



A Papermaker and Toolmaker in Argentina: Alejandro Geiler

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TRANSLATION AND INTERPRETATION
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*Geiler shows a student how to check for fiber
readiness when beating by hand (July 2018).*

All photos courtesy of Alejandro Geiler.

In early 2019, I came across the name of Alejandro Geiler, a papermaker and mould maker in Argentina. After I emailed him, he sent an immediate response and, a few days later, a request for a video chat. I saw a bespectacled man with a bushy white beard and wide intense eyes, a cello stored behind him, and heard his deep voice. Over emails and WhatsApp video chats and texts,¹ I learned more about this self-made papermaker who supported the craft in his country.

Born in 1951 in Buenos Aires, Argentina, Alejandro Geiler grew up with a younger brother, a homemaker mother, and pilot father. Full of curiosity from an early age, he built small rockets and model aircraft that he could play and experiment with, and loved art and music, especially painting and classical music. To this day, he is a big classical music fan and began cello lessons eleven years ago.

Since his parents did not encourage an art career, Geiler studied geography and became an engineer of geodetic surveying. He was good at precise measurements and special tasks and for a while enjoyed his job. But after working in remote areas like the jungles of northern Argentina, he found it difficult and boring. To preserve his mental and physical health, he quit the job in his mid-30s. A mere ten days after leaving the position, he discovered papermaking. His parents, now deceased, did not understand why he would leave a well-salaried job to become a papermaker.

In 1986, Geiler attended an exhibit at the Predio Municipal de Exposiciones (which no longer exists) celebrating the centennial of the Catalan community in Argentina. There he met Luís Morera, a Catalan papermaker who explained how paper is made by hand. Fascinated, Geiler went to a bookstore and found a small book about handmade paper and printing by the great Argentinean printmaker Fernando López Anaya (1903–1987).² At a bar, he read the entire book and thought, “I can do this.”³

With no guide or teachers save the small book, Geiler experimented on his own for many months. He built two moulds and a Hollander beater (2-kilogram dry capacity) and adapted a book press. His “Eureka! I got it”⁴ moment arrived on October 30, 1986. With part of his savings, he worked full time, expanded the paper mill bit by bit to include printmaking, and made larger sheets of paper.

At the end of 1988, Geiler moved to Patagonia, where he lived for sixteen years making paper and teaching printmaking classes. In 1995, he traveled to Japan for the IAPMA congress and Japan Paper Symposium in Kyoto and traveled the country. Over the course of 45 days, with scant language skills, he felt, “I found my place in the world.”⁵ He visited many paper mills across prefectures such as Fukui and Gifu, and took a washi course at Awagami Factory alongside Catherine Nash. In Japan, he met people with whom he stays in touch, including a friend who sends him gampi fiber. Fifty miles from Buenos Aires, another friend with a field of mulberry (*Morus alba*) occasionally delivers a couple kilos of bark. Long before his trip to Japan, Geiler had taught himself to make washi using Timothy Barrett’s *Japanese Papermaking* book. He relished the challenge and no one in Argentina made washi for sale, so he had a market advantage. His Asian-style paper is in great demand, especially as he is its only domestic producer. He also makes cotton paper on request.

Though Patagonia was beautiful and a healthy place to live, he returned to Buenos Aires in 2004 to work for Papelera Palermo. The company shut down in October 2015, due to inflation (common in Argentina) and poor management. Now he works alone, and with Asian papermaking he can perform all the steps perfectly on his own. Fully equipped for both Asian and European papermaking, his studio is fifteen blocks from his home.

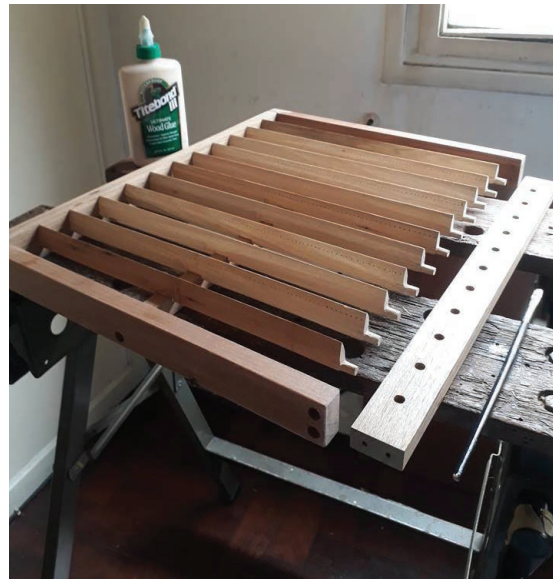
From the start, Geiler had to build his own equipment. With carpentry skills and a can-do attitude, he learned to make moulds to become equally a papermaker and mould maker. He enjoys making laid moulds and weaves facings on a loom that he built to be identical to Japanese *su*-making ones. To date, he has produced over 100 Western-style moulds; and he makes Japanese-style *sugeta* for his own use. Orders for moulds come domestically and from Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Colombia, and Panama. He can build other papermaking equipment on request. Many of his clients are colleagues to whom he offers advice in case they have any issues at the vat.

