

# Cultivating Hanji in America

by Aimee Lee



AIMEE LEE *Paper Dress 3* Hanji, 33" x 17" x 1.5", 2012. Photo: Stefan Hagen.

**A few days shy of the 2014 spring solstice, I charged my apprentices at the Morgan Art of Papermaking Conservatory & Educational Foundation with a task that will become an annual practice: starting seeds for hibiscus manihot.** The Morgan already has the largest kozo garden in the US in its urban lot. Known in Korean as *dak* and colloquially as the paper mulberry tree, kozo is the plant used extensively in Korean and East Asian papermaking. For the past four years, we have invited volunteers from Cleveland and beyond in a November harvest that involves cutting, steaming, stripping, and scraping *dak* bark, while sharing stories, eating chili, and preparing the fiber that is the centerpiece of our new Eastern Paper Studio (EPS). This studio is the country's first non-academic, root-to-sheet site where the public can learn about the history, science, cultural significance, and craft of Eastern papermaking.

The foundation of EPS is the Anne F. Eiben Hanji Studio, the only Korean papermaking studio on the continent. In 2010, I collaboratively built the EPS with the Morgan to raise awareness of *hanji*—Korean paper. In graduate school, I was curious about *hanji*, but found scanty resources in English. I spent a year in Korea on a Fulbright grant to uncover the stories I knew had to exist behind the basic premise that papermaking was invented in China, traveled to Korea, and landed in Japan.

*Hanji* was born early in the Common Era. The oldest extant woodblock print in the world, dated 751, is a Korean *sutra* (spiritual aphorism) printed onto *hanji*. Buddhist faith required illuminated sutras, temple decorations, and spirit paper. The government needed efficient ways of recording, disseminating, and storing information. The literati treasured manuscripts that eventually became books, and shamans used *hanji* in their services. Spurred by collective practicality, curiosity, and ingenuity, the new papermaking technique involved a substrate made from cellulosic plant material blended with water and a mucilage (a formation aid made from certain plants). The mixture was moved across a bamboo

screen that allowed water to drain away, leaving behind a transparent film of matted fiber. The labor- and time-intensive process of papermaking fell to the lowest classes and to farmers who needed extra income during the winter slack season.

Because the Morgan is located in an old machining warehouse, it is notoriously difficult to heat. Cleveland's winters usually render the studio dormant after the November dak harvest. I wanted to take advantage of this underuse, which falls at the exact time of traditional hanji production—the coldest months of the year. Hanji is a product of nature, so papermakers wait for sap to drain from the trees before harvesting, and make hanji in ice-cold water so that dak fibers contract to make shiny, strong paper.

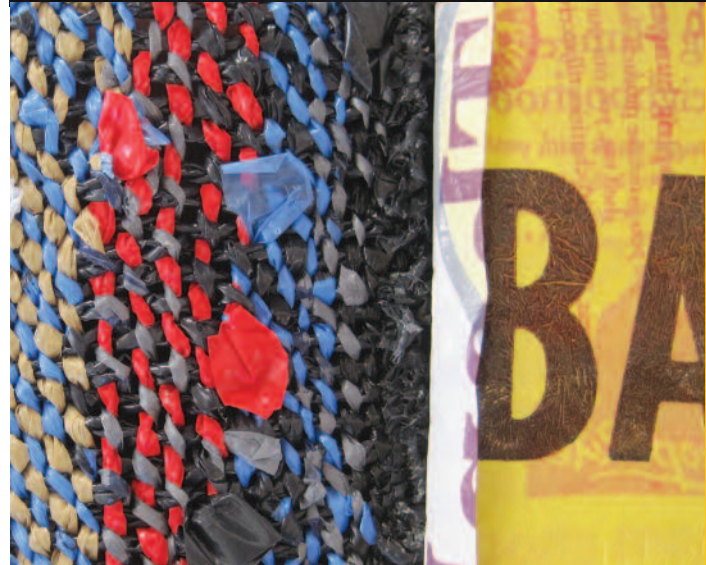
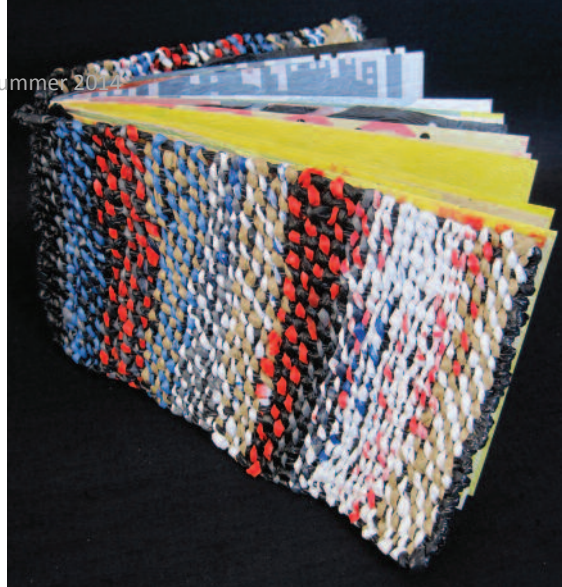
Once the leaves have fallen, year-old mulberry tree shoots are cut down and processed until only the inner white bark that sheaths the woody dak core remains. The core is used for firewood while the white bark is bleached in the sun and then cooked in an alkaline solution made from plant ash that neutralizes acid elements in the bark. This fiber is rinsed, picked over by hand to remove remaining impurities, beaten to a pulp, and poured into a vat of water.

