

Amanda and Michael in front of the Paper Valley Motel in Appleton, Wisconsin, during a Dard Hunter Conference, c. 1987. All photos courtesy of the authors.



Amanda and Michael in Silver Spring, Maryland, in 2005.

Founders' Conversation: Amanda Degener and Michael Durgin

For this twentieth-anniversary issue, Hand Papermaking invited its co-founders to share their thoughts on the past and future of the organization. This conversation took place in October 2005, at the home of Amanda Degener. Ed.

Michael Durgin: Here we are, back living in the same place again, after more than thirty years.

Amanda Degener: That's right. We both live near Silver Spring, Maryland, just outside of Washington, D.C.

MD For *Hand Papermaking's* twentieth-anniversary issue, we were asked to speak about where the idea for the magazine sprang from. But, since the story of our meeting at the 3 Aces Diner in Lebanon, New Hampshire has already been told, we thought we would talk about early beginnings.

AD Michael and I met because our families were friends. Our fathers taught at the same school and our mothers both taught art at a different school, but not at the same time. And we lived in the same neighborhood.

MD More than anything though, it was our moms who were the tight connection. Very close friends.

AD I would agree with that. They were both extremely creative people. Charlotte, Michael's mom, used to make fabulous costumes for theatrical performances; they were just unbelievable artworks in themselves.

MD Halloween was fun too. [Both laugh.] She also made puppets and she taught art to kids, as did your mom, Patricia. They were both multi-talented but clay was Patsy's main medium and continues to be.

AD I was very influenced by her, growing up in a production atmosphere. My mom did production ceramics: bowls, mugs, plates, that kind of thing. Now I do production paper...

MD I think that both of us had each other's mothers as teachers at some point, whether it was formal or informal. Do you remember that Charlotte had little art sessions in our backyard? I recall our backyard fence covered with kids' art from one of those afternoon sessions.



Charlotte Durgin (1919–2005) with student art work, early 1960s, St. Louis, Missouri.



Amanda's mother, Patricia Degener, painting her paper jewelry in her garage studio in St. Louis, down the street from the Durgins.

AD She had this great kind of “we can do it” energy. “Let’s just make some projects and see what happens!” That’s the kind of attitude we had going into the magazine—well, why not?

MD That is how the magazine started. It was as though we had said: “Let’s put on a show!”

AD We thought, what could go badly? A lot of people wouldn’t have that kind of attitude.

MD Before we talk about the magazine, let’s talk about how we both came to papermaking. You were more on a track that was art-oriented than I was. I took kind of a roundabout route...

AD ...Books!

MD That’s true, for me, paper was a natural connection because I grew up in a house with hundreds of books. They held a fascination for me, as objects, beyond the text. I just like being around books: old books, interesting ones, different kinds. My first exposure to papermaking happened when I visited you at Bennington College.

AD I always said that the best thing I ever did for hand papermaking was to introduce Michael Durgin to the field. [*Both laugh.*]

MD After I visited you at Bennington, I moved to the Washington, DC area and got busy with a totally different field. I’m doing that full-time now, working with computers and software and economists and other wild people. After a few years in Washington, I began to feel this itch of wanting to do something creative. An artist named Yuriko Yamaguchi, who is still in the Washington area, was teaching a papermaking course during the week, down in Alexandria. I asked my boss if I could take off Thursday mornings to take this course, and she said, sure, which was very nice. And so, for two months I started falling in love with papermaking. That was my first formal training, followed by classes over the years at Pyramid Atlantic (which, at that time, was up in Baltimore, and was just called Pyramid). That was 1983 or ’84, and then the magazine’s first issue came out in ’86. So, that’s the progression for me, but what about you?

AD I had been doing ceramics at Bennington, which was like being at home because I grew up with ceramics. Then I had a whole year’s worth of sculptural claywork explode in the kiln. It was actually

the best thing that ever happened to me. Of course I didn’t know it at the time. I thought, oh, this is crazy. I want to work big and I can’t work big, so I started making these wood things and I wasn’t very good at carpentry, so I covered them with paper pulp to cover up my carpentry and they looked like these big floats in a parade and I just thought they were fabulous. I started getting really into it—à la spitballs—throwing the pulp onto the form and having it stick.

