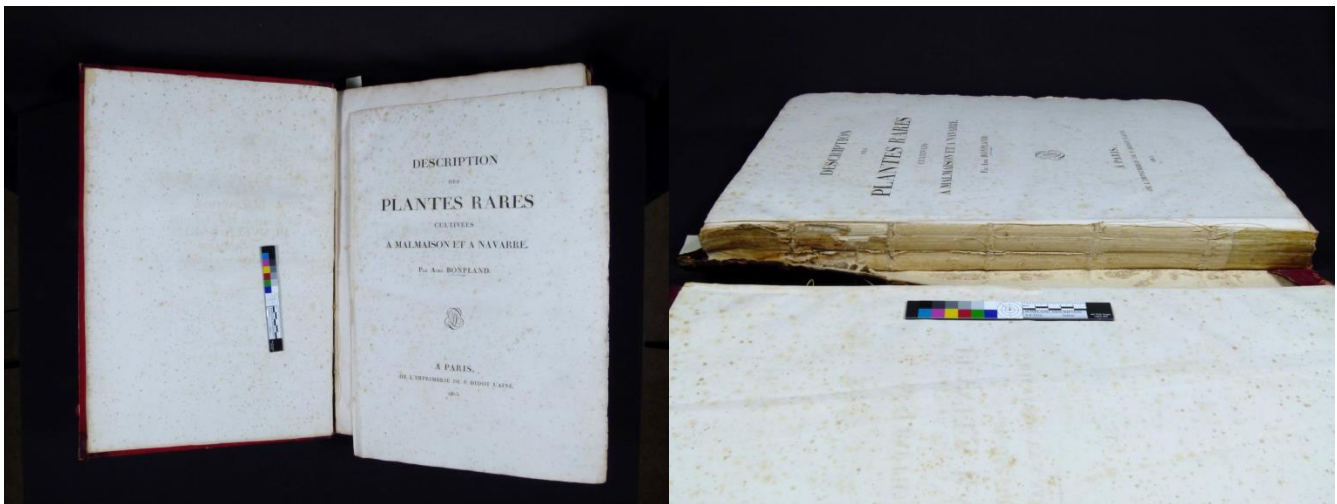


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## Big Book, Big Evil

The Peter H Raven Library of the Missouri Botanical Garden has many large, beautifully-illustrated botanical folios, most of which are in need of some kind of treatment. It was while treating one of these big books that the Library's book conservator, Susie Cobbledick, contrived a way to make their treatment more efficient, effective and safe.

The book in question was *Description des Plantes Rares Cultivées à Malmaison et à Navarre* by Aimé Bonpland with illustrations by Pierre Redouté, probably the premier botanical artist of his age. The book was issued in parts from 1812-17 and was 22 inches long.



This volume had numerous condition problems: The textblock had essentially split into two parts, the front hinges were broken and there were loose leaves, rips, losses and sooty deposits throughout. The book needed to be dry-cleaned, mended, re sewn, rounded, backed, relined and put back into its original boards.

The treatment proceeded in a routine manner, but the conservator paused when she came to the rounding/backing part of the process. Rounding was simple enough, but backing a book of this size was going to be difficult. For those who don't know, rounding and backing involves 1) forming the back of the textblock into a convex arch and then 2) forming shoulders by locking up the textblock in a job backer or backing irons and using a hammer to knock the back edges of the first and last sections into right angles to form a space for the boards.



The conservator hesitated to put the textblock into a job backer for fear of losing control of this large, flexible object and dropping it between the jaws of the tool unto the floor. She was also concerned that even if she managed to get the book into the job backer, she would have lost her carefully rounded back in the course of her struggles.

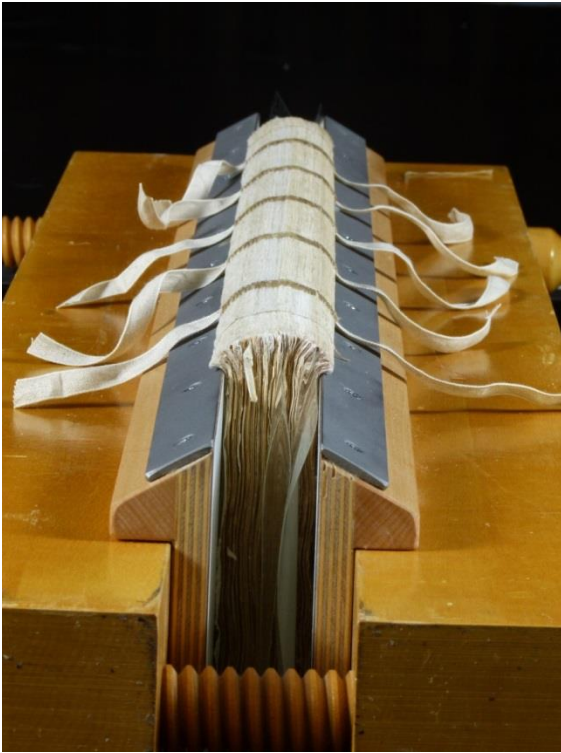
She considered using backing irons instead and hoped to find a way to secure the textblock in a pair of irons while it lay safe and horizontal on a table. The problem with this idea was that most backing irons are short and wedge-shaped; if she laid the textblock on top of one of them it would become distorted, and any distortion to the textblock would take the back out of round. Jim Poelstra at Affordable Binding Equipment makes backing irons with a different design. They are not wedge-shaped, but they wouldn't do because they were still too short to support the entire textblock and keep it straight. They may not have been quite what she needed, but Jim's backing irons gave the conservator an idea.



