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Book Smarts

In a digital age, professors work to save an ancient craft and integrate it into the curriculum

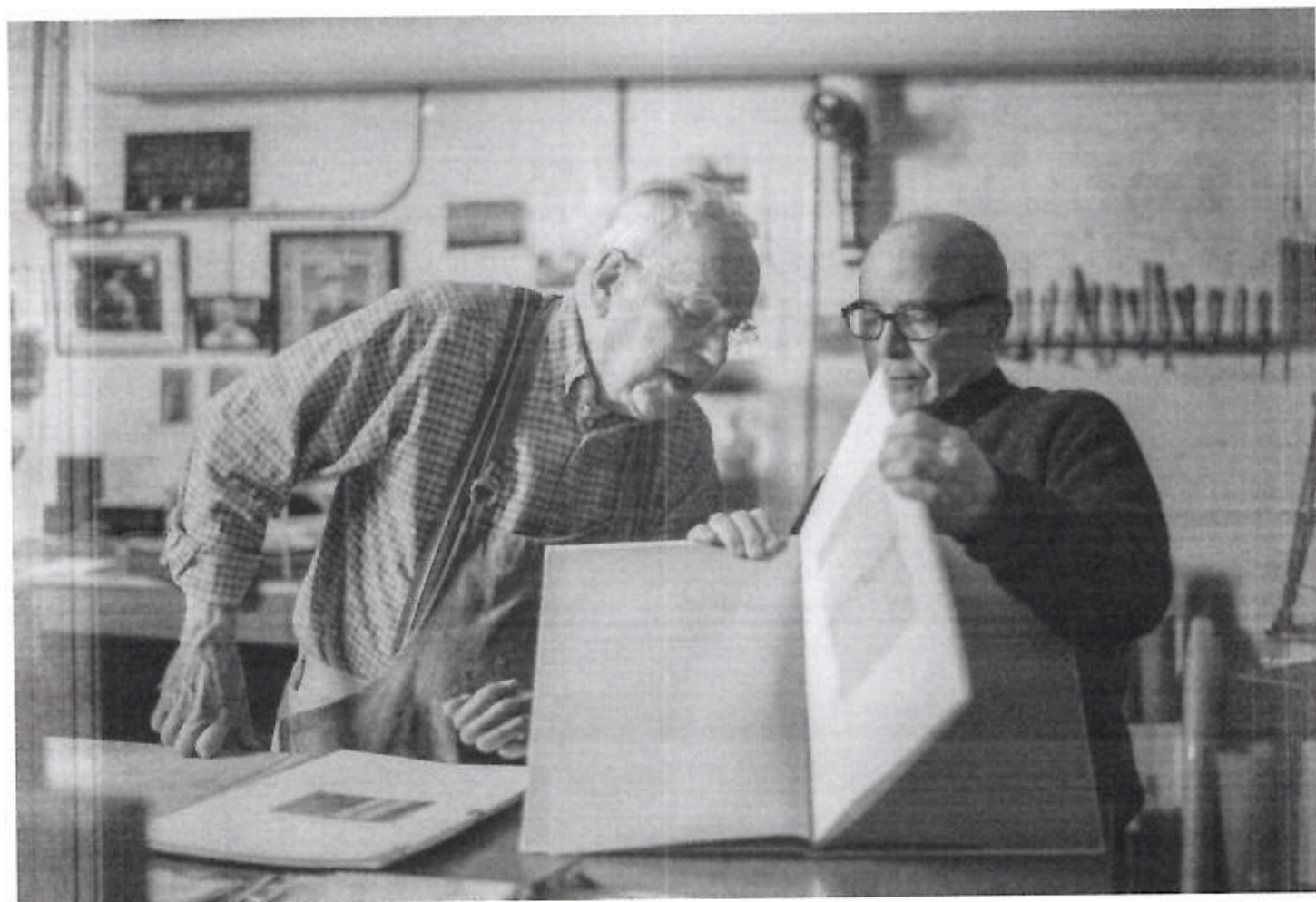
By Laura Meader

In the basement of Lorimer Chapel lies one of Colby's best-kept secrets—the Hitchcock Bindery. In this tidy room, with its central worktable, book presses, and hand tools, bookbinder Chuck Ferguson has toiled away with little fanfare for more than 40 years. But if two professors have their way, the bindery will shift from a little known to a well-known asset while preserving the ancient craft of bookbinding at Colby.

Photographer Gary Green, associate professor of art, discovered the bindery in 2015 while searching for someone to make prototypes of an art book. Anita Savo, assistant professor of Spanish, learned of the bindery at a talk Green gave after he and Ferguson successfully collaborated to make prototypes of *After Morandi*. Within six months, Ferguson gained two allies at a critical juncture—just as he's considering retirement.

Ferguson, associate professor of French and Italian, emeritus, arrived at Colby in 1967. At that time, the bookbinding equipment at Colby sat unused since its donation by Alna, Maine, resident Alberta Hitchcock in the 1960s. Ferguson, who learned bookbinding skills at his previous teaching job at the University of Connecticut, was recruited and agreed to make the bindery operational in the early 70s.

Since then, he's rebuilt "miles of books" for the library and other departments, he said. Along with student apprentices, he's quietly kept the bindery going even after he retired from teaching in 1995.



Chuck Ferguson, associate professor of French and Italian, emeritus, and Associate Professor of Art Gary Green consider Green's book *After Morandi*, a photographic tribute to Italian painter Giorgio Morandi. Ferguson produced a prototype of the book that led to its publication.

The collaboration between Green and Ferguson motivated Green to try preventing the bindery from slipping back into oblivion. But why save it? What does bookmaking add to the academic experience? "The idea of students making things is so important," Green said. "Not because that's the field they're going into but because making things makes us a little more human. Making things triggers all kinds of other healthy ways of thinking, processing, and problem solving."

