

HAND PAPERMAKING

A woman with short dark hair, wearing a brown turtleneck sweater, a matching scarf, and brown trousers, stands in the center of a large, circular tunnel. The tunnel is constructed from thousands of overlapping, hand-made paper leaves or petals in various shades of yellow, orange, and brown. The woman is looking upwards and to the right. The floor of the tunnel is a light-colored, reflective surface, possibly polished wood or stone, which shows the reflection of the woman and the surrounding paper structure. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a dreamlike atmosphere.

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Paperwork: Institutional Classifications of Handmade Paper Artworks

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Nazanin Noroozi, Tehran 200108 #1 (from the series *This Bitter Earth*), 2022, 30 x 40 inches, pigmented linen pulp on handmade cotton base sheet. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.

As works of art made from paper pulp become more widely created and collected, museum acquisitions practices have revealed a few growing pains. For years, museums have inconsistently labeled paperworks in their collections and exhibitions, sometimes resulting in inaccurate or misleading work descriptions.¹ Paperworks seemingly defy standard institutional categorization. Arguably, paperworks are not truly “works on paper,” nor “prints,” nor “drawings.” Once they are acquired by institutions, limited category options, terminologies, and understanding of specific techniques can create substantial challenges for ensuring that works are properly defined in collections. This article examines the challenges in creating accurate descriptions of paperworks as they travel from artist and studio to institution, catalog, and archive.

Modern museum artwork departments—paintings, drawings and prints, photography, and sculpture—are not structured consistently, sometimes categorizing work by material (e.g. paint, paper-based) or sometimes by process (e.g. printing, sculpting). For multi-media works, or those that defy standardized categorization, artworks can simply be designated by the department, curator, or funding committee that approved the acquisitions.² The inconsistent rules for museum categories follow the inconsistent logic of medium definitions, which are similarly indicated by process or material. Print—the form most often associated with paperworks—encompasses artwork created through the transfer of an image using a matrix and is therefore defined by the application of a process. Consider the contrast to painting, defined as an unique work created with pigment suspended in liquid (material), or sculpture, defined by the work’s final form and dimensionality.³

At Dieu Donné, we have long held the stance that paperworks are not prints, nor are they paintings or drawings, but are a wholly unique

and separate category of art in and of themselves, requiring a new institutional classification. This unique classification would focus on both the materials and processes used, encompassing artworks made primarily with paper pulp but that incorporate techniques beyond simple formation of a substrate. While acknowledging their ties to printmaking, Dieu Donné’s founder Susan Gosin argues that paperworks break away from the print model too much to be classified under a museum’s prints department. She explains that the difference between the mediums is simple: in a print, “The image is...sitting on the surface...[in] papermaking you can use the same techniques, but when you’re using paper pulp it is not sitting on the surface, it is a part of the entity—it is a part of the object.” She continues, “In papermaking [the image] is of the paper...it’s structural....”⁴ This distinction is notable. Gosin describes paperworks, whether two- or three-dimensional, as objects; a paperwork cannot be a print because it is not a transferred image; it cannot be a painting because it is not at core created through the application of pigment; and it cannot be a sculpture because it is not fundamentally three-dimensional. A paperwork is the image, it is the object.

A new and broader classification would be necessary to accommodate this fundamental distinction between print and paperwork, the creation of which is not without precedent in modern museums: print and photography departments, for example, are fairly recent and unfixed collection areas in institutions.⁵ Gosin suggests that acknowledging the distinctiveness of paperworks could be as simple as expanding drawings and prints departments to something such as “The Paper Arts: Drawings, Prints, and Paper Art.”⁶

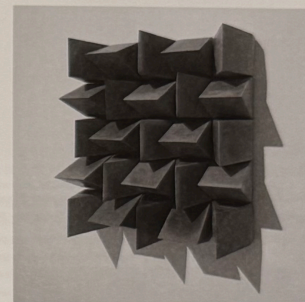
Whether paperworks are distinct enough to warrant their own category in institutional collections requires a closer look at the existing delineations between mediums. Hand papermaking often uses the language and processes of printmaking, adopting and adapting them to paper pulp.⁷ Even within niche circles of printmaking experts, scholars, and curators, however, the field of hand papermaking as a fine art medium is little known, resulting in institutional staff that broadly absorb paperworks as prints within prints and drawings departments, or that create material entries that list paperworks’ mediums as simply “paper,” which while technically correct, is severely lacking in full artistic and technical context.

