

Surface Enchantment

Hand-Made Fine Art Papers

by Elham Shafaei

The seedlings of history was shown by the Egyptians who, approximately 4000 years ago, created writing surfaces by weaving papyrus (a type of reed) into mats and pounded them into thin sheets. Indeed, the word 'paper' has its etymological root in the word 'papyrus'. Nonetheless, the invention of paper as we know it today emerged 2000 years later in recorded history, credited to the eunuch Tsai Lun, a Chinese court official working under the emperor Ho Tai. Tsai Lun established the technical foundation of papermaking, beating old clothes and plant matters into pulps, submerged them in water and formed into sheets that dried into papers under the brilliant heat of the oriental sun.

This innovation later migrated westwards, trailing the Arab caravans during the height of the Islamic Empire. After making its mark in Baghdad, papermaking reached the northern tips of the empire, crossed the Mediterranean Sea and landed on the shores of Europe around 10th century A.D. In 1719, the Frenchman René de Reamur noticed the activities of wasps making their nest by chewing the wood fibers. By the mid 1800's this simple yet enlightening observation ushered in the modern production of industrialized papers using pulped wood, which became the basis of the daily paper products that we use today.

However, industrialized paper made from wood pulp is not suitable to be used as ground for the graphic arts. These papers have high acid and lignin content due to the processing of the wood pulp. Acidic papers turn yellow quickly in time, negatively affecting the durability and aesthetic value of the artwork. For this reason, the production of fine art papers for drawing and printmaking remains heavily based on the use of plant fibers and rags.

As an artist who works extensively on paper, Elham is acutely aware of the crucial role of grounds for graphic artists. While the number of practicing artists in Malaysia continues to increase significantly, there's a serious lack of attention paid on the local production of fine art materials. Our artists are left to rely on imported fine art paper to do their drawings, paintings and prints on. This state of local artistic technology, if we may use such terms, has shaped Elham's consciousness as a graphic artist, which in turn forms her current academic project. Using a wide range of materials and techniques, Elham explores the potential of local natural fibers to produce high quality papers that are specifically tailored for artistic use. Based on her experience and practice as a visual artist, she turned the fibers of mengkirai, kantan, banana as well as cotton into exquisite surfaces for the artist to work on. While these papers are made to be used as grounds for drawing, painting and printmaking, their rich textures,

colors and 'feel' make them an art form in its own right. Under the care of Elham's hands and sensitivity of her soul, nature has been tamed into works of art, surfaces emerge to caress our eyes and enchant our touch.

Dr. Izmer Ahmad & Mr. Adnan Mat
(Project Supervisors)