

Kimberly Kwan

Small but bulky: a study on the rebinding of a portable 15th century book of hours

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Book conservation treatment rarely calls for the full rebinding of a book. Where possible, conservators preserve the material nature of a book by keeping its original components and performing minimal intervention. At times, more interventive treatments are necessary to prepare the book for safe handling. HRC 10, a 15th-century Flemish book of hours from the Ransom Center's Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts Collection, presents a case-study where rebinding became essential, allowing an in-depth examination into combinations of different binding components suitable for small, bulky manuscript formats.

Prior to treatment at the Ransom Center, HRC 10 was in a 19th-century stiff board, laced-in binding sewn on recessed cords. While the manuscript is small enough to fit into the palm of a user's hands, its 226-folio text block makes the volume very thick. The opening of the volume's parchment leaves was restricted by the binding and the text block's heavily lined spine. To access the book's contents, users had to exert pressure to open the text block, often with their fingers touching the fragile illuminations and writing that is close to the edges of the pages. As the manuscript is often studied for its illuminations, curators and conservators determined that treatment was necessary to increase the openability of the text block.

Multiple conservators worked on HRC 10 over the course of its treatment, and the treatment plan changed greatly from its initial development to completion. When a decision to re sew and rebind a text block is made, conservators usually attempt to create a new binding structure that is sympathetic to the period of the text block. For HRC 10, this would have meant re sewing on raised supports. While this is a strong sewing structure, it is not optimal for small, bulky text blocks, where the sewing supports tend to restrict the movement of the spine. Resewing HRC 10 in such a structure were therefore not successful in increasing the openability of the volume. Several models with various sewing structures were made to determine the best structure for HRC 10, using different combinations of components such as sewing style, sewing support materials, lining materials and methods of attachment, and endbands. An unsupported link stitch, similar to the sewing used for earlier Byzantine and Coptic bindings, was finally selected. It greatly improved the openability. The binding was then covered in an alum-tawed skin, a conservationally-sound material.

The treatment project of HRC 10 presented an opportunity to trace the thought-process of different conservators throughout the treatment of one manuscript, culminating in an in-depth examination of the structural complications of working with small, bulky text blocks to provide a satisfactory treatment solution.