MD How did you even know about pulp?

AD My drawing class went to visit Ken Noland, who was living in the Bennington area at the time. It was a field trip and everyone got to make *one* sheet of paper. I remember putting my hands in that paper vat and when I pulled a sheet of paper, I gasped. I thought, oh my god, that’s it! You know, people talk about love at first sight. It was completely like that. I mean, I just knew, from *one* sheet of paper.

MD That sounds more intense than most people’s experience, but there is that immediate, visceral kind of reaction to papermaking, like finger painting or making mudpies.

AD It wasn’t just that it was gushy and fun, it was more that I *knew* I was meant to do it, from making that one sheet. I knew instantly, that *that* was what I was supposed to be doing.

MD How fantastic. I never heard that story.

AD After that experience, my whole senior show changed. Sophie Healy, my drawing teacher who took us on the field trip, knew about papermaking and she really encouraged me. She told me how to buy linters. I also bought a hydropulper and I started doing it on my own in the sculpture area. I cleaned up a corner where welding took place. I said, “I’m taking over this corner.” My whole senior show was paper pulp thrown onto wood armatures. After I graduated I applied to Yale with slides of that work. I got in and was able to work with Winifred [Lutz] who just completely turned my head around about the sculptural possibilities and the craft.

MD Wonderful.

AD During that time in the summers I went to Oxbow, which later became the Paper & Book Intensive. One year, Winifred brought



Michael, Amanda, and helper in Minneapolis, stuffing the Winter 1987 issue into envelopes.

me as her assistant. I met a lot of paper and book people and I got into that very small pond a long time ago.

MD Deep into the pond because people like Tim [Barrett] and Elaine [Koretsky] were there and thank goodness, because those people encouraged us and provided a kick-start for our first issue. Because of your connections we were able to ask them to write for us and they were very enthusiastic.

AD Having their support made a huge difference. They recognized in me a young person who was completely addicted in the right kind of way. They saw that we could do it. We didn't *know* we could do it, but *they* knew we could do it. We had no idea what we were getting into...

MD ...which was just as well because there were some periods where we were stuck, and had we known in advance, we might not have ventured into it the way we did. It was a lot of work.

AD I had this file that said something like "Miscellaneous" and it kept getting fatter and fatter.

MD I had *several* of those... [Both laugh.] One of the things that I've really enjoyed with the magazine that I don't think either of us anticipated at the beginning were the spin-offs—the projects that came out of it. Because the magazine only came out twice a year, the newsletter arose out of necessity. There was timely information that couldn't wait for the long production cycle and really deserved a quarterly airing.

AD People really value the newsletter. It gets separated from the publication, which is unfortunate, but the newsletter is so great, with all the workshop descriptions and the informational columns.

MD The newsletter also afforded us another place to put our advertising. I think when we moved our ads from the magazine to the newsletter that really helped the look of the magazine. We wanted it to be a little oversized and have a classy appearance. *Fine Print* was our model...

AD ...oh, that's right...

MD We couldn't afford to letterpress-print the magazine but we wanted that look – it gave us a good model to start from...

AD ...hot...

MD Yeah, we just started with a bang! It makes for a nice continuity twenty years later with that same general format.

AD The magazine is more like a reference book or a journal. I'm always going back to particular articles and looking up specific interviews. I always read the magazine when I get it, but it has become so important as a reference library over time. I might ask myself, "What was that paper in Czechoslovakia made out of?" I can't remember, but I can go back and look. The magazine has been a great research tool linking the craft of papermaking and the art of papermaking.

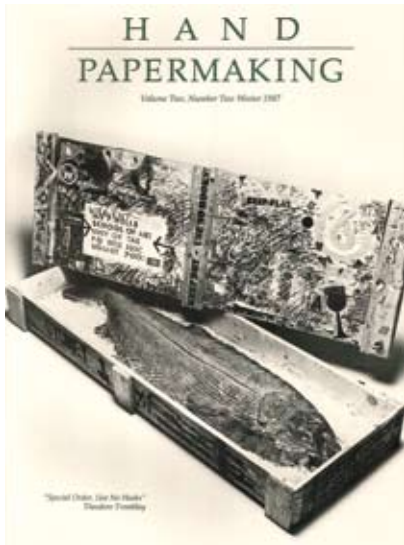
MD That's true. When I would tell people that I worked on this magazine, they would scratch their heads, so I would have to give a synopsis of what it was. I would always talk about the fact that we covered both Eastern and Western traditions, if they even knew what that meant, and that we dealt with both the early craft as well as contemporary, artistic uses of paper.

