the book to sit on the shelf with the rest of the collection and look the part of an 18th century library. It will still be accessible to researchers while being allowed to tell its story. Although this was not my initial preference for treatment I find the comprehensive treatment plan to be perfectly aligned with the object's context.

Some conservators might find the proposed treatment controversial but it is guided by the post-treatment state most useful for the collection and takes into account the perspective of the curator. Salvador Munoz Vinaz, in his book *Contemporary Theory of Conservation*, points out the need to include the stewards of objects when making treatment decisions. "It is the affected people who best know what meanings the object possesses, and how it will be best to convey those meanings; it would not be ethically correct to impose a different point of view just because someone has some expertise in art history, in organic chemistry, or in stone conservation techniques." (Viñas 2011, 201–202) We cannot treat materials based on their physical condition alone, or our own preferences, we need the context as well. Our treatment goals need to include telling the story, and that is not always possible by simply preserving the object in the state we find it. The best treatment is not always the least invasive one.

EVIDENCE OF USE

Please don't misunderstand me, I'm not arguing for more or less treatment, just the appropriate treatment. For instance, I believe strongly in the evidence of use, you can also think of this as purposeful "damage", as Jana Dambrogio has touched on in her research on *Unlocking the Secrets of Letterlocking*. (Dambrogio 2015) Preserving evidence of production or use; folds, tears, cuts, stubs or dirt that conservators might flatten, mend, or otherwise alter during treatment can be vital to understanding an object. As conservators, treating this damage is often our first thought when examining materials and it can be difficult to leave this "damage" alone. Shelley Smith pointed out this type of "action bias" during the AIC Annual Meeting in 2013. (Smith 2013)

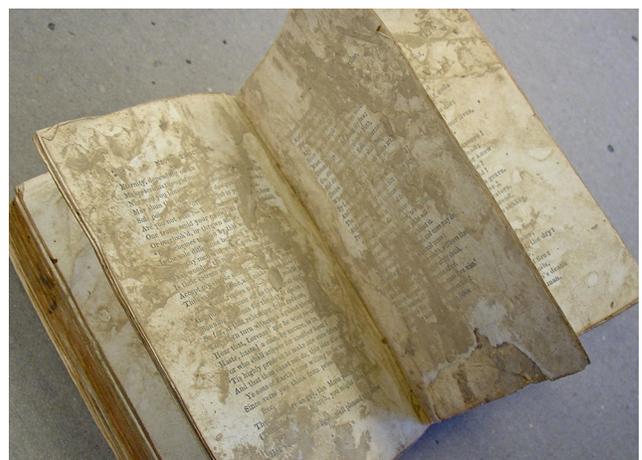


Fig. 9. Mud on text pages. Young, Edward. *Night Thoughts on Life and Immortality*. Philadelphia: John B. Perry, 1855. National Park Service, Gettysburg National Military Park, GETT 4490. Photo by Julie Martin.

For example, the book shown in Figure 9 has extensive dirt on many pages and an initial treatment preference would most likely include removal or reduction of this dirt. However, if we understand the context, the dirt is an integral part of the object, arguably the most important part. This particular book was found on a battlefield two days after a major Civil War engagement, dropped during the fighting by a soldier who had carried it in battle. The text is a long poem dealing with death, human frailties and how quickly life and opportunities can slip away. If we remove the dirt the book becomes just another copy of that printed edition. The dirt embeds meaning and witness. While there are many possible post-treatment states for the volume it is imperative to arrive at one that involves less treatment than an initial preference might entail, one where preserving the evidence demonstrating that it was left on the battlefield is a priority. Protecting this evidence of use can make the difference between preserving an object's "story" and just preserving the object itself.

THE CONSERVATION TREATMENT OF THE BIBLE

To return to the conservation treatment of the Kienholz Bible, our initial treatment preference proposed using fittings to hold the text in place in relation to the cover. The comprehensive treatment agreed upon with the staff at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery called for the cover to be reattached to the text block. Pressure-sensitive tape was removed only where absolutely necessary as Kienholz might possibly have applied the tape himself. The tape did have to be removed at the spine area so the text block could be released and repositioned during the conservation treatment. (Fig.



Fig. 10. The Bible during treatment. Edward Kienholz. *The Minister*, 1961. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, New York. Charles W. Goodyear Fund, by exchange and Gift of Mrs. George A. Forman, by exchange, 2013. #2013:10a-c

10) Two Japanese paper hinges were attached to the spine of the text block with starch paste, toned to match the pastedowns. These were both left extended at the back interior hinge, as this is the only area of connection to the binding.

