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

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FACULTY



“

The idea of students making things is so important. ... Making things triggers all kinds of other healthy ways of thinking, processing, problem solving.”

—Associate Professor of Art
Gary Green

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.

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.”

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.

BOOK SMARTS

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

By Laura Meader

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.

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.”

