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A Stitch in Time: Repairing the Original Sewing Structure on Bound Materials
1. A Cautious Approach to the Repair of Sewing

ABSTRACT

Successful repair to damaged sewing in a book is often best based on careful observation of the existing sewing structure and designing the repair to work within the sewing system already established for the volume. Making as little repair as is essential for the intended use of the book will support and restore it without overpowering it. Failed recessed cord sewing, for example, can be repaired with small adjustments to the selection of materials and attention to guarding, sewing, and spine-lining technique.

At Brigham Young University, curators use a chart to rate items for repair in each of five categories on a scale of 1 to 5. Conservators use this information to provide options for repair. This matrix provides a visual map of each book's use and value. For instance, if an item is seldom used because it has been photocopied, and the photocopy circulates, the repair might be minimal. If the item is heavily used and there is no other copy, a more invasive repair might be warranted. The matrix provides a dialog between the conservator and curator.

If conservation treatment is warranted, we try to honor the original sewing system.This not only helps preserve the history of the volume, but often produces the most effective and efficient repair. Older books have adapted to the system with which they were constructed. Often the majority of the book is intact and the first and last pages or sections need repair. Changing part of the sewing system may disrupt the connection to the rest of the book. The use of better materials but a similar sewing method can promote balance between the repaired sections and the rest of the volume.

Recessed cords provide an example of how small changes can be largely effective. The same approach can be used with any repair. Recessed cords were sewn flat to the spine. The thread passes the cord to the spine side of each signature thereby "recessing" it. To achieve this, small areas of paper are removed at the sewing stations with a saw in preparation for sewing (fig. 1).

In *The Craft of Bookbinding*, Eric Burdett credits Nicholas Derome with introducing recessed cords. Burdett says that, "If used with discretion and executed carefully it has a good deal to commend it…." (Burdett 1975, 76).

> Where sewing is on recessed cords the remaining band marks [aside from the kettle stitches] have to be sawn to a depth and width which will exactly accommodate the cord used. This presents a problem; the book must be sewn on cords thick enough to give maximum strength and yet not damage the book by sawing in too deeply. The golden rule is that the saw kerf should not penetrate beyond the centre fold of the section. Where this does not permit the use of cord sufficiently strong there are the alternatives of sewing on a greater number of cords or using them in pairs, side by side, with a saw kerf wide enough for them to fit in. Yet a third method is the use of three fine cords

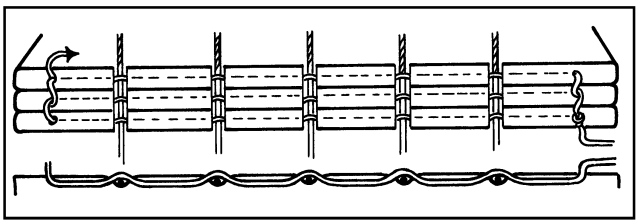

Fig. 1. A sewing system for recessed cords. From the *Thames and Hudson Manual of Bookbinding*, reproduced with permission of Arthur Johnson.

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> arranged triangularly, the saw kerfs being cut at an angle to receive them. (Burdett 1975, 85)

However, in most volumes I have repaired, Burdett's description is not carried out. The saw cut extends beyond the center folio into the center of the signature. This pushes the cord into the signature so it cannot provide support for the spine. In addition, the large saw cuts allow glue to move into the signatures, restricting the movement of the pages at the spine.

We can repair the damage caused by overly recessed cords by reverting to the original system described by Burdett, mending the sewing stations with Japanese paper and resewing on a new support.

Support material should be strong enough to hold the new sewing but small enough not to add extra bulk to the back of the spine. If cord was the original material, replace with suitable cord. The goal is to match the part of the book that is intact.

Tapes are often chosen to add additional stability, but require introducing a second hole to each repaired sewing station and add bulk to the back of the spine. When I decide to use tapes, I use unbleached muslin which I coat with a suitable adhesive for stability and, when dry, cut to a minimal width. Lining between the tapes with the same muslin creates a flatter spine. Thin muslin hinges may allow the reuse of the cover without enlarging the spine. It is advantageous to avoid added bulk to the back of the spine. It may enable us to reuse the original case without having to enlarge its spine area.

