

Working on Paper in Three Dimensions

To the untrained eye, an early 19th-century bandbox may look like a simple container. But to the trained conservator, a bandbox presents a series of challenges. In responding to a major bandbox treatment project from the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in New York, NY, CCAHA conservators applied strategies learned in treating ostensibly very different objects, including ancient Egyptian papyrus, daguerreotype cases, Joseph Cornell boxes, and the fashionable wallpaper in the Diplomatic Reception Room at the White House.

Bandboxes are round or oval containers usually made of pasteboard and/or wood and covered with decorative papers. They resemble traditional hatboxes but were used as fashionable shopping bags or luggage for all types of items. Their popularity took off in the 1820s and remained high until the late 1840s, when they quietly slipped out of fashion.

Today, bandboxes are highly regarded by collectors of American folk art. Delightful three-dimensional structures, bandboxes provide beautiful records of American-produced hand-printed papers and offer charming vignettes of Americana. They evoke an image of ladies shopping in the bustling small towns and cities of early 19th-century America. The 17 bandboxes that Cooper-Hewitt brought to CCAHA for conservation treatment are prime examples of the craft, featuring high-quality craftsmanship and artistry.

Bandboxes pose a variety of challenges to a conservator, requiring expertise in a number of specialized areas. In order to develop effective treatment protocols, CCAHA conservators and technicians had to share practical experiences gained from projects that presented comparable problems. This ability to develop a collaborative approach is one of the advantages of working with a large conservation center.

Barbara Lemmen, Senior Photograph Conservator and the team leader on this project, was particularly well-suited to manage the work. In 2003, Lemmen supervised the treatment of approximately 70 bandboxes from the collection at Landis Valley Museum (Lancaster, PA), so she approached the Cooper-Hewitt project well aware of the problems that she might encounter. Lemmen assembled a 12-person team in order to move the project through the laboratory quickly while ensuring that each piece received full and careful attention.

The colorful illustrations on the bandboxes are similar to wallpaper but specially designed to fit the bandboxes. Wallpaper treatment is a specialty within paper conservation, and CCAHA has completed several outstanding wallpaper projects. Mary Schobert, Director of Paper Conservation, worked on the most prestigious of these projects when she served on the team that treated the wallpaper in two rooms of the White House—the Dining Room in the residence and the Diplomatic Reception Room. Schobert noted that there are considerable differences between working on wallpaper that is still on the walls as opposed to a wallpapered container that you can easily hold in your hands; nevertheless, her experience in working on previous wallpaper projects provided insight into how to proceed with the surface cleaning of the paper on the bandboxes.

Lemmen's team consulted with Jim Hinz, Director of Book Conservation, because of the surprising similarities between bandboxes and some rare book bindings. "The bandbox materials are similar, if not identical, to those used in book construction," Hinz explained. "The underlying structure of wood, pasteboard, or pulpboard contains the same base materials commonly used for book covers." Hinz suggested several options for how the team could approach structural repairs to the actual containers.

Jessica Keister, Mellon Fellow, brought her experience in photograph conservation to bear on the bandboxes. "I found that my experiences working with cased objects like daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes provided a good background," she said. "These early photographs were frequently housed in complex, multiple-component packages. If a case is damaged, responsibility for treatment falls to the photograph conservator. My experience of working with a paper-covered, wooden bandbox was very similar to that of working with a paper-covered daguerreotype case, though the bandbox is much larger and more colorful."

Conservator Samantha Sheesley relishes the creative problem solving involved in treating three-dimensional paper objects and mixed-media pieces. For the bandbox project, she requested to work on a lid that was in need of structural repairs. "I enjoyed the challenge associated with simultaneously meeting our ethical obligations, the client's requirements, and my own determination to successfully integrate the repairs with the original material," she said. Sheesley applied problem-solving strategies that she had used in conserving American artist Joseph Cornell's boxes and collages from the Smithsonian American Art Museum (Washington, DC). According to Sheesley, "comparisons can easily be drawn between this bandbox treatment and the collages by Joseph Cornell in terms of their constructions; both objects consist of paint or ink on paper that is attached to a primary support."

Soyeon Choi, Senior Conservator, recalled CCAHA's use of spectrometric analysis to determine the chemical composition of pigments on an Egyptian papyrus sheet from Lafayette College (Easton, PA). She proposed using a portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometer (XRF) to determine the chemical nature of the pigments used in the bandbox inks. The XRF results were used to determine treatment protocol, and the information from the analysis was conveyed to Cooper-Hewitt in the final treatment reports.

As with treatment of the Cooper-Hewitt bandboxes, many CCAHA projects develop as conservators make surprising connections, tapping into their wealth of experience. While the untrained eye sees an attractive early American artifact, a conservator may see connections that span continents and millennia, even finding inspiration in Egyptian papyrus for the treatment of a 19th-century American bandbox.

—LEE PRICE



All bandboxes pictured are owned by the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution **1** / Bandbox with lid, after treatment (gift of Mrs. James O. Green, 1913-12-9-a,b) **2** / Mellon Fellow Jessica Keister using a portable X-ray fluorescence spectrometer to determine the chemical composition of pigments used on a bandbox (gift of Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt, 1913-17-21-a,b) **3** / Conservator Rachel Wetzel consolidating flaking paint (gift of Eleanor and Sarah Hewitt, 1917-36-7-a,b) **4** / Senior Conservator Soyeon Choi smoothing a fill in an area of loss (gift of Mrs. H.P. Davison, 1975-31-1-a,b)