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Zarina Hashmi Papers, Clippings and Press, 1970-1999

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Artists Discover A New Medium In An Ancient Craft Tradition

By Patricia Degener
Post-Dispatch Art Critic
St. Louis 8/15

NEW YORK ARTISTS ARE RESTLESS and inquiring, ever on the lookout for a new and challenging medium in which to express themselves. In the last decade, they have rediscovered an ancient craft process, hand papermaking. In fact, the current revival of hand papermaking, both in its traditional form of a flat sheet -- a support for images -- and the innovative usage of paper by contemporary artists as a substance, a material for manipulation, constitutes a renaissance of sorts.

By the early 19th century in Europe and America, the handmade paper mill had become a victim of the industrial revolution. In the last century, great changes have occurred and new technologies have been developed in the making of paper, with the effect of changing the product.

It is not the production of paper, however, that is the concern of contemporary artists and artisans, but the exploration and manipulation of the process itself, its chemistry and its unique physical qualities as a vehicle for visual expression.

The American Craft Museum has mounted three simultaneous exhibitions in New York this summer that examine the history and process of papermaking and celebrate works in paper by contemporary artists. "The Handmade Paper Book," a show that includes 44 works by 33 artists, and the "Douglas Morse Howell Retrospective," honoring the work of the pioneer of studio papermaking, are installed at the museum at 44 West 53rd Street.

"Papermaking USA," featuring the work of 33 contemporary artists, appropriately inaugurates the opening of the American Craft Museum II. This handsome example of corporate patronage is located on the first floor of the International Paper Company's world headquarters at 77 West 45th Street. All three exhibitions make for a fascinating visual and didactic experience.

The place to start is with the Douglas Morse Howell retrospective. Examples of Howell's 36-year experimentation with and exploration of hand papermaking reflect the range of possibilities of the medium: from opaqueness to translucency; from the flat sheet (although to call a Howell linen paper with its incredible richness of texture and color a flat sheet is hardly descriptive) to the three-dimensional object, such as his flax forms, in which small sculptures of pale, golden flax paper, resembling stretched, translucent animal skin, capture light and air; from fragility to the toughness of his molded-paper recreation of traditional Chinese paper armor.

Howell, unorthodox but nevertheless committed to making paper archivally sound, worked in collaboration with a number of artists -- Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner, Joan Miro and especially Ann Ryan, who used his paper in her collages.



In 1959, he created the first paper made of blue jeans at the request of the late Tatyana Grosman, the legendary printmaker and guiding spirit of Universal Limited Art Editions. This paper was used for the limited edition "Stones" that featured the lithographs of Larry Rivers and poetry of Frank O'Hara.

It was Howell, according to the exhibit's curator, Alexandra Soteriou, whose vision inspired a group of skilled papermakers and artists, who "emancipated paper from its role as printing surface alone. . . and focused instead on the nature and aesthetics of paper."

The great variety and essence of handmade paper develops from a basically unchanged process first discovered by the Chinese at least 2000 years ago. True paper, as opposed to proto-papers such as papyrus, tapa or amate, must be made from fibers -- flax, jute, linen or cotton rags, wood, or bark -- macerated until each individual filament is a separate unit, mixed with water. Then, with the use of a sieve-like screen it must be lifted from the water in the form of a thin stratum of intertwined fibers, or paper, as the water drains off.

The strength of the paper is determined by the interlocking of the fibers in the forming process, and the further tightening during pressing, the length and shape of the individual fibers, and finally, a chemical reaction called hydrogen bonding, which occurs during drying, when fibers further connect by closing molecular chains opened in the beating process.

For Howell, "Paper is made in the beater." He constructed a beater with a lucite tub to allow viewing of fiber changes during beating. The immense variety of the tactile and visual quality of papers made by Howell from flax and linen alone attest to the significance of fiber choice and process.

Paper can be molded. It can be couched -- layered -- when wet, with objects added between the layers. Pulp can be dyed, or color can come from beaten rags such as blue jeans. Colored pulp can be poured on a newly formed sheet, producing the soft edges and saturated color that is typical of handmade paper works. Paper pulp can be manipulated on a wire form, or it can be cast.

