

# NOBS Newsletter

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## READING THE BOOK: A REPORT ON A RECENT SYMPOSIUM

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The Intermuseum Conservation Association (ICA) symposium, *Reading the Book: How Preservation Impacts Interpretation*, took place on the Oberlin College campus on Friday, September 7<sup>th</sup> and was co-sponsored by the Friends of the Oberlin College Library. The free, day-long symposium featured excellent presentations from four scholars, and examined the book as an object from which meaning may be both derived and ascribed.

*Reading the Book* is one of a series of educational programs sponsored by the ICA designed to foster “knowledge about cultural heritage preservation.” Additional information about ICA programs may be found at [www.ica-artconservation.org/education/field.htm](http://www.ica-artconservation.org/education/field.htm). Nicole Hayes, Field Services Officer for the ICA noted that the organization had hoped for approximately 30 attendees from area museums and libraries. However, the symposium was an overwhelming success with over 100 people attending. According to Hayes attendees included “private individuals (including many bibliophiles from Aldus, NOBS and Rowfant) and staff from organizations like the Cleveland Public Library, the Cleveland Museum of Art, the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, the First Ladies Museum, the Ohio Preservation Council, and even the Sisters of Charity of St. Augustine. Professors, staff, and students came from Oberlin College, Kenyon College, Kent State University, Case Western University, Ohio Northern University, University of Cincinnati, the College of Wooster and the University of Illinois.”

The first speaker, Dr. Erik Inglis, Associate Professor of Art History at Oberlin College, presented “Making and Meaning in Late Medieval Illustrated Books: Two Case Studies in the International Marketing of Books of Hours.” He discussed the importance of the physical state of a medieval book and what a complete, bound manuscript book can tell us; individual leaves of medieval manuscripts represent only a fragmentary state of their original context. Inglis discussed his observations about two books in Oberlin’s collections: a manuscript book of hours from the Allen Memorial Art Museum and a printed book of hours, made in Italy in 1523, from the Oberlin Library’s Special Collections Department. Each of these books reveals a great deal about the production and trade in illustrated books during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

He explained that the style of the illustrations in the manuscript book of hours indicates that it was produced in Flanders around 1450, but the fact that there is an illustration depicting the martyrdom of the English saint, Thomas Becket, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1162 to 1170, tells us that it was produced for and sold in the English market. Additionally, that particular illustration has been partially scraped away and the accompanying text has been crossed out; Inglis explained that this demonstrates that this book was still in use in England after 1538, when King Henry VII had decreed that all images of Becket and mentions of his name be destroyed. The physical evidence preserved in this manuscript tells us where it was made, that it was produced for a market in a

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different country, and that it was still in use nearly 100 years after its creation.

Additional evidence of the international trade in books of hours is revealed by the printed book of hours in the Oberlin Library's collection. Although it was printed in Venice, Inglis noticed that some of the illustrations do not match the style of the others and are actually French. The printer, Gregorio, apparently acquired a set of plates from a French artist and this kind of communication, the sharing of images from France to Italy, is something that we wouldn't normally suspect to have happened. Additionally, Inglis made the point that this is the kind of book that often gets neglected because it was a "potboiler," produced to meet a large demand for books of hours, but that it has an important story to tell. He made the point that preservation is sometimes just the keeping together of an object, especially the more humble or common objects, and that these are the very objects that can reveal the fuller picture of the print and visual culture of the time.



Photo: John Seyfried, ICA

The second speaker took the audience forward in time to the nineteenth century. Dr. Cathleen Baker, Senior Paper Conservator at the University of Michigan Library, presented her talk, "Nineteenth-Century Publishers' Bindings: Reflections of the Industrial Revolution," which was also a close analysis of the physical evidence presented by books. Baker outlined a detailed survey of the characteristics of

nineteenth-century bindings and the important innovations in bookbinding during the century, particularly case construction, which made it possible for books to be mass produced on a scale that had been impossible previously. Machines began to replace the handwork of bookbinding and a greater division of labor developed. Larger binderies appeared and publishers, such as Harper Brothers, began doing their own binding in-house.

