

MARBLING AND SUMINAGASHI

DESCRIPTIONS

MARBLING . . .

Although the Japanese or the Chinese are credited with first having discovered the art of marbling, Western man owes his knowledge of the process to the Persians. Perhaps as early as the 15th Century but certainly by the 16th, marbling was well developed there. By these artesans, who used marbled paper to decorate manuscripts, the art was called Ebru, "cloud art."

Put as simply as possible, this is the process: one floats color, specially prepared with ox gall, upon the surface of water which has been thickened with some sort of vegetable gum, most often one of two kinds, either gum tragacanth or gum caragheenan. Next one teases the floating colors into patterns, using a variety of tools. Once the desired pattern is achieved the artist lays a piece of paper which has been treated with a mordant (alum) upon the image floating on the water and carefully withdraws it. The design comes away on the paper. The sheet is then rinsed with clean water and hung up to dry. With this step the sheet is finished and one begins the procedure anew.

SUMINAGASHI (FLOATING INK) . . .

Suminagashi is the Oriental equivalent of western paper marbling, but it is older, dating to 1118 or before. To produce suminagashi, one floats sumi ink on unthickened water, then urges the spots of color into concentric bands using a pitch-based surfactant. Next the bands are teased into images using either a stylus, a human hair, a breath of air or a hand-held fan. Finally, the image is transferred from the water's surface onto an absorbant paper and allowed to dry.

As with Western marbling, both fabric and paper have been used as carriers of the images.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

The bibliography of suminagashi is small, and it is scattered widely among several languages, most of which are rather unfriendly to English speakers: Japanese, Chinese, German. When I have chosen to include an article in a language other than English I did so either for its illustrations (which can be "read" regardless of language) or for its significance in the history of the craft (which can be read through a translator by those interested).

Two titles on the list below deserve special attention because they are specialized bibliographies devoted to decorative papers, either narrowly (as with Easton on marbled papers) or more broadly (as with Haemmerle on decorated paper ["buntpapier"] generally). Both include articles in whatever language materials on their subjects have been written, with transliterations for non-Western languages. Easton writes in English, while Haemmerle's language is German. So, of the two, Easton is a little easier to use, and, since it was done after Haemmerle it has the dual advantage of including the relevant materials cited in the German book and of reporting items missed by Haemmerle or printed after his book was published. These two books are set apart from the others because of their importance. The items following them are listed in alphabetical order.

No pretense of completeness is made for this bibliography.

EASTON, PHOEBE J. Marbling: A History and a Bibliography. Los Angeles, Dawson's Book Shop, 1983. 190 pages. Illustrated with original samples.

A thoroughgoing bibliography on the subject of marbled paper, it necessarily includes items on suminagashi as well. While these may be found only by scanning the entire bibliography, they are reported, and that is a very important first step. I recommend the book highly.

HAEMMERLE, ALBERT. Buntpapier. Munich, Callwey, 1961. 250 pages. Illustrated with original samples. [Reprinted with photographic samples: Munich, Callwey, 1977.]

Haemmerle takes as his subject the entire range of decorative papers, and, while he includes material on suminagashi, there is less here than in Easton. [There is only one reference in his index to a page number under suminagashi.]

EASTON, PHOEBE J. "Suminagashi: The Japanese Way with Marbled Paper." Coranto: Journal of the Friends of the Libraries, University of Southern California, VIII (1972), pp. 3-17.

Discusses the topic well in the short compass of her 15 pages, the last of which is a bibliography worth consulting. The history and technique of the craft are treated concretely, while other issues, i.e. origins, transmission, influences upon western marbling are dealt with speculatively, due largely to the nature of the evidence. Contains an original sample of contemporary suminagashi.

EASTON, PHOEBE J. "Suminagashi: The Japanese Way with Marbled Paper." In: [Easton, Phoebe J. Marbling: A History and a Bibliography. Los Angeles, Dawson's Book Shop, 1983. pp. 3-14.]

This is an expansion of the earlier article which appeared in Coranto. It discusses suminagashi in the context of marbled paper, rather than approaching it as a separate decorative technique. It adds information unknown at the time of the earlier article, but absorbs that article's bibliography into the broader one of the book.

HEYECK, ROBIN. Marbling at the Heyeck Press. Woodside, California, The Heyeck Press, 1986. pp 59-61, 63.

Robin writes here, briefly, about her experiences with suminagashi in Japan with Youichi Yamada, her teacher. There are two original specimens of her paper in the book, as well as cover papers decorated in the fashion of suminagashi. Western paper was used for all of the work.

IPERT, STEPHANE and MARIE-ANGE DOIZY. "Les origines extreme-orientales du papier marbre." In: [Le Papier Marbre: Son Histoire et sa Fabrication. Paris, Editions Technorama, 1985. pp. 11-16.]

Stephane is a good researcher and his chapter on the oriental origins of paper marbling, i.e. on suminagashi, exhibits this fact in a very good light. There seems to be little dispute that paper marbling originated in the Far East. Stephane, taking advantage of information he has discovered, poses the interesting question whether suminagashi might not have originated in China, thence transmitted to Japan, where it was developed.

NARITA, KIYOFUSA. "Suminagashi, Ink-Floating Paper or Marbled Paper." In: [A Life of Ts'ai Lung and Japanese Paper-Making. Tokyo, The Paper Museum, 1980. pp. 71-76.]

Because Mr. Narita was first a manager in and later a paper historian for a large Japanese paper company, he was well prepared to write his book's chapter on suminagashi. Concise, well written (in English) and loaded with information, the material forms the basis for most of the other writings about the craft which have appeared during the last 40 years. (An earlier version appears in: The Paper Maker. Vol 24, No 1 [1955], pp. 27-31.)

THOM, KARO. "Suminagashi: Ink Floating." Fine Print, Vol 7, No 3 [July 1981], pp. 79-81+.

Ms. Thom prepared this article after she returned from Japan where she worked with Yamada on suminagashi. Ms. Thom is the first American known to have spent time working with a living master of suminagashi. What she learned has formed the basis of the present pamphlet.

YAGI, TOKUTARO. "Kanzen Shuroku Suminagashi-Zome Denjusho." In: Senshoku to Seikatsu, 7 [Fall 1974]. pp. 51-69.

This is an important article on the technique of suminagashi. Unfortunately it is written in Japanese, but it is accompanied by many excellent photographs, from which much can be learned, if indirectly. Other articles discuss the history of the craft and its place in contemporary Japanese culture. (See Easton [Marbling, Dawson's, 1983] for citations to the other articles on suminagashi in this magazine.)

[NOTE: This article is scheduled for publication by The Heyeck Press in a collaborative translation by Kyoko Muecke and Robin Heyeck.]