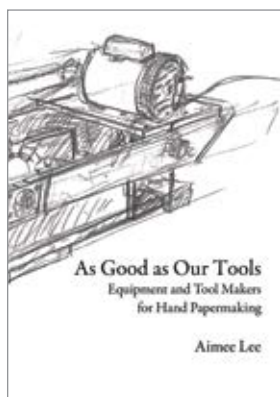




As Good as Our Tools

REVIEWED BY TIMOTHY BARRETT

Seo Jeong-im, weaving a bal. She is now the last person in Korea who still makes bal for hanji-making. Photo: Veronica Pham, May 2024. All photos courtesy of The Legacy Press.



**AS GOOD AS OUR TOOLS:
EQUIPMENT AND TOOL MAKERS
FOR HAND PAPERMAKING**
*Aimee Lee. Ann Arbor, Michigan:
The Legacy Press, 2025, soft cover,
10 x 7 x 3/4 inches, 304 pages with
390 full-color images, \$48.*

Aimee Lee's new book, *As Good as Our Tools: Equipment and Tool Makers for Hand Papermaking*, is a valuable asset for a range of readers who may have very different perspectives.

First and foremost, this book is a portrait of a generation of specialists who devoted themselves to making tools for our hand papermaking community. During the beginning of the hand papermaking revival in North America in the late 1960s and early 1970s, if you wanted to try your hand at papermaking, you had to have hand skills and be inclined to invention. At the time there were few professional toolmakers in the European tradition, such as Aimes & Son in England who made hand moulds. Nor were there books with instructions for building your own equipment. At the time, we all worked primarily from Dard Hunter's *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft* (1943, Alfred A. Knopf). Hunter's publications were a revelation to anyone who was intrigued with hand papermaking. For me and many of my contemporaries, Hunter's books instantly convinced us that our curiosity and suspicions were not misguided. On the contrary, Hunter showed us hand papermaking was a rich, deep, and broad area for research, study, and possibly practice. That said, it gradually became apparent over the years and decades, that despite Hunter's rigorous detail, none of his publications actually provided information on how to build tools or the step-by-step process of actually *making paper*. Nevertheless, the man was an inspiration and for those of us with a certain intense fascination with the craft, Hunter's books were a guiding light. With Hunter's lead, we pushed ahead and endeavored to make our own tools, and then make paper with them.

Aimee Lee's book takes us through the stories, sagas really, of eighteen tool makers who, in many cases, have built their careers around building tools, so that the rest of us could make paper. Gradually, as you read through the book, you become aware of what a gift this has been because of what Lee calls the "multiplying effect" that each tool builder has had on our community. A sense of this seeps into your appreciation for the story because Lee does not just give us a chronological report on how each individual's career in tool building developed; she tells us, in each case about the difficulties and disappointments they were up against, about their lives, how their significant others supported them, the harsh financial struggles (including bankruptcy), and their doubts at times about the paths they had taken. The book is also therefore a portrait of what it means to believe in yourself and your sense of direction.



David Reina with new stack dryer and two-pound beater in his Brooklyn shop, May 2017.



Claudine Latron standing in front of her laid surface loom with one of her laid moulds, in her former studio in Lille. Photo: Aimee Lee, March 2019.



Howard Clark in his shop, 1983. Photo: Todd Matus. **BELOW:** Lee McDonald promotional photo with laid mould. Photo: Peter Vandermark, circa 1980s. Courtesy of Lee McDonald.



In that way the book is an excellent source of encouragement for anyone starting out in any field, struggling and wondering if you are going to make it. There are no easy answers here, but you cannot help but come away thinking, “Dang. These people did it against some pretty tough odds. Maybe I can too. At the very least I am going to keep trying.”

For those seriously considering going into tool building for hand papermakers, there is no list of instructions, no formula for guaranteed success, but there is a treasure trove of information about how these tool builders learned their skills, and the various assets that helped them along the way. Nearly all of the individuals in this book express an interest in helping anyone, young or old, who is seriously considering going into tool building. More than seeking instruction or training, just getting advice at first from the tool builder about the rewards and setbacks they have experienced would be very beneficial. As I know from personal experience, encouragement and having someone believe in you can be of great value.

