

Digital Medievalist

NEWS / OBITUARIES

In memory of Christopher Clarkson, preserver of medieval manuscripts and bookbinding structures

2017-06-19 ACAMPAGNOLO LEAVE A COMMENT

Christopher Clarkson (Blackheath, UK 1938 – Oxford, UK 2017) was a distinguished conservator of medieval manuscripts and early printed books, and a thorough bookbinding historian, with a focus on the structural and material history of books from the birth of the codex to the early Renaissance.

He trained in design and graphic arts at the Camberwell College of Arts and Crafts (London, UK) and subsequently at the Royal College of Art (London, UK), where, almost by chance, he encountered the art of bookbinding and fine binding and was later taught by Peter Waters (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Waters). He then went on to work with Anthony Cains (<http://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n94-45745/>) at Douglas Cockerell & Son (<http://worldcat.org/identities/lccn-no98096976/>) and with Roger Powell ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Powell_\(bookbinder\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roger_Powell_(bookbinder))), where he deepened his understanding and knowledge about the repair of early printed books and manuscripts.

In 1966, he was invited to join the English Government team sent to respond to the cultural heritage emergency resulting from the devastating flood of 4th November in Florence, Italy. It was there that the principles of modern 'book conservation' (a phrase coined by Chris himself) were first formulated. These aimed at repairing books with a strong emphasis on the historical and archaeological significance of their materiality and structures, and not just on making the objects usable again or producing historical facsimiles, as was the custom, often in manners non-sympathetic to their materials, structures and historical evidence.

Chris went on to work at the Library of Congress (Washington, DC), The Walters Art Museum (Baltimore, MD), and the Bodleian Library (Oxford, UK), where he developed, in collaboration with David Cooper, the system of wedge book-supports now found in rare-book reading rooms worldwide.

In 1987, Chris embraced his calling as trainer and mentor of book conservation students and professionals. He moved to the Edward James Foundation at West Dean College (near Chichester, UK) and helped conservators from around the world develop a deeper understanding of the conservation of book materials. He was also involved from the very beginning in the shaping of the *European Course in Preservation and Conservation of Book Materials* held in Spoleto, Italy, since 1992, where he taught up to the early 2000s. He ran Staff Training programmes at the National Archives and the National Library of Slovenia (Ljubljana), the Bodleian Library, and the Wordsworth Trust at Dove Cottage (Grasmere, UK). He taught at the Rare Book School (USA) and run workshops and seminars in many countries, including Japan and South America.

In 2004, Christopher was awarded the Plowden Gold Medal of the Royal Warrant Holders Association in recognition of his invaluable contribution to training and educating conservators worldwide, fostering deep historical awareness of the materiality and structure of the books as objects. In 2012, he was awarded a Doctorate Honoris Causa (<http://www.clarksonconservation.com/2012/07/22/honourary-doctorate/>) by the University of the Arts London for his contributions to the history of bookbinding and archaeology of the book.

Throughout his career, Chris dedicated his research interests in the study and understanding of historical book materials and bookbinding structures, and medieval binding structures in particular.

Book conservation bridges a wide range of disciplines—history, science, engineering—, but also requires high levels of observational skills and craftsmanship. Advocating the close study of period materials and book structures, Chris, through thorough visual and tactile training sessions, taught his students to seek an ever-deeper knowledge of the historical integrity of artefacts.

Chris despised facsimile work—he called this ‘the danger of poor conservation training’—for past culture and artefacts cannot (nor should) be recreated by mindlessly applying historical typologies without an understanding of, and respect for, the unicum that each book is. Chris, thus, taught us how to see the object, with its peculiarities and unexpected characteristics: “to train the eye is to train the mind”, as he put it.

Understanding historical binding techniques, and the cultural significance of specific material characteristic of books, is a skill that has probably never been as relevant as it is today in our transition to the digital.

The teachings of Christopher Clarkson have influenced the new generations of book conservators globally, and for this we are all greatly in his debt, for his principles of conservation, aiming as they are at preserving the essence of each period artefact, safeguard historical material evidence in the collections of memory institutions the world over.

Now, this preserved information needs also to be transposed into the digital, and integrated with valuable digitization efforts of library and archive materials. Book conservators have been trained on how to see (and thus understand) period artefacts for their uniqueness: these skills should now also be taught to digital humanists engaged in the translation of our written cultural heritage into the digital medium.

If this happens, we will have a more complete representation of the object than we do nowadays, and for this we will also and always be thankful to Chris.

Alberto Campagnolo

Final note: On Monday, 26th June 2017, there will be a memorial for Christopher Clarkson (<http://events.arts.ac.uk/event/2017/6/26/ONE-OF-A-KIND-A-gathering-of-family-friends-colleagues-and-all-who-have-learnt-from-him-to-celebrate-the-life-and-work-of-Christopher-Clarkson-/>) at the University of the Arts London to celebrate his distinguished life with family, colleagues and friends. Unable to participate because of the distance, I would like to pay my respects to Chris with this post.



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