



American Academy of Bookbinding

**FINE BINDING PROGRAM**

Diploma Program Guidelines

December 2024

*The American Academy of Bookbinding  
is an internationally known degree-oriented bookbinding and book conservation school that offers book enthusiasts of  
all levels the opportunity to initiate and improve their skills in a generous and supportive learning environment.*

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# AMERICAN ACADEMY OF BOOKBINDING

Founded in Telluride, Colorado, in 1993 by Tini Miura, Einen Miura, and Daniel Tucker, the American Academy of Bookbinding is an internationally known diploma-oriented bookbinding school where students of all levels have the opportunity to initiate and improve their skills in a generous and supportive learning environment. A program of the Ah Haa School for the Arts, the American Academy of Bookbinding conducts intensive courses in the art of fine leather binding, book repair, paper conservation, book history, and other related subjects. Our goal is to provide a superior bookbinding education and to award professional-level diplomas to those students who develop the knowledge and skills to produce the highest quality of work.

The American Academy of Bookbinding is unique in the United States in its ability to offer a flexible low-residency diploma program in bookbinding, taught by some of the most experienced and highly regarded bookbinders and conservators in the world. Students can progress through the diploma program at a pace that works best for their circumstances, attending classes as often as their busy lives allow. The training that students receive at the American Academy of Bookbinding will provide them with a level of skill and understanding that ensures quality and confidence in their work, whether they are already established professionals or are just getting started in the field.

This document will outline the requirements for a Diploma in Fine Binding.

# OVERVIEW

In the Fine Binding Program, students will learn to produce unique design bindings. At all levels of the program, emphasis is placed on excellent hand skills, design choice, and overall quality of work. Each candidate will be introduced to the following techniques:

## *Bookbinding techniques:*

- sewing
- edge decoration
- weaving headbands
- board shaping
- leather work
- titling & tooling
- Doublures
- Inlay & onlay

## *Design techniques:*

- innovative design
- relationship between design and book
- execution of design

## *Protective box making techniques:*

- clamshell box and other protective enclosures

The program consists of coursework and independent study to immerse students in the practice of fine leather binding. Each course consists of intensive one- to two-week in-class study, followed by specific homework assignments encouraging students to develop their skills independently. Students are required to take a minimum of fourteen courses at AAB, and to complete ten projects in class and ten projects at home to fulfill the homework requirements.

Core courses are required for all students pursuing the diploma. Electives, which vary from year to year, allow students to pursue a wide range of interests and skills.

## COURSEWORK AND HOMEWORK

Coursework for the Fine Binding Program is structured in three progressive levels, plus elective courses (See [sample transcript](#) for reference). These levels are meant to reflect the increasing growth and specialization of courses as students progress, and provide a “road map” for completing the diploma. During these courses, ten in-class book projects for the diploma.

Students who are new to bookbinding will begin with Introduction to Bookbinding Levels 1 and 2. These courses are meant to prepare students for the Fundamentals courses by introducing bookbinding tools, materials, and basic structures.

Students with bookbinding experience will have the opportunity to submit photos of their work to ensure placement in courses that will be sufficiently challenging, but not daunting.

While it is recommended that students take Level I courses before moving on to Level II and so on, “detours” are available, and students will have the opportunity to choose which courses to take, and in what order, in consultation with their faculty mentor and the Managing Director.

Ten homework bindings with enclosures are also required to complete the diploma. These projects are reviewed by a faculty mentor. See “Homework Review & Requirements” below for more detailed information.

