

From Rare Volumes to Heirlooms: The Care and Repair of Books

By DIANE M. FRESQUEZ

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FOR A DUTCH computer trainer, a foray into the world of rare-book conservation came by chance, when he rescued a deteriorating old volume that a friend was about to trash. It turned out to be a rare copy of "The Paraphrases of Erasmus on the New Testament," from 1548 — worth around €10,000.

But it sure didn't look like much: insects had eaten away at the book and the pages were worn and brittle. "The bindings were a catastrophe — someone had once repaired them with thick saddle leather, nailed on the back," says the technician, Egbert, who asked that his last name remain anonymous to protect the privacy of his book. To set things right, he found a book restorer based near Maastricht, Cors Knops, who for €1,500 did a massive refurbishment that involved calf leather, wooden pins and "home-cooked paste."

Even in the age of the Internet, book restoration is a thriving, though uncommon, vocation. Sure, the Gutenberg Bible is right there on the Web to read (www.gutenbergdigital.de). But there's nothing quite like the real thing — at least, not to the libraries, museums and collectors who keep conservators like Mr. Knops busy. Even those who don't have a library filled with rare books sometimes turn to a restorer for help in preserving a family heirloom or an impulse purchase from a flea market.

Sometimes the books Mr. Knops works on are neither rare nor valuable,

except in a personal way. He once repaired an old family Bible that had been damaged by the birth- and death-certificates stuffed between its pages. To keep them in top condition, he made two protective storage boxes; the family Bible and the family history, entwined for generations, were now laid to rest in two separate coffers.

Other jobs are years-long endeavors involving valuable pieces. For years, Mr. Knops has tended the vast collection of music books and scores belonging to Ton Koopman, a Dutch harpsichord and organ soloist, and conductor of the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir. "If you buy books, it's like having kids. You need to take care of them," Mr. Koopman says.

Mr. Knops, who runs his business with one assistant, says he has more work than he can handle. Depending on the repairs involved, he charges €45-€70 an hour. His cozy workshop, just off the kitchen in his house, is full of the tools of his trade, such as parchment and calf hide. On his "leaf-casting machine" — a large sink filled with water — he demonstrates the fine art of paper repair.

Putting a torn piece of newspaper in the machine, he adds chopped paper fiber to the water. Then, as the water drains, the paper fibers fill in the holes as if by magic.

How does one get into such a rarified profession? Mr. Knops, originally

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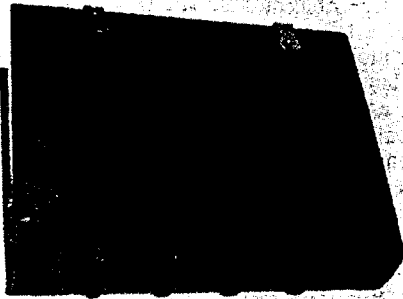
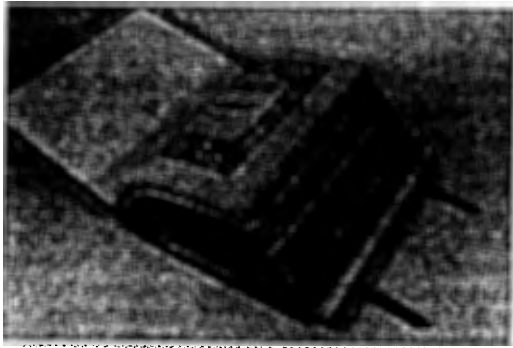


Photo: Knops Boekrestauratie

A valuable copy of 'The Paraphrases of Erasmus on the New Testament' before restoration (top photo) and after (photos below)

Restoring Rare Volumes

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trained as an art teacher, fell into the job in 1987, when he happened to see an ad for a restorer. Forty other candidates also went for the job, but Mr. Knops succeeded by scoring highly, among other things, on a psychological exam measuring concentration. He had never really seen old books before, but when he got one in his hands, he recalls, "I fell in love."

That kind of concentration came in handy for his most high-profile assignment: restoring four of Van Gogh's sketch books — small pads that the painter once kept in his pockets — for the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. As part of the work, Knops took drawings from the museum's collection, probably ripped from the sketchbooks by Van Gogh himself, and returned them to their rightful place. To put the pages in order, he relied on clues such as the charcoal imprints of the drawings on the backs of pages still in the books.

