

RESCUING VALUES

AN EXHIBITION OF BOOK RESTORERS, 23rd SEPTEMBER–24th OCTOBER 2011



In 2011 The National Library was celebrating the 30th anniversary of the start of education in book and paper conservation and restoration. An exhibition revealing the secrets of this work and the specialised training course was created on this occasion.

In Hungary this is the only vocational training specifically for book restoration. Led by the heads of the restoration workshop at the time Ildikó Kozocsa Beöthy and Beatrix Kastaly, the program was launched in September 1981 and has been running ever since. Managed by colleagues with long years of experience, practical sessions are held in the well-equipped workshops of the Restoration and Bookbinding Department. This is why all Hungarian book and paper restorers see this studio in the National Széchényi Library as the “cradle” that they can always return to and find answers to their professional queries. Between 1981 and 2011 there were twelve special courses, with a total of 178 students receiving their diplomas in paper restoration and conservation. The comprehensive depth of the training is unique in Europe, therefore the graduates’ skills and knowledge are well acknowledged outside Hungary. We remembered the past years on 27th September 2001, greeting Ildikó Kozocsa and Beatrix Kastaly, who is responsible for the training at present. As part of these celebrations, the graduating year of students presented their diploma work, which was followed by a friendly reunion of Hungarian book restorers and their former instructors.

The exhibition was composed of two main units. One section covered the history of paper restoration and the training of book and paper restorers. The first course on the conservation of paper documents was launched by the Hungarian National Archives in the late 1950s, where in the 1956 Revolution much of the material had been damaged by fire and water. The Hungarian University of Fine Arts started its correspondence course on restoring artifacts in 1974, whose paper and leather specialization was completed by many of the students who had earlier obtained the NSZL diploma in book and paper restoration. Up to 1990, the evening course covering solely book and paper restoration was run jointly with the Training School for the Fine and Applied Arts, and since then it has been working independently under the auspices

of the Library Institute. Since 1994 there have been certain entry requirements and an entrance examination for the three-year course I. Following this historical overview, there were tableaux showing what students learn in the six semesters of their training. Using the work of recent students, the documents in the cases illustrated the tasks apprentices are given each semester and their solutions. The pre-conservation state was shown in photos, while the process of restoration was explained in a short written summary. In the three years of their education, our students did restoration work on the library’s documents to the value of about twelve million forints. Their curriculum includes professional theory, practical training, general and specialized art history and drawing. The syllabus is again made up of two main parts: over the first three semesters, students learn about the restoration and substance of such non-book documents as individual sheets of paper and parchment, as well as graphic and photographic pieces. Over the subsequent three terms, they learn about the materials, structure and binding techniques of books in different covers. For the purposes of teaching these theoretical and practical subjects, 24 course books have been issued by the National Széchényi Library. The apprentices’ diploma work is the restoration of a paper or parchment document or of a book bound in parchment, supplemented by detailed written, drawn and photo documentation. The restored diploma piece is demonstrated and defended in a public presentation. The second part of the exhibition was about the book restorer’s actual task, since outsiders often think that all he does is rewrite the letters...

While the librarian, the reader and the researcher are interested in content, the restorer focuses on the information carrier, in other words, he or she concentrates on the technical details of book bindings, their materials, such as the quality of the paper, leather, parchment, ink, dyes, stamps, glues and textiles. Having surveyed and recorded the extent of the damage to the documents, the restorer plans the process. Conservation is supposed to stop a piece’s chemical degradation, restore physical damage and recreate its missing sections. All this is to be done in a way that the final product should be as close as possible to the original state while, naturally, not hiding the ravages of

past years or centuries. The materials applied and the book binding techniques are to be identical with the original ones. It is critical that the restoration work should always be reversible. In other words, the glues and supplements built in should be easy to remove if necessary, and never cause any damage to the document. Therefore, book restorers should be familiar with all the substances and techniques that old masters used, as well as with the new materials, such as chemicals and glues that they may safely turn to without any risk of damage. Restorers look after documents also in the course of placing them into storage and putting them on display. They can tell what the right environment is for information carriers of varying sensitivity (heat, light and humidity) and what the ideal museum installation or storage facilities are for them.

The exhibition tableaux guided visitors along the subsequent stages of restoration, giving an insight into the “invisible” elements of the job, while at the same

time showing what each type of document may be like before and after restoration. The mock-ups placed in the cases reveal the numerous types of joints, headbands and hinges used over the past centuries for making books. Interesting tools and book restorers’ smaller lab equipment, as well as a number of leather and paper samples surrounded the graduating students’ diploma work, the books they restored. The guided tour on the last day of the exhibition met with great success, as at this point the cases were opened up, revealing details not seen earlier.

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¹Excerpts on the NSZL Library Institute web page available at: <http://ki.oszk.hu/content/okjkepzesek>