# INTRODUCTION TO BOOKBINDING

**Note:** *These courses are not required for the diploma, but are necessary for students who have no prior bookbinding experience to prepare for the Level I Fundamentals courses.*

## INTRODUCTION TO BOOKBINDING 1

*1 week*

**Description:** If you are new to bookbinding, this class is for you! This one-week class is an introduction to the fundamental building blocks of bookmaking. Each student gains an understanding of paper and paper grain, tearing and folding, cutting, gathering, and sewing. Best practices, posture, and essential aspects of materials are covered. The class begins with a simple Pamphlet Binding, expanding into Double-section Bindings and casework, and ending with various multi-signature Flatback Case Binding constructions. The foundational considerations of design, tools, and materials are taught in this introductory course. Tools and materials common to bookbinding are covered, with many opportunities to explore the variety of results they offer. The last part of the class discusses essential tools for a home studio in order for students to practice and explore the bookbinding skills they have developed.

**Prerequisites:** None

## INTRODUCTION TO BOOKBINDING 2

*1 week*

**Description:** This course is for students who have taken Introduction to Bookbinding I or for those who have some prior experience with paper, multi-section sewing, and case binding. In this one-week class, students are introduced to the process of bookblock preparation, the principles of a rounded spine, basic top-edge coloring, hand-tied endbands, and basic leather

work. The resulting structure is a modified Millimeter Binding. Students will take a textblock from a book-in-sheets to a finished binding. Beginning with principles of design and harmony of materials, students will work from forwarding through leather paring with both paring knives and the Shärfix machine. The course also includes a discussion of best practices with tools and materials for the home studio.

**Prerequisites:** Introduction to Bookbinding Level 1 or experience with multi-signature sewing and case binding.

## LEVEL ONE COURSES

### FUNDAMENTALS OF TRADITIONAL LEATHER BINDING

*2 weeks*

**Description:** This core course is a foundation for the Fine Binding and Comprehensive Binding programs. This course introduces students to half-leather bindings, a standard of the 19th-century trade shop. These bindings feature leather on the spine and corners, with a cloth or decorative paper on the remaining area of the cover boards of the book. The books are sewn on raised cords, laced in, and endbanded. In this class, students can try different tools and techniques for paring, including English and Swiss knives, spokeshaves, and the Schärfix. A particular emphasis is placed on paring leather and sharpening paring knives, along with proper forwarding techniques. The finished product is a visually exciting book with a full-leather binding strength, still popular today. Students will complete at least one half-leather binding in this course.

**Prerequisites:** Introduction to Bookbinding Level 2 or experience with multi-signature sewing and case binding; some experience working with leather preferred.



**Diploma Homework:** Optional; none required for the Fine Binding Diploma.

## FUNDAMENTALS OF FINE LEATHER BINDING

*2 weeks*

**Description:** This core course is a foundation for the Fine Binding and Comprehensive Binding programs. Over two weeks, students will complete at least one full-leather book using traditional bookbinding techniques interpreted for the 21st century. Students will become familiar with hand sewing using a sewing frame, rounding and backing, preparing top edges for decoration, weaving headbands, leather paring, chamfering, and applying leather to their books. At all stages of the class, students will be exposed to design options (some minor, some major) that directly inform the look and feel of the finished binding. They will also be introduced to simple decorative techniques such as raised and recessed boards and freehand tooling.

The class will focus on learning and reinforcing sound leather bookbinding practices, particularly forwarding. Students will leave prepared to continue their studies in the diploma program and in other elective and design courses at the Academy.

**Prerequisites:** Introduction to Bookbinding Level 2 or experience with multi-signature sewing and case binding; some experience working with leather preferred.

**Diploma Homework:** Throughout their diploma process, FBP students will complete a total of 10 fine leather bindings.

# LEVEL TWO COURSES

## FUNDAMENTALS OF FINE LEATHER BINDING

*2 weeks*

**Description:** The Fundamentals of Fine Leather Binding course is designed to be taken multiple times throughout a student's time in the Fine Binding Program. Intermediate students, who are taking Fundamentals of Fine Leather for a second or third time, will have more opportunities to hone their skills through independent study and practice.

