



## 2021 Guild of Book Workers Award Recipients



Cindy Haller

**LAURA S. YOUNG AWARD**

*In recognition of service to the Guild of Book Workers*



Mark Esser

**LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

*In recognition of service to the profession of the book arts*



## 2021 LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD RECIPIENT:

# Mark Esser

by James Reid-Cunningham

**M**ARK ESSER IS THE FINEST bookbinder working in the United States today. His career as a fine binder, teacher and conservator spans the last four decades. He was born in Joliet, Illinois in 1950. His grandfather was a cobbler, and as a child, Mark was fascinated to see him work with leather. He asked his grandfather to teach him, but his grandfather refused because he wanted his grandson to go to college and become a professional. A shy child, Mark never enjoyed school, but he graduated from Grinnell College in 1972 with a major in biology. His first job after college was an assistant curatorial position at the Farlow Herbarium of Cryptogamic Botany at Harvard University. He rehousing dried specimens of mosses, liverworts and fungi. It was while at Harvard that Mark discovered bookbinding when he saw books being sent out to be rebound. His original interest in the field was in conservation rather than in fine binding. In the late 1970s, he saw an advertisement for bookbinding workshops at Sam Ellenport's Harcourt Bindery in Boston, so he took introductory workshops with Joe Newman.

In early 1980 Mark was hired by Barclay Ogden at the Newberry Library in Chicago to work in their in-house bindery. It was here that Mark learned the basics of bookbinding and developed the kind of efficient economy of motion that is the bedrock of craftsmanship. The library also

had a conservation laboratory where Gary Frost and Pamela Spitzmueller worked on rare materials. Mark had his first exposure to paper conservation when he worked with Janet Ruggles, the Newberry's paper conservator, on letters from the Adams family. He was also able to work with Gary Frost, who was planning on moving to New York to teach at the new library conservation program at Columbia University School of Library Science. Mark learned a great deal about book structures from Gary: "I think he used us as guinea pigs to help fine tune some of the things he'd be teaching at Columbia. An incredible learning experience, in any case."

During this period, Mark took a weekly binding class from David Brock, who was apprenticing with Bill Anthony, a master bookbinder originally from Ireland. After almost two years at the Newberry, Mark left to work for Bill Anthony at Anthony and Associates Bookbinding in Chicago. Bill offered him either a job where he would learn only what was needed to complete a specific task, or a traditional apprenticeship where he would learn the full range of the elements of the craft of bookbinding. Mark jumped at the chance for a five-year apprenticeship. In the bindery, they did repairs, small editions, enclosures, new bindings, the full range of binding tasks. Mark remembers "He would give me five or six books to work on and among the pile of books would be some



North Bennet Street School, 1992

new work with no explanation. I had to figure it out or ask questions.”

They did not do fine bindings from commissions, but both Bill and Mark did fine bindings on their own. Bill believed that because sometimes day to day work can be mundane, it was essential to also have challenging projects, requiring one’s highest skills. He advocated that if you can do fine bindings, your ordinary bindings come out better.

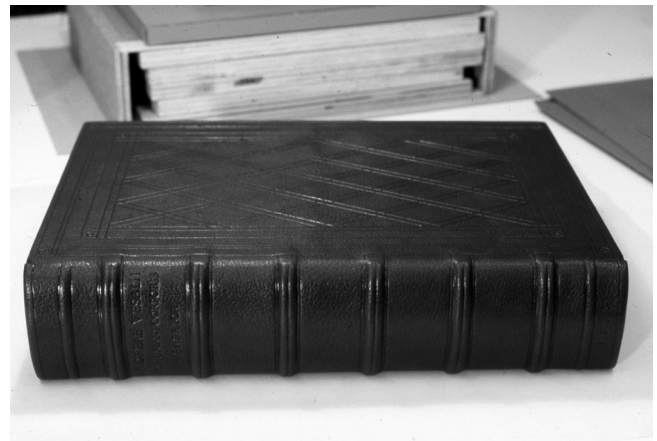
In 1983, Bill Anthony was hired as the conservator for the University of Iowa Libraries. His move preceded the creation of the Iowa Center for the Book in 1986. Mark went to Iowa to continue his apprenticeship. At Iowa, Mark worked with Bill on an exhibition entitled “The Art and Craft of Bookbinding” in 1985. They created models of historical bindings reaching back to the Middle Ages. Neither of them had experience with medieval bindings, so both were challenged to accurately recreate ancient book structures. Mark had his first experience in teaching binding at Iowa, with a course for undergraduates called “Elementary Bookbinding” that focused on non-adhesive structures. He did not enjoy teaching, but Bill emphasized the importance of handing down one’s knowledge to others.