Women first began to enter the binding trade during this time of greater mechanization during the industrial revolution and Baker discussed the types of jobs they were allowed to do as well as the rise of women book designers, such as Margaret Armstrong and Sarah Wyman Whitman, by the end of the century. Baker also presented examples of how contemporary decorative tastes are often reflected in the type and color of the cloth used and also in the style of the stamping and embossing. Ribbon embossing, for example, a two-step process developed and used to decorate bindings in the 1830s and 1840s, emulated the styles of popular ladies' ribbons at the time. This talk presented a detailed survey of the technologies that developed around the production of books and what the books reveal about ordinary life, social conditions, and decorative taste in nineteenth-century America.

Following lunch, symposium participants were invited to take part in a hands-on book identification session presented by speaker Randy Silverman. Participants examined approximately 15 books published from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Based only on the covers, they attempted to guess the publication date of each book, earning more points the closer they came to the exact date. Cheers, sighs and cries of "Bingo!" went up from the audience as they clearly enjoyed the opportunity to participate.

Following his book identification session, Silverman, Preservation Librarian at the University of Utah Marriott Library, presented his talk, *Jackets Recommended: The Case for*

*Preserving Dust Jackets in Research Libraries.* Silverman argued that book jackets, although initially used as wrappers in the 1830s to protect books from many environmental hazards, had evolved by the mid-1870s into “the publishers’ primary means of synopsising bibliographic information, promoting their wares, and adding a unique aesthetic identity to each book.”

Silverman showed that by the end of the nineteenth century, book jackets were featuring images that were not to be found on the book cover itself. Informational and aesthetic value was being added to the book through the creation and use of the book jacket. Silverman then examined the work of some of the most influential book jacket designers of the twentieth century who have been drawn from varying fields including typography, painting and graphic art. Designers highlighted included E. McKnight Kauffer, William Addison Dwiggins, Alvin Lustig, George Salter, Paul Rand, Seymour Chwast, Milton Glaser, Chip Kidd, Warren Chappell, Carin Goldberg, Carol Devine Carson, Barbara De Wilde and Paula Scher. Silverman opened and closed with the plea that book jackets be preserved as policy by research libraries, and acknowledged as an integral part of the complete book.

The conference ended with a presentation by Anne Trubek, Associate Professor of English at Oberlin College. Trubek’s talk, *A Short History of New Writing Technologies, from Plato to MySpace*, focused on the “fetishization” of old writing technologies during periods in which these methods are threatened with replacement by new technologies. Trubek’s talk began with the development of writing itself and the threat that Plato argued it represented to the older methods of memorization and discourse. She argued that each new writing technology threatening to replace an older method, from handwriting to printing, to typewriting and computing, brought with it a nostalgia for the older technology and a sense that the older technology better represented both the intent and humanity of the author.

The ICA-sponsored symposium was a fascinating one and speakers covered much ground, both philosophical and practical. The proceedings were filmed and Nicole Hayes of ICA’s Field Services has submitted a grant to re-master the film. If successful, the symposium content could be made available on DVD free of charge from the ICA website.

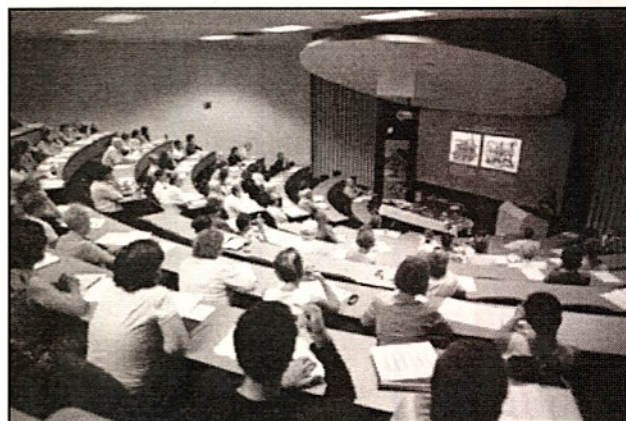


Photo: John Seyfried, ICA



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