

THE CRAFT OF BOOKBINDING

Many of us have had books fall apart after a couple of reads. But some books have withstood the passage of time, passing down the joy of reading through the generations. What is the difference between a machine-made book and an expertly crafted leather-bound one? Dr Terence Tan speaks to Adelene Koh, whose love for the ancient craft of bookbinding led her to give up her career to pursue it as a profession.



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Could you share with us what bookbinding is and how you got into this profession?

Bookbinding is an age-old craft that has been around for a long time. Books, as we know today, are mainly a thing of utility where information is passed, a form of quiet entertainment, or even simply to prop up a table. However, this form as we know it has evolved in many ways to what it is today. Bookbinding brings together many components, such as the work of the author, illustrator, paper maker, printer, leather tanner, and so many others. It is the final part of creating the theatre that sets the mood and tone to how the content of the book is presented to you.

I learnt simple bookbinding in art college. I loved it so much that I taught my sister the craft, too. Soon, we were making handmade journals for friends as birthday gifts. However, I left this hobby behind after graduation and did not pick it up again until 2011 when I was in Brooklyn. There, I met a bookbinder at the New York Book Art Fair and realised that bookbinding is a profession — a real job. I decided to quit my job and dove into full-time bookbinding.

Do you think bookbinding is still relevant in today's market where e-books are becoming more popular?

It is the same as asking whether vinyl records are relevant today. Digital music is readily available, but there are still people who love the motion of putting a vinyl record into the turntable and setting the pin gently down onto the record, and they enjoy every part of that process. It is the same with books. Even though e-books are readily available, many people still love the smell, feel and touch of a beautifully leather-bound book, and enjoy listening to the sound of the paper pages being turned. I would say that many people are keen to own a beautifully made book that has evolved from something that is simply utilitarian to something that is a luxury to have. It is an all-sensory experience when you read such a book.

Could you bring us through the process of binding and the skills it takes to be a master bookbinder?

The many processes of bookbinding vary across different cultures and eras. There are also certain types of books that require more time to process than others. In the past, one has to be an apprentice for a minimum of five years and work as a binder for more than 20 to 30 years before he or she can be considered a master bookbinder. I am still at the infancy of my journey. I think a craft has to be honed over years of experience and not something that



one can simply tick off a checklist and be considered a master when the list is complete.

What are some memorable projects you've worked on?

I have fond memories of all the books that I've made or restored. Regardless of whether it was an old book that needed restoration after being loved for many generations or a new book that I made, every book has a different "life" story to tell. Before preparing a book for my customers, I usually spend time chatting with them, listening to their personal stories and understanding what they have in mind for the book. I then create a one-of-a-kind bespoke journal based on my experience with them and their stories. As for books made for

competitions, I draw inspiration from its content and then create a visual representation of the book on its covers, doublures and endpapers. Even the way I sew it may be influenced by how I relate to the story.

Recently you were in the UK for a project but encountered some problems with funding. Can you tell us more about it?

Yes, I was in the UK for the Society of Bookbinders Education and Training Conference. It is a biannual conference where many master bookbinders gather for three full days of lectures, demonstrations and workshops. I was very privileged to be able to attend the conference and met with many like-minded people. After the conference, I spent a month with my mentor in London to create my design binding for an annual bookbinding competition. During that time, I also applied for the Certificate of Competence by the Society of Bookbinders.

However, pursuing a bookbinding certification has always been a struggle. Bookbinding has become a very niche craft and not many people know about what I do. Because many things have been mechanised or computerised, most books these days are machine-made and hand bookbinding is not commonly heard of in Singapore. Thus, my recent attempt to seek funding from a local council was unfortunately declined again and I turned to crowd-funding instead. I am very grateful for the many people who have come forward to support me.

What's next on the horizon for you?

There is so much, really. At the conference, I was one of the younger people among experienced bookbinders who had been binding for at least 30 or 40 years. One of the oldest and most respected binders there is 90 years old this year. So I would say that I look forward with great anticipation to improving my bookbinding skills. One day, I hope to be the grand old lady in Singapore who has an abundance of interesting stories to tell through the books that I have made. ♦

PROFILE



TEXT BY

DR TERENCE TAN

Dr Terence Tan is a full time locum. He has a strong interest in the arts and publishes a guitar and a ukulele magazine with the time that he has outside of work and family. Feel free to contact him at terence@guitarbench.com.

Legend

1. Customised full leather journal with leather onlays of cats for a fund pledger of Adelene's UK trip in August 2015
2. Breakfast at Tiffany's by Truman Capote bound by Adelene. This received the "Highly Commended Certificate" in The Bookbinding Competition 2015 by Designer Bookbinders UK
3. Mark Cockram, Adelene's mentor and tutor, in London, sharing the joys at the Prize Presentation Ceremony and Exhibition for The Bookbinding Competition 2013 & 2014
4. Display of entries for the The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám

Photos by Louis Kwok

