

## Making History in Cleveland

Building the first Korean  
papermaking studio in  
North America

*by Aimee Lee*

The author pulling *hanji* at the Morgan Conservatory, Cleveland.

**W**hen I researched Korean papermaking on a Fulbright grant in Korea in 2009, people often asked what I, an American, was doing, and why.

I wanted to learn how to make traditional *hanji* (Korean handmade paper) and to share that knowledge. I also wanted to advocate for the Korean papermaking method, not only through my teaching, art, online presence, and writing, but through direct

transmission. I dreamt of building a studio where people could learn how to make traditional *hanji*.

There was, I told the disbelieving Koreans, a precedent: the traditional Japanese papermaking facility built by Timothy Barrett at the University of Iowa. However, I never imagined that I could build a *hanji* studio within the next five years, or even ten. I returned to the United States, and started a residency where I made new work with the tools and

techniques I had just learned, all the while wondering how I would start my *hanji* advocacy.

Then I read a blog entry by my former teacher, Melissa Jay Craig, where she detailed a visit to the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, Ohio, a new organization devoted to papermaking and book arts. After I read in Melissa's entry about how they grew their own paper mulberry trees, I contacted Tom Balbo, the executive director, and expressed my interest in sharing my research. In his first response, he signed off with "Give me a shout. This is what the Morgan is about."

I donated *hanji* artwork to their annual fundraiser, and in February, 2010, we started to talk about the workshop I wanted to teach: the traditional Korean sheet formation technique on a full-size screen, which required a very large vat. To my surprise, the Morgan offered to make such a vat for my class, and I agreed to travel to Cleveland to build it and the other tools necessary to make *hanji*.

In the interim, at my next residency in Belfast, Northern Ireland, I launched a Kickstarter project to support my residency to build the *hanji* studio. The fundraising succeeded, and enabled the Morgan to procure additional funds. Three weeks after I returned from Belfast, I flew to Cleveland.

It had been a year since my return from Korea, and I longed for a similar experience, where I was in the exact place at the right time to do what I was meant to do. Such moments are rare, but four years before, I had written a quote by Zen master Dogen into my sketchbook: "When you find your place, practice begins."

The physical process of building the tools and equipment for this studio was a major element of this practice, but an unexpected piece became clear as soon as I met the interns. Although they were available for manual labour and tedious tasks, I also found them ready to learn at every turn, and I was delighted to work with people who rarely complained, and found the work engaging.

Tom Balbo was the only skilled carpenter on the project team, and though I balked at using a couple of power tools, my woodworking skills increased

exponentially as we pieced together a wooden box measuring 1.83 m × 1.68 m × .46 m (6 × 5.5 × 1.5 ft.) based on my *hanji* teacher's vat in Korea. When I explained why the Korean technique required such a big vat, Tom asked, "Why do Koreans make everything so hard?" Among papermaking methods, the Korean way is perhaps not the most efficient, but to me, it was the most elegant, and worth building a studio in which to promote it.

In two days, we had a structure sturdy enough to truck over from Tom's woodworking shop to the Morgan, along with the equipment to complete the vat on site. We installed protective bracing on the bottom, and then I was on my own, with a vat that required at least two people and a dolly to flip over. The top lip was capped with maple trim and inner gaps filled with epoxy, then the vat was flipped upside-down to spackle, sand, and varnish.

After cutting a drain hole, we sanded for a day before putting down four coats of West System marine epoxy. Tom finished the vat with framework, plumbing, and a belly board, and I donated my own Korean mould to attach to the framework.

Aside from the vat, much work remained. One intern trimmed stainless steel rods to test in making screens, while another started weaving a screen, using letterpress slugs as weights instead of bobbins. I built a jig to weave screens based on a model used



Moving the vat from the woodworking shop into the studio at the Morgan Conservatory.

by the last screen-making family in Korea. We wove two screens, and sewed fabric onto their edges. Bark-scraping platforms, based on Korean prototypes, were built, and we discovered that oyster knives worked well to scrape the bark. We built a couching table, couching guides, and smaller student moulds, and cut hundreds of parting threads. A retail bamboo placemat was the perfect size for the student moulds, and we bought a dozen.

To cook the bark, Tom purchased a restaurant-grade stove and a stainless steel pot, and installed a gas line near the back garage door to facilitate outdoor cooking. We prepared tables and wooden mallets to hand beat fibre. An electrician hooked up the heater on a donated paper dryer. We hauled large drying boards and tested fine wallpaper brushes, which worked well to dry the paper. PVC piping of various thicknesses was cut to size to use variously as a vat agitator, couching log, and parting stick. A few days before the workshop, the vat was full of water



Weaving the papermaking screens.

and test fibre, with not a leak in sight, and a gooey batch of formation aid close by.


Throughout the summer, I spent time with Tony a Morgan Conservatory board member, and Tom, discussing their trip to Korea for the 2010 International Association of Hand Papermakers and Paper Artists (IAPMA) congress in Wonju, and I created a narrated slide show for them to present there. IAPMA and The Friends of Dard Hunter will hold a joint congress at the Morgan Conservatory, October 17–21, 2012. Next summer, I will rejoin the Morgan to present the *hanji* studio, and look forward to meeting the future witnesses of history.

The workshop we held was a wonderful way to christen the new studio, and I was honoured to have such dedicated students. But the most gratifying part of the process was teaching the interns: one took to *hanji*-making especially well after studying my videos online. I would watch him at the vat and see the nature of a papermaker inside of him, working steadily in silence, and pulling sheet after sheet. Claims are dangerous to make, but I am sure that he was the first 18-year-old boy from Ohio to make *hanji* in the history of the craft – an unexpected but welcome aspect of my once far-off, now realized, dream. •

For a detailed description of building the studio: [www.youtube.com/moonaimee#p/u/0/dAWB1dOysd0](http://www.youtube.com/moonaimee#p/u/0/dAWB1dOysd0)

For a video showing papermaking in Korea: [www.aimeelee.net/paper/hanji/](http://www.aimeelee.net/paper/hanji/)

See *Hand Papermaking*, Volume 25 Number 2, "Generations of Hanji: Korean Papermaking from the Fields to YouTube," by Aimee Lee.



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