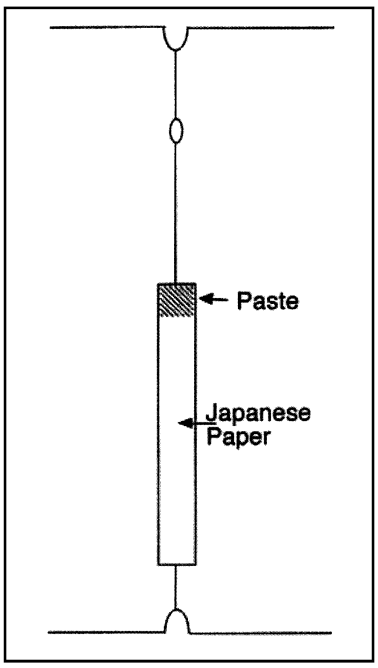

Fig. 2. Japanese paper is pasted at the tip only and is placed over the sewing hole. The dry paper is pulled away.

When we repair items we send a message to the reader. If there is much alteration to the original, the message may be that this item is less valuable, or that it can be repaired again. An intact original case, even if repaired, makes a statement to the reader that much care was taken to preserve this item in its original state and reminds the reader of the intrinsic value of the object. It often takes less time to repair the existing case than to replace the spine with new material.

Guarding can add bulk to the spine, but this can be minimized. It isn't necessary to put Japanese paper along the entire length of a signature to repair the sewing stations. This practice will often cause the spine of the signature to contract toward the fore edge causing the spine fold to curve.

By putting Japanese paper only where the paper is torn or missing, the paper is allowed to retain its original shape. This way of guarding takes as long or less time than guarding the entire length of the fold. Figure 2 illustrates this way of guarding. Hold one end of a long strip of thin Japanese paper in one hand. Paste the other end to accommodate the mend. Hold the pasted paper over the area to be mended with one finger, while pulling away the excess paper. This works particularly well if paste is applied to a stone rather than to the paper, and the end of the Japanese paper is dropped over the paste. It is easy then to carry the pasted tissue to the mend.

For recessed cord repairs we can strengthen the book by adjusting the system of the original sewing. Instead of passing the sewing thread to the spine side of the sewing support, circling the support will push it to the spine side of the fold (fig. 3).

After sewing, the sewing support will naturally press into the back of the signature as the Japanese paper mends will not completely replace the paper removed by the saw. The new sewing will become almost as flat as a completely recessed cord. The result blends well with the old sewing, preserving the accustomed state of the volume.

Sewing repair may not achieve adequate support for the back of the spine. Linings can be added to improve the stability and shape of the spine. The spine shape can be a gentle arc or may be almost flat, as long as the sewing is

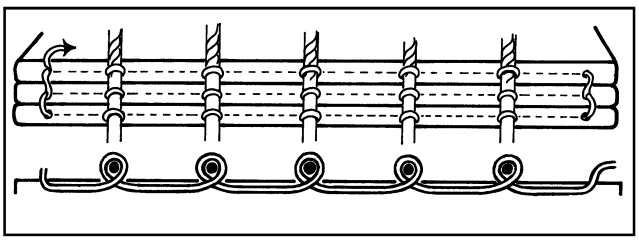

Fig. 3. A sewing system for circling cords. From the *Thames and Hudson Manual of Bookbinding,* reproduced with permission of Arthur Johnson.

protected. We aren't trying to create a perfectly shaped spine, only to improve the existing one.

Depending on sewing alone to create and preserve the spine shape causes stress on the new and old sewing. Japanese paper linings between the cords will consolidate the signatures in the desired spine shape. Japanese paper lining may be all that is necessary since it will bond with existing glue, but if not, an additional lining with 20 lb. bond paper will hold the shape. Additional lining should be added only if essential to hold the shape of the repair.

In conclusion, consider working within the sewing system already established for the volume and make as little repair as is essential for the intended use of the book. The repair should support and restore the book, but not overpower it.

REFERENCES

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