Working with Bill Anthony in Chicago and Iowa provided Mark with experience in both private practice and

institutional conservation. As his apprenticeship came to an end in 1986, Mark was approached by the North Bennet Street School in Boston to teach bookbinding full-time. A trade and craft school with an emphasis on hand work, NBSS was considering creating a two-year program in hand bookbinding. The school provided him with a proposed curriculum, but he quickly discarded it and created a curriculum based on his experiences in Chicago and Iowa. The program emphasized traditional craft skills, fine workmanship, the use of non-adhesive and reversible processes and structures, the use of protective enclosures to preserve rare books, and the creation of historical models.

The school agreed to his proposed curriculum and Mark took the job. He knew he would need to stay at least three years before he would know if the program was a success or not. If graduates of two classes were to get jobs in the field, Mark would know that his curriculum was successful. The program is still ongoing today, graduating four to eight students per year. Mark’s former students work in both private practice and institutional settings. Although teaching wasn’t his goal and in many ways was never easy for him, he became one of the most influential bookbinders in the nation by training many binders who would become leaders in the field.

In 1994 Mark left NBSS to become the conservator at the John J. Burns Library at Boston College. This position gave him the opportunity to conserve a small and fine collection of rare books. Like most institutional conservation positions, Mark was involved in administration, exhibit preparation, climate monitoring, housekeeping, and all the other essential elements in the successful stewardship of rare library materials. But unlike most institutional conservation positions, Mark was able to spend almost half of his time on benchwork, performing conservation treatments on incunabula, rare books and archival letters, and building protective enclosures.

