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ARTIFACT, CRAFT, AND MEMORY

Recordness in Handmade Paper

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The reader of books formed with handmade papers engages with a record that offers evidence of ecology, practice, maker, and craft. The persistence of handmade paper, and of books formed by handmade papers, in an increasingly digital production environment is evidence of the continued valuation of these material narratives, and of paper itself as a text. This paper offers an artifactual discussion of handmade paper (within the context of functional books), placing emphasis on explicating its material narratives, evidential significance, and lastly, its function as a particular communicative form. An argument can be made that the continued presence of handmade paper, as craft, process, and object, is informed by an assignment of value to its material narratives, and the information and evidential elements that these express. Read archivally, these works are also valued for the material, craft, maker contexts that they can evoke.

Keywords: *artifactual; craft; handmade paper; material narratives; reading*



Handmade paper is often used in the formation of artist and fine press books. This form of paper is adopted because of the unique properties of its materials and the quality of the resulting sheets.

Particular expressions of paper, in terms of fiber and process, may be selected based on their aesthetic and sensory qualities.¹ Book artists that create their own paper as part of their creative practice may select fibers, and create particular forms of paper,

as a means of offering a specific experience or presentation affect.² While handmade paper, like machine made paper, captures and carries the inked impressions that mark a book copy's pages, its role and value extends beyond this architectural function. The character of the paper will inform how the page is perceived, how the printed material is displayed, and the physical sensation of navigating the book.

In these works, textual characteristics extend beyond the printed texts that they contain.³ The papers contain additional tangible and intangible texts. Narratives of fiber, process, infrastructure, knowledge, and the identity of the papermaker, are also present.⁴ These particular materials, evidential, and contextual texts coexist with the more immediately visible printed texts that rest on the paper. While hidden, they can be read.⁵ Focusing on these elements can assist us in considering definitions of evidence, information, and textuality.

It is difficult to discuss handmade paper generally. Each sheet, and its associated pages, will be informed by a unique combination fiber materials, pulp formation processes, craft practices, and particular craft of the papermaker.⁶ Sheets of paper that are seemingly similar, created by the same papermaker, composed of the same fibers, and formed by the same papermaking process, will be distinct. Each sheet is linked to a specific context; papermaking is an event. The geography or source of the fiber material, the environmental conditions on the day that the paper

was made, the specific tools used, and the expertise of the papermaker, will contribute to this variation.⁷ In contemporary books, handmade paper can be thought of in terms of its utilitarian purpose, but can also be appreciated in reference to these narrative elements. Associated with these texts is a memorial function. Handmade paper can read as a record. This is a record of geography, craft, individual expression of craft, and of process and practice. Handmade paper communicates texts that also operate as records.

This discussion offers an introduction to these textual and artifactual narratives. Here, emphasis is placed on drawing attention to how the material characteristics of handmade paper operate as inscriptions, which coexist with a book's printed text. These inscriptions provide access to an artifactual history. This history includes material composition, process, and the identity, skill, knowledge, and intentions of the papermaker. When perceived and read, these markings become texts, communicating narratives of an artifact, its associated craft practices, and the memory of its making.

Reading Handmade Paper

How can handmade paper be read? In books, the printed texts that appear on handmade paper are often the primary focus of reading. However, handmade paper contains multiple material narratives, which can also be purposely read. These narratives

are informed by the diversity of materials, tools, and practices that define this craft.⁸ The types of fibers, primarily plant material, used will affect the appearance and texture of paper.⁹ The particular practice, and its associated tools and processes, will also reveal itself. Papers created using Japanese (Washi), Korean (Hanji), and Western methods will exhibit distinct characteristics and communicate specific paper narratives.¹⁰ Similarly, as craft, the specific expression of the papermaker's practice, and of each sheet as an individual generative act, will also be reflected.¹¹

Reading these inscriptions requires varying degrees of expertise. Differences in fiber and practice can be appreciated by even the most novice reader of handmade paper.¹² An individual familiar with hand papermaking practices will be able to identify the particular fiber material, forming process, and paper expression.¹³ Contextual narratives may be less visible. The identity of the papermaker, and possibly the paper mill, is more difficult to read. This narrative will likely not be readily known unless specific paper evidence is available [a watermark, for example], or if secondary documentary evidence exists, such as a description of the paper in a book's colophon. Though specific identities might be unknown, characteristics and traits can be inferred. The expertise, knowledge, and skill of the papermaker can be observed.¹⁴

'Handmade paper provides for a sensory reading experience.'