## BOX MAKING

*1 Week*

**Description:** Protective and decorative boxes are a bindery staple for fine binding and book conservation. During this course, students will make a variety of preservation enclosures. Students will learn the qualities of materials used for presentation and preservation of books and papers. Measuring and making appropriate sized enclosures will be discussed and practiced. Enclosures covered will include the clamshell box, phase boxes (including clear spines), self closing wrapper, corrugated clamshell box, and insets for small items.

**Prerequisites:** Introduction to Bookbinding Level 1 or familiarity with board cutting and working with cloth and adhesives.

**Homework:** Boxmaking does not have its own homework project, but boxes or enclosures are required for all homework books submitted for review. See "Submitting Homework Books" below for more information.

## DESIGN TECHNIQUE: INLAY & ONLAY

*1 week*

**Description:** Inlays and onlays are fundamental techniques for design bindings, and high-quality execution can take a binding from interesting to exceptional. The techniques learned in the class open real possibilities for creative work in contemporary decoration on leather bindings. Students will focus on several techniques and skills, including inlay, onlay, incision, relief, and juxtaposition. Each student will prepare and work on a leather-covered plaque, following premade design patterns. Students will begin with simple skills and exercises, which will lead to more complicated inlay designs as the week progresses. Using various materials such as metal, stone, leather, and objects, students will learn new approaches to inlays. The methods taught are easily accessible to everyone and will lead to precision, finesse, and improved work quality. Students will come away from this class with a technical understanding of different skills and techniques to stimulate individual creativity and help execute design ideas.

**Prerequisites:** Fundamentals of Fine Leather Binding or Fundamentals of Traditional Leather Binding, or adequate experience paring leather.

**Homework:** None required.

## DESIGN TECHNIQUE: TOOLING

*1 week*

**Description:** This class will introduce students to fundamental techniques and practices that will enable them to successfully transform drawn designs on paper to sparkling gold designs on leather. Students will learn to prepare drawings, cut and handle gold leaf, and do blind and gold tooling. While work

in class will be on designs with straight lines, the techniques learned will be applicable to designs with curved lines as well.

**Prerequisites:** No tooling experience is necessary to enroll in this class, though some experience with leather bookbinding is desirable.

**Homework:** None required.

## LEVEL THREE COURSES

### INTERMEDIATE/ADVANCED FINE LEATHER BINDING

*2 weeks*

Description: This class is designed to help students with varying experience levels in fine binding refine and review their techniques, develop more advanced and sophisticated ones, and even invent new techniques. Emphasis will also be placed on creative binding design and design execution. We will discuss big concepts regarding design choice, book content, and personal aesthetic; and smaller questions, such as, given your aesthetic and intention, is your design solution effective? How can it be more effective?

Some advanced techniques that may be explored are elaborate woven headbands, edge gilding, gold, blind and painted tooling, inlays, and onlays of leather or other materials.

Advanced students may work independently on their projects, with close monitoring and guidance from the instructor. Intermediate students will receive a bit more direction. All students will have an opportunity to explore various design concepts and decorative techniques, depending on their experience and expertise.

Students are encouraged to use this class as an extensive fine-tuning of their forwarding techniques or to concentrate on a few or even one specific advanced technique, provided the student has already taken a course in that technique.

Please note that this class is not a substitute for other classes offered or required by AAB. It is meant to help students further develop and explore skills already introduced to them.

**Prerequisites:** At least one Fundamentals of Fine Leather Binding or experience in leather paring. This course may be repeated as needed or desired.

**Homework:** Throughout their diploma process, FBP students will complete a total of 10 fine leather bindings.

## DESIGN TECHNIQUE: TITLING

*1 week*

**Description:** This course will outline the simple yet precise techniques necessary to achieve elegant gold titling. Students will be exposed to two titling methods: loose brass type arranged in a hand-held type holder (composer) and handle letters (individual brass letters mounted in wood handles). This class will build a strong practical foundation in titling through personal guided instruction, including body form mechanics, tool heat and pressure, blind tooling, the handling of gold leaf, and titling in gold. Significant emphasis will also be placed on learning to make adjustments and correct errors that will inevitably occur. Once this foundation is built, the rest is practice.

