



Handmade watercolor paper with deckle edges.

Paper Pushers

The choice of paper is one that many artists make quickly, but it has major repercussions throughout the drawing process and in the final product. If a drawing is not working out the way you hoped it would, your paper might be part of the problem. Because it is so frustrating to find yourself working on a surface that is not well-suited to your intentions, in this column we'll study some of the basic properties of paper in order to help you make the right choice for your own drawings.

Paper is composed of plants whose fibers have been macerated or disintegrated in water to form a pulp that is processed into flexible sheets. Paper pulp can be made of vegetable and plant cellulose from sources such as hemp, mulberry trees, tree bark, palm leaves, bamboo, papyrus, rice, Iris leaves or reclaimed paper. Cotton paper, also called *rag paper*, has often been considered the premium material for artist's papers.

The impact of paper on the history of Western art cannot

be overstated. It was invented in China sometime between 200 B.C. and 105 A.D. but did not become widely accessible to European artists until the 15th century. During the Renaissance, the increasing availability of paper revolutionized the art-making process and led to the practice of drawing as we know it today. Artists now have access to such a bewildering panoply of paper types that choosing the right one for the right reason can be a perplexing task.



Washed Ashore IV

by Wendy Shalen, 2012, pastel on handmade paper, 30 x 40.

Wendy Shalen used a handmade paper for her "Washed Ashore" series. Her pulp was made from strips of discarded watercolor paintings, which she pulverized with water in a blender and mixed with pigment. She poured the colored pulp onto a 30"-x-40" screen mold while manipulating the fiber slurry to form an abstract color composition in the paper itself. She then drew on the finished paper with a combination of charcoal and pastel, sometimes moistened for a wet-on-wet technique.

MAKING PAPER BY HAND

Most papers you'll find in stores are machine-made, but some companies still make paper by hand, an art form all its own. Handmade papers are usually produced with considerable care and high-quality ingredients, and the beauty of these papers can be an integral part of the beauty of the images drawn on them. The process is not easy to perfect, but it's fun to try, as the basic methods are surprisingly similar to those used centuries ago. Here's how it works.

The raw ingredients are first cleaned and made into small pieces. They are beaten with a wooden mallet

or pulverized in a blender into a pulp suspended in water, resulting in a substance known as *half stuff*. This is then poured over a mold consisting of fine mesh stretched over a wooden frame that has been placed at the bottom of a vat. A second frame, called a *deckle*, is placed over the edge of the mold.

Once the mold is coated with a layer of the mixture, it is lifted out of the container and shaken to drain excess water. Sheets are removed from the mold and placed in a pile between woven sheets called *felts*. The full pile of alternating paper sheets and felts is known as a *post*. The post is pressed to remove moisture, and the paper is then separated from the felts and air dried. The resulting sheets are framed on all four sides with the distinctive characteristic of handmade paper, the irregular *deckle edges* that result from pulp that has leaked between the mold and the deckle and remained attached to the paper.

If the mold is gently shaken as it is lifted from the wet pulp, the pulverized fibers interlock in a crisscrossed way, creating a relatively smooth, random pattern of fibers. This type of surface allows an artist to develop evenly massed darks and sharp clean



Handmade black textured paper with white, copper, silver and gold fragments.



Delicate imported tinted fiber papers.

lines in a wide range of values. When the mesh has a crisscrossing pattern, the resulting paper has a *wove* finish on the side of the sheet that was in contact with the mesh. If the mesh consists of parallel strands, the sheet instead has a *laid* surface.

The material used for the mold also impacts the look of the paper. Mold strands were originally made of cord, which imparted a soft, organic pattern to the drawing surface. Today wire is often used instead, but it can give paper an unpleasantly uniform pattern. Some artists prefer to draw on the "wrong" side of the paper to avoid the mechanical look of the wire-strung imprint.