After the preparation of the text some areas of the binding were lifted to allow for the insertion of repair materials. The original spine linings that were still adhered to the cover were removed and retained. The pastedowns were lifted at the spine edge of the front and back covers. As the Bible has a semi-limp binding there is no board in this area, the pastedowns are adhered directly to the heavy binding covering material. (Fig. 11) The front hinge was put down with Jade 403. Since the text is only attached at the back hinge the Japanese paper was adhered across the spine of the binding providing greater strength while preserving the attachment of the text as it was before the visitor damage. The spine of the text is lightly lined with Japanese paper so the Bible will open on the podium as before conservation treatment. The back hinge was put down with Jade 403 with the text held at an angle to allow for proper adhesion in the hinge area. The pastedown and previous spine linings were readhered with Jade 403. Although most of this material will be hidden when the book is open on the lectern small amounts at the spine ends will be visible as before treatment. A fitting of binder's board covered with MacGregor handmade paper was constructed to compensate for the missing pages during storage of the Bible. A sheet of Permalife was inserted at the exhibit opening to aid in locating the page opening for future display of the artwork. A drop-spine box was constructed to safely house the Bible when the artwork is not on display. (Fig. 12)



Fig. 11. Detail of the hinge across the interior of the spine of the cover. Edward Kienholz. *The Minister*, 1961. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, New York. Charles W. Goodyear Fund, by exchange and Gift of Mrs. George A. Forman, by exchange, 2013. #2013:10a-c

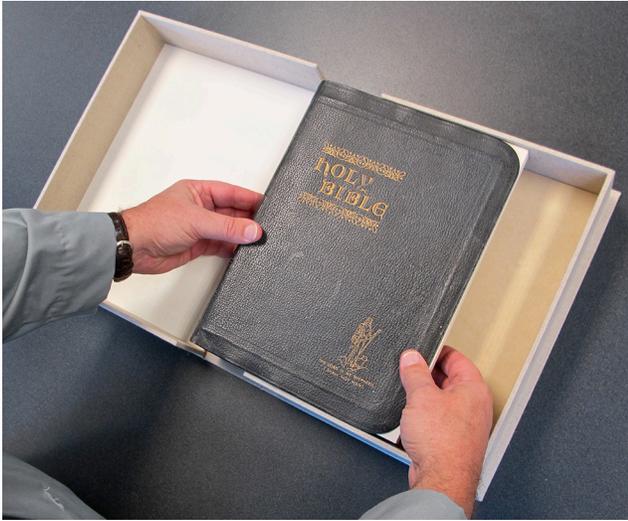


Fig. 12. The Bible in its custom-fitted enclosure. Edward Kienholz. *The Minister*, 1961. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, New York. Charles W. Goodyear Fund, by exchange and Gift of Mrs. George A. Forman, by exchange, 2013. #2013:10a–c

The after documentation of the Bible shows minimal visible change as a result of the treatment, even at the front hinge, which is not visible during exhibition. (Figs. 13–14)

CONCLUSION

In order for conservation to work, we need to have meaningful conversations with the curators, librarians, registrars, preservation specialists and other stakeholders of objects. It is imperative that we understand the expectation that these groups have for conservation treatment and the outcomes that they hope intervention will achieve. While we may have conservation treatment preferences we have to be mindful of our own bias when developing treatment proposals. Each of the objects that we work on has context—tells a story—and the goal of conservation should be to help tell that story in a responsible manner. If we aren't able to listen to the perspective of the custodians of objects and collaborate successfully, they might search out someone else who will.

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Fig. 13. After treatment documentation of the front hinge area of Bible. Edward Kienholz. *The Minister*, 1961. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, New York. Charles W. Goodyear Fund, by exchange and Gift of Mrs. George A. Forman, by exchange, 2013. #2013:10a–c

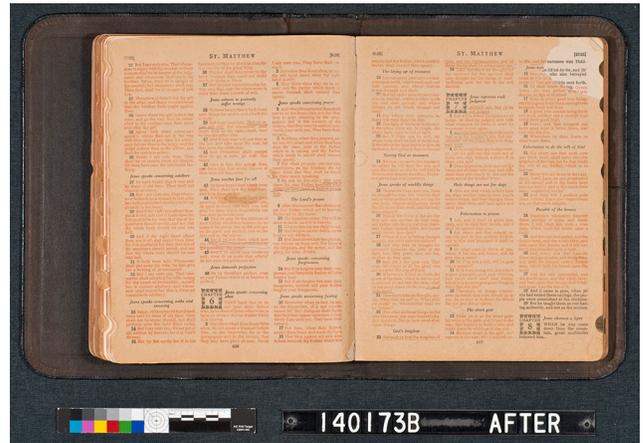


Fig. 14. After treatment documentation of the page opening of Bible. Edward Kienholz. *The Minister*, 1961. Collection Albright-Knox Art Gallery Buffalo, New York. Charles W. Goodyear Fund, by exchange and Gift of Mrs. George A. Forman, by exchange, 2013. #2013:10a–c

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