

PAPER SAMPLES

Our lives with paper: an autobiography
told through handmade paper samples

by Peter Thomas

Peter and Donna Thomas, Santa Cruz: 2022

FOREWORD

In 2018, John Hoover of the Mercantile Library at the University of Saint Louis asked if he could buy a portfolio with examples of our handmade paper, and could we write a bit of text to describe each sheet. We didn't commit to the project, but kept it in the back of our minds. In 2020, while searching through our shop for samples of overruns and ephemera to include in our book "Evidence: Overruns and Ephemera," we came across a large box with multiple examples of our earliest handmade papers.

There were no notes in the box, nothing to indicate when the sheets were made, and we started to reconstruct the chronology of our papermaking as a way to date them. Mid-way through the chronology we realized we were starting work on the portfolio John had requested. There was enough of our paper to make six sets of samples, so we committed to making an edition of six, each with 45 different examples of paper we made between 1975 and 2000. Each sample is placed in a folder, along with a printed description of how the paper was made or the technical improvements that were required to make it.



1985, Papermaking family, Tanya, Peter, Donna and Suzanne Thomas

INTRODUCTION

Donna and I are part of a long lineage of American artists who work on paper, but as artists who make and use their own handmade paper in their artwork, we are unique. Our quest to learn how to make paper by hand, and subsequently, how to make really good paper by hand, is documented in the written descriptions of the paper samples included in this book. When I pulled my first sheet of paper in 1974, before the Internet and easy access to procedures and techniques, it was very difficult to find instructions for how to make paper by hand, so our quest for information was not unique: it was an odyssey that was independently pursued by many of our peers and mentors. Since the late 1800s, fine press printers and artist-printmakers have used handmade paper both for practical reasons, like superior fold and tear strength, and for its aesthetic beauty. Until the mid-1970s, handmade paper was still commonly available in Europe, where hand paper mills continued to operate, but in the USA the mills had all closed by the first part of the 20th century. It was the lack of locally produced handmade paper as much as any other factor that stimulated the hand papermaking renaissance that took place in the USA during 1960-70s.

Paper was first made in Western Europe in the early 1100s. John Tate is credited to have set up the first paper mill in England in 1588. English settlers arrived on the North American continent in the early 1600s, but paper was not made in the American colonies until 1690 when the first paper mill was set up by William Rittenhouse in Pennsylvania. Over the next 150 years more than 500 hand paper mills were established in the United States. The first papermaking machine was installed in 1817, in a hand paper mill belonging to Thomas Gilpin. It was not long before Gilpin estimated that his one machine could make as much paper as six of his papermaking teams at their vats could make, and by the mid-1830s most hand paper mills had been forced out of business. The Ivy Mill, in Pennsylvania, which first began making paper in 1792, was the last to close, ceasing production

in 1866. Between 1866 and 1881 no paper was made by hand in the USA. In 1881 the L. L. Brown Paper Company in Massachusetts started making handmade paper and continued until 1906.

Before the Industrial Revolution it was practically impossible for an average person to privately own a printing press or paper mill. By the late 1800s equipment costs dropped, and surplus equipment became available, allowing artistically inclined individuals to set up their own “private presses” to make special editions of books. Most of these printers used handmade paper. The first documented instance of an individual who was not trained as papermaker through the apprentice system, making enough paper to print a book was in 1915, when Dard Hunter of Marlborough-on-Hudson, New York, produced his limited edition of William Bradley’s *The Etching of Figures*.

As news of Dard Hunter’s accomplishment spread, others were captured by the allure of making their own paper by hand. Some artists and printers, already using handmade paper in their work, were attracted to the craft in order to make their own paper, something different than what was commercially available. Others were paper merchants curious to discover how paper is made. But, because of limited information and the lack of small scale equipment or pre-processed pulp, the number of people who actually made paper by hand in the USA between 1907 and the 1960s was limited to just a few individuals: the most influential were Dard Hunter, Dard Hunter Jr., Harrison Elliot, Henry Morris and Douglass Morse Howell. Others included Arthur Laws, Golda Lewis, James Weygand and Roy James Yarnell. In 1930 Hunter Sr. made an unsuccessful attempt to set up a commercial hand paper mill in Lime Rock, Connecticut, using equipment and papermakers from England. They began operation in 1930 but the Great Depression struck before much paper was made. The mill went bankrupt in 1933.

