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Benedictine monasteries have been important centers of learning and culture throughout their history. Benedictine monks, long involved in scholarship and writing, also have a tradition of contributing their creativity, time, and resources to the development and maintenance of libraries. The monastic tradition is felt today in the library of Mt. Angel Abbey in the development of monographic and serial collections, the cataloging and classification of titles, and in the maintenance and binding of the materials.

Bindery at Mount Angel Abbey Library: Following in the Benedictine Monastic Tradition

Paula Hamilton

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In monasteries of the Middle Ages, monks labored faithfully and diligently in the production of manuscripts.

In monastic scriptoriums, one monk read while several others transcribed onto pages of vellum or parchment. Then the illustrator or rubricator illuminated the initial letter with gold leaf prepared from ground gold and other colors. Margins were sometimes decorated with floral and linear designs, and illustrations

featuring scenes from medieval life were embedded within the text. A few of these manuscripts, especially Books of Hours, are currently on display at Mt. Angel Abbey.

When scribe and rubricator had completed their work, the manuscript went to the book binder. Binding in the Middle Ages, as well as today, served simultaneously to further decorate the text as well as to protect it from dust, water, and sunlight.

A book bindery has existed at the Abbey almost as long as the monastery itself. Prior to 1970, the bindery was housed in several locations within the Abbey complex, including a room in the monastery

basement. At present, the bindery resides on the second floor of the Alvar Aalto library in impressively large quarters. The space measures 16 feet by 48 feet, large windows at one end enable the binder to work by natural light, and classical music or Gregorian chant emanates from the radio. Work stations are set up at strategic locations. Each station contains the tools, material, or equipment required to perform tasks assigned to that post. While the glued spine is drying on some items, others are measured for cover boards. Cover cloth is readied to be cut, while the stamping machine is supplied with the necessary letters to label the covers of books.

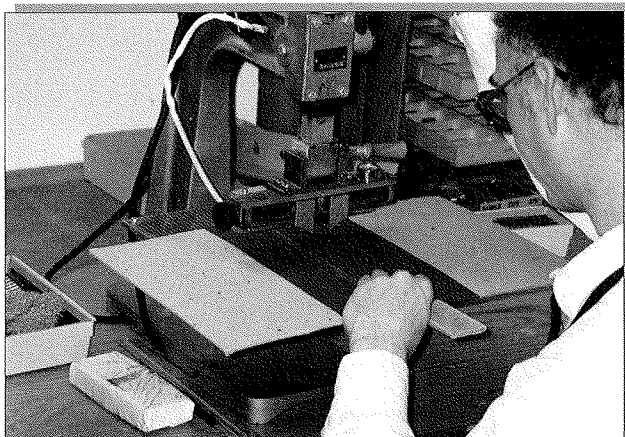
Order reigns within the bindery. Spine boards are cut to various dimensions and assigned to shelves labeled by size, as are end papers. Multi-colored rolls of fabric are neatly stacked in bins awaiting text blocks needing covers. Metal lettering meant to be placed in the stamping machine to entitle book covers is carefully stored in partitioned trays. The blades on the power cutter, knives, and shears are sharp. Nipping, cast iron, and wooden presses are in excellent working order. Considerable thought goes into which glue and brand of foil will best adhere to a particular paper fiber and cover fabric. The ambiance reminds one of the Rule of St. Benedict: "He shall regard all utensils and goods of the monastery as sacred vessels of the altar."

Brother Simon Hepner is the binder. He is mischievous and quick to laugh. He describes himself as being "ornery," but also claims that he is conservative and careful. Brother Simon entered the monastery in August 1971 after completing two years in the college seminary. For 16 years he worked in the Abbey post office, the last 10 of those years as postmaster. At one time he worked in a paper mill, where he gained an understanding of wood, fiber, grain, and the features that distinguish different types and qualities of paper. Brother Simon initially worked in the cataloging department of the library, but after 16 weeks did not feel his gifts resided with the classification and cataloging of library materials. Bored by the prospect of sitting at a computer terminal, Brother Simon relished a bindery job that would require manual labor as well as more commodious working quarters. In August 1989, he was offered the position of binder for the library.

Brother Simon began learning his trade by reading and visiting other binderies in the area. He took a 10-day class from a professional book binder and acquired an understanding of the tools and techniques of his new profession. He also spent five days observing book repair processes at the University of Oregon library. Brother Simon began to catch a glimmer of how a good bindery might function. Then, he began to explore in more detail the world of papers and glues and cloth covers. Like any good experimenter, he has exchanged less effective methods

See Bindery page 19

Brother Simon prepares a binding at Mt. Angel.



Bindery

(continued from page 10)

for more successful ones. He eliminated unnecessary steps and fashioned numerous changes along the way. According to his own estimation, Brother Simon is employing his seventh improvement for binding our library's periodicals. All this with the goal of fabricating a product that works well and looks good.

Brother Simon confesses that there have been occasional minor disasters: letters printed upside down on a cover or serials bound out of sequence. He has succeeded, he claims, in making all of the mistakes one can possibly make. However, he also notes that none of his mistakes has been irreversible. Referring to himself as a "craft binder," Brother Simon concentrates predominately on binding serials and pamphlets, creating covers for books, replacing the spine cloth on monographs, repairing books, and fashioning pockets in books for items such as maps. Except in special situations, Brother Simon's work is performed mostly on the circulating and reference materials of the Mt. Angel Abbey library. Our rare and antique books are sent to specialists for restoration, repair, or rebinding. But Brother Simon is skilled in, and makes use of, preservation procedures such as humidification and encapsulation of rare materials.

Mt. Angel Abbey Library procedures fall somewhere between hand and commercial binding. The process Brother Simon employs begins with placing the text block in a vice, making several cuts in the spine, and then brushing the entire area with glue. While the glue is still wet, thread is placed in the notches in a figure eight pattern and tightened so that the text block is securely fastened. The flyleaf or end sheet is then glued to the spine. Super cloth (spine or mull cloth) is attached to the back, adhering the book to its cover. When the adhesive is dry, French grooves are formed on the spine with an English hammer to ensure a firm fit for the cover. Then Davy boards (stiff coverboard consisting of dense recycled paper) are cut, measuring one-eighth of an inch beyond the edges of the text block. Cloth covering is cut to fit over the exterior of the Davy board, including several inches inside. Using a flexible adhesive, the

cover cloth is attached to the Davy boards. After the cloth has dried onto the cover boards, it is taken to the stamper, where the title is stamped in black, white or gold onto the spine or the cover using a heat transferred foil. The final step involves adhering the end paper and super cloth to the inside of the cover.

Brother Simon takes pride in the professional finish of his books and periodicals. His multi-volume series are bound with lettering consistently centered on each spine. Tight and evenly fitted covers on his books enhance the shelves.

Brother Simon binds or repairs approximately 100 items per month, although he has completed as many as 250 in a month's time. When he is not binding serials or recovering books, he combs the shelves of the circulating and reference collections of the library looking for items in need of repair.

"That in all things God might be glorified" is a Benedictine rule that Brother Simon must hold in his heart: The spiritual atmosphere of the Aalto Library has benefited greatly from his splendid work. **Q**

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