

No Lost Art

Hanji, traditional Korean paper, continues to inspire

“Would you say you’re in a romantic relationship with Hanji?” So asked a curator during one studio visit, as she listened to me explain my creative process. “Yes,” I replied, after some hearty laughter and contemplative reflection. “It’s been a wonderful relationship, indeed.”

Many artists often project themselves into various materials throughout their career, but end up gravitating toward one specific medium of choice. I am one such artist, and Hanji has become my preferred material over the years. While I fell in love with Hanji at first for its soft appearance, I stayed in love with the material for its strength and durability. For the past decade, I have been incorporating Hanji and the process of its creation into my work. Its influence is present throughout my artistic journey across various forms, including artistic books, performances, interactive installations and more.

As I’ve now spent the latter half of my life in the United States, I am definitely Korean-American, and not just Korean. Another one of Hanji’s particularly attractive qualities, however, is its origins and ties to my mother country. Hanji translates literally as “Korean paper,” with *han* meaning “Korean” and *ji* signifying “paper.” Like a mother, it is graceful and delicate — sometimes even wrinkled — yet also flexible, resilient and forgiving.

The process: how Hanji is made

Hanji is deeply rooted in traditional Korea and is a byproduct of site-specific resources. The paper is handmade with bark derived from the paper mulberry, a native tree. The trees are bountiful in Korea, thriving on the country’s rocky mountainsides.

Harvesting mulberry bark and making Hanji has long been a communal pastime during the winter. Mulberry fibers are naturally long but are especially strong when harvested in cooler temperatures. Before agricultural activities got into full swing, villagers would use this slower working period to participate in the laborious process of papermaking.

It begins with trimming bark from trees, then steaming it for several hours. After that, the material is peeled, cleaned, bleached in the sun and cooked with a plant ash solution. Once the fibers have been pounded and poured into a vat with hibiscus root extract, it is ready at last, transformed into paper.

This is merely a summary of the papermaking process, however. Preparing these fibers is an ancient process, developed and perfected over the course of thousands of years. It is meticulous and scientific. The plant ash, for instance, is an alkaline solution. Cooking the fibers in it is an alchemical transformation, yielding a material that is stable and perfectly, chemically balanced.

The painstaking papermaking process also gives Hanji a particularly strong quality, in contrast to the standard unsubstantial perception of paper. The single cord-forming method, or *oebalddeugi*, is a derivation uniquely devised in Korea. This approach allows fibers to move freely and overlap. The fibers often criss-cross at 90 degree angles as a result, contributing to the paper’s rugged nature. One step also calls for the layering of two wet layers and fusing them together, in order to increase durability. This doubling is the inspiration of one of Hanji’s nicknames, “yin-yang paper.”



Yoon Youngwoo, Untitled (2006), Hanji, 100x90.5cm. Courtesy of The Artists' Estate and Kujig Gallery. Image courtesy of the Kujig Gallery.

The myth: 100 steps, 100% pure

Hanji has acquired a handful of nicknames over the years, in fact. Beyond “yin-yang paper”, it has also been lovingly referred to as “*dak-jongee*” (*dak* means mulberry bark) and “*baekji*,” with the homonym “*baek*” meaning both “pure” and the number 100. The multiple meanings of “*baek*” make *baekji* a doubly appropriate nickname. It alludes both to the fact that a white sheet of Hanji is pure and that making Hanji, when done in traditional ways, involves 100 steps.

The number 100 thus suggests an interesting tension. While it symbolizes completeness and wholeness, it is also often unattainable and impossible. Throughout Korea, undergoing 100 days of a test period suggests virtues of perseverance, patience and devotion. Let us return now to Hanji. Having undergone a 100-step process in its creation, each sheet of Hanji formed is very special. Some might even say it attains a divine quality as a direct result of this reverent, arduous process.

The legacy: Hanji throughout history

As a result of its meticulous production process, Hanji is a beautiful, durable and pH-neutral substrate that is well suited for the finest art forms. Its archival and ink handling qualities make it an ideal material for bringing life to painting, calligraphy, printmaking and, these days, digital printing.

In fact, many paper conservators confirm that this very scientific method of Hanji making is what has sustained a copy of the Buddhist Dharani Sutra for 1,300 years. The Pure Light Dharani Sutra, as it is called, is thought to be the oldest copy that is printed

in wood block and still preserved to this day.

Hanji’s durability has been also officially acknowledged by Italy’s Central Institute for Restoration and Conservation of Archival and Library Heritage (ICPAL), and Italian conservators have started using Hanji to restore important cultural artifacts, including writing by Saint Francis of Assisi (1182–1226).