Savo, who's been apprenticing with Ferguson for a year, agrees. Bookbinding "forces you to take your time with things and opens up space to think about what you're doing and why you're doing it," she said.

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—ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF ART GARY GREEN

Savo will offer that experience to students in a new storytelling and bookmaking course this spring. Savo, a medievalist interested in the material culture of text, designed the course with the bindery in mind to "imitate medieval practices of storytelling in order to see what we can glean from these practices," she said.

Students will work with Ferguson in the bindery to make their own book from stories they've written themselves in order, Savo hopes, to "sympathize in a deeper way with a distant world."

Colby is one of only two NESCAC schools to have any kind of bookbinding, Ferguson said. But there's more to it than the equipment. "Part of the appeal, and dare I say magic, of the bindery has to do with Chuck himself," Savo said. "He's a living archive of information about the history of the bindery, of the College, and the workings of this dying art."

Green would like to see it reside in the art department if it can be viable. Most importantly, Green says, is that people continue to make things with their hands. "We need to organically engage with each other," he urges. "We need to be smart or we risk losing things that we'll never get back."



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Features

Getting to know Chuck Ferguson, Colby's bookbinder

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By: **Michaela Morris** on April 13, 2017.

In the basement of Lorimer Chapel, down a brightly-lit hallway, there is a small, little-known room designated "The Russell Hitchcock Book Bindery." Scrolls of fabric line the back walls. Shelves containing jars of paste sit above a bright red backing press. Tools—scissors, saws, hammers—are hung carefully on corkboards on the left side of the room, and a large work table is situated in the center. On most mornings, Chuck Ferguson can be found here, setting type, sewing sections, and binding books. Ferguson has been operating Colby's book bindery since the mid-1960s, after coming to Colby to work as a French professor.

Prior to Ferguson's arrival on campus, the equipment had been idle. In the early 1960s, Alberta Hitchcock donated her husband's hand bindery to the college. Passionate about genealogy, her husband Russell Hitchcock, a retired sea captain, had bought the equipment in Massachusetts to make books containing his genealogical findings.

However, for the years following the initial donation, the bindery was used only once, during a Jan Plan course. Hitchcock was disappointed with the College's inactivity with the equipment, and on a few occasions threatened to rescind the gift. After learning that Ferguson had experience in bookbinding, the then-chair of the art department asked him to take charge.

Ferguson is not a native East Coaster. He grew up in Hudson, Ohio, where he attended the Western Reserve Academy. After especially enjoying learning French from a teacher whom he termed "excessively cool," Ferguson decided to pursue a career in French studies. After completing his undergraduate degree at Oberlin College, he went on to Ohio State University to earn his graduate degree. There, he met his wife, another graduate student and teaching assistant. Eventually, the couple ended up working at the University of Connecticut. There, they began taking bookbinding lessons offered by a retired woman in her home down the street from the university. The lessons, held on Tuesday evenings throughout the winter, began with the simple task of binding a magazine, then moved onto more complex projects of binding multi-leaf books. By spring, Ferguson began to assist in lettering and hot-stamping of the covers.

Since then, Ferguson has bound thousands of books. "I get great satisfaction out of taking something old and decrepit and giving it new life," he said, describing his passion for the art. Currently, he is working on a French music facsimile for Laura Jeppesen, a well-known musician who specializes in playing the Viola da Gamba. Currently, the sheet music cannot be played, as it falls apart when opened. Jeppesen heard about Ferguson through a past member of Colby's music faculty. "The word [about my work] spreads, and I get an incredible variety of works to bind," Ferguson explains.

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Ferguson has bound many family bibles, but his personal favorite projects are well-used, beloved cookbooks. Often, cookbooks are missing pages. In this case, Ferguson turns to librarians, who can find the edition of the cookbook and photocopy the missing page so that it can be included in the final product. Ferguson has quite a lot of experience in cookbooks. "Fanny Farmer, Betty Crocker, The Joy of Cooking, I've done them all," he said.

He also binds yearly music journals for a friend. "He says all his musical friends are jealous. I've been binding his books for twenty years, and they look very impressive on the shelf," Ferguson said.

Throughout the bindery's existence, Colby students have played various roles. Prior to retiring in 1996, Ferguson opened positions in the bindery as campus jobs, describing the job as the perfect fit for anyone who enjoyed "repetitive, monotonous work." Each semester, he had two or three students work with him. Currently, Ferguson has two apprentices and is collaborating with six students from a Spanish class called "Telling Stories and Making Books." Each student comes in, learns the binding process and eventually binds a book themselves.

To bind a book, Ferguson first sews sections together within linen tape using a sewing frame. He then uses a lying press, sandwiching the sheath between two metal slabs and using a backing lever to shape the spine into a mushroom shape. To trim the paper to the appropriate size, he uses a guillotine. The next step is called "casing in." The binder picks fabric, cuts boards for the cover, brushes paste on the end paper and the board, and puts it in the press overnight. If the book needs lettering, Ferguson moves to the stamping press, sets up the appropriate type, places it in the press, then heats it to 200 degrees. The press then produces a label, ready to be secured to the completed book. "Except for trimming, a binder never does anything that can't be undone," he said.

In addition to binding books, he enjoys playing piano. Every Friday, he meets with three other pianists and plays in "The Stanley Hill Quartet," a musical group that specializes in old-fashioned scores written for two pianos and eight hands. He also recently translated and published an 18th century text called *L'art du Facteur*. He especially enjoys bookbinding, though, because "there are always new challenges. It never gets routine," he says.

Author: Michaela Morris

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