MACHINE-MADE PAPER

As you would expect, machine-made papers produce more uniform results. Commercial papers come in many standard weights, with the heavier and thicker papers generally being more durable and preferable especially for working with wet media.

Commercial papers often come in



Torso

by Terry Ann Tomlinson, 2015, cast pigmented Kozo paper, 26 x 12 x 4.

Torso is a sculpture made out of *kozo paper*, a stiff Japanese paper made from fibers of the *kozo* plant. "Kozo is wonderful in that every strand has its own personality," says Tomlinson. "When I made this piece I arranged the fibers to express the flow of energy in the female human form."

MATERIAL WORLD

three basic textures. *Hot-pressed* paper is processed between hot rollers, evolving into fine, smooth surfaces. *Cold-pressed* papers have an unblemished, medium-texture surface. *Rough* papers, created with special pressing and drying techniques, have the most irregular, textured surfaces. A given drawing medium will behave very differently depending on the texture of the support. The rougher the paper, the more the medium will be sanded off by the surface and retained by it. A smoother surface allows for subtler shading tones in light areas and sharper, unbroken lines.

Newsprint is an inexpensive form of paper that is frequently recommended for beginning artists. Personally, I have a love-hate relationship with it. I love it because it



City Study

by Sherry Camhy, water-soluble colored pencils and crayons on handmade paper, 8 x 11.

was the first paper I learned to draw on, and I liked its feel and its mellow tone. But newsprint doesn't age well, and my saved drawings have become brown and brittle. No responsible artist or gallery would sell work on such a surface, and today I use it only for wrapping gifts. You never know when a drawing will turn out to be your best, so I recommend always working on an archival surface, if only for safe keeping.

PAPER POINTERS

There is nothing more unpleasant than drawing on paper that begins to feel like an old pilled sweater or discovering halfway through a drawing that your paper is not the right one for the media you're using. On the other hand, nothing feels better than working on the right paper for the right drawing on the right day. To help achieve these perfect fits, here are some considerations to keep in mind while purchasing and using drawing paper:

- Rougher surfaces allow you to apply more layers of media such as pastel than smooth surfaces do.
- Moisture affects paper, making it expand, contract, wrinkle and crumble. If you're using water-media on a paper lighter than 300-lb, you should stretch the paper firmly to minimize distortion.
- The absorbency of a paper is affected by whether *sizing* has been added to the pulp or sprayed on the surface. Sizing serves as a protective coating, making crisp pen-and-ink or watercolor images possible. It also makes erasing easier. Un-sized paper acts more like a blotter, soaking up wet media.
- Whitening agents are sometimes added to pulp to intensify the brightness of a paper. Whiter papers allow for a wide range of values, give greater transparency to colored pencil pigments and often add a cold, crisp feeling to the image in general.