**Prerequisites:** No tooling experience is necessary to enroll in this class, though some experience with leather bookbinding is desirable.

**Homework:** None required.

## DESIGN COURSE

*1 week*

**Description:** Creative, innovative design is an integral part of the Fine Binding Program. While design concepts are integrated into binding courses, students are required to take a one-week course with design as a primary focus.

AAB offers a variety of design-focused courses for diploma students. These courses include (but aren't limited to):

- Content/Concept/Object, a design-focused course co-taught by Don Glaister and Suzanne Moore;
- What's Next, a course that helps students incorporate their knowledge of decorative techniques to create interesting, skillful designs.
- Binding design courses and master classes taught by visiting instructors

Prerequisites: Varies

Homework: Varies

## MINIATURES

*2 Weeks*

**Description:** Miniature bindings are delightful, fun, and challenging for the binder. Students will produce a book in full-leather with leather joints and end bands. There will be an opportunity to explore a variety of decorative techniques. Design for miniatures requires visual and structural adjustments to create an object that appears to be a scaled-down version of a full-size book. While this course produces a miniature book, the thought process, and hand skills required are valuable additions to a binder's repertoire.

**Prerequisites:** Introduction to Bookbinding Level 2 or experience with multi-signature sewing and case binding; some experience working with leather preferred.

Note for Diploma Students: This course can be used to fulfill one of your required binding courses.

## ADDITIONAL BINDING COURSES

Certain “Master Classes” in bookbinding at the Academy can meet one of the binding course requirements for diploma students. These courses are taught by visiting instructors and are generally appropriate for more advanced students.

These courses include miniatures (described above), box calf, contemporary fine binding in parchment, and others. Since these courses vary from year to year, see individual course descriptions or contact the Managing Director with questions about how they apply toward the diploma.

## ELECTIVES

### *1-2 Weeks*

Electives give students the opportunity to choose courses that interest them specifically. We recommend that students take two electives from the Comprehensive Binding Program and one from the Fine Binding program, but this can be discussed with the faculty mentor. The goal is to enhance training in areas that interest and excite students. While three different electives are required, students are encouraged to take as many as their resources allow. If a student wishes to take the same elective twice, the second time will not count on the transcript as an elective.

Options for elective courses change annually. Common offerings

include: Edge decoration, production tooling, paper and book conservation and repair, alternative book structures, miniature bindings, design courses, paper decoration, and others.



# THE DIPLOMA PROCESS

## DECLARING THE DIPLOMA

Beginning in 2025, students who wish to pursue a diploma, and who have completed both Fundamentals of Full Leather and Fundamentals of Half Leather, will fill out a [Diploma Declaration Form](#). Students who have declared their diploma emphasis will be considered active diploma students for as long as they remain in AAB, and will be entitled to the benefits provided for diploma students as long as they are current with their diploma fee.

## DIPLOMA PROGRAM BENEFITS

Completing the Diploma Declaration entitles students to the following:

**Ongoing communication and support from a faculty mentor:** As students complete their homework books, they are encouraged to ask for suggestions and guidance from faculty mentors.

**An annual meeting with the Program Director and Managing Director:** Whether the student is able to attend class in a given year or not, a meeting will be scheduled to discuss their progress and make a plan for future diploma completion.

**Priority registration:** Diploma students are given priority class placement during the initial registration period each year (one month after registration opens)

**Access to monthly Diploma Student meetings:** One hour meetings with useful presenters, program updates, and opportunities for questions and answers from faculty.

## DIPLOMA FEE

In order to fairly compensate our faculty, and to help cover the administrative costs of maintaining student communication and files, AAB is implementing an annual diploma fee of \$100.