EXAMPLES OF ALL these methods and combinations are included in the exhibition of handmade books, and in "Papermaking USA."

"Wing Shoot," by former St. Louis artist Suzanne Anker, is a stark and powerful black and white landscape of cast and molded paper, plaster, glass, corborundum and pigment. Nancy O'Banion's "Jupiter Effect Diptych," with its flags of translucent blue in an opaque field of yellow and red, vibrates with luminosity and saturated color, imparting the fullest realization of its "new wave" imagery.

Kenneth Noland, who has been working with handmade paper for a number of years, and who has his own studio mill, has two lyrical works in the exhibition, a contrast to the leather-like, studded, totemic-shield form, called "Julio 1980," by Frederick Amat. Sculptor Winifred Lutz, consultant to the exhibition and author of the excellent essay, "Thoughts on Papermaking Today," in the catalog of the exhibition, is represented by two works. "Substratum" is minimalist, but at the same time is a

sensual deck form of wood, covered with a rich, red, Korean-style floor paper, burnished with tung oil. One of her "Dayfinder" structures, made of wood framing and thinly cast paper, is a magical object for capturing and transmitting light.

Handmade paper is central to the growing preoccupation of artists with the book, which is considered not only as something to be read but also, more often, as a unique three-dimensional art object, carrying all the traditional associations of books, and thereby lending an almost ghostly mystery to the objects.

I especially liked the austere, sculptural, rock-indented-earth and handmade-paper book, "Stove Pipe Wells History 1975," by Michelle Stuart.

Some of the artists in the exhibition have their own paper studios. Some have worked in collaboration with contemporary mills, such as the Dieu Donne Press and Paper Mill. Some have a background in painting, textiles or ceramics. Others are totally absorbed in papermaking.

As Lutz says, "The innovative aspect of the present renaissance of papermaking by hand in this country is actually a shift in emphasis from paper as support to paper as substance, and to the procedure of papermaking as an inspiration for aesthetic invention." The strongest work in the show is work that is informed by -- even immersed in -- the physical properties of the medium.

The exhibitions will run through September 26. Two excellent catalogues, one on Douglas Morse Howell and the other covering "Paper Making USA" and "The Handmade Paper Book" exhibitions, are available from the American Crafts Council. For Publication Sales Office, 401 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10016.

Groups Expand Concert Series

HARD TIMES notwithstanding, it appears that the concert season in St. Louis next season will be as busy as ever, and two organizations are expanding their musical activity. Webster College, where Jacques Israelievitch has played violin programs for four years, will continue that five-recital series and add three string quartet concerts, with Israelievitch, Jenny Lind Jones, Thomas Dumm and John Sant'Ambrogio taking part.

Furthermore, the college is sponsoring a new woodwind quintet of St. Louis Symphony musicians -- Jan Gippo, James Meyer, Thomas Parkes, Robert Mottl and Lawrence Strieby -- and it will play two concerts in Winifred Moore Auditorium. All these events will be without admission charge.

The other upward-bound organization is the Classical Guitar Society. It is offering its series at the Ethical Society auditorium in the form of four Thursday-Friday pairs instead of four single concerts.

The recitalists in this series for 1982-'83 will be Eduardo Fernandez, Oscar Ghiglia, John Holmquist and Michael Newman. An event that ought to attract a much larger public will be the recital of Julian Bream in

Powell Hall Nov. 9, jointly sponsored by the Classical Guitar Society and the St. Louis Symphony. The Guitar Society will open its season with a special fundraising concert by Marie Garritson, flutist and David Sussman, guitarist, Sept. 19 at Webster College's Winifred Moore Auditorium.

[[Image 1]]

A handmade paper book, "Flight Wings," (17 by 26 by 1 inches, 1979) by Caroline Greenwald.

[[Image 2]]

"Spaces to Hide," (30 by 30 inches, 1980) by Zarina, made of linter sheets and pigments. In the American Craft Museum's "Papermaking USA" show.

[[Image 3]]

American Craft Council
Papermaker Helmut Becker macerating and hydrating flax fiber in a Howell paper beater.

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