In a sense this book is about Aimee Lee and her own love for the craft, the Korean papermaking craft in particular. If you do not already have a copy of her *Hanji Unfurled* (2012, The Legacy Press), you’ll want a copy of that book, in addition to this one. Lee’s motivation for doing this new book is closely connected with her deep concern for what will happen when this generation of tool builders pass on, as some of them featured in the book already have. Speaking of Lee’s commitment, the reader should know that it took nine years of research and writing to produce the book we are celebrating. That is, in itself, testimony to her own papermaking saga.

Aimee Lee leaves us with a concerning question: What happens next? Almost without exception, the specialists Lee introduces us to in this book have not trained understudies. This is not for lack of willingness to do so, but more a case of the right person not coming along and lack of time and space to take someone under the wing for the necessary time period. “How did we get



Tim Moore in his studio in front of his loom, with one of his moulds. Photo: Aimee Lee, October 2017.



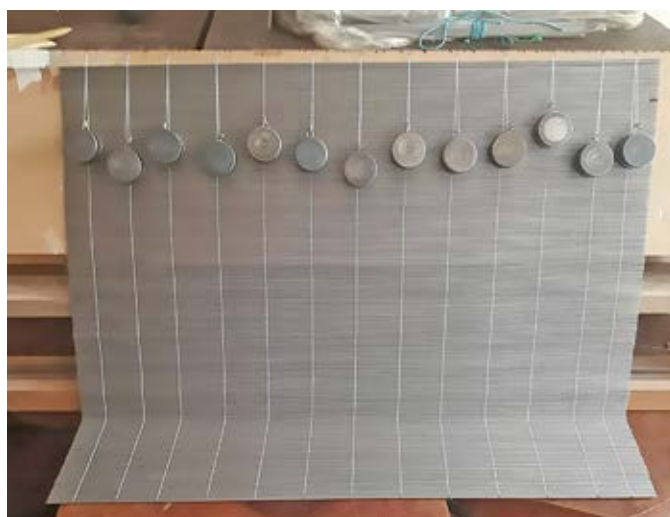
Serge Pirard setting up his laid surface loom prior to his death in 2024. Photo: Aimee Lee, March 2017.

here?” she asks, in the *Final Thoughts* section of her book. Lee attributes the present state of affairs to a devaluing of manual work and the disappearance or decline of such things as shop class and home economics, hand skills passed on in the home, and apprenticeship programs. She encourages the reader and those we know to seek out hands-on work, “to exercise bodily intelligence to strengthen and invigorate both the desire and the endurance to fail and fail again as [you] embody hard-earned skills.”

Since the publication of her book Aimee Lee has proposed various plans for bringing current tool makers together with prospective future tool makers. One idea that Lee and I have discussed is the possibility of getting one of our hand-papermaking organizations (North American Hand Papermakers, *Hand Papermaking* magazine, or the International Association of Papermakers and Paper Artists) to raise money to fund one-on-one conversations, over a two- or three-day period, between potential tool makers and willing current tool makers. The idea would be to seed a dialogue, with no obligation on either party beyond the immersive first meeting. There would be an application process, and current tool makers would be able to select from possible tool maker applicants. Both parties would receive an honorarium. Clearly, finding the right funding for such a program is a first step, and finding interested participants is the next one, but Aimee Lee and I both think there would be serious interest from current and possible future tool builders.

In the end, I have faith that in the future, committed and inventive individuals with a curiosity about papermaking will rise to the occasion, much in the same way this book shows us how papermakers and would-be papermakers in the late 60s and early 70s did just that, *and birthed a generation of tool builders*. Thank you Aimee Lee, for this detailed and revealing portrait of ourselves!

Reviewer’s note: Aimee Lee wrote an excellent and personal summary of the book on her blog. I recommend it! Go to: <https://moonaimiee.blogspot.com/2025/07/new-publication-as-good-as-our-tools.html>.



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