

# Papermaking in the Pyrenees

BILL HORNE spends a fortnight in the western Pyrenees soaking up the creative, meditative art of making fine paper by hand.

AUTUMN 2013 GAVE ME the pleasure and privilege of apprenticing for two weeks with master papermaker Juan Barbé in his studio called Eskulan in Zizurkil, Euskal Herria (Basque Country, Spain). I had met Juan in 2012 through the Tolosa Paper School (EPT). I had arranged to tour the EPT's facilities, but when I reached Tolosa, I discovered that they were closed for a holiday. Its staff asked if I wanted to meet a former student in lieu of the tour. Of course I said yes, and Juan took me to Eskulan, then to his warehouse "Paperlan" in nearby Billabona, where he stocks fibres and papers from around the world. We got on very well and stayed in touch through the winter via e-mail.

When I posed the idea to Juan of a short apprenticeship, he was enthusiastic. We agreed on a time period, the kinds of activities I could tackle under his direction, and remuneration

for his time. I applied to the Access Copyright Foundation, which generously assisted me with a \$3,000 professional development grant covering 85% of my eligible expenses, such as travel, accommodations, and an honorarium for Juan.

(The Access Copyright Foundation provides research and events grants to publishers, individual creators and publishing, writing and visual arts organizations. Their programs and eligibility requirements have changed in recent years, so if you're interested I recommend checking with the Saskatchewan Arts Board, which administers these programs on behalf of the foundation: [tinyurl.com/8ov7xzt](http://tinyurl.com/8ov7xzt).)

I knew I was going to be in an area where the majority of residents speak Basque, and also Spanish. I felt I could manage with my Nicaraguan-accented Spanish, but I took along a Basque phrase book and iPod app. People in



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*Bill Horne learning to dip single sheets of cotton rag paper in the Eskulan studio. (Juan Barbé photo)*

shops and in the street were very responsive and welcoming. Basque is difficult to learn, and apparently most visitors don't bother trying, so anyone making the effort will find a warm reception.

#### THE RHYTHM OF WORK

Juan and his associate, Javier Viñarás, start their work day very early each morning. Throughout my stay they were working hard to fill an order to supply a Michelin-rated restaurant with white deckle-edged paper for their menus. The shop was in full production mode.

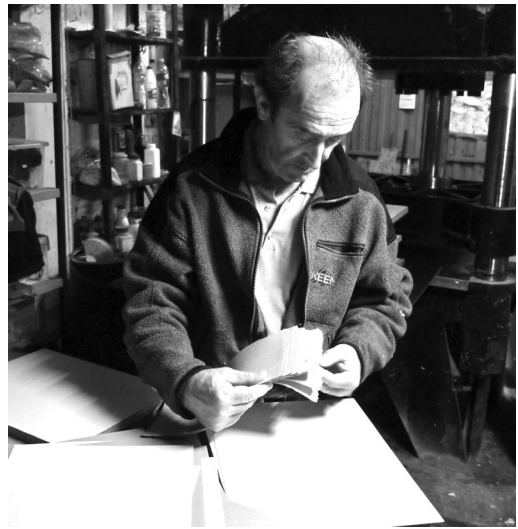
Javier had milled up a big batch of cotton rag pulp and would periodically transfer it to a vat, from which Juan could top up his main dipping tank as needed. Because of the volume of the order, Juan was using a large screen and deckle that makes six sheets at once. After agitating the pulp to the proper level of suspension with a giant motorized blender stick, he would bend over the tank and deftly, smoothly and quickly dip the screen and pull it up from the surface.

Excess water would take a minute to drip away, then he would "couch" the wet sheets onto felts and an interleaved release material to prevent them from sticking to each other—another very smooth move—then cover them with a heavy dampened drying sheet and repeat the process until he had a "post" (stack) of wet sheets between two heavy PVC sheets.

Juan showed me the most ergonomic way to help shuffle the post to the enormous paper press he had custom-built at a machine and metalwork shop down the street. I learned how to operate it: power on, press down. . . wait to reach 50 tons of pressure, indicated by a gauge and water flowing out of the post of paper. At that point I was to quickly stop the press and power off.

The compressed, wet sheets sit in the press for a short resting period, then Juan and Javier raise the press plates, slide the fresh post out onto another surface, and peel apart the damp drying sheets with the fresh paper stuck to them from all the felts and interleaving sheets. They move the fresh paper up to a mezzanine level where Javier hangs them to dry. Then Juan moves all the felts and interleaving sheets back near the vat and starts another set.

It's noisy, wet, steady work that demands



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*Juan Barbé examines the dried, pressed sheets of Rumex crispus paper. (Bill Horne photo)*

continuous concentration and patience. At the same time, it's also meditative.

#### PAPER TEST BATCH: RUMEX CRISPUS (CURLY DOCK)

Before I left my home in Wells, B.C., in late September, I cleaned, dried and vacuum-sealed a kilo of curly dock fibre (*Rumex crispus*).

Although many people consider curly dock to be a nuisance invasive species, the young leaves of this perennial can be eaten (if boiled sufficiently to reduce the level of oxalic acid) and its long taproot is rich in iron. Since it's abundant where I live, I was curious to find out its potential use in papermaking.

