

Viral Paper

By Tom Bannister

I was asked to reflect on the field of hand papermaking in the late 20th century, the so-called renaissance which began in the mid-1970s, and Marilyn Sward's involvement in the context of that revival. It was my privilege to work closely with Marilyn during the twelve years she served on *Hand Papermaking's* board of directors, half the time as board chair. Like me, she was most definitely a carrier of the highly infectious paper "bug" and we happily spread the virus together. Where did she first catch this insidious fever?

In her formative years Marilyn nurtured an innate creativity that ultimately landed her among art school peers, but hand papermakers were as rare as desert mosquitoes back then. Unless she studied the American Arts & Crafts Movement, specifically a group of craft revivalists called the Roycrofters, she was unlikely to come across the name Dard Hunter. Yet years later she would devour his many books on hand papermaking and develop a kinship with this paper pioneer's grandson. If there is one source of our frenzy it would be Hunter's 1943 classic *Papermaking: The History and Technique of an Ancient Craft*, especially the 1978 Dover edition.

In the 1950s one may have chanced upon an exhibit or lecture by Douglass Morse Howell, who by that time had designed a studio-sized beater, grown his own flax, and experimented with pulp painting. Then there were three visionaries of varied backgrounds who first made paper in 1957: fine printer Henry Morris, weaver Mildred Fischer, and sculptor Winifred Lutz. While these and a very few other Americans had

fallen prey to the bug and already had their hands in the vat, the curious mainly looked overseas for information and inspiration. For most of the 20th century, The Japan Paper Company and its later incarnations imported handmade papers from global sources, and published amazing swatchbooks giving artists a glimpse of the potential. Similarly, a little Chicago shop called Aiko's served this need for locals; Marilyn Sward was first drawn to this magnet in 1961.

In the early 1960s, when Marilyn was a painting major at the University of Illinois in Urbana, Laurence Barker was busy in the Printmaking Department at Michigan's Cranbrook Academy of Art establishing the very first college-level papermaking program. With skills he picked up from Douglass Morse Howell, some moulds originally belonging to Cranbrook's founder George Booth, and a beater donated at the request of Dard Hunter, Barker pieced together a studio and curriculum. His students went on to found other fledgling papermaking programs, most notably at Wayne State University and at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

In the 1970s, Kathryn and Howard Clark forged their Wayne State instruction with San Francisco ideals and built Twinrocker in Indiana. Sue Gosin and Paul Wong soaked up Walter Hamady's teaching in Madison and the result was Dieu Donn  in New York. Joe Wilfer took leave from the Madison Art Center to establish his Upper U.S. Paper Mill and organize The First Conference of Hand Papermakers. Fulbright and MacArthur Fellow Timothy Barrett embarked with a Cranbrook initiation and a Twinrocker apprenticeship and became the first president of The Friends of Dard Hunter. The bug was spreading.

About this time Marilyn was feverishly experimenting with all manner of textured surfaces, especially paper (I remember her talking about an early piece of hers, a sewn quilt of handmade papers with photo images), and she was forming collaborations with like-minded artists. In the 1980s Marilyn put her organizational energy into Paper Press and then Chicago Paper. Elsewhere, others with similar zeal founded Pyramid Atlantic in 1980, Magnolia Editions in 1981, Paper Intensive (later Paper & Book Intensive, or PBI) in 1982, Picante Paper in 1984, MCBA in 1985, International Association of Hand Papermakers and Paper Artists (IAPMA) in 1986, The Rutgers Center in 1987, and other such societies of the afflicted. Public institutions also responded to the outbreak of paper passion. The Summer 1988 issue of *Hand Papermaking* magazine states that 249 colleges and universities responded to a survey of hand papermaking classes.

On first glance, paper is surprisingly easy to make, so those susceptible are painlessly bitten. At some point, everyone mentioned above (and many others unmentioned, with apologies) said to themselves “I can do it!” Then they spent the rest of their days attempting greater perfection and richer expression. I’m guessing that Marilyn Sward segued fairly quickly from “I can do it!” to “Let’s do it!” She naturally and gracefully collaborated with others and got the job done, all the while visualizing her next venture--forming her next alliance.

The last project we collaborated on was the establishment of an endowment fund to mark *Hand Papermaking* magazine’s 20th anniversary. Securing our future was important to Marilyn. It was a hectic time and she often encouraged me to take some R&R at her bucolic paper studio in the Wisconsin northwoods. Not long before she died I sat next to her hospital bed lamenting that I was never able to accept that invitation to

make paper with her. At this point in her illness she could not open her eyes and could barely speak. Very softly, with considerable effort and the tiniest smile, she murmured her last words to me: "Let's do it!"

Tom Bannister is the Executive Director of Hand Papermaking, Inc.