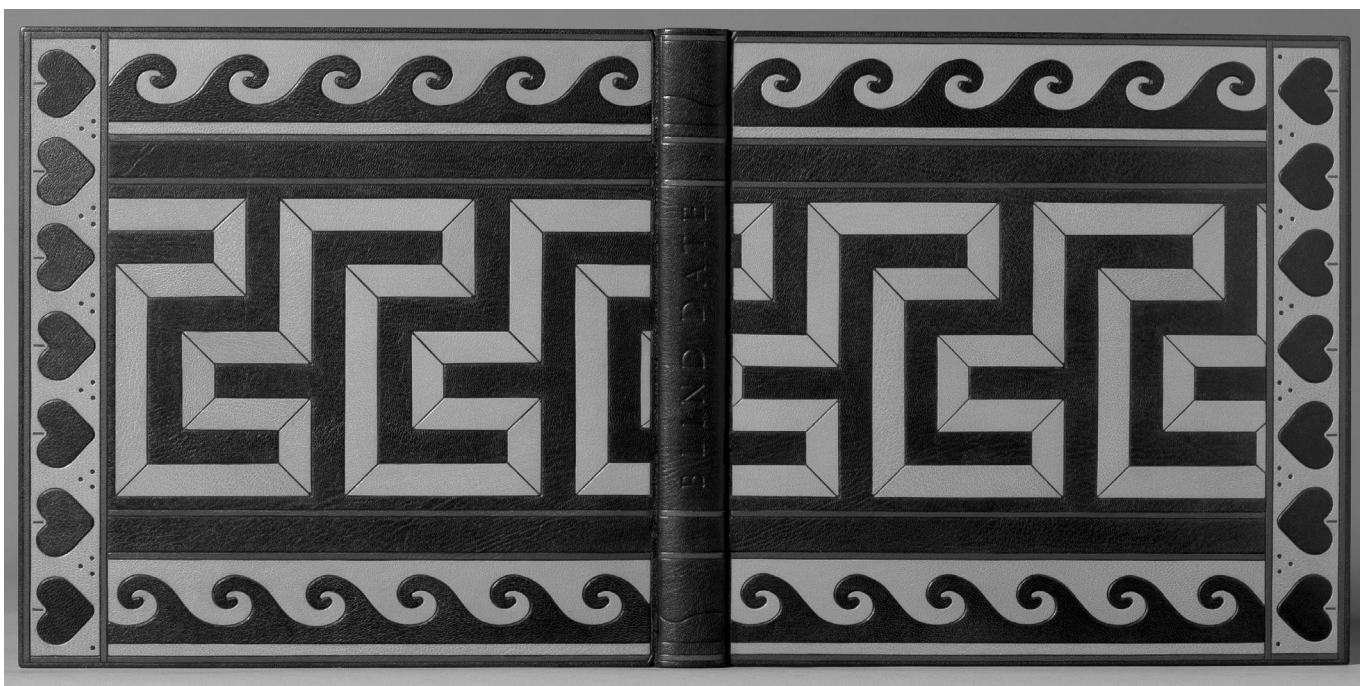


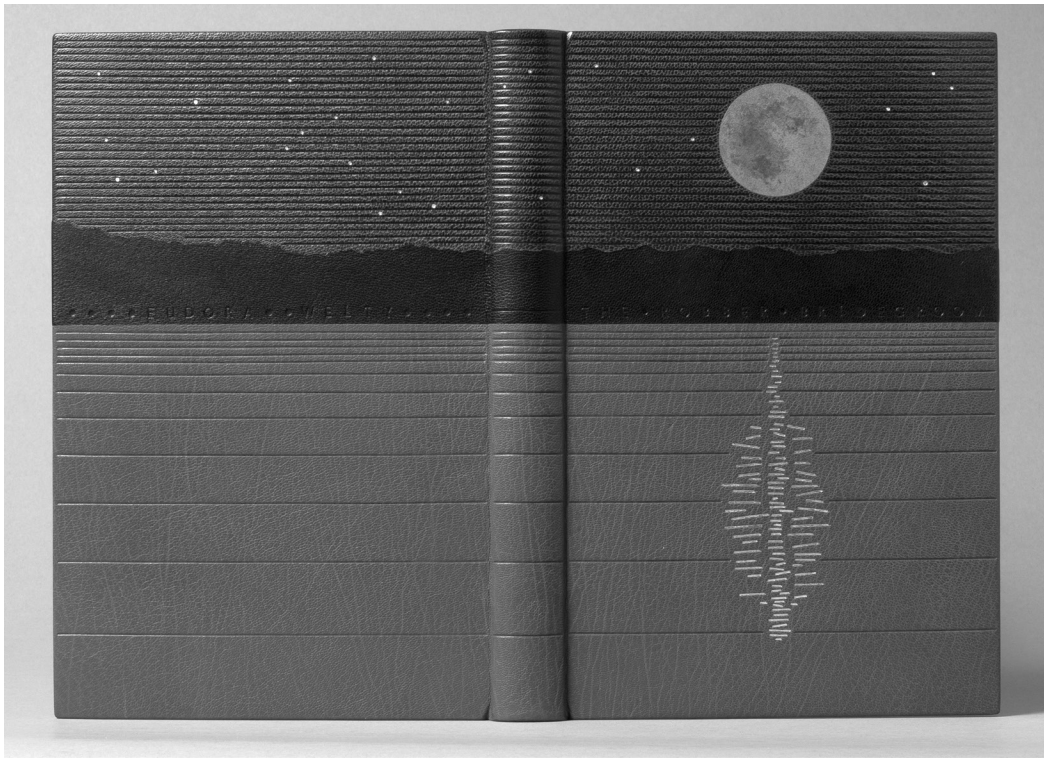
*De humani corporis fabrica*, Andreas Vesalius, Basil, 1555. Conservation treatment performed at the University of Iowa Libraries, 1985. Photo: Courtesy of the University of Iowa, Hardin Health Sciences Library, John Martin Rare Book Room. FOLIO QM21 .V4 1555



**Above:** *The Golden Age of Handbuilt Bicycles*, Jan Heine, Seattle, 2005. 300 x 240 x 25mm. Bound 2010. Full blue goatskin, laced board binding. Graphite edges, double core silk endbands, gold tooling, palladium tooling, red leather onlays. Green goatskin edge to edge doublures tooled in gold and palladium. Owned by binder.

