

An Ancient Art Lives on at GPO: Today's Bookbinders Carry on a Long-Standing and Beloved Agency Function

"It's like you know them through their work, even though you never met them," says GPO Head Forwarder Joshua Crotty of the GPO craftsmen who came before him. "We know who the Head Forwarder was before me and who did it before him. The work of somebody who was in my shoes decades ago is often the example I'm working from. I get to see into the mind of the craftsperson who came before me and be a part of a continuum."

Crotty points out a frame that hangs over the marbling station on the third floor of GPO. In the frame are different marbling patterns, each one with its own unique combination of bright, swirling colors. It was done by Head Forwarder Steve Rye at GPO in the 1980s. Crotty and GPO Bookbinder Sarah Hurtt say they tape up their own marbling patterns directly beside each of Rye's patterns to demonstrate that they are able to match exactly what he did all those years ago.

Matching marbling patterns of the past is an important part of what Crotty and Hurtt do. They are often asked to recreate designs so that routine publications such as the Jefferson Manual look consistent from year to year. But their jobs offer opportunities for plenty of creativity as well.

On any given day, Crotty and Hurtt are hand-crafting special editions of publications, boxes, display stands, and more for GPO's

Federal agency customers, Congress, and the White House. The custom products they create include details like leather binding, marbled edges, and gold stamping and are presented to some of our Nation's most prominent figures, including Senators, Representatives, Agency Directors, and the President of the United States.

Crotty and Hurtt are currently working on a job of 200 books for the National Science Foundation's 70th anniversary. The publications are primarily being worked on by hand. Few other binderies around the world could pull off a project of this volume.

The origins of marbling are not exactly known. However, it is believed that Japanese aristocrats practiced a similar technique to enhance the look of calligraphy and haiku as early as the 12th century. In the 1600s, wealthy European travelers could purchase marbled paper from Turkey and Persia. Throughout history, marbling has had its share of practical purposes as well. In the past, it was used as a security measure in accountant's ledger books. If a page had been ripped out of the books, the missing part of the pattern gave away the transgression. In addition, the harsh chemicals of paint were used to kill off any pests that could potentially ruin publications. Today, GPO uses marbling for decorative purposes, giving Federal publications a statelier look.



Bookbinder Sarah Hurtt and Head Forwarder Joshua Crotty marble edges of Science the Endless Frontier for the National Science Foundation's 70th Anniversary.



GPO Bookbinders use all sorts of patterns and colors when marbling notepads, which are a favorite takeaway for customers and other GPO guests touring the agency.

Though marbling is an ancient art, Crotty and Hurtt have done quite a bit to make the process more efficient. Some of the changes they've made since joining GPO in 2015 (Crotty and Hurtt started at GPO on the exact same day) include marbling with a different type of paint than their predecessors did and adjusting the paint to water ratio. These improvements have made for more vibrant and consistent colors in

GPO's marbling. They've also invested in new combs so it's easier to match past patterns, as well as provide consistent patterns from book to book.

Hurtt and Crotty say these advances have come as a result of Hurtt's dedication to troubleshooting and experimenting with her craft and Crotty's self-described "incessant nit-picking."

"When I mess up, I take it personally," says Crotty. "You have to have an internal ability to identify with the

books as a career, rather than producing them, which might prove as a challenge to GPO in the future.

Crotty, who attended North Bennett Street School, America's very first trade school, has worked as a Bookbinder the majority of his adult life. He says every place he's worked prior to GPO is now non-existent.

Hurtt, who attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for her undergraduate degree and the University of Wisconsin, Madison for a masters in fine arts, has also seen shifts in the industry. Prior to working at GPO, she taught bookbinding-related art, including box making, Japanese binding, and printmaking at the Corcoran School of Arts & Design in the school's Art of the Book Graduate Program. The program has since been disbanded.

And though they both humbly note that there are people all over the world who marble as a hobby or marble professionally for a

small shop, it's undeniable that their talents are rare—nobody is crafting decorative publications on the scale that Crotty and Hurtt do. These two literally have a hand in creating some of our Nation's most important publications that will be around for years to come.

"There is a sense of pride in knowing the products I make are going to be archived and preserved long after I'm gone," says Crotty.

Thanks to them, this agency tradition is still going strong.

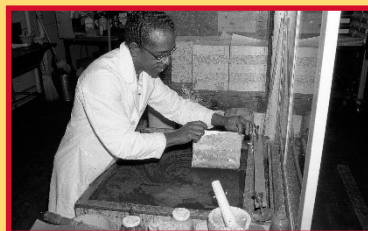
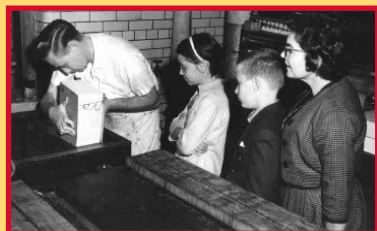
How Is Marbling Done?

Once books are sewn and trimmed with smooth edges, the publications of our Nation are ready to take a marbling bath! This bath is made of a mixture of water and Carrageenan, a natural ingredient that comes from Irish seaweed. The mixture sits overnight to thicken. Bookbinders either splash colors on the surface of the bath to create a stone pattern or precisely drop colors to create a combed pattern. The paints used are thinned acrylic paint. They use tools like combs, rakes, and pins to draw patterns in the bath, adding more tools as they go to build upon the pattern and make it more intricate. Next, starting with the top or bottom corners, they gently kiss the surface of the book to the bath. Let it dry and voila, a book has come to life with the magic of marbling!



Head Forwarder Joshua Crotty (above) points to an old frame made by a Head Forwarder in the 1980s. Today, he and Bookbinder Sarah Hurtt can match the patterns made decades ago.

Roll Call visits GPO to interview Head Forwarder Joshua Crotty and Bookbinder Sarah Hurtt on their marbling work for the agency.



Bookbinding at GPO: A Historic Timeline

1914–1918

GPO began marbling paper as a wartime expedient during World War I.

1939

A bindery apprentice marbles the edge of a large volume.

1939

Members of the class of 1940 Apprentice School at work finishing fine leather bindings.

1960s

A GPO Bookbinder demonstrates edge marbling, where a decorative pattern is applied to the edges of a bound book.

1979

A Bookbinder works to marble edges of publications.

1990s

Bookbinder Edmond Davidson gives a marbling demonstration.

1991–1993

A Bookbinder works on a book for the 102nd Congress.

2003

GPO Bookbinder Peter James greets President George W. Bush during the presentation of the first volume of the President's Public Papers in the oval office.

2016

Joshua Crotty gives a marbling demo for employees of the Library of Congress.

2018

Sarah Hurtt and Joshua Crotty show kids how marbling works at the 2018 USA Science and Engineering Festival in Washington DC.

2020

Bookbinder Sarah Hurtt dips a National Science Foundation publication in the marbling bath with an Italian vein pattern, a pattern most often used for high volume projects.