The print/paperwork dichotomy may not be so simple, however. Many in the print community continuously reexamine and adjust their understanding of what can classify as a print based on a generous concept of secondary contact.⁸ This broad definition of print manifests in exhibitions such as Print Center New York’s 2022–23 “Visual Record: The Materiality of Sound in Print,” which included more “traditional” prints alongside objects like Audra Wolowiec’s cast-concrete work and cast paperworks or Jess Rowland’s circuitry tapestries.⁹ Jenn Bratovich, Director of Exhibitions and Programs at PCNY argues that the organization is not responsible for “pushing” the boundaries of print—“Artists are. We just show what’s going on.... It is useful for us to challenge our thinking. We’re just trying to follow practice.”¹⁰

Using this understanding of print as produced by contact, in papermaking one could arguably classify stenciling or blowouts as a form of printmaking, albeit with the application of linen pulp paint rather than ink. For example, Melvin Edwards created his *Fragments and Shadows* (2001) edition using the blowout technique, through which papermakers used water pressure to carve out the image of locks, chains, and auto parts in a freshly formed sheet of pulp using a stencil matrix.¹¹ (The stencil matrix allows for new sheets of pulp to create replicated forms in multiple). Consider the parallels to creating a matrix through carving a wood block and replicating that shape through inked transfers.



Jess Rowland, *Sound Tapestries*, 2022, 48 x 18 inches each, copper foil on acetate, with electronics. Installation dimensions variable. Photo: Argenis Apolinario. Courtesy of Print Center New York.



Audra Wolowiec, *concrete sound*, 2020, 18.5 x 18.5 x 7 inches, cast ceramic with pigment. © 2020 Audra Wolowiec.

In Nazanin Noroozi’s *This Bitter Earth* series (2022), the artist uses a traditional screenprinting matrix to create images in paper pulp. The papermaking process holds a direct parallel to the printmaking process in this series, but Noroozi uses finely beaten linen pulp pushed through the prepared screens onto still-wet pulp base sheets to create her images. If printmaking as a medium is defined by its use of a matrix, and not its use of ink, then Noroozi’s pulp prints can find a comfortable home in a museum’s prints department.

The print parallel does not apply to all paperworks. Natalie Frank’s pulp portraits, for example, utilize a more painterly approach. Frank works freehand and uses the linen pulp paint as a stand-in for traditional paint. On her website, Frank classifies these paperworks as “paper paintings” that are “formed with brushes, spoons, and poured onto formed cotton base sheets.”¹² The precedence for this paperwork-as-painting classification goes back to the early days of modern hand papermaking (look to David Hockney’s 1970s *Paper Pools*, made in collaboration with Ken Tyler at Tyler Graphics).¹³ Paperworks utilizing a more



Melvin Edwards, *Fragments & Shadows*, 2001, 22 x 17 inches, cotton blowout on pigmented linen base sheet. Edition 16/20. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.



Nazanin Noroozi, *Beirut 200804 #2* (from the series *This Bitter Earth*), 2022, 40 x 30 inches, pigmented linen pulp on handmade cotton base sheet. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.



Melvin Edwards in the Dieu Donné studio, 2006. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.



Nazanin Noroozi in the Dieu Donné studio, 2022. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.

freehand process do not align with printmaking's transfer of images. They are more akin to paintings, rather than prints, and could perhaps be found in a paintings department, thereby splitting paperworks between departments.

Or perhaps this medium-specific classification system is no longer sufficient for contemporary artworks. Instead, understanding holistically how artists engage fluidly with their materials and techniques should be more important than creating sharp delineations between departments. Bratovich notes that you "have to understand the process [of making an artwork] and how it was created to understand where it might be classified."¹⁴ Gosin agrees,

explaining that there needs to be an ongoing exchange between the papermaking community and the curators and scholars interpreting paperworks, "because we need their help...[but]...they also need us—they may not know they need us but they do. It has to be a partnership."¹⁵ Ultimately, ongoing conversations between artists, makers, and curators will be necessary to accurately describe and document paperworks in institutions. New curatorial sensibilities, and cross-departmental collaborations can only serve to enrich the public's understanding of artworks made from paper pulp, bringing papermaking as a medium further into the larger fine-arts conversation.



Natalie Frank, close detail of *Woman, Eyes Closed III*, 2019, 26 x 19 inches, linen pulp paint on cotton base sheet. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.



Natalie Frank in the Dieu Donné studio, 2019. Courtesy of Dieu Donné, New York.

has organized its collection of drawings and prints both separately and together over the years, first presenting as a cohesive department in 1960, separating into "Prints and Illustrated Books" (in 1971), and finally consolidating all three artwork types once again as recently as 2013. See *The Museum of Modern Art, "Chronology of the Department of Photography,"* press release, May 1964, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdf/doc1/press_archives/3415/releases/MOMA_1964_Reopening_0041_1964-05.pdf; and "The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Records 1929-1959 in The Museum of Modern Art Archives," MoMA The Museum of Modern Art, <https://www.moma.org/research/archives/finding-aids/MoMAExhFiles1929-1959/> (accessed September 8, 2024).