Throughout the centuries, Hanji has become one of the most versatile materials. In addition to paper’s most conventional application as a writing surface, it has been woven into elements all around us from special occasions to daily lives. During Buddhist ceremonies, for instance, you might encounter ornate temple decorations made with Hanji flowers and lanterns. Still many people use countless household items that are lined inside and out with Hanji, in a manner similar to decoupage.

While you may think of paper as a typically flimsy and fragile material, it can be further transformed into independent, three-dimensional structures. This is primarily possible only after being treated with traditional paper craft techniques like *jiseung*, which converts papers into cords to enable weaving, and *joomchi*, which binds multiple sheets together like felt.

When wallpapers and windows were being redone in the past, old paper was carefully removed so that the scrap sheets could be repurposed into cords or felted paper. Given a new lease on life, the transformed materials could then generate new Hanji objects like baskets, bowls, vases and much more. Many of these Hanji objects are also varnished with natural lacquer or dyes, in order to become water resistant.

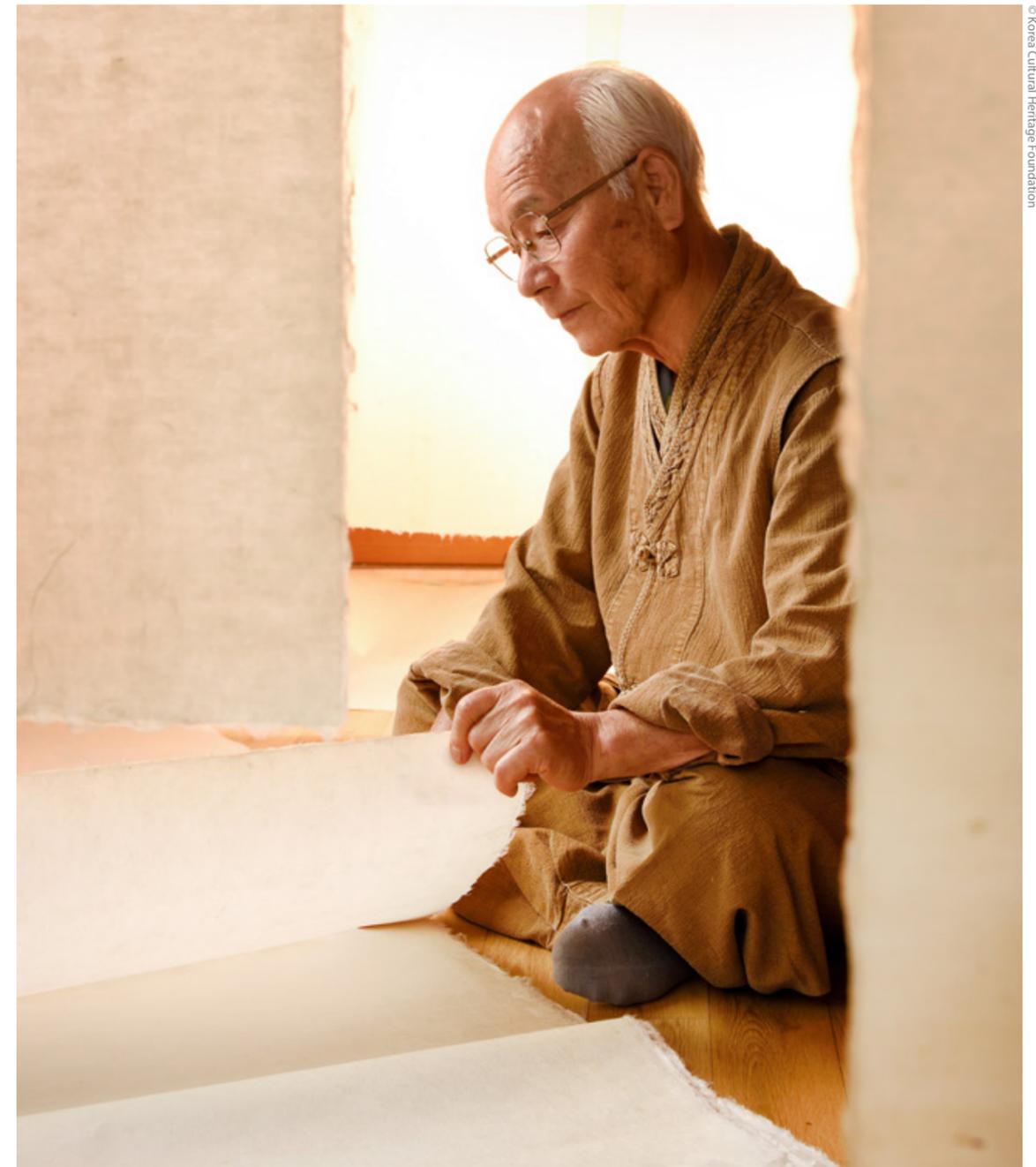
Paper was even once transformed into protective



In the olden days, Hanji used to be called *baekji*. This refers to not only its white hue, but also to the laborious process required to produce it. It’s said the paper required 100 processes to make it - the Korean word for 100 is *baek*.

