Student Report

My first semester at West Dean College has been jam-packed with new educational and professional experiences. From the outset, I have been challenged to work independently on conservation projects in order to learn how to put together my own treatment proposals, to undertake independent decision-making, and to justify my actions in terms of practical treatment carried out on books and flat documents. Whilst I have experience in the field of conservation, I am used to working with a fellow colleague when it comes to devising treatment plans; it has been a real learning curve for me to begin to work independently at the bench, and I very much appreciate the opportunity to begin to develop myself as an autonomous conservator.

Since September, I have undertaken conservation projects at the bench on a range of different items: a 20th century dictionary volume, a 19th century prize binding, an 18th century print and a paper label on a 19th century wooden chair. Alongside these projects I have developed my bookbinding skills through recreating a Romanesque binding, practicing Greek and Islamic endbands and making a Greek-style binding to aid the development of my MA thesis project. Furthermore, we have had the benefit of a number of internal and external tutors teaching us variously about: paper washing, knife making, gels in conservation and parchment conservation.

The print conservation project began as an exercise in backing-removal in order to separate the engraving from its old, acidic mountboard. Whilst this was the goal of the project as set by our tutors, I felt I wanted to gain further experience in mounting and displaying flat works, so I decided to take the project further by lining the print with Japanese tissue, inlaying the print into a secondary paper support and mounting the overall display in a window mount, using the college’s mount cutter. There are a huge variety of methods that can be used to inlay and mount prints, so this project was yet another occasion for me to consider why it was necessary and appropriate for me to conserve and protect the object via a particular selected method. In this case, the print would be placed into storage with occasional consultation – I felt it was appropriate to mount the print so that it could be safely handled via the mount, rather than through direct handling of the print itself, which was now vulnerable having been removed from its original backing. Not only was this a useful exercise in decision-making...
a valuable lesson in preparing items for display and exhibition – if working for an institution such as a museum in future, this type of activity could form part of my role as a conservator.

Alongside conservation projects, workshops such as the recreation of the Romanesque binding with Sean Thompson from Cambridge University Library have supplemented our learning and allowed us to continue to hone our hand-skills in the field of bookbinding. It is essential for us to be able to work delicately and employ intricate techniques in conservation; the specific sewing techniques that we learnt through making this binding served the exact purpose of enabling us to effectively employ such intricate techniques on book conservation projects. As book conservators, it is also important for us to understand the structure of books in all of their forms, which is another huge benefit to making a book in a particular historical style from start to finish. This activity enables us to work through all of the processes of book-making in sequence, and to observe along the way how each step contributes to the functionality of the final binding.

From left to right: backing before treatment; backing during removal; mounting in progress; final mount

Sewing the textblock for the Romanesque binding

Tab sewing and endband on the Romanesque binding
Finally, parchment repair with Mariluz was of particular interest to me. I have come across parchment through prior work experience in the field of conservation but have not had the tools at my disposal to approach its repair. Parchment is a delicate and unpredictable material that is very sensitive to the changes in humidity. It is very important to assess the material before even considering undertaking an invasive treatment. A lot of our time with Mariluz was spent understanding the material science behind parchment, investigating how it is made and looking at different types of parchment under the microscope. After going through the procedure for assessment we then experimented with different methods of repair: beginning with historic sewn repairs and moving right through to the current approach to repair using Japanese tissue and different adhesives such as wheat starch paste, gelatine and isinglass (made from the swim bladder of the sturgeon fish). I now feel more confident in being able to assess which treatment method may be suitable for parchment conservation projects and will continue to practice the repair techniques independently in the studio.

Moving forward, I will be focusing on my thesis topic which will be centred around the conservation of Greek bindings. I am currently undertaking my work placement at the National Library of Greece in Athens and have selected 24 bindings from their collection with particular structural damages that will be the focus of my thesis study. Being able to work directly with this material and to have the opportunity of working with conservators who have specialist knowledge in this field of conservation is of huge benefit to the development of my own knowledge and experience with Greek bindings. Alongside working with Greek bindings, I am also conserving a parchment binding and have just finished resewing a 17th century cartonnage binding on alum-tawed thongs. My conservation projects in Greece have been specifically selected to allow me to develop my experience undertaking structural repairs and therefore help to fill current gaps in my learning.

I will be returning to Greece in the coming months in order to survey the bindings selected for my thesis and will continue to work towards developing my research project over Easter. I have a particular personal fascination for Greek binding structures, which, compared to Western European structures are sewn unsupported (the sewing thread alone is used to sew the textblock of the book and to attach the boards). These structures present their own particular challenge for conservation and I hope that in future I may find further opportunities through funding or employment to work with this particular style of binding. To this end, I have recently applied to the Fred Bearman Research Grant with the aim of developing my project on Greek bindings beyond my MA at West Dean.
It would have been very difficult for me to have gained such a wealth of experience in such a short space of time without attending the course at West Dean. I believe this course will open-up doors for me in terms of my future career in conservation and I look forward to continuing to develop my professional experience in the coming months at College.