Handmade paper is read visually and tactilely. Difference in texture and color can be read visually, allowing the reader to make inferences regarding the type of paper, its source materials, and processes of its generation. Texture can also be read through touch, with different forms and expressions of paper offering distinct sensory experiences. Knowledge of the fibers, processes, and craft can be acquired through observation and direct physical experience. Handmade paper provides for a sensory reading experience.

Textuality of Handmade Paper

Reflecting on how handmade paper can be read is helpful in identifying and understanding its textual characteristics.¹⁵ A carrier of texts [printed inscriptions], handmade paper consists of additional, less explicit, texts. These can be categorized as: material, infrastructural, process, and craft. These correlate to the primary elements of handmade paper. *Material* texts include the fibers that form the papers, their originating plants, and the context of their collection and processing. *Infrastructural* texts refer to the tools of papermaking. The presence of each sheet of paper is evidence of the tools that supported its creation; evidence of this context can be identified and read. *Process* texts correlate to the physical actions that support papermaking [gathering,

cooking, beating, agitating, pulling, couching, drying].¹⁶ And lastly, *Craft* texts refer to the specific practice of a papermaker evidenced in paper. This includes the associated knowledge, skill, intentions, goals, and creative practice that informed the work. This categorizing provides a method for considering the narratives of paper, and how they might be identified and read.

These four elements will express themselves uniquely in each book made up of handmade paper. Sheets made at the same point in time, from the same pulp, and by the same papermaker(s), will each be unique artifacts. Each sheet is the result a specific series of creative, physical, and environmental acts, which will be present in the books that they form. When handmade paper is read, it is through the perception and analysis of these material, infrastructural, process, and craft texts, and their unique textual characteristics.

Varieties of Inscription

How are these texts constructed? What is the nature of their associated inscription mechanisms? Handmade paper often exists first, as an idea.¹⁷ Concern with how it will be used, and the desired physical characteristics inform fiber selection, the processing of fibers, the creation of the pulp used in the forming the sheets, and the technique deployed in making the paper. If handmade paper is being purchased by an author, printer, or publisher, similar considerations of use and affect may

information a selection decision.¹⁸

Following the processing of the fiber material to create the pulp, sheets are formed through physical action. In Western style papermaking, paper is formed through dipping a mould and deckle into the vat containing the agitated paper pulp. As the water drains from the mould, the papermaker joins the fibers with a quick shake of the mould. Following this process, the paper is moved from the mould to a dry felt. The paper will then be pressed and dried.¹⁹ All of these actions, from the consideration of a paper's substance, to the physical acts of papermaking, mark the sheet, determining its final form.²⁰

Hand papermaking can be framed as a writing process that generates narratives. The paper pulp is the raw writing material of the sheets. Hand papermakers have experimented (and continue to experiment) with fiber materials, and cooking and crafting procedures to create paper with particular physical characteristics.²¹ Process also marks the page. In reference to form, the characteristics of paper will be influenced by tools used in the process [Western and Japanese style papermaking, for example, require different tools]. At an artefactual level, papers will reflect the specific tools used in their formation. A skilled reader of handmade paper can engage with this narrative, and by focusing on how evidence of process is captured, imagine and visualize the tools that contributed to a paper's creation. A papermaker's identity is similarly inscribed.²² As noted, specific

biographical information is difficult to determine, unless supported by documentary evidence, or if already known to the reader. However, papers will reflect the knowledge and skill of papermaker, craft is inscribed in the paper, and can be appreciated and read.²³

Handmade Paper as Archive and Record

A discussion of hand paper-making, writing, and inscription draws attention to the contexts of creation that papers reflect. Their existence is the result of fiber materials, infrastructure, craftspeople, and their knowledge. Handmade papers are uniquely linked to their material contexts. If made from natural fibers, they are tied to specific plants and their geographies.

Each sheet is also specifically linked to physical production infrastructures. Evidence of paper mills, vats, beaters, moulds, deckles, paper presses, felts, and drying stations find their way into the paper. This is a record of intellectual, creative, and physical actions.²⁴ The identification of materials, the formation of pulp, the pulling of sheets, and their pressing and drying are all elements of a sheet's context, waiting to be discovered.²⁵ Their specific identities might be hidden, but evidence of the labor and creativity is visible.²⁶

'The intentions and goals of the papermaker, though hidden, are reflected in a paper's composition and how it is used.'

