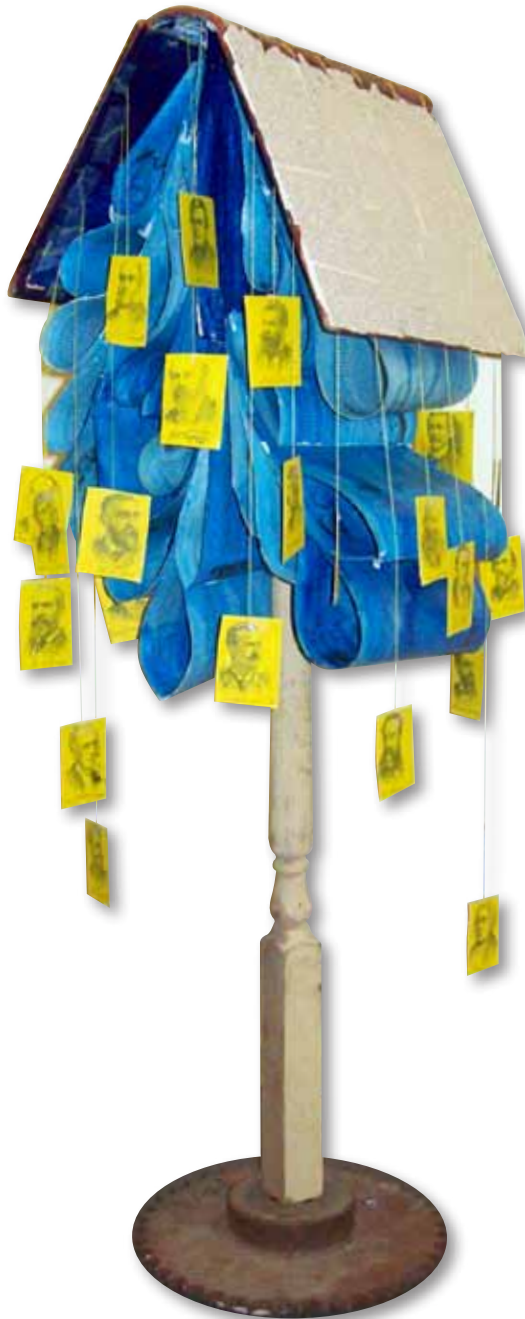


# Thinking Outside of the Book: Recycled Book Art at the Library

by Maryke Barber

A 1960s book on Gothic art has been painstakingly cut and spliced with images from Disney's and Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*. Shockingly bright in his black-and-white environment, the March Hare peers out from behind pointed arches, while a pensive blue Caterpillar lounges among the crowds at Golgotha. Next to this, a beat-up hardback copy of Steven King's *The Stand* has been transformed into a tome bound in stitched skin, scarred and bleeding, with a milky eye embedded in the cover. The next book is an old encyclopedia volume, whose pages have been folded and sprayed with adhesive to keep them open and stiff: across the fanned-out paper, the artist has stenciled a message: "PRINT IS DEAD."

People love to make art out of books. Once you give them permission, their first hesitation to damage a hallowed library book disappears as the pleasure of the creative impulse takes over. The result can be anything—abstract art, collage, jewelry, or poetry. Book art offers the inspiration of text and the simultaneous challenge to transcend it. A mass-produced item is reclaimed by the artist and returned to its origin as a unique and personal creation. When it is finished, it provides enjoyment for others who love books. The book art fascinates library patrons, who are able to see the objects they have been consuming in a different light.



*Untitled by Shannon Bryant: encyclopedia volume, paint, thread, turned post, machine part.*

The recycled book art contest at the Wyndham Robertson Library at Hollins University has three categories: Sculpture, Two-dimensional, and Creative Writing. Each of these categories has inspired a broad range of entries. The Library has twice hosted the contest. The first time was in 2009, on earth day, which conveniently fell during a week-long celebration of the library's tenth birthday. The "Eco-biblio-laborations" book art contest fit nicely into a slate of activities designed to appeal to different groups from the university community. Advertised especially heavily to both the studio art department and the eco-conscious, it drew enthusiastic participants from both groups. Entries could be made on-site. The library made space, books, and art supplies available for several hours, after which judges made their decisions and the prizes were awarded. Participants could also submit entries made ahead of time.

The contest was repeated in 2011, when several university departments decided to participate in a city-wide "Marginal Arts" festival. The event was re-christened "Making Art Out of the Margins," and this time the majority of participants came from a visiting high

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*Maryke Barber is the Arts and Outreach Librarian at Wyndham Robertson Library at Hollins University. She can be reached at (540)362-6328 or mbarber@hollins.edu.*

*Untitled by Amanda Dibben: meticulously cutting to reveal some words and scratching to obscure others creates what is known as "blackout poetry."*



*Flesh Book by Brittany Hays*

school group and a mixed-media class offered by the art department at Hollins. The professor teaching mixed media incorporated the contest into her syllabus as an assignment, ensuring that there were some very creative and accomplished entries.

A program featuring recycled book art fosters creativity while encouraging dialogue about environmental responsibility. It should be treated as a publicity opportunity before, during, and after the event. To get the word out about the contest, the arts librarian solicited assistance and advertising opportunities from the university's art faculty, and the outreach librarian posted signs throughout the library and created flyers, email announcements, and newsletter articles. After the contest, the recycled book art was displayed in the library for several weeks, and a series of photos was put on the library's Facebook page. Both displays resulted in considerable patron traffic and positive comments.

Along with participants, a successful art contest needs three things: materials, judges, and

prizes. Books ripe for recycling, with low to no resale value, were drawn from the library's steady stream of discards. The staff member who designed the program was an experienced book binder and artist; she brought in her own supplies and tools and worked with studio art faculty to borrow more. Those same faculty members were invited to judge, while prizes were solicited from local businesses.

A few things should be kept in mind when planning a similar program. Consider inviting someone experienced with book art, collage, or mixed media work to attend your event, to bring ideas and examples, and help less experienced artists with their pieces. Make sure your staff is prepared to answer any patron concerns about destroying books, as there will always be people who are made profoundly nervous when they see someone attacking a book with a box cutter—even when that book is already falling apart, or it's an index of an obsolete CD-Rom collection. It helps to select recyclable books early, because some participants will want to start working on

their pieces long before the actual contest day. Finally, consider soliciting prizes from businesses whose owners may have an interest in this topic: The Wyndham Robertson Library had the most luck with booksellers and art supply stores.

Libraries and book artists are natural partners: for further inspiration, check out some of the stunning collections of artist's books at institutions such as Virginia Commonwealth University (<http://www.library.vcu.edu/jbc/speccoll/bookart.html>), Florida Atlantic University (<http://www.library.fau.edu/depts/spc/JaffeCenter/collection/index.php>) and the University of Wisconsin (<http://uwdc.library.wisc.edu/collections/artistsbks>). Recycled book art takes this relationship one step further, offering discarded items for a "re-think" and a second life as a work of art. You'll be surprised what people come up with when you invite them to think outside of the book!

View photographs of the 2011 contest entries on our Facebook page: <http://tinyurl.com/9sknzhm>. 