The history of hand papermaking in the United States can be roughly divided into two eras: before and after 1907. From 1690 through 1907 all handmade paper was produced commercially using traditional hand papermaking tools, by craftspeople trained as hand papermakers through the master/apprentice relationship. After 1907, handmade paper was produced by individual artists and craftspeople who worked on a small scale, and primarily made the paper for their own use. Although Elliot, Hunter

PAPER SAMPLES

1. 1974, MARCH One-sixth of the first piece of paper made by Peter Thomas, La Cañada, CA. Newsprint pulp. Erector set metal frame “mould,” nylon stocking screen, diamond shape, 7 x 16 inches.

So how did I get interested in papermaking and the book arts? It's not a *straight forward story*, but life is that way. In high school I was on the pre-collegiate track, which did not allow much time for art classes. But I was interested in writing fairy tales, having long hair, and wearing funny clothes. Perhaps these interests were what lead me to the Renaissance Pleasure Faire, where as a modern Don Quixote I found my destiny. I first visited the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Agoura, California with my parents when I was in high school. I loved the whole thing, the costumes, pageantry and fantastic structures that created an imaginary Elizabethan market village, and I wanted to be a part of it. I gathered together some friends who did art work in high school, and applied for a crafts booth, but was not accepted, which was probably smart on the part of the Faire. When I went to college in Santa Cruz, Jeff Gluckson lived on the same hall. I found he was an actor at the Faire, in a group called Cock and Feathers. The northern Faire was going on at the same time school was, and many of his actor friends stopped by, and slept on the couches in our dorm. As I hung out with them I thought to myself, if they can be actors, so can I.

At the time I was in a pre-punk band in Santa Cruz called “The Silver Chalice.” One of the members, Gaza Gideon, had grown up in Los Angeles and had worked at the Faire. His girlfriend had been a belly dancer. I got everyone in the band to agree to apply, saying Gaza would introduce us to the belly dance troop. We came up with the idea of doing a human puppet show, wrote a script, took photos, applied and were accepted. Our music was all spontaneous, so we figured our acting should be the same, and we never practiced the show. We were scheduled for two shows a day. The first on the Drury Creek stage at 10:30, with an afternoon show on

the main stage. One of our band members refused to go to LA, so I found a friend to help out. The performance was terrible and everything fell apart in the middle of it. No one except me showed up for the show on main stage. The Faire's organizer, Ron Patterson, kindly said that since I had good costumes and a tolerable fake English accent I could stay on as an actor.

That led to two fun filled years as a "volunteer actor" and with a couple of thousand other people, I played a part in recreating an Elizabethan market village. What does this have to do with papermaking and the book arts? For me it was the beginning. Actors slept on hay bales and craftspeople had booths. I wanted a better place to sleep so I needed a craft. The Faire, to maintain their status as a non-profit "living history center," needed to have historically appropriate activities. Steve Marisch, the coordinator for actors, was also in charge of activities. He said that since I had a good costume and spoke with a good fake old English affectation, if I could come up with an activity, I could have a booth. The only thing resembling an Elizabethan craft I could do was write fairy tales, so I applied for a booth where I would write and print a fairy tale with four beginnings, four middles and four endings, and teach the visitors how to bind it into a book. Steve liked the idea, my proposal was accepted, so I had to figure out how to make a book.

I went to the library, to the 600 section, to find some books on bookbinding and found a book titled *Creative Bookbinding* by Pauline Johnson. I followed the instructions well, really looked at the pictures and made some wild guesses about what to do, and came up with a sloppy single signature case binding. It actually looked like a book, and was something I could teach others how to do. I showed it to Steve and he said, "It looks like a book to me, you are in." I realized I needed to read the bookbinding manual more carefully, so returned to the library, but it was checked out. Of course, I got distracted and found myself reading a book titled, *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* by Dard Hunter. I flipped it open and when I read that the first papermill in England was built in 1492, I thought to myself that papermaking would be even better than bookbinding as a craft at the Faire. But since I had already committed to bookbinding I thought, "I'll just learn both... I can teach people how to make paper too." I don't remember reading the book very carefully, and

that probably explains why I “reinvented” the process of papermaking in such a historically inaccurate way. My early follies make good stories to tell on long evenings, but now I will only say that as I taught, I learned.