6. Susan Gosin, telephone conversation with the author, August 22, 2024.
7. Susan Gosin notes that there is a clear tie between the mediums, and a reason why so many papermakers get their start in printmaking. Gosin, telephone conversation with the author, August 22, 2024.
8. In her 2024 book *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print*, art historian Jennifer Roberts simplifies the definition of the prints she discusses to "object[s] that [have] been made by transferring an image between two surfaces in contact." Jennifer Roberts, *Contact: Art and the Pull of Print* (Princeton University Press, 2024), 13.
9. For more see Ellere Endos and Jenn Bratovich, eds., *Visual Record: The Materiality of Sound in Print* (Print Center New York, 2022).
10. Jenn Bratovich, conversation with the author, August 16, 2024.
11. Widely collected by large institutions, this work is classified as a print in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art, and under the Drawings and Prints Department at the Museum of Modern Art, NY. "Fragments & Shadows," The Collection: Modern and Contemporary Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/491996> (accessed September 8, 2024); "Fragments & Shadows," Collection, Philadelphia Museum of Art, <https://philamuseum.org/collection/object/348331> (accessed September 8, 2024); "Melvin Edwards: Fragments & Shadows," Art and artists, MoMA, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/82626> (accessed September 8, 2024).
12. "Paper Pulp Painting," Natalie Frank, <https://www.natalie-frank.com/home/paper-paintings-and-ceramics/project-one/jsu4d-4n28> (accessed September 8, 2024).
13. Hockney classifies his Paper Pools series on his website as paintings, despite the lack of "traditional" paint-material (oil, acrylic, etc.) used in his making. In his 1981 book recounting the making of these paperworks, Hockney explained that "painting and papermaking are totally fused" when working with pulp. David Hockney, *Paper Pools* (Abrams, 1980), 5.
14. Jenn Bratovich, conversation with the author, August 16, 2024.
15. Susan Gosin, telephone conversation with the author, August 22, 2024.

NOTES

1. Papermakers and writers describe artworks made from handmade paper in many ways, often using inconsistent language and terms. These terms include "paperworks," "paper works," "paper art," or "paper-based works of art," among many others. For the purposes of this article, I will borrow Timothy Barrett's term "paperworks" to refer to artworks made primarily of paper pulp. For more see Timothy Barrett, *European Hand Papermaking: Traditions, Tools, and Techniques* (The Legacy Press, 2019), 316; Eugénie Barron essay in *Handmade Paper: Fibers Exposed!* (Hand Papermaking, 2012); Tatiana Ginsberg, ed., *Papermakers Tears Volume II* (The Legacy Press, 2023), 116; Bridget Donlon, *Pure Pulp: Contemporary Artists Working in Paper at Dieu Donné* (Prestel, 2016), 6; among others.
2. Clara Rojas-Sebesta, telephone conversation with the author, August 9, 2024. My thanks to Clara Rojas-Sebesta, Scout Hutchinson, and Tamara Fultz for taking the time to explain certain elements of the cataloging and documentation process at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Thomas J. Watson Library, respectively.
3. See "prints (visual works)," *Art and Architecture Thesaurus Online*, Getty Research, <http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300041273> (accessed September 8, 2024); "paintings (visual works)," *Art and Architecture Thesaurus Online*, Getty Research, <http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300033618> (accessed September 8, 2024); and "sculpture (visual works)," *Art and Architecture Thesaurus Online*, Getty Research, <http://vocab.getty.edu/page/aat/300047090> (accessed September 8, 2024).
4. Susan Gosin, telephone conversation with the author, August 22, 2024.
5. MoMA's Department of Photography was not established until 1940. MoMA



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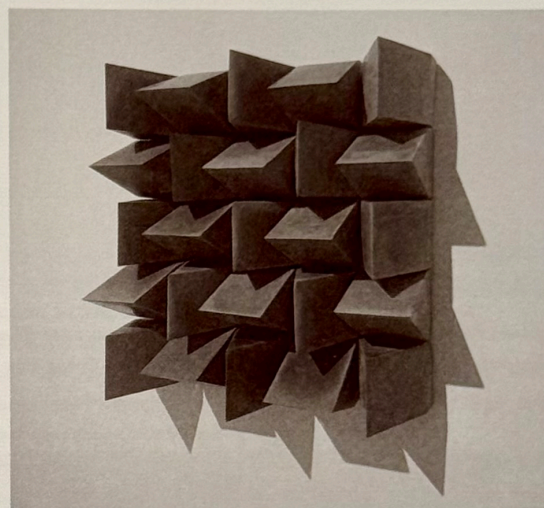
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