## DURING THE DIPLOMA

### Course Consultations

To assist a diploma student in understanding his or her skills, a review with the instructor is held at the end of each graded course. During this review, the student's work receives a numerical grade from 1 – 5, with 5 being excellent (See Appendix for sample FBP grading sheet). The instructor bases a student's grade on the understanding of technique, quality of the work, ability to handle the materials, and skill development.

During this review, a student's strengths and areas needing improvement are discussed. Homework assignments and areas of focus related to this course are determined during this discussion.

These consultations are also an opportunity to review the student's transcript and to ensure that a plan for graduation is in place.

### Annual Consultation

Once a year, diploma students meet with their faculty advisor and the Managing Director. At this meeting, students will look over their work with their mentor, plan homework and courses for the following year, and review their transcripts. If the student attends a class, this meeting will take place during the

Course Consultation, described above. If the student does not attend courses, or attends courses that aren't graded, the consultation will be held virtually.

## HOMEWORK REVIEW & REQUIREMENTS

PROTECTIVE ENCLOSURE REQUIREMENT: Students are strongly encouraged to submit **all** homework books in clamshell boxes, but we recognize that students who haven't yet taken the boxmaking course may not have them in their repertoire. Students in Fundamentals courses will be taught a simple protective enclosure which will suffice until they learn to make a clamshell box.

At least five homework books **must** be submitted in clamshell boxes. These boxes will only be graded if the student has taken (or tested out of) boxmaking.

Homework can be reviewed at any time throughout the year. Students can bring their homework to courses for grading and review.

Students can also ship their work to their instructor for review. Students should arrange a shipping time with their instructors beforehand, so instructors know to look out for them. Students are responsible for the cost of shipping. When shipping to your instructor, make sure to provide them with a paid return label, either printed or by email.

## COMPLETING THE DIPLOMA: FINAL YEAR

### Final Review & Faculty Support

After required course work is completed, the Program Director and student will meet to discuss the student's readiness to be a Candidate for the Diploma.

They will review the student's file, including prior grades and homework. This meeting occurs approximately a year in advance of the student's expected graduation date. During this meeting, the Director determines if the candidate is satisfactorily producing independent bindings, or if more work is required.

A student will only be approved as a candidate for the Diploma when they demonstrate a level of skill and proficiency that will ensure success before the jury. If the student needs more homework or before beginning their Diploma Project, this practice will be planned during the meeting.

If it is determined that the candidate is ready to begin work on their final year Diploma Project, the project is discussed, and approximate dates for the jury process are proposed. This enables the candidate as well as the Director and staff of the Academy to prepare for this process. The candidate will have approximately one year to produce their Diploma Project (see below under "Diploma Bindings" and "Artist Statement" for details). The Project will be evaluated by an independent jury.

The schedule for the diploma project jurying varies slightly from year to year based on the dates of the GBW Standards of Excellence Conference. These dates will be determined at the student's final review meeting, or as soon as possible after the dates for Standards are announced.

During their final year, diploma students will have monthly meetings with the Program Director, to review their progress, answer questions, and provide support.

Students are required to pay a diploma fee, determined annually, to cover the cost of monthly faculty meetings and shipping books to the jury.

## **Diploma Bindings**

The candidate for Diploma must produce at least two leather bindings with protective enclosures. Candidates are encouraged to begin with 4-5 bindings, and to select 2-3 for submission to the jury. Though three may be submitted to the jury, only two are necessary to complete the diploma. The third binding is a supplementary option to demonstrate a particular skill not seen in the other two bindings. Though this third binding is not judged as part of the diploma project, it may be offered as further demonstration of the candidate's skill and understanding.

These bindings will be realized entirely independently, with spoken consultation provided during monthly contacts with the mentor. The Diploma Project books are meant to showcase both the candidate's creativity and technical skill at fine leather design bindings. They should exhibit inventive design and demonstrate the candidate's skill in the use of decorative techniques such as gold and blind tooling, onlays, inlays, and edge decoration, as well as less traditional decorative techniques. These techniques are options for design, and students aren't required to use them all.

