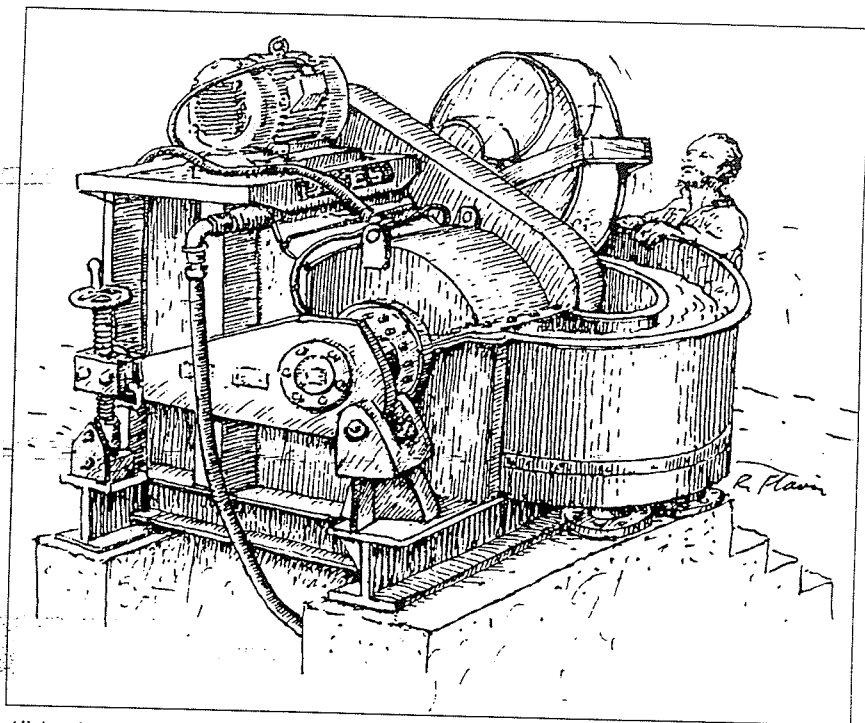


HAND PAPERMAKING

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All drawings by Richard Flavin.

Aesthetics and the Future of the Craft

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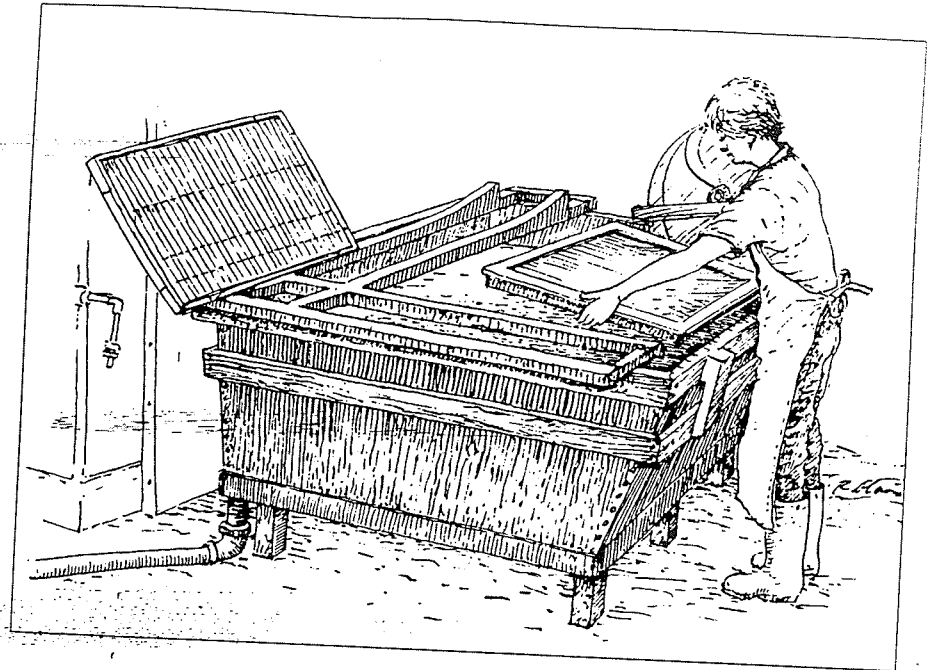
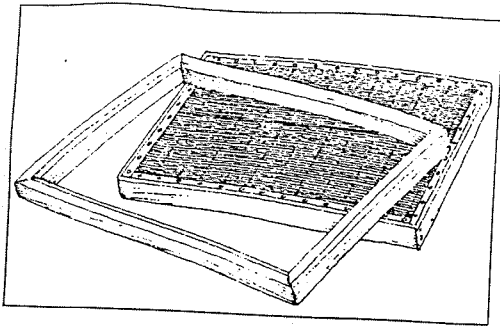
As my career in hand papermaking has developed, I have constantly wondered why I have been so drawn to this craft and what specific aspect of it most motivates me. I have become interested in the history of the craft and the science of papermaking. I enjoy teaching papermaking and writing about it. I get a bang out of developing new tools and techniques, and new papers. But I now believe that aesthetics, in the end, underlie all this and intrigue me most about handmade paper. I refer to the aesthetics of plain sheets of paper, not decorated papers or sheets with elegant watermarks or paperworks (works of art made from paper or paper pulp). Aesthetics in handmade paper is thorny territory, fraught with pitfalls, not the least of which is the natural tendency to think of it from a purely personal, subjective point of view.

