

Review.

Practical Leather Conservation Course.

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Group photo of participants of the leather conservation course with Theo Sturge

In a small town called Wooburn Green a group of eleven people came together in the Wooburn Craft School from the 14th until the 17th of February 2023. Despite the fact that they spoke different languages, there was one thing that united them: their desire to learn about leather restoration. But before the leather workshop even started, there was a hurdle to overcome. Theo Sturge, the leather conservator and professor for that week had caught corona. But like leather, Mr. Sturge was strong, and together with the appropriate measures, and more importantly, his assistant Ernest Riall, who runs the Craft School, they made the week a success.

After a small introduction of the participants, the workshop started off with an assignment. The assignment was to iron leather that was completely wet. Little did we know, we were trapped. This method taught us the most important lesson of leather restoration, never use heat and water on leather at the same time. I will never forget. Each morning started with a cup of tea and a treat, followed by theory that would introduce the practical for that afternoon. The theory was accompanied by many case studies from Theo's working experience. Several subjects were covered; ranging from cleaning of leather, to preparing filling materials and filling leather, to retouching and dyeing leather. The group seemed to have a preference for gilt leather. Therefore, the course content was slightly shifted towards gilt leather restoration.

Next up in the workshop was to create our own gilt leather because, in order to understand gilt leather, it is important to understand the production process. Therefore, on the first day we applied silver leaf to a piece of leather. The

silvered leather was then manipulated by means of a mould. We had the choice to use a mould depicting a beautifully curved (and carved) dragon, or a bird designed by Mrs. Sturge. After the leather had dried, we applied a layer of varnish to give it its golden appearance. Theo also taught us how to identify different types of animal leather and the difficulty of this identification. The same day we made some preparations for filling materials. For instance, BEVA 371 was coloured with pigments and left to dry for the night. Also the subject of feathering the edges for leather patches was covered.



Daniëlle Stobbe applying varnish to silvered leather, photograph made by Julia Hartmann

During the following two days we performed several adhesive tests with different adhesives and different materials. We experienced their advantages and disadvantages for adhering to leather. The results from these tests were put to practice during the process of filling leather pieces with BEVA, Reemay (polyester non-woven), leather and other materials that were introduced during this workshop. The fillings were matched as close as possible to the original leather by means of creating relief, dyeing the leather and by retouching with dyes and acrylics.

All in all, personally I learned that leather is a peculiar material that is as much alive as it is dead. It requires knowledge for a proper restoration and in order to continue to live on. Many thanks for the blood (especially from the saddle stitch), sweat and fortunately only tears of happiness that were put into this workshop by the participants, and first and foremost, Theo Sturge and Ernest Riall.

And

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"Life's too short" could be the informal motto of the four-day Practical Leather Conservation Course with Theo Sturge, which took place from 14th to 17th of February 2023 in Wooburn Green, UK.

Theo Sturge, ACR-FIIC, has more than 40 years of experience in conservation-restoration. In the last 25 years he has specialized in leather conservation and now teaches internationally, running his own studio, the Sturge Conservation Studio, since 2000.

The housing institution of this course, the Wooburn Craft School Ltd (Ernest Riall), welcomed the participants (twelve



Julia Hartmann performing the saddle stitch, photograph made by Daniëlle Stobbe

conservators with diverse conservation backgrounds from five different countries) with open doors, tea, sandwiches and well-prepared working stations equipped for each person.

Not even a Covid-19 infection could stop Theo Sturge from passing on his knowledge about leather, leather-objects, gilt-leather and its risk factors, alterations and degradations - as well as damage phenomena and, of course, the professional approach to leather conservation.

The four-day-course was divided into sessions of theory and case-studies, followed by practical hands-on experience.

Each participant made their own piece of gilt-leather, step-by-step, and experienced the challenges behind this historic technique. Apart from developing an understanding of leather in general, its behavior and risk factors, the course clearly focused on the different degradation patterns of leather and their conservation. We learned how to address these from an ethical and professional perspective for preservation and exhibition purposes, as well as for objects that are still intended to be used after conservation.

Repair materials for structural conservation treatments as well as consolidants, glues and fillers, dyeing and retouching media, finishes and dressings, as well as the techniques for deformation treatment and surface-cleaning were discussed, tested and evaluated by each participant.

While the course was clearly based on the years of expertise of Theo Sturge, the diverse perspectives of conservators specialized in books, paper, furniture, textiles, gilt-leather, historic interiors, social history, paintings and

modern art also led to interesting discussions and additional ideas.

The course offered a professional platform to learn general approaches of leather conservation, but also time and a workspace for each participant to concentrate on topics and challenges that are of personal interest for their field of work. The knowledge that was developed and transferred during these four days was dense and intensive but also very hands-on and realistic. We learned about basics, recent research, Theo's life-long experiences and instructions, but also by working with each other, by making mistakes and by purposely testing the limits of leather. Common and historic tools, materials and techniques were presented, tested and discussed but also critically and scientifically evaluated.

With my background as a conservator for paintings and modern art, my focus was so far on the surface finishes of leather objects. Personally, I therefore appreciated the hands-on structural work with leather and the positive learning atmosphere of the group the most. The course definitely taught a proper understanding of leather as a material, its needs and challenges, in order to ask the right questions when choosing adapted conservation materials and treatments.

I had the feeling that Theo and his assistant Ernest were constantly at my side, demonstrating and giving constructive critiques whenever possible. Even with the full program, Theo still found time to demonstrate and teach one-to-one, especially when it came to basic leatherworking techniques like skiving with different skiving knives or basic saddle stitching.

I am therefore very grateful for the chance to experience Theo Sturge's Leather Conservation Course, and to benefit from his experience and teaching skills. I can wholeheartedly recommend his course to any professional conservator with an interest in leather and gilt-leather conservation.

Weblinks: <http://leatherconservation.co.uk/training.htm>
<https://thewoobumcraftschool.com/>