

# from RAG to PAPER

A VISIT INSIDE PAPERIE SAINT-ARMAND

A blank sheet of paper marks a new beginning and endless possibilities. Many artists feel a certain sense of fear when faced with a blank page. You can find yourself stalled and waiting for that burst of inspiration before making the first mark. But what comes before that pause—before the artist receives the sheet, before the paper hits the shelves of the art store and before the product even leaves the factory? There is a remarkably intricate and labour-intensive production line, turning raw materials into paper. And beyond the industry of mass-paper engineering, there are still a small number of mills sprinkled throughout North America that are employing traditional techniques and making paper by hand.

**T**ucked away below street level on the southwest shore of the historic Lachine Canal in Montreal, we find one of those hidden gems. Were it not for the yellow door, one would likely miss the entrance to this nondescript brick building. Head down the short flight of exterior stairs and push through two heavy doors, and you will suddenly find yourself inside a working paper mill.

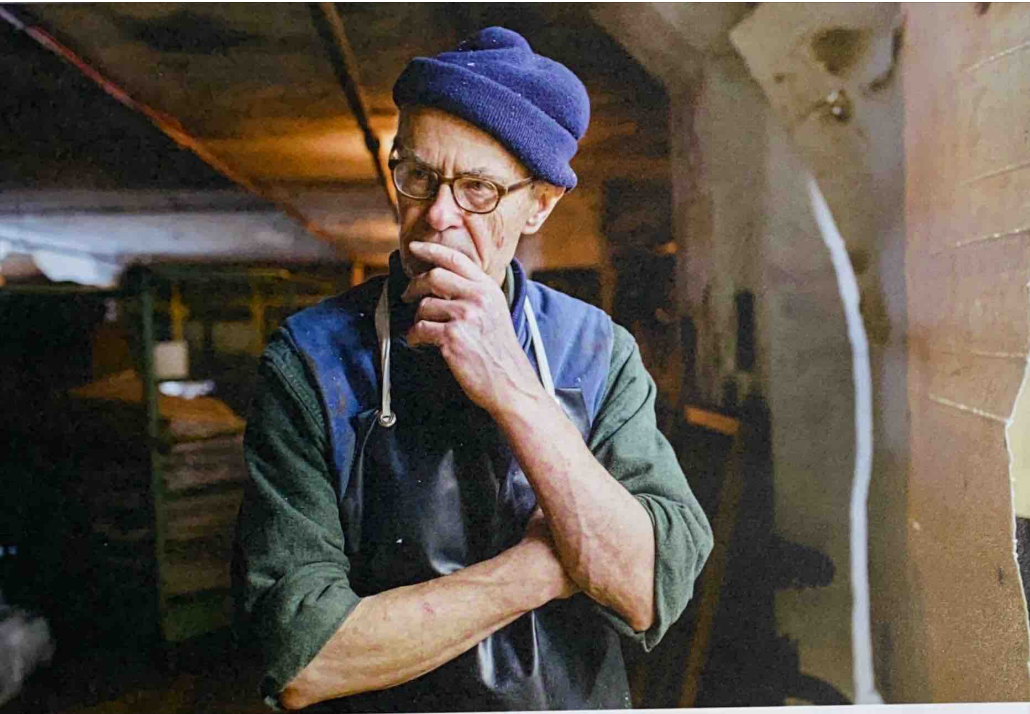
Papeterie Saint-Armand is a sprawling space that is bursting at the seams with paper in various stages of production. The uneven cement floors are damp, and you can hear the rhythmic slosh of water and the whirl of antique machinery. Beyond the centre area work tables, individual sheets of paper are draped over tubes and hung on lines by clothespins. There are piles, boxes and shelves bursting with exquisite papers, ranging from solid tones to decorative and organic patterns. There are

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*Proprietor of Papeterie  
Saint-Armand,  
David Carruthers  
surrounded by the  
materials and tools of the  
paper-making trade.*







mountains of artist pads with deckled edges, and these stacks create delightful textures that I cannot resist touching. It is a paper lover's dream, and it might just be me, but there is a touch of magic in the air.

When I arrive at the mill on a winter morning, owner David Carruthers is up to his elbows in wet pulp. He moves between a deep vat of water and a table with stacks of fresh paper, pressed between sheets of felt. An industrial rubber apron and pair of heavy waterproof boots help shield him from the constant splash of water. He is a bespeckled gentleman with a twinkle in his eye and paper in his genes.

David's grandfather owned the Interlake Paper Mill in Ontario, and his father sold paper for the family company. With a degree in economics, David spent years working at the Pulp and Paper Technical Association of Canada. He conducted research and represented the company on matters of legislation, labour relations and newsprint media. However, he grew tired of office work and decided to launch his own business. He knew there was a place in the market for handmade papers made with "a dash of technology." In order to gain capital for his new endeavour, David sold his dairy farm, which was located near the town of Saint-Armand in southern Quebec. Thus, in 1979, Papeterie Saint-Armand was born. He began on a small scale and moved several

#### THE HANDMADE PROCESS

*From stirring the pulp using a rafting paddle, much of the paper-making process is done by hand.*

*David submerges the mould in the pulp and then lifts. The pulp settles in the mould and the water drains through the mesh.*

*The deckle is carefully lifted off the mould and the pulp that flows over the edge of the frame creates the deckled edge that is a hallmark of handmade paper.*

*The "couching" process involves pressing the mould onto dry sheets of felt, thus transferring the paper. Each wet sheet of paper is nestled between two layers of felt. Once a stack is prepared, the excess water is removed in a hydraulic press.*

*The pressed sheets are hung to dry.*







times, eventually purchasing larger equipment as business grew. Woolfitt's Art Supplies and New York Central Art Supply were among his first customers, and Saint-Armand continues to sell paper to retailers, bookmakers and artists alike.