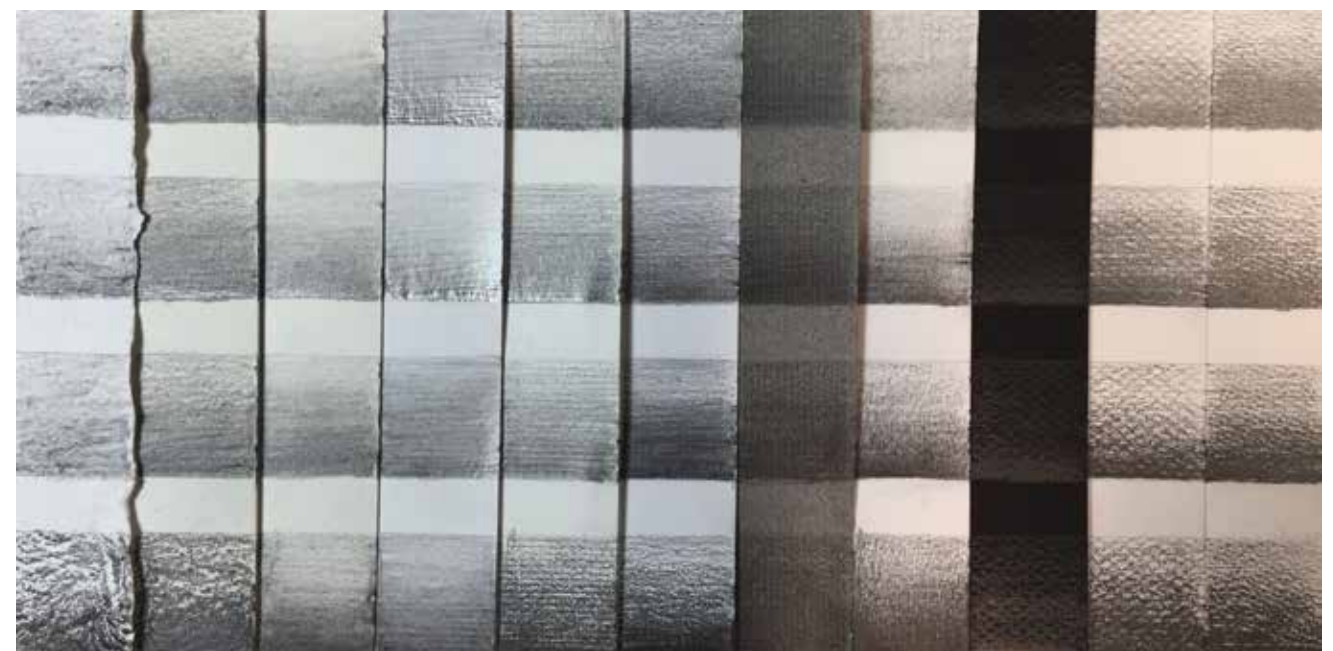


ABOVE

When whiteners are added to a white paper, the paper will reflect blue light when rolled.

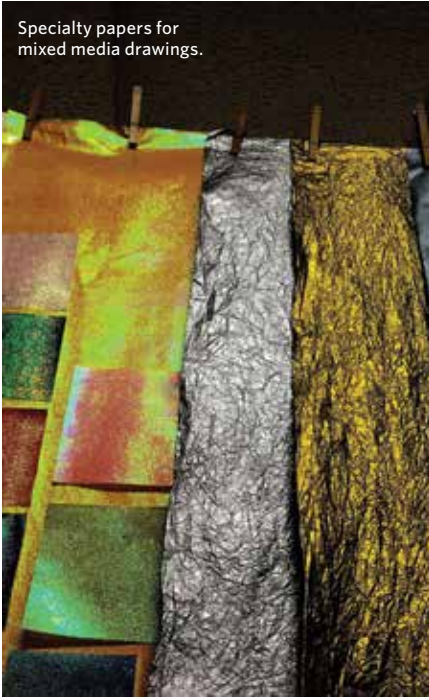
BELOW

Swatches of graphite from four pencils (2H, HB, 2B and 9B, moving from top to bottom) on various artist papers.



MATERIAL WORLD

Specialty papers for mixed media drawings.



- “Ply” indicates the thickness of a sheet. The higher the ply number, the thicker the paper.
- Papers with a pH level of 7 or higher, which are often labeled “acid free,” are acceptable for most artists’ purposes.
- Check that any paper you are using for finished work is marked “lightfast.”
- Toned papers are favored by many artists. Drawing on toned paper makes it easier to judge values, to create darker darks, and to add highlights for dramatic effects. Working on toned paper helps harmonize your colors, because everything will have the same color base.
- Semi-transparent, delicate rice

papers can be used to create complex levels of overlapping images.

- When shopping for papers, feel the surface yourself, because textures vary between manufacturers. A “vellum finish” from one brand might feel different than another.
- Before buying a paper, do your research and read all the information about it you can find.

If you haven’t found the right paper for you, keep experimenting, and remember that a material’s limitations can sometimes stir a creative response. There may be no one perfect paper for every drawing every time, but it is exciting to have so many to choose from. ❖