"Mother Hubbard" is part of the DAAP Library's new Paul Johnson collection. Photos courtesy of UC Preservation Lab.

By Dawn Fuller
513-556-1823

A one-of-a-kind work of art by a famous international artist received some serious special attention by the “book doctors” on campus at the University of Cincinnati. In this instance, the patient was Old Mother Hubbard, and what she really needed was a fancy new cupboard.

Down in the basement of UC’s Walter C. Langsam Library is a team of what you might call the book specialists – intently working in the Preservation Lab. Launched in 2012, the Preservation Lab is a partnership between UC Libraries and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. The lab is equally managed and staffed between the two institutions to provide conservation and preservation treatments to library holdings.

Their challenge on this project was creating a way to store and preserve a four-book collection by international book artist Paul Johnson, including a work commissioned by the Robert A. Deshon and Karl J. Schlachter Library.
for Design, Architecture, Art, and Planning (DAAP). It was one of Johnson’s famed Mother Hubbard stories that featured UC and Cincinnati in the storyline.

“Old Mother Hubbard went on a spree to Cincinnati,” begins the book. But the Preservation Lab staff members weren’t quite sure where to begin on creating a cupboard to protect Old Mother Hubbard.

They first decided to create a storage space to house the book in its open position. “When it’s closed, it kind of looks like a book,” says Veronica Sorcher, a conservation technician for the Public Library of Hamilton County. “It sort of looks like a big castle when it’s wide open, and its spine looks like a teapot handle. I kept thinking that the teapot handle was positioned in such a way that it could sag. We had to figure out a way to prop it up when it was standing upright.”

Creating a box for "Mother Hubbard."

Another challenge, says Sorcher, was that the artist uses vibrant, industrial dyes. “We didn’t want too much of the book to come in contact with the enclosure because we didn’t want the color to wear off – the book is so beautiful,” says Sorcher. The technician started the project with what’s called a tall, banker’s box. “It’s the type of box that would be used to store reams of paper,” says Sorcher. Using archival Etha Foam, she fitted the box with wedges and blocks to keep Mother Hubbard supported, standing upright and touching as little of the box as possible. A pullout tray allows students and artists to take the book out of the box without ever needing to touch it.

“Veronica had each of us open the box at different times,” says Holly Prochaska, head of the Preservation Lab. “She was trying to see if intuitively, we could open it. So, we were the test subjects in using the box.”

“Each of the technicians created a box to house books in the Johnson collection,” says Preservation Lab conservation technician Jessica Ebert. “They ranged from the very simple clamshell-type of corrugated box that was made for ‘Sailing to the Dance of Day,’ to Veronica’s very involved custom creation for Mother Hubbard,” says Ebert.

All of the Paul Johnson creations now housed in the DAAP Library are one-of-a-kind, handmade books: “Old Mother Hubbard in Cincinnati,” “Spirit House,” “Secret Garden” and “Sailing to the Dance of Day.” Jennifer
Krivickas, head of the DAAP Library, says the library is the only library in the world to have a collection of his works. His creations are also in the prestigious holdings of the Library of Congress, Yale University, Harvard University and the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County.

"Secret Garden," by Paul Johnson.

Johnson has traveled the world to promote literacy and education through the art of bookmaking and was featured at a workshop presented by the Cincinnati Book Arts Society in 2013.

Krivickas says nearly every discipline in DAAP requires that students make a book. “Not only does bookmaking fuel expression, but it also supports practice. There’s a lot to creating a book in terms of structure, binding and foundational supports in addition to art,” says Krivickas. “This collection is also a study not only because of the technique of paint and ink, but also inspiration and whimsy. These are beautiful works.”

Krivickas says the books are part of the special collection in the DAAP Library and will eventually go on exhibit.

Prochaska says the Preservation Lab is the country’s only joint preservation lab with shared duties and budget between a public library (Cincinnati and Hamilton County) and an academic library (UC). “Some research universities may have binderies for general repairs, but UC’s joint Preservation Lab serves three key functions: special collections treatment, general circulating repairs and commercial bindery,” says Prochaska. “Also, we work in other areas of preservation such as pest management, disaster recovery and environmental monitoring.”
Prochaska says the lab provides around 30 different kinds of repairs for general library collections, and there are about five student workers on staff who gain more challenging responsibilities as they grow their expertise in making repairs. Conservation technician Pat Schmude trains and supervises the student workers.

The Paul Johnson collection is just one example of the Preservation Lab’s work. Another unusual project included building a preservation box for a prosthetic ear that is in the collections of the Henry R. Winkler Center for the History of the Health Professions. Other projects involved preserving and displaying a 6-foot-10-inch by 13-foot linen map of 18th century London, and building storage around accessibility for 19th century, oversize bound editions of the Cincinnati Enquirer. Schmude recalls developing a box for one of the rare books stored in the UC Archives and Rare Books Library, a book about monograms that was in the shape of a spade.

“It was warped and a little out of shape, and we didn’t want it to rattle around in the box,” she says. “We added filler to the clamshell box to fit around the shape of the spade.”

The Preservation Lab staff also shares some ideas on keeping your home collection in shape.

“When you’re storing books on a shelf, hold it in the middle when you pull it out, and don’t dog-ear your pages because they’ll eventually break off,” says Schmude.

“If you want to keep a book forever, you should find an edition in hardcover,” says Prochaska. “And remember to store books in areas with stable temperature and humidity.”

And lastly, keep beloved books out of the reach of small, curious children and pets. “We’ve repaired things like a dog-chewed book cover,” says Schmude.

**Links:**

Rare Paul Johnson pop-up book collection gets special preservation treat... http://magazine.uc.edu/favorites/web-only/rare_books.html
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