**Below:** *Blind Date*, Thomas Meyer, illustrated by John Furnival, Circle Press, Guildford, 1979, Ron King. 310 x 315 x 41mm. Bound 2016. Full black goatskin, laced board binding. Sewn on meeting guards, double core silk endbands, blind tooled, with onlays in black, terra cotta and red. Terra cotta goatskin edge to edge doublures, and black suede flyleaves. Owned by private collector.





*The Robber Bridegroom*, Eudora Welty, Pennyroyal Press, West Hatfield, 1987, Barry Moser. 248 x 165 x 28mm. Bound 2019. Half dark blue, half gray goatskin, laced board binding. Graphite edges sprinkled with gold, double core silk endbands, blind and gold tooling, onlay of black leather and inlay of painted, orange goatskin. Black goatskin edge to edge doublures with blind tooling and black suede flyleaves. Owned by private collector.

In 2008, Mark decided to leave Boston College and begin a private practice in fine binding. He also took in conservation, but fine binding has dominated most of his time ever since. His bindings aren't always commissions but are done on speculation with the hope that he can sell them afterward. Unsurprisingly, he has been very successful at placing his bindings with collectors.

Despite the artistry of his binding, Mark has little training in art or design. He took a life drawing class at an adult education center in the 1970s, but he hated it. He was encouraged to let go, to be loose and creative, but he was more interested in the craft. He also took a class in drawing for bookbinders, taught by a botanical illustrator in Chicago. The striking visuals and fine detailing of botanical drawing have informed his work ever since. Mark expresses a certain uneasiness about thinking of his fine bindings as art:

I can say with certainty that creating a work of art is not the point when I embark on a fine binding. One goal driving each new binding is the renewed effort to come as close as I can to perfection in technique and execution. Another is to create an object that provides a rewarding aesthetic experience for the person viewing and handling it. I want it to feel good in the hand, and open reasonably well, and be readable. The

decoration should be engaging and compliment the text. My ultimate goal for a fine binding is to create a total object that will strike at least some people as beautiful. Practically, I find it best to not give much thought to how successful I've been and to just continue renewing the effort.

It is interesting to note the similarities between Mark's bindings and those of his favorite binders. His favorite binder is Michael Wilcox, who is both brilliant technically and in his design sense. He admires French binders such as Pierre Legrain, Henri Creuzevault, and Jean de Gonet. This is not surprising given the complexity of their designs and the exquisite execution of their bindings, which mirror his own bindings.

In addition to his fine bindings, Mark's greatest influence on the field was his years teaching bookbinding. I was fortunate to train with Mark at NBSS. Mark is a consummate craftsman, and it was a pleasure just to watch him work. Each day with Mark was a revelation. I'd often study how he stood at the bench during a specific process, or how he held a tool. I'd mimic his actions, trying to figure out why his bindings turned out so much better than mine.

Mark believes that the primary influences on his practice of bookbinding are Gary Frost's ideas on book structure and

Bill Anthony's emphasis on practical craft skills. There is a certain mystery about how it is that you learn a craft from a master. Teaching a craft isn't a matter of information transfer. The real lessons are often so subtle, they're almost invisible. At some point, you suddenly realize that you no longer need him correcting you, because you've internalized the voice of your teacher. Many binders hear Mark's voice in their head as they work.