During the twenty-three years that I have been active in the craft, I have mulled a lot of related questions over in my mind and I think I have arrived at some credible answers. I believe these answers begin to go beyond personal point of view to encompass a more universal perspective. Furthermore, I believe some of them may be crucial to the survival of the craft and its chances of prospering, not just in this country but around the world. Since I do not make my living primarily from the production of handmade paper, my responses to the queries at hand may be considered unrealistic by some. However, I feel I have enough experience making traditional handmade papers and enough respect for those whose livelihoods depend on production that my responses have some grounding in reality. Having stated these reservations, I offer the following thoughts for the consideration of the reader.

*I have selected this format because it allows me to raise key questions and then answer them directly. Furthermore, if someone differs with my answer, they can easily formulate an alternative response. (I hope this format inspires dialogue. I first saw it used by Soetsu Yanagi in his book, *The Unknown Craftsman*. This book and Sukey Hughes' *Washi, The World of Japanese Paper*, were two primary influences in the development of my own aesthetic viewpoint.)*

Question: What makes a plain piece of handmade paper especially useful for considering aesthetics in objects made by humans?

Answer: Handmade paper, which Hughes refers to as "the simplest of substances," represents perhaps the essence of things ordinary. Yanagi himself claims, "There is no simpler material imaginable." Paper appears mundane, almost boring. At first glance it seems devoid of elements we would normally use to discuss aesthetics, such as



color, form, design, embellishment, or decoration. In this empty, pure sheet of paper then, we can look for evidence of aesthetics which, if revealed, will actually be more clearly obvious, easier to identify and discuss than they would be in other craft or art objects made from materials that have been heavily worked and manipulated.

In the void of the plain sheet contemplated in our hands, small, subtle, and otherwise unnoticeable marks of the maker stand out. The richness of the raw material and the skill with which the papermaker prepared it may be more immediately considered. The plainness of the sheet requires us to use other senses in addition to sight to take in the piece of paper—we run our fingers over the surface, we listen to the sound it makes in our hands, we bring the surface of the sheet close to our nose and smell it. Many of the characteristics that speak of a paper's being handmade stand evident in a plain sheet's empty expanse.

These subtleties become secondary in a craft or art object loaded with form, color, and exaggerated surface texture. The absolute humility evident in a plain sheet of paper gives it, ironically, a powerful and direct aesthetic presence. The right sheet has character and authenticity, qualities lacking in other handmade and machine-made papers.

Q:What is the quality you call "character" in paper and where does it come from?

A:Character, for me, is a quality that makes the right piece of handmade paper undeniably different from any paper made on a machine. Usually, this quality is not associated with performance attributes, like strength, permanence, durability, or response to various media, although such qualities play a role in the character of the sheet. I appreciate that certain artists find the working attributes of a piece of hand-

