

Sanctum Sapientiae Sed Spolia (or Treasury of Knowledge) foregrounds the unstable boundary between the precious and the discarded, the erudite and the incorrect, the inherited and the improvised. Is this library a hoard of value or an accumulation of remnants? New or old? Both conditions coexist within this miniature treasury, which was constructed entirely without the purchase of new materials. Like the treasuries and reliquaries that inspired it, the work is an act of aggregation and remixing: a careful reassembly of objects retained over time for their perceived potential, affective resonance, or quiet beauty.

The materials that compose the library—reclaimed, reused, and repurposed—are embedded with personal and collective histories. Some are precious because of their intimate origins, others because of their form or function. Many have traveled alongside the artist from Texas to Pennsylvania to New Jersey, accruing geography as well as time. Non-metallic book bindings and a ceiling roundel were sourced from reclaimed book plates, echoing long traditions of fragment reuse within the history of the book. The red velvet lining, once an upholstery off cut from Pittsburgh, now exists in an altered afterlife, a box cushion unknowingly entwined with the intellectual architecture of this tiny library. Such transformations foreground the interlinked and fragmentary object histories that quietly surround us.

Other materials carry equally layered pasts. Gold fabric paint left over from custom shoes created for the artist's doctoral graduation finds new purpose here, as does terrarium glass left over from a pair of reliquary earrings made as a gift. Rhinestones and costume jewelry elements were gathered from the remnants of friends' crafts and from pieces of broken jewelry accumulated over years. A shell, formerly part of a necklace, now stands in for a Mayan "book," recalling objects held in the Princeton University Library's Special Collections. A chain decorating the lowest shelf's bindings likewise once functioned as personal adornment before reenacting historical bibliographic circumstance.

The reuse of discarded books aligns this work with past practices of parchment reuse within early modern bindings, where older texts were often hidden within newer ones. Illumination comes from candlelight (the dominant non-solar light source of the premodern world) rendered here as both invitation and threat. The light allows access to information while simultaneously endangering it, a paradox echoed in the computer-chipped-chair of the clever-animal-reader. Perhaps fragility, even more than novelty, has most endangered our precious, materialized knowledge.

Artist: Sarah Reiff Conell, PhD

Material: Found Multimedia

(acrylic paint, rubber cement, fabric paint, fabric glue, sharpie, ballpoint pen, nail polish, fabric scraps, rhinestones, glass paint, aluminum foil, cast tin, paper, coffee grounds, toothpicks, colored pencil, charcoal, hot glue, super glue, discarded books, twist ties, costume jewelry pieces, beads, ribbon, shell, wire, pieces of grandmother's broken silverware box, reclaimed I-shaped shelf pins, magnets, super glue, led tea-lights, wool roving, computer chip, plastic fern, paint stir stick, thumbtacks, and old headband)

Trained as an art historian and working in research data, Sarah Reiff Conell operates at the intersection of history and technology. While professionally engaged with digital tools and information systems, her work remains grounded in the materiality of objects and the histories they encode. She is drawn to the ways humans assign value through making, use, and care—preserving beliefs, labor, and lived experience in physical form. Her artistic practice is shaped by reuse and transformation, and by gift-giving as a quiet resistance to conventional economies of value.