#### **COMMENTS FROM FORMER STUDENTS**

##### **Nancy Lev-Alexander, Library of Congress:**

I studied with Mark at a point where I was making a radical change in career direction. I had everything to learn, and no bookbinder was more skilled, patient and dedicated than Mark to teach the history, materials and techniques of the craft. But thirty years later I turn time and again to the ethics I learned from Mark—how to treat books, tools and people—as I go about my work as a Conservation manager at the Library of Congress and in my private bookbinding. The lessons he displayed every day are lasting and timeless. Give every book the respect it deserves by making thoughtful choices about the structure and materials you select whether a beloved and worn family bible or a flashy new design binding. Inspire students to evaluate their work critically but encourage and remind them that skills take repeated practice to master and everyone makes mistakes. Learn to not be defensive but open to critique and the hard work it takes to correct an action. I routinely apply all of these lessons to my work as a bookbinder, supervisor, and colleague and owe him a debt of gratitude for this fine launch into the field. My favorite saying of his in the NBSS bindery was, “a little more work and a little less talking.” So many times I have wanted to say the same at the Library, but I know I won't pull it off with the same firm but kind tone that is the essence of Mark.

##### **Barbara Adams Hebard, Boston College**

I am proud to be a graduate of the NBSS Bookbinding Program and especially grateful to have been taught by Mark Esser. Mark had a gentle teaching style, although he also was adamant about maintaining high standards in the bookbinding craft. His anecdotes about his apprenticeship with Irish bookbinder, Bill Anthony, and his stories about fellow apprentices made us, his students, aware that we were a part of a continuing tradition of bench-trained bookbinders. It has been a great honor for me to have received Mark's training at NBSS and later, to follow in his footsteps working as the conservator in the John J Burns Library at Boston College. Barbara Adams Hebard BB'90

##### **Consuela (Chela) Metzger, UCLA**

I was lucky to be one of Mark's students at North Bennet Street School from 1991-1993. We had a collegial cohort that year. I remember lovely lunches with the class and Mark in

various North End cafés. But there is no doubt that his influence on me as a professional was deep and lasting, beyond what I learned from my classmates. When I came to be a book conservation and bookbinding instructor myself, I could do no better than his words the first day of class: “Every Book Is Different”. Embedded in that phrase is attention to the whole book. Embedded in that phrase is honor for the context of a book. What his instruction gave every day was the respect for every detail that goes into making books and intervening in the life of books made by others. When I graduated, I entered a library conservation world which idolized efficiencies. Mark taught me how batch work in binding and conservation can be done beautifully, and I do batch work when it makes sense. What I most hope to convey to those I work with is what Mark conveyed to me: honor, attention, respect for the individual books in our life.

##### **Mark Andersson, Panther Peak Bindery**

There are fewer than a handful bookbinders who excel in all five aspects of the profession: forwarding, finishing, design, conservation and teaching. Mark excels in all of them. The significance of this is that he sets an example with his work and then goes out of his way to help others do the best work they can. And he does it with grace and kindness.

I have lots of examples of this, but the most telling for me is when I was thrown into teaching at NBSS with very short notice. I asked Mark to come in for a few hours to help me sort things out. He came in for a whole day and refused any compensation and burned a vacation day. It helped me out, helped the students out and helped the school out. It wasn't the only time. When I wasn't sure what to do while teaching at the school, I only had to think about what Mark did and that gave me my answer. The fact that the program is still going strong is a testament to how perfectly he established the program and how he implemented it.

As a teacher he set the standard very high and then showed how to meet it. His mistakes, very, very few and far between, were better than the finest work done by the best of his students. He has a way of breaking down the work into digestible elements that took away the feeling that doing such work was beyond our ability.

Mark doesn't deserve this award because he's the best binder in the country, or because his conservation work is unparalleled, or even because he was the best teacher I've ever had. He deserves it because he is all of those things at once.

The Lifetime Achievement Award implies that it is an acknowledgement of the work done by someone in their career. Mark is at the top of any list in any category of any aspect of binding, conservation and teaching. But the award also, to my mind, should be about the contributions one has made to the field. And Mark is also at the very top of that list as well. While always being extremely kind and helpful.