AD The magazine takes the pulse of the field...

MD ...and documents its time-honored traditions.

AD Another spin-off from the magazine was the slide registry. Early on it helped us to find out what paper artists were making so we could choose material for publication. There just wasn't that much artwork that we were aware of being made with paper, but of course, that's changed a great deal since the magazine started. The other purpose of the slide registry was to promote paper art and to show it to other people. I've always had a personal interest in elevating the craft. So, by having the slide registry, really touting what can be done with the material, and making it easy for curators to look at paper artworks, I thought it would help to close that gap.

MD Another thing that came out of the magazine and the organization were the portfolios. We're now up to, what, our seventh portfolio? The point of the portfolios was to document in fact and in word what was happening at the time that the papers were made. The paper samples in the magazine, in their own way, documented what was happening when the magazine was published. But the portfolios went beyond the paper samples in that



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they were collections on specific themes, papers that otherwise would never be assembled together, or in the same way, and not documented in that kind of detail.

AD What makes the Hand Papermaking portfolios so special is the educational text that accompanies the samples. They are so valuable for teaching. Not only do they describe the aesthetic considerations but they also cover the technical details in making the pieces. The texts are all beautifully edited, and the portfolios are packaged so handsomely. It's not just a bunch of people contributing paper. It's all the material that backs up the paper that is so fabulous.

MD And that was very conscious. We really wanted to document all of the non-paper techniques, such as printmaking or photography, and as much specifics about the papers as the contributors were willing to share. People now and years from now will look at these sets and understand and learn from them.

AD Not that the magazine needs to take on any other projects, but what do you see as some of the possibilities for where it could go? In your wonderful imagination...would it be increased circulation so there's a copy in everyone's dentist office? [Both laugh.] There would be *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Hand Papermaking* magazine?

MD God forbid... I don't know. I guess I have more modest aspirations. I always wanted to do a pop-up paper sample.

AD That's still possible!

MD Possibly a pornographic one.

AD We've been talking about that since the beginning.

MD Really?

Well, I think the current staff, the current board, and the board as it evolves will use their imaginations and, if they want to enter new areas, that will happen organically. How about you? Do you have a vision of the future of the organization?

AD I actually think that papermaking is still the stepchild in the craft field and I'm sorry about that because it's been everything to me in my life. I make art with paper, I write about paper, I make sheets of paper, I teach papermaking, and it's amazing to me that you still come up against these prejudices. I notice it mostly

when I'm hanging out with a variety of craftspeople, and within that field, paper is still constantly rejected at the craft shows and repeatedly put on the back burner.

MD Do you think it's misunderstood?

AD I think that those are the people who need to read the publication. Some of the places that have made a huge difference are the art centers that are doing a lot of collaborations with artists. They are attracting serious artists to work in the medium and they are putting out handsome publications. All that makes leaps for the field. It's all that conversation, dialogue going back and forth, the work being exhibited, that promotes the field. So it's definitely gotten better, but somehow I think that the magazine could play more of a key role in that. I don't know how, maybe it could promote collaboration more. I think the portfolios definitely do that. And certainly our upcoming twentieth-anniversary event at MICA [Maryland Institute College of Art] has collaboration at its heart: we are commissioning Lesley Dill to make a giant, handmade paper kite in collaboration with MICA and kite experts from The Drachen Foundation.

MD It sounds like what you're saying is that to whatever extent the magazine and these adjunct projects have validated papermaking as a medium, there is still more work to be done and the organization should continue to do so. Also that it takes a long time. But nonetheless, I think that in the twenty years since the magazine started, there's been at least incremental movement and new opportunities in the field and positions at institutions...

AD ...more employment...

MD ...more exhibits, more dialogue.

AD The magazine has helped make that happen. And the upcoming celebration at MICA will definitely contribute to raising awareness of the organization and its mission to advance hand papermaking.

MD It should be an exciting event. I'll be there!