**MELISSA JAY CRAIG** *Speak For Yourself* (front and back) Cast kozo and kozo hanji, kozo fiber joomchi, procion dyes, hemp cords, linen thread, 10" x 7" x 5.5", 2012. Detail *RIGHT*. Photos by artist.





**JULIE SIREK** *Dissolving Dream* Hanji, thread, buttons, 34" x 17.5" x 5", 2012. Photo: Warwick Green.



**SARA PARKEL** *Baggage* (with detail) Woven plastic bag cover, wood type on laminated plastic bag pages, 7.5" x 4.5" x 0.75", 2012. Photos by the artist.

Contrary to expectations, papermaking fiber is not the only crop we must cultivate in Cleveland to mimic hanji. The tiny round hibiscus seeds are crucial because this plant's roots yield a mucilage that transforms a lumpy and uneven slurry into smooth, silky waves of papermaking gold. This goo, known in Korea as *hwangchokgyu*, also slows the draining time of water by increasing its viscosity. However, this natural formation aid only works in low temperatures—it turns into water if it gets too hot, not unlike Cinderella's carriage at midnight. The bitter cold of winter provides constant refrigeration, preventing mounds of cooked fiber from succumbing to bacterial growth. We dunk our hands in buckets of warm water adjacent to the cold vats, turn up the overhead heaters to a balmy 58 degrees, and use marine supply cuffs that cover wrists where

the blood supply is most abundant.

After the showy step of forming sheets, we must press, part, dry, and sort finished paper. Hanji can be written and painted on, cut down to bind books, crinkled and massaged to change the texture and strength of a given sheet, and dyed with plant colors. It can also be corded, and woven off-loom to create a wide range of useful and stunning objects, from chamber pots to jewelry to furniture. I learned how to manipulate the lustrous sheets at a fourth-generation family paper mill in Jang Ji Bang, Gapyeong, South Korea, and was determined to share this remarkable body of knowledge upon my return to the US.

A national schedule of lectures and workshops, the creation of online resources that have been viewed by well over a million people

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SAMMY LEE *Supper Hanji and water*, 33" x 15", 2014. Photo by the artist.

worldwide, and the publication of my book *Hanji Unfurled: One Journey into Korean Papermaking*, were all logical vehicles to disperse this information. The heart of transmission, however, has always been teaching the process directly to new papermakers.

Steady efforts towards raising awareness of hanji, coupled with the desire to provide a complete picture of papermaking history, have garnered enough interest and support to create my dream job at EPS. Its launch was generously funded by lead sponsor Cuyahoga Arts & Culture, along with the Gund Foundation, Cyrus Eaton Foundation, and substantial individual giving from mentors and students. One grant panelist noted that this was not only a project vital to the Cleveland area, but a nationally important venture. The studio trains apprentices in every aspect of Korean papermaking and produces specialty lines of Eastern papers. It also includes on- and off-site workshops in Eastern paper techniques, special lectures and exhibits, artist events for members, and eventually an international residency program that will host papermaking experts from Asia.

Why champion Korean papermaking techniques and related crafts? These rich traditions demonstrate the resiliency, strength, and versatility of hanji. They are also safe and sustainable ways of making art. The history and folklore of this particular paper culture provide meaningful insight, potential contemporary applications,

and fodder for wonderful storytelling. Like any other technique, these deserve to be part of any maker's toolkit, just as shibori, indigo dyeing, and bojagi textiles have been incorporated into the mainstream of American craft practices. Now, five years removed from my Korean sojourn, I am impressed by the inspired and original work coming from the hands and studios of former students and other colleagues touched by the endless possibilities of hanji.

In August, we will celebrate Eastern Paper Studio's inaugural year with the group exhibition *Revive & Renew: Contemporary Artists and Eastern Paper*, showcasing 13 artists in North America who use Eastern paper and fibers in their artwork. By then, the hibiscus seeds will have become seedlings strong enough to transplant into the garden outside, where the kozo trees will be so leafy that you can barely walk the paths. Our new place is thick with potential and I am grateful to be part of its growth.

*Revive & Renew: Contemporary Artists and Eastern Paper* is on display at the Morgan Conservatory in Cleveland, OH (August 2–September 20, 2014). Aimee Lee will teach a hanji making workshop at EPS August 16–17, 2014; [www.morganconservatory.org](http://www.morganconservatory.org).

—Artist and papermaker Aimee Lee exhibits and teaches from coast to coast. Her award-winning book *Hanji Unfurled: One Journey into Korean Papermaking* was published in 2012 by The Legacy Press. [www.aimeelee.net](http://www.aimeelee.net)