At Eskulan we soaked the fibre in water for a few days before boiling it in lye in a stainless steel pot on a gas burner. Our goal was to break down the lignin that binds the fibre. But it turned out to be very resistant. Some plant fibres are ready in less than an hour; this was still a bit rigid after six! In the end, we put a lid on the pot and left it to steep overnight.

After draining the pot, we rinsed the fibre thoroughly and put it into a bucket of water. We used a large industrial blender stick to partially break up the fibre. Then we transferred this to a small, stainless steel Hollander beater that Juan had filled with water.

It didn't take very long to pulp the fibre. Juan tested it a few times by putting some in a clear bottle with water and shaking it to see if the fibre was hydrating and going into suspension. The process took about 20 minutes in total.

Juan made about a dozen sheets using the Nepalese style (see below) in order to be able to use all of the pulp and not waste a drop. They went into the press—at a lower pressure than the production cotton rag paper—then were peeled out and hung up to dry. A few days later we carefully pulled all the paper from the drying sheets, then gave it some compression time in the press for its final flattening.

The result: a gorgeous caramel-coloured paper. The short fibre of the *Rumex* doesn't yield a strong paper, but it's very pretty. Both of us were very happy with it.

#### THE NEPALESE STYLE

For their typical production runs, Juan and Javier use a classic Western papermaking technique which consists of scooping from a large tank of pulp onto a screen with a deckle attached. This requires an excess of pulp and regular top-ups, as well as skill and acute awareness, to maintain sheet consistency.

At a certain point, though, there's not enough pulp in the tank to dip a screen into, so they drain and strain the tank, then squeeze the remaining pulp into balls. Dried out, they can be rehydrated later and used again in another batch.

Juan and Javier also employ Nepalese techniques and equipment: smaller screens with very deep deckles. This makes it possible to use all the pulp, an important advantage when working with a small test batch, especially a plant fibre that has required so many painstaking steps.

For our *Rumex crispus* test, Juan filled a small rectangular container with water beside our bucket of fresh-milled pulp. He placed a screen at the bottom and held a deep-walled deckle tightly to its upper surface. With his free hand, he scooped a cup of pulp from the bucket and poured it into the deckle, which was  $\frac{3}{4}$  full of water. Then he lifted the screen and deckle straight up. The water poured out and the pulp remained on the screen, ready to be couched onto felts.

Each time he poured the same volume of pulp



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*Juan lifts the deckle and screen while the water drains. (Bill Horne photo)*

into the deep deckle, which ensured consistent sheet thickness. Very simple, very efficient.

#### PAELLA AND ARTISTS' BOOKS

At the end of my last day at Eskulan, Juan and I walked back to the flat in Billabona where he and his wife, Carmen Sevilla, live. I had accompanied Juan early when he was shopping in the neighbourhood for clams, prawns, chicken and chorizo, and now he busied himself in the kitchen. While the fragrant fumes of saffron mixed with pimentón, garlic and tomato wafted through the air, Carmen, a printmaker and book designer, showed me around their place, pointing out the many pieces of art they have collected over the years. Some were her monoprints, and all of the pieces were beautiful in their own right.

After a fine lunch of Juan's paella, they brought out their collection of artists' books. A few were one-of-a-kind books Carmen had made using letterpress on exquisite handmade papers or her own pulp paintings, accordion-folded or





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*A book of pulp paintings made by Carmen Sevilla. (Bill Horne photo)*

stitched in innovative and traditional ways.

Juan had been telling me how ingenious Carmen is with book design and bindery, and he was right. One of her pulp painting books evokes the coastline and crashing surf of Asturias, where she is from; another conjures up forests. Anyone who has ever attempted pulp painting knows how much labour, skill and serendipity go into this process. She generously gave me a copy of a catalogue of her pastels published by the Caja de Asturias in 1997. Sparse, gorgeous work.

*Semblanza de Gijón* was one of Juan's first commissions as a professional papermaker. It's a very handsome boxed edition of 75 books printed with letterpress text facing full-page, monochromatic etchings by Pelayo Ortega on Juan's handmade cotton rag paper (92 pages; see [tinyurl.com/pp22zgq](http://tinyurl.com/pp22zgq)).

He showed me what he described as his "only book": a leather-bound journal of stitched, handmade paper. Each page documents a plant fibre he has made into paper, with its characteristics,

time boiling in lye, time in the Hollander beater, etc. Each page has a small sample of the paper attached. This book is truly a unique document—a live, ongoing and dimensional parallel to Lillian Bell's classic *Plant Fibers for Papermaking*.

Everything I saw was a precious object that would win the top prizes at international book fairs. Carmen and Juan, though incredibly modest, are masters of their arts and crafts, among a handful of such people in the world, and I was extremely fortunate to spend time with them.

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 ~ Bill Horne is a visual artist in Wells, B.C., and a former executive member of the board of CARFAC BC (Canadian Artists' Representation/Le front des artistes canadiens). An abridged version of this article appeared in CARFAC BC's newsletter, *Visual Arts Voice*, and some passages, with more photos, can be seen at [bill-horne.net](http://bill-horne.net). The author gratefully acknowledges the generous financial support of the Access Copyright Foundation.