But before the paper even touches the hand of the artist, it undergoes quite a journey through the mill. Saint-Armand does not use artificial dyes or bleaches, so when it comes to creating colours, they start with the original fibres. Remnants of blue jeans are used to create blue paper, while humble T-shirt scraps are turned into beautiful sheets of white cotton paper.

Our tour begins in a dim area of the mill that houses fabric and raw materials. There are bins of T-shirt cut-offs and high-thread-count bedsheets, as well as various colours of linen. Other barrels contain denim scraps from blue jeans. There are also huge wheels of jute—a versatile vegetable fibre commonly known as burlap. I run my fingers through raw Belgian flax, a soft fibre that is grown for weaving and textiles. Saint-Armand also stocks Canadian flax, which is grown for seed and therefore contains coarse fibres, or “shive.” All of these materials are quietly awaiting transformation and a new life.

The rags are run through a chopper to create small, semi-uniform pieces that will be beaten into pulp. Although

Saint-Armand opened in 1979, it was not until 1992 that David was finally able to locate an early 20th century beating machine, in Massachusetts, and transport it across the border. His Hollander beater is a massive workhorse, powered initially by electricity, then by the pure centrifugal force of its giant flywheel. Water is added, and the fabric is beaten into pulp and then pumped upstairs to the room that houses the Fourdrinier. This impressive machine is another antique (purchased from a research centre in Ontario) that uses conveyer belts to drain and press the pulp, and ultimately cut the newly made paper to size. David and his employees know these old machines intimately, making repairs and handling maintenance completely in house.

But pulp at Papeterie Saint-Armand can also take an alternate journey, into large vats full of water where paper will be made by hand. Making handmade paper is physical work, requiring a good degree of fitness. Case in point: the pulp has to be constantly stirred with a rafting paddle! Saint-Armand's handmade papers are created using a variety of moulds and decks, which are handcrafted by Britt Quinlan of The Paperwright. Britt's moulds are made of fine-wire screens, woven on a loom and hand-sewn onto pine and mahogany frames. A second empty frame (known as a “deckle”) is laid over the mould and then submerged underwater. When the



mould is pulled up, the excess water drains through the mesh and the pulp settles at the bottom. Some of the pulp flows out from under the frame, creating the wavy or “deckled” edge that is characteristic of handmade papers. On the day of my visit, David was creating “wild deckle” paper with especially exaggerated edges. Once the mould is drained, it is carefully pressed on wet sheets of felt. This process is called “couching,” which comes from the French verb “coucher” (to lay or set down). The paper is gradually stacked between layers of felt and then taken to a hydraulic press to drain the excess water. The freshly pressed sheets are then hung out to dry. One day you might find a sea of tomato-red papers hanging out to dry, while on another, a host of blue sheets. On any given day, David and his team can make between 120 and 150 sheets of handmade paper. “You have to be quite focused,” he says. “It's a nice zone to be in, too.”

Beyond standard stock and client orders, David loves to create unique decorative papers. Browsing through a stack will reveal an eclectic array of patterns, shapes and colours. He makes these papers for his own enjoyment, and bookbinders are often attracted by the designs, which they can section and frame to their liking. Depending on what is available on a given day, David will laminate different colours of pulp on a base sheet. He plays with different forms and motifs, creating pin-stripes, plaid and shapes inspired by mangoes and watermelon. “So many different motifs,” he muses as we sift through papers. “I was trying to get some of the spirit of plaid, but it's very hard.” The transparency of tartan can be hard to capture, but the effect can be achieved by layering thin bits of pulp. When I ask if the choice of motif depends on his mood, David replies with a laugh, “I usually just wait until there is an accumulation of pressure.”

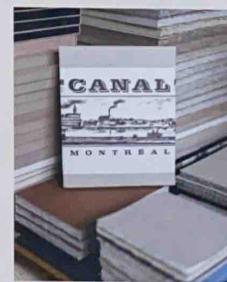
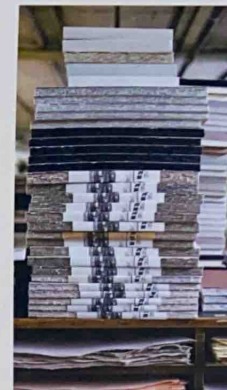
And such is the nature of the creative process. Even the master papermaker can find himself confronted with a blank sheet, waiting until the moment is right to make that first mark. **1**

st-armand.com

## A SYMBIOTIC SUPPLY CHAIN

Some of Saint-Armand's cotton fabric is sourced from Delyla, an independent textile manufacturer in Montreal's Mile-End neighbourhood. Owned by Josephine De Bono, Delyla is committed to eco-friendly business practices, from selecting sustainable fabrics to ensuring that their scraps see a second life. “Josephine is imaginative,” says David Carruthers. “She wants to be sure her waste isn't just going into the St. Lawrence River.” Saint-Armand transforms her cut-offs into paper that is used for all kinds of purposes—including Delyla's hanging tags and business cards.

delyla.com



## THE MANY USES OF SAINT-ARMAND PAPER

Aquaints, bookbinding, boxes, calligraphy, card making, collages, drawing, drypoints, embossing, encaustics, envelopes, etching, intaglio, journals, letterpress printing, monoprints, painting, paper quilting, pastel, presentation folders, retail tags, silkscreen, sketching, wallpapers, watercolour, wedding invitations and more!

For details about papermaking kits and equipment, visit [The Paperwright at users.trytel.com/~brittg](http://ThePaperwrightatusers.trytel.com/~brittg).

How It's Made: To view a short film about Saint-Armand's papermaking process, visit [youtube.com/watch?v=Gq7L9-0XdVw](http://youtube.com/watch?v=Gq7L9-0XdVw).