Book repair has come a long way in the past half-century, says Bas van Valzen, senior tutor of paper conservation at the Institute of Cultural Heritage in Amsterdam. At the moment, the Netherlands is a leader in book restoration because of *Metamorfoze*, a national program that focuses on preserving Dutch works from 1840-1950. Mr. van Valzen is one of the authors of the 10-year-old *VeRes Code of Ethics*, the Hippocratic oath of Dutch book restorers, which echoes similar codes in the U.S. and U.K.

Tenet No. 1 of the *VeRes Code*: Don't use materials that will be impossible to remove later. This allows for future restoration, if necessary, with improved materials and techniques. Previously,

restorers didn't think much about the consequences of slapping nylon, plastic and the like onto original materials, such as parchment paper. Now the repairs are disintegrating and the glue, for example, is getting into the parchment. "It's a very, very big problem to undo," Mr. Knops says.

Other tenets of the Code include: Don't make valuations; do squeal on moonlighters; and do share your knowledge with colleagues. "We're not competitors," says Mr. Knops, noting things have changed since the time when conservators prized their "secret recipes." Nowadays book conservators try to help each other, he says.

After hanging around books all day, it's no surprise some book restorers also become collectors. Mr. Knops got hooked after a visit to a flea market. Returning home, he examined the makeshift dust-jacket on the book he had just bought: It was a sheet of parchment, from 1637, regarding an exchange of vacant land. "I was very happy with it," says Mr. Knops.

Adding to its interest, the document mentioned a family of printers from Antwerp named Cnobbaert - the same printers of the book the document was wrapped around. Mr. Knops decided to start a collection of Cnobbaert books and now has several. Ironically, the book that started the collection has a dry leather cover and a gently warped spine. "I'm not going to restore any of them," he says. "I like them much more in this state."

Indeed, for anyone who wants to start collecting, Mr. Knops advises: "Collect something that suits you." Most of his private clients have a "special relationship with their books" but don't focus on

Protecting Precious Pages

It's not just how books are handled, but how they're stored that can cause damage. Here are some tips on caring for your books:

TEMPERATURE AND HUMIDITY

Humidity should not exceed 50%, and temperature should be cool, below 60 degrees Fahrenheit (16 degrees Celsius), says John Penman, director of conservation services at Riley, Dunn & Wilson Ltd., a U.K.-based company that conserves paper and binds books (www.rdw.co.uk). "Library books suffer so people can be warm," he says.

WATER DAMAGE

As soon as a book gets wet — freeze it, advises book restorer Cor Knops. Then deterioration, such as mold growth, is stopped, buying time during the restoration process.

HANDLING/STORAGE

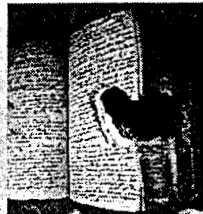
Don't pull a book off a shelf by grabbing it from the top of the spine. Instead,

push the two adjoining books inward and remove the chosen book by holding the spine from the middle. Keep books away from sunlight. For more advice, see the Web site of the International Book Collectors Association (www.rarebooks.org/bookcare.htm).

HOME REPAIR

It's best to turn to the experts when it comes to valuable volumes. But for anyone wanting to try home surgery, Dartmouth College Library has published "A Simple Book Repair Manual" (www.dartmouth.edu/preserve/repair/repairindex).

—DIANE M. FRESQUEZ



the monetary value of their collections. There's even one client who shares Mr. Knops' taste in the "look" of old books. When restoring books for this man, Mr. Knops has to use restraint. "I just stop the decay — nothing more," he says.

And for bibliophiles who don't wish to collect, there's always adoption. For £15 to £4,000 (€24 to €6,332) in the British Library's "Adopt a Book" program, anyone can have one of the library's broken-down candidates restored. Currently on the adoption list is Sir Thomas More's "Utopia," 1685.

After an adopted book is repaired, benefactors and books "meet" at an event that includes demonstrations of book restoration, such as sewing a book's spine.

Susan Daniels, a casework manager for English Heritage, spends hundreds of

pounds adopting books from the British Library. For her first adoption (£500) she was entitled to a behind-the-scenes tour of the conservation work. The conservation staff was in the middle of restoring an ancient, rolled-up Buddhist text written on tree bark. Although they unfurled it with painstaking care, parts of it were disintegrating to a fine dust. While Ms. Daniels and others looked on, the conservators made a request: "Please don't sneeze."

- *Knops Boekrestauratie (Munstergeleen, the Netherlands)*
www.xs4all.nl/~knops/
- *Metamorfoze (The Hague)*
www.kb.nl/coop/metamorfoze/
- *Adopt a Book - The British Library (London)*
www.bl.uk/about/cooperation/adopt.html