

Craig Jensen

Recipient of The GBW Lifetime Achievement Award
2011

Craig W. Jensen first came to my attention in the fall of 1985, during a six-week road trip eastward from Santa Fe, New Mexico, with coworker Pamela Smith from the Palace Print Shop, Museum of New Mexico. Traveling over 6,000 miles, our quest was to visit other printing history exhibits and notable book workers.

All along our journey we heard rave reviews and saw examples of the fine edition binding work of Craig Jensen of Austin, Texas, particularly on letterpress editions published by W.

Thomas Taylor, also of Austin. In Vermont, esteemed printer Claire Van Vliet stressed that Craig Jensen's case binding skills set a fine example for us to study. When in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, Gabriel Rummonds, who had recently returned from Italy to set up the graduate book arts program at the University of Alabama, commended the quality of Jensen's fine leather, millimeter style binding of his own Plain Wrapper Press editions. It was a pleasure to hold a book bound by Craig Jensen. The binding looked effortless, elegant and fine tuned, almost untouched in its finesse.

I began to envision Craig Jensen working in a large, pristine bindery space. To our astonishment when we arrived in Austin, we found Craig Jensen and his bindery partner, Gary McLerran, at work in a small garage, no bigger than 250 square feet. The bindery was arranged for maximum efficiency as they worked on folio size boxes for an edition called *Of Birds and Texas*.

Like many Americans in the 1970s when the book arts experienced a revival, Craig Jensen "fell" into a bookbinding career starting in 1976 as a student at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. Jensen's intent pursuit of learning hand papermaking techniques, self-educating him self through written texts and by experimentation, impressed a library administrator at the university. Within a year, he was hired for a newly created position as library conservator for the Harold B. Lee Library at BYU. In turn, in 1977-78, Craig interned at The Library of Congress in book conservation under the keen direction of Don Etherington and Tom Albro. Though a natural problem solver with talented hand skills, Jensen's study opportunity at L.C. raised his standards to another level as a bench conservator and bookbinder. By 1981, he was recruited to Austin, Texas, by Don Etherington (after his move there) to become head book conservator at the new laboratories of the Conservation Department at the University of Texas, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center. Eventually, in 1984, Craig Jensen left the HRC conservation lab and established the Jensen Bindery, first for book conservation and boxmaking, then with a focus on limited edition bookbinding.

In less than three years since first seeing Craig Jensen work inside a small garage bindery, he had moved into a larger space in the same building where Tom Taylor's press and publishing venture was locat-



ed. A few more employees had been hired after partner Gary McLerran left for California. I was fortunate to join the Jensen Bindery staff in 1987 after completing a master program in fine binding at the HRC called *The First Institute of Fine Binding and Conservation*, the vision of Don Etherington and HRC Director Decherd Turner. By then, Jensen Bindery had been moved to an even larger commercial space in a business park in northeast Austin. Now, this was the kind of space I had visualized Craig Jensen in, on my book

arts trip of 1985!

At the onset of establishing his own workshop, Craig Jensen incorporated a refined, northern European style of case binding for his editions with elegantly thin boards, small squares and more defined and well-formed joints. There was no room for error within these parameters. When working with leather, Craig scored the area to trim off with a bonefolder, so that when the decorative paper was applied it looked like blind tooling. Case boards were back cornered and the leather spine turn-ins slightly pushed up during construction to leave just the right amount of leather to form an attractive headcap.

As the company grew, Craig Jensen had more administrative demands and put in long hours to meet deadlines, often barely meeting his employees' payroll. So when the owners of two library binderies from Massachusetts, Acme and the Bridgeport National, approached Jensen with a business venture, he was ready for the challenge. Their goal was to develop a preservation service company that fell between rare book conservation and library binding. Craig took on the partnership and BookLab, Inc. was established in April 1988, bringing Gary Frost from Chicago to develop the library preservation services. As BookLab, Inc., the bindery continued to specialize in edition binding and boxmaking, while it developed its preservation photocopy (to deal with the brittle book problem) and collection maintenance repair services to be offered to the library field.

In fine edition work, Craig Jensen's reputation grew for accepting and taking on the unusual. Work arrived from the Artists and Writers Series published by the Whitney Museum of American Art or the finest art editions of Vincent FitzGerald & Company of New York. With Gary Frost on the team, more demanding structural problems were overcome and complex editions accepted like the Ellesmere Chaucer facsimile edition of folio sized oak boards covered in tawed goatskin in a 15th century style binding.

BookLab, Inc. expanded from less than a half dozen employees to over thirty, with departments in library book repair, preservation photocopy, clamshell boxmaking, and edition bookbinding. The

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Jensen Bindery binding style evolved into a Book-Lab style, which included larger board squares and joint widths during the construction for speed when working with a larger crew; but never did it compromise the quality of structure or materials. Innovations such as the air compressor press allowed the bindery to produce what the Toronto Public Library described as “the largest clamshell boxes in North America”. Computer programs were formulated with cutting specifications for box work that made it possible to take numerous mixed batches of boxes for housing rare books from various library collections. Craig even designed special press boards made of thin Baltic Birch wood with extruded aluminum edges that were custom fit to the different thickness of binders’ board, making the pressing job faster by allowing more books to be pressed at once. The collection maintenance repair service was designed in a manner that allowed library administrators to budget and plan for the maintenance of their collections.

It may be surprising to realize that BookLab, Inc. existed only ten years before the partnership dissolved in 1998, but the work produced at both BookLab, Inc., and Jensen Bindery are a testimony of the vision and standards originally set by Craig Jensen in his small garage bindery. In 2002, Craig and wife Ann moved to the outskirts of San Marcos, Texas, where he returned to the concept of a small hand bindery, reestablishing the workshop with his original partner Gary McLerran. They called BookLab II.

Originally a native of southern California, born in 1951, Craig Jensen recently celebrated his 60th birthday, which may seem young for a recipient of a lifetime achievement award. The contributions of Jensen’s thirty-five year career in bookbinding has furthered the craft through his training of countless employees, while leaving a legacy of work for future generations to study. Even more exciting are current projects and editions being bound at the BookLab II bindery that mesh the Jensen master craftsmanship with some of the finest letterpress publications being produced in the United States today. Lastly, this award honors a fellow colleague, who would rather work behind the scenes than out in public; who, on first impression, may seem pensive and quiet, even shy; that is, until he is engaged by a certain technical question or if he is asked to show a book he has bound, then one has the surprise of discovering, with wit and humor, the utter passion Craig Jensen has for the finely printed and hand bound book.