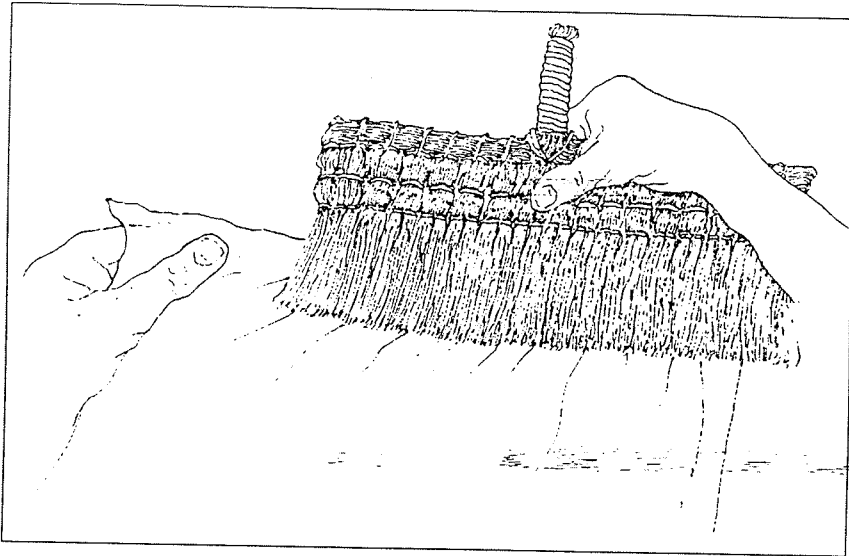
made paper the essence of its special character. But what concerns me most are the qualities of a sheet before any medium has touched it. Character relates to the degree of presence, personality, integrity, and authenticity in a sheet of paper. Often a sheet with character embodies contradictory qualities: the sheet is soft, but crisp and lustrous at the same time; or it is tough but pliant and supple; well formed and even but possessed of small inconsistencies, touches of the hand. These contradictory elements lend a sense of tension to the sheet that intrigues and mystifies. Somehow an undeniable sense of the sheet's having been made by hand comes across, but without it being obvious.

Sloppy or poor quality workmanship destroys character by eliminating subtlety. The presence of the original human workers and the richness of the original raw material both somehow manifest themselves in a sheet with character.

Q:How do these qualities become part of a piece of paper?

A:In my experience, character in paper comes from:

- a) Skilled selection of exceptional quality, raw, natural materials. This includes water, fiber, and sometimes other additives, such as formation aid.
- b) Careful hand preparation of the fiber, respecting its natural qualities, color, and integrity.
- c) Work accomplished completely by people with extensive experience.
- d) A certain detachment and lack of attention to perfection that results from working in a high-volume production situation.
- e) Often, the use of traditional papermaking methods.



A: Large quantities of inexpensive handmade paper entering America, Europe, and Japan are causing real concern on the part of established papermakers. Few would disagree the world is terribly out of balance, with so much difference between the haves and the have-nots. I have always seen this imbalance as a problem that would become serious sooner or later and demand acknowledgment if not correction. I did not anticipate, though, that I would see it manifest so soon in my own discipline. Colleagues of mine who make paper in the West and Japan are very concerned about the threat of competition from developing countries.

To address this, I think that, first, papermakers must continue to innovate and improve quality in order to produce papers of such distinction that the informed customer willingly pays the premium price. Second, we should all work to build an international hand papermaking community in which producers in the richer countries are also engaged in the import/export business. This should be done in a manner that allows them to both help improve the quality of foreign-made papers and sell them at home, thereby making a profit while helping improve the lives of fellow papermakers abroad at the same time. Westerners, because of the lucrative market they represent, can have a powerful influence in shaping the direction of papermaking traditions in developing countries. I consider this a somewhat frightening but challenging and exciting time for hand papermaking.

Q: What can ensure the future of the craft around the world?

A: Hand papermakers should study the best papers of the past and attempt to thoroughly understand the materials and techniques used to make them. They should combine this knowledge with the reinstitution of traditions they have explored and found valuable. Modern artisans should then draw on these important resources to aid in the invention of new handmade papers that can answer the needs of the present cultural moment. These actions, taken together, can help ensure the future of the craft.

Q: Have you ever seen or made a perfect sheet of paper?

A: Ironically, a sheet's ever-so-subtle embodiment of imperfection is exactly what can make it perfect. The subtlety enters in because the imperfections exist in the midst of uniformity and consistency. This is a delicate balance. Setting out to make a perfect beautiful sheet of paper usually guarantees failure; the sheet ends up too

precious, too perfect. On the other hand, a good deal of the paper I make with my co-workers fails because our lack of skill and experience leaves us with paper with too many imperfections and not enough uniformity and consistency. Part of the secret to getting the right balance in the finished sheet lies in avoiding too much orchestration or planning. I believe the ideal characteristics appear in a sheet when the papermaker combines a certain detachment or lack of intention with a long acquired intimacy with superior quality fibers and sympathetic processes. I find the right elements stand the best chance of coming together in a situation where skilled, experienced artisans work in regular, daily production.

Q: If you were to boil your view of aesthetics in handmade paper down to its essence, what does an especially well-made sheet of paper evoke for you?

A: A handmade sheet of paper provides documentation or physical evidence of a dialogue between human beings and nature; between men, women, and God; between people and something of great significance in the cosmos. It stuns me to think such a simple thing could embody so much but I believe handmade paper—perhaps because of its very plainness—does so more successfully than any other material made by humans.

Notes

1. Sukey Hughes, *Washi, The World of Japanese Paper* (Tokyo, Kodansha International, 1978), p. 150.