Apprentices and assistants have arrived from Argentina and abroad, and each month he teaches a two-day intensive papermaking course. He provides tools, materials, techniques, and tips on how to make paper by modifying domestic tools that students can find in their everyday lives. He has taught in Canada, Chile, Bolivia, Paraguay, Brazil, Uruguay, Venezuela, and Panama. Over 33 years, he has trained many people, several of whom have set up their own paper studios.

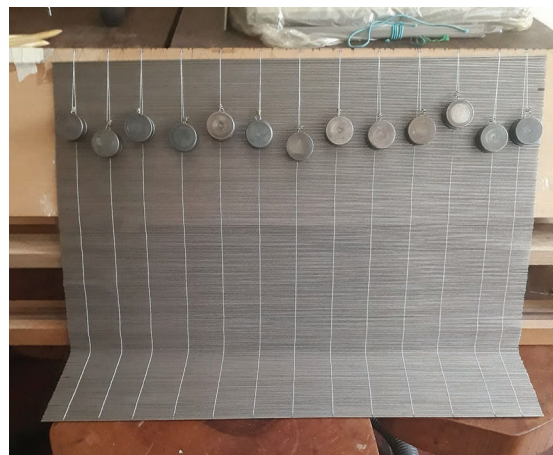
Geographically far from many paper communities, Geiler stays connected through Facebook,⁶ where he publishes his work, promotes classes, and sells his papers. A friendly and reliable communicator, he sent pictures of his *gampi* papermaking process from rinsing and beating to board drying. He sent funny messages like, “I HATE CHIRI TORI!!!!”⁷ that anyone familiar with Asian fibers would understand. Though frustrated while trying to communicate through an interpreter, once he began to talk about paper, his entire countenance brightened. Relatively isolated in the southern corner of the planet, he has created a whole papermaking world, sharing generously and widely to maintain a papermaking life that he imagined over 30 years ago.

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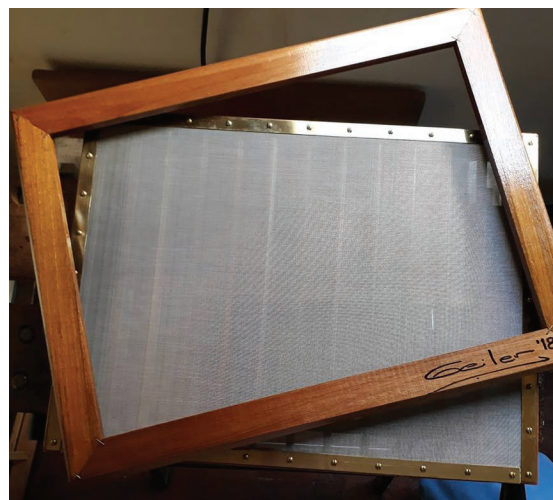
1. All information was gathered via emails, chats, and texts that began on January 4, 2019. Also helpful was a series of blog posts by Genevieve Lapp, especially her summary of working with Geiler on her September 5, 2014 post, <https://thefiberwire.com/2014/09/05/the-future-of-the-craft/> (accessed February 13, 2019).
2. Geiler said that the book title was *El Papel Hecho a Mano y Elementos de Tipografía y Grabado*.
3. Geiler, email message to the author, January 15, 2019, translated from his actual words, “yo puedo hacer esto.”
4. *Ibid.* Translated from his actual words, “Eureka! lo conseguí!!”
5. Geiler, email message to the author, January 26, 2019, translated from his actual words “te aseguro que encontré allí mi lugar en el mundo.”
6. Geiler’s Facebook page, <https://www.facebook.com/alejandro.geiler>.
7. Geiler, WhatsApp chat with the author, January 21, 2019.



Hand-carved ribs for the mould before final assembly (April 2018).



A laid mould facing being woven on a loom built by Geiler to mimic Japanese versions. The laid lines are made of 0.7-mm stainless-steel wire and are woven together with a durable polyester thread (April 2018).



A completed mould by Geiler constructed from rauli wood, stainless-steel mesh #50 (0.20-mm wires), and phosphor bronze strips to cover edges of the mesh screen (April 2018).