I “knew” papermills used lots of water, so guessed I could create pulp using water pressure. I put some old newspapers in an empty trash can and sprayed them with a high-pressure nozzle on a garden hose. Luckily it worked...I ended up with a pulpy mess. Then I made my first papermaker’s “mould,” based on my memory of Hunter’s pictures and description of the tools used in Asia. I made it using my childhood Erector Set, screwing together the long narrow metal pieces to make a square frame, which I covered with one of my mom’s worn-out nylon stocking stretched over it. I dipped this “mould” into the pulp, pulled it out to find a fine layer of pulp setting on top, then left it setting out in the sun. In about an hour it was dry and I could just peel it off the nylon stocking. But as the pulp had dried, it contracted, shrunk, and that had forced my erector set frame to “scissor” so, much to my disappointment, my first piece of paper ended up being diamond shaped.

2. 1974, SPRING Peter Papermaker’s paper made at Renaissance Pleasure Faire (RPF), Agoura, CA. Newsprint pulp. RPF I mould, wood frame, nylon stocking screen, 8 x 10 inches. Dried on screen.

I decided to take a break between my freshman and sophomore years of college. This is when I had my first papermaking booth at the Renaissance Pleasure Faire in Agoura, California, in the spring of 1974. At the booth besides teaching people how to bind books, I showed them how to make paper in the “ye olde Elizabethan” way that I had just invented. I used unprinted newsprint to make the pulp for papermaking: roll ends from the local paper, instead of using old newspapers, so there was no ink residue.

To break it down into pulp I put some of the newsprint in a trashcan and sprayed it with water using a high-pressure nozzle until it mashed apart. The paper I made was pretty weak and soft. I tried pounding it with a mortar and pestle, like I saw done in pictures in Dard Hunter’s book, thinking that might help make it stronger. It didn’t. My next innovation in pulping was to try using a hand crank egg beater. The paper I made was



RPF1 mould



RPF2 mould, aluminum window screen



RPF2 mould, aluminum watermark detail

good for toilet paper but not much more. While using the egg beater during the first weekend of the Faire I realized I could use a blender when I was home with electricity.

That is how I made the pulp for this this paper example, which was made at the Faire, on moulds I had made based on Hunter's pictures of ones that were used in Asia. My mould, built using trimmed down fir 2x4s, measured about 8x10 inches. My screen was a nylon stocking, stretched over the wooden frame and stapled in place. I did not use a deckle. I dried the paper on the mould, setting the mould on a hay bale facing the sun. I removed the paper from the screen by sliding a butter knife between the paper and the nylon stocking.

One of my friends at the faire was the harpist Carol Kleyn, who sang her original compositions for the crowds outside the front gates as they came and left. She saw me toiling away at my booth and wrote a song about me giving up the actor's life of pleasure and poverty for the craftsman's life of work to earn "the green dollar bill." In the song she called me "Peter Papermaker." The name was a perfect fit, and for the next fifteen years that was how everyone, everywhere, knew me.

3. 1974, SUMMER Paper made from cotton tee shirt, San Luis Obispo, CA. Cotton rags ground in a meat grinder. RPF 2 mould, wood frame, large triangle support ribs, aluminum window screen, no deckle, 8 x 10 inches. Dried on screen.

After the faire ended, I went back to the library where I found Dard Hunter's book *Paper-making in the Classroom*. In that book he stated one could use a "common meat grinder" and "in a few minutes" reduce enough fiber into pulp to make a few sheets of paper. I tried it and decided Hunter had never really tried it himself. On my first crank, the coarsest blade broke. Replacing that with the finer blades, my meat grinder produced a knotty mush. Mixing the pulp with water I found I could form a sheet, but when dry it was limp and had no strength, feeling more like a rag than paper.