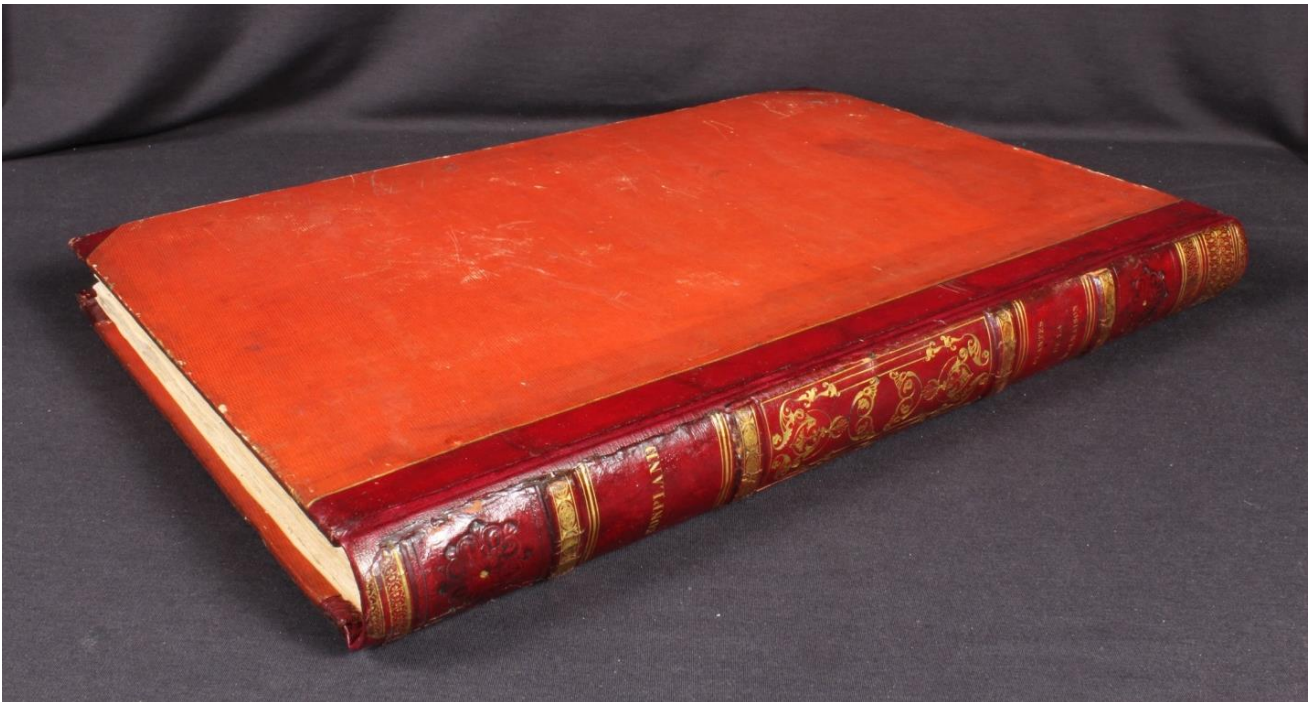
She got in touch with Jim and asked him to do a custom job for her: Make a set of backing irons using his usual design, but much larger and deeper—30” long and 18” deep. He agreed, and the backing irons arrived in the lab in due course. She was able to place one iron flat on a table and put the textblock on top, where it lay perfectly flat and supported from head to tail and back to fore edge. She then put the other iron on top of the textblock and was able to make any final adjustments to the rounded back before calling in two assistants to lock the entire package up in the largest laying press that the Library had.



At that point, the textblock was immobilized and could be moved without loss of the rounded back. The package of press/backing irons/textblock was then suspended vertically between two tables, and the conservator could proceed to back the book with a hammer and then line it. After drying, the textblock was removed by reversing the process and loosening the laying press while the irons and the textblock were safely horizontal on a table.



The project was finished by putting the textbock back into its original boards, adding a new leather spine and then placing the original spine on top.



Sources of Materials:

Affordable Binding Equipment

Jim Poelstra

<https://affordablebindingequipment.com/>