The books should be submitted for review in clamshell boxes, which should be titled. A single page explanation of the title, materials and techniques used in the binding should also accompany each book.

## **Artist's Statement**

The candidate should also write an artist statement about the design. This 1500-2500 word statement is an opportunity for the candidate to discuss themselves and their work, and to reflect on the process, design,

and materials used in the creation of their bindings. These should be serious explorations into your process, your thinking about your process, why your books look like they do relative to the texts (if they do), how craft plays a part in your design (if it does) etc. Photographic or graphic illustrations may be useful and are encouraged. You may want to concentrate on one of your books in this exploration, but try to relate it to your work in general and by extension to your other book(s). The parameters of the statement are deliberately broad, as students are encouraged to create a unique, introspective, personal account of their work and experience as artists.

Both the diploma bindings and the artist's statement should reflect the knowledge and skills that the candidate acquired from the Academy's instruction and independent study.

## **Submitting the Diploma Project**

The candidate is strongly encouraged to send his/her finished Diploma Project and Artist Statement to the Program Director at least 8 weeks prior to jurying, for review and suggestions for improvement (if necessary).

If the Director has reviewed all of the candidate's materials and determined them to be of high quality and complete, the work is shipped to AAB. If the Director believes further work is necessary, the work is shipped back to the student in time to complete the recommended work, before the books are due to the jury.

## **Jurying Process**

The FBP Director selects a panel of three or four qualified evaluators to serve as an independent jury. Jury members are prominent in the field of bookbinding, and are not necessarily associated with AAB. Members of the jury will receive the student's completed Diploma Project by mail,

will complete evaluations of the work, and will either confirm their recommendation of the candidate for graduation or decline, and recommend further work. The Program Director is not a juror, but is available to the jurors to answer questions.

If a majority of jurors recommend the candidate for graduation, then a diploma will be issued.

## **Awarding the Diploma**

The candidate is informed of the jury's decision immediately after the final juror has completed their evaluation. Candidates will receive their projects back in the mail, and will also be given access to the evaluations written by each juror.

The diploma will be awarded to the student at the Guild of Bookworkers Standards of Excellence conference. AAB is very proud of our graduates and we celebrate in style! If the graduate is unable to attend the Standards conference, the diploma will be mailed, and the student celebrated at a subsequent conference if they're able to attend.

## **ADDITIONAL INFORMATION**

### Leave of Absence: Returning to AAB

**For students whose most recent class was after 2016:** The diploma guidelines that were in place when the student began taking classes at AAB will be used to determine the student's requirements. Questions about individual courses can be discussed with the Program Director and Managing Director.

**For students whose most recent class was prior to 2016:** Guidelines have changed since the program began in 1993. All courses that a student has taken at AAB count toward the diploma and will continue to do so, but these courses will be applied toward the current diploma requirements, revised in 2024. All prior lists of requirements will be considered null.

Individual students who want to return and complete their diploma will meet with the Program Director and Managing Director to review their coursework and homework and create a plan of completion.

As with all diploma students, the Program Director must approve a student's request to begin their diploma year. Upon approval, the diploma year begins and the fee is paid.

At least 5 of a returning student's homework books must have been completed recently within the last 5 years in order to be approved as diploma work.

## Independent Study Outside of AAB

Students in the diploma program are encouraged to learn as much as they can, in as many places as possible. Independent study with AAB faculty or other teachers can broaden a student's skill set and help students create a network of support.

Independent study does not replace in-class work, and all students pursuing the diploma are required to take a minimum of 19 course weeks in Telluride. If a student studies a required skill—tooling, for example—and wishes to test out of that course, they are welcome to submit work for review, but will need to take another elective in place of the required course.



# APPENDIX: HELPFUL DOCUMENTS

[FBP transcript sample](#)

FBP grading sheet

[Diploma Declaration Form](#)

Juror evaluation form