Handmade paper expresses recordness. Along with printed texts, and material and production texts, handmade papers carry the contexts of their creation and can be read as records. Geography, infrastructure, intention, process, and identity are present in each sheet. Fibers have a geographic and ecological origin. Papers are contextually fixed to specific tools and making sites. Handmade papers also offer an intellectual record. The intentions and goals of the papermaker, though hidden, are reflected in a paper's composition and how it is used. Much of this information is subtle, and is inaccessible without the aid of paper evidence, or secondary objects that contextualize these values, intentions, material origins, and biography. However, even when precisely indeterminable this recordness is present.

Handmade papers are records of experimentation, method, and craft.²⁷

Conclusion: Materiality, Narrative, and Communicative Power

Handmade paper is a site for reflecting on the plurality of texts, traditional and non-traditional, that are presented in traditional books. In books composed of handmade paper, linguistic texts

are joined by material texts, which if framed as such, offer material, geographic, and craft information. Handmade paper offers a unique set of material narratives, which possess particular communicative capabilities. While as a structure, handmade paper contributes to the delivery of evidence and information, handmade paper used in books also communicates these material narratives. Handmade paper is a site for engaging with material histories, acts as a record of process, and presents evidence of skill and expertise.

In this paper, my objective was to offer an introduction to the textual characteristics of handmade paper, and its capacity to record and communicate material, artifactual, and craft narratives. Considering these characteristics and functions supports an understanding of the role of handmade papers in contemporary books, and more broadly, how these works can be evaluated and read. Handmade paper presents opportunities for multiple readings, if they are engaged.



¹ E. Adnan, 'The Unfolding of an Artist's Book', *Discourse*, 20:1/2 (1998), p. 20.

² S. Dawson & S. Turner, *A Hand Papermaker's Sourcebook* (New York: Design Books, 1995), p. 5.

³ M. Lorenté, *The Art of Papermaking with Plants* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), pp. 16-17.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

⁵ T. Barrett, 'Listening to Paper', *Hand Papermaking*, 32:2 (Winter 2017), p. 6.

⁶ Comprehensive overviews, and illustrations of this complexity, can be found in Helen Hiebert's *Papermaking with Garden Plants and Garden Weeds* (North Adams, Massachusetts: Storey Publishing, 2006) and Hiebert's *The Papermaker's Companion: The Ultimate Guide to Making and Using Handmade Paper* (North Adams, Massachusetts: Storey Publishing, 2000).

⁷ M. Tasillo, 'For Beginners: More Couching and Drying', *Hand Papermaking Newsletter* 96 (October 2011), p. 10.

⁸ Hiebert, *Companion*, pp. 91-114.

⁹ Hiebert, *Garden*, pp. 66-81.

¹⁰ Timothy Barrett's *Japanese Papermaking: Traditions, Tools, and Techniques* (Warren, Connecticut: Floating World Editions, 2005) provides a comprehensive examination of Japanese papermaking history, methods, and practice. Aimee Lee's *Hanji Unfurled: One Journey into Korean Papermaking* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The Legacy Press, 2012) provides a comprehensive examination of Korean papermaking practice. Both offer autoethnographic accounts of their experiences in papermaking.

¹¹ Barrett, *Papermaking*, pp. 7-8.

¹² Hiebert, *Garden*, pp. 6-9.

¹³ Papermaking recipe books offer a good introduction, and visual illustration, of the distinct expressions of handmade paper. See Hiebert, *Garden*, pp. 64-97. and Lorenté, *Papermaking*, pp. 41-147.

¹⁴ Hiebert, *Garden*, p. 62.

- ¹⁵ D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 12-13.
- ¹⁶ Hiebert, *Papermaking*, pp. 22-61.
- ¹⁷ Hiebert, *Ibidem*, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ Adnan, *Unfolding*, p. 20.
- ¹⁹ Hiebert, *Companion*, pp. 91-115.
- ²⁰ Dawson & Turner, *Sourcebook*, p. 8.
- ²¹ M. Tasillo, "For Beginners: Selecting Source Fibers", *Hand Papermaking Newsletter* 97 (January 2012), pp. 8-10.
- ²² The bibliographer, Allan H. Stevenson, offers early comment on issue of identify, evidence, and papermaking in reference to early printed books. See: A. Stevenson, *Observations on Paper as Evidence* (Lawrence, Kansas: The University of Kansas Libraries, 1961), pp. 12-16; 24-26.
- ²³ Barrett, *Listening*, pp. 6, 9.
- ²⁴ Lorenté, *Papermaking*, p. 154.
- ²⁵ Barrett, *Listening*, pp. 8-9.
- ²⁶ Barrett, *Papermaking*, pp. 69-70.
- ²⁷ Hiebert, *Papermaking*, p. 23.