I was inspired to learn more about papermaking and so once again looked through Hunter's book on papermaking. I learned that in the



1976, Peter Papermaker at the Southern Renaissance Pleasure Faire

own Hollander beater. Through a bit of pre-internet sleuthing, I found Mr. Laws. He had passed away, and had willed everything he owned to his local public library, with the caveat that his housekeeper could live in the house until she died. She was still alive and I spoke with her on the phone. She said the beater was in the garage, along much of Laws equipment for making paper and binding books, “and there was a lot more there too when he died, but I cleaned it all up to make the garage presentable.” She put me in touch with his lawyer, who put me in touch with the head of the library, who said they would be happy to give his beater to me. Soon after that, on my way to attend the 1987 Friends of the Dard Hunter Paper Museum (FDH) meeting in Appleton, Wisconsin, I went to Avon Lake, accompanied by Sara Gilfert who lived in Ohio and offered to drive. We picked up the beater (which is now being stored by Howie Clark). A wonderful surprise came when the Librarian gave me their copy of the typewritten book Laws had made about his papermaking (which is now at the University of Iowa Special Collections Library). This was the book Morris had used for his text in *Omnibus*.

For several years I had been engaged in a long series of correspondence with James Weygand who lived in Nappanee, Indiana. He was a retired union printer who had a private press called The Press of the Indiana Kid. He had built his own Hollander beater, made paper and printed miniature books. I had arranged to stay with him a few days after the FDH conference, and Sara dropped me off there on her way home to Athens, Ohio. I spent a wonderful few days there talking “shop” and making paper. He was an inspiration: through reading books and correspondence with the likes of Dard Hunter and Douglass Howell, and a serious bit of “Yankee ingenuity” he figured out how to make a beater and how to make paper. This visit was a pivotal moment in my book arts trajectory: Weygand, as he called himself, was 20-30 years my senior. While I was there, he asked me what I was doing printing fairy tales? What private press collector wants fairy tales? They all want books about books. And in a very fatherly way, he said that if I wanted to sell my work I should really be printing books about papermaking. Although I did not immediately take his advice, I saw the wisdom in making books that people would want to buy. Being at that founding meeting of the Miniature Book Society in Ohio, I knew we would have a ready market for any miniature book we made. I put the idea of making the *Valwania* book on the back burner.



1987 *Beater Time Tests*



1987 *The Poet is Dead*

I made several colors of coagulated pulp and added them to the vat as I formed each sheet. After some experimentation I had some success.

To create the feel of granite I had to come up with a way to dry the paper that would leave a surface referencing the texture. To get this surface I could not just restrain dry the sheets, as then they would be flat. Instead, after pressing the post, I hung each sheet individually to dry. As they dried the sheets cockled and curled madly. Once dry, I soaked them in water until they relaxed and were flat again, then hung them to dry. Each time I repeated this process the fibers stretched and relaxed as they soaked and cockled and curled less as they dried. After 4-5 damping and dryings the sheets were flat enough to use and had had a very noticeable stippled surface texture left behind by all the contractions and expansions.

45. 2014 Paper decorated using coagulated pulp. Half stuff, linter, abaca, black and blue pigment, sized and retained. Amies wove mould 17.5 x 22.5 inches.

I made this paper with the help of Katharina Seidler as we were working on making the book about the Tuckenhay Mill. We considered using a paper with coagulated pulp for the end pages and cover of the book, and made these sheets to make sure we had complete control of the process and could make the paper we imagined. The big difference between this sample and the sample of paper made for *Hetch Hetchy Flora* is that this paper was restrain-dried.

46. 2017 Paper for *Piute Creek*.

A. 2017. Pulp sprayed paper made for the text of our book *Piute Creek*. Half stuff, linter, abaca, blue Arch shred, ochre pigment, spray pulp from brown, grey and blue tee shirt rag, sized and retained. Amies wove mould, 17.5 x 22.5 inches.

B. 2017. Paper made for covers of *Piute Creek*. Half stuff, linter, abaca, blue, black and green Arch shred, blue and black pigment, sized and retained. Amies wove mould, 17.5 x 22.5 inches. Treated with Konnyaku.



2012, Donna spraying pulp for illustration in *The Alder*



2012, Peter making paper for *The Alder*



2017 *Piute Creek*



2012 *The Alder*

This print on demand book was created to accompany a portfolio of 46 paper samples made by Peter and Donna Thomas between 1974 and 2017. As always, Peter and Donna want to thank Gary Young for his editorial assistance. Book layout was done by Julia Warner using digital Goudy Modern and Neuland types provided by the P22 Type Foundry. Six numbered copies were made for the portfolios. Additional copies were made for distribution to institutions and collectors interested in learning more about Peter and Donna's papermaking odyssey.

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