옛사람들은 한지를 백지라 불렀다. 흰 빛깔 때문에 백지(白紙)라고도 했지만 백 번의 손질이 필요하다 하여 백지(百紙)라 부르기도 했다. 한지의 정성스럽고 고된 제작 과정을 담고 있는 이름인 것이다.

Hong Chun-su, a master of Hanji-making, which is designated Korean Intangible Cultural Heritage No.117.



© Korea Cultural Heritage Foundation



Hanji was featured in its own booth at this year's Paperworld, held in Frankfurt, Germany. Visitors to the fair, the world's largest for stationary, office supplies and writing instruments, had an opportunity to experience Hanji's beauty, both as a material and in its traditional and modern applications.

올해 초, 독일 프랑크푸르트에서 열린 세계 최대의 종이·사무용품 박람회 페이퍼월드(Paperworld)에 한지관이 개설되었다. 참가자들은 한지가 지닌 소재로서의 가능성과 전통에서 현대까지 이어져온 한지 공예의 아름다움을 한자리에서 경험하는 기회를 누릴 수 있었다.

Hanji
The Korean Traditional Paper

KCDF
Korea Craft & Design Foundation

armor. During the reign of King Yeonsan of Joseon some 500 years ago, a number of civilian infantrymen wore at least 13 layers of felted paper armor created with *joomchi* techniques. There are government records that indicate over 30 percent of soldiers used paper armor, citing its adequate protection and added benefits of lightness and insulation during battle. In fact, the government at the time also offered tax incentives for the civilians who equipped themselves with their own paper armor. They even went so far as to provide piles of failed essay sheets from official government exams for use. I can only imagine how humorous and visually exciting it must have been at the time to see armor with such essays written all over it.

Learning more about Hanji

Apart from design and art practitioners, Hanji remains widely undiscovered by the general audience, despite its prevalence throughout Korean history. Opportunities to learn more about Hanji's superb nature are often limited to regional Hanji festivals or to relevant but niche global events.

For those visiting Korea, there are several regions that are still celebrated for producing fine paper. The most prominent Hanji mills are located in Jeonju, Jeollabuk-do, and Wonju, Gangwon-do. Both Jeonju and Wonju have museums dedicated to Hanji, and these areas host local festivals in the spring as well.

Throughout the year, visitors can tour Hanji mill facilities to learn about the material's rich history and production process. In addition to viewing Hanji creations, visitors can also shop for Hanji handicrafts and — for the adventurous — even experience the intensive papermaking process themselves, to make their own sheets.

Even outside of Korea, awareness of Hanji is growing. Last January, for instance, Hanji was featured in a dedicated booth exhibited at Paperworld, the largest international trade fair for stationery, office supplies and writing instruments. Taking place in Frankfurt, Germany, nearly 3,000 vendors from over 60 countries attended this fair. The Hanji booth showcased the material with beautiful, high quality products of both traditional and contemporary origins.

The evolution of Hanji today

Hanji's unique properties continue to inspire material scientists, industrial designers and artists to research the material for new uses and interpretations. The modern take on Hanji has already been incorporated at the industrial level, with paper being reborn as thread, fabric, furniture and architectural materials.

The Korea Craft and Design Foundation, a subsidiary organization of the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism, also sponsors annual design competitions focused on the material. New generations of designers are challenged to explore Hanji's potential to develop innovative products. All winning and finalist designers from these competitions are encouraged to attain better understanding of the material through visits to Hanji mills and introductions to mentors.

Among today's Hanji applications, I am most excited by the selection of three-dimensional *joomchi* Hanji as "Active Matter" by Material Connexion, the leading international material information and resource agency. Several years ago, during a visit to Material Connexion in New York, I remember seeing countless architects, designers and students exploring endless rows of shelves filled with different material samples. This honor shines a global spotlight on Hanji's potential, and I look forward to discovering where Hanji is used next as a result of this exposure.

One intriguing application of Hanji that has already been realized is the use inside a high performance audio speaker by a company called Sonodyne. An internal cone of Hanji paper forms a thin layer to help sound resonate. The company says due to Hanji's strength and thinness, the speaker can achieve fuller sound that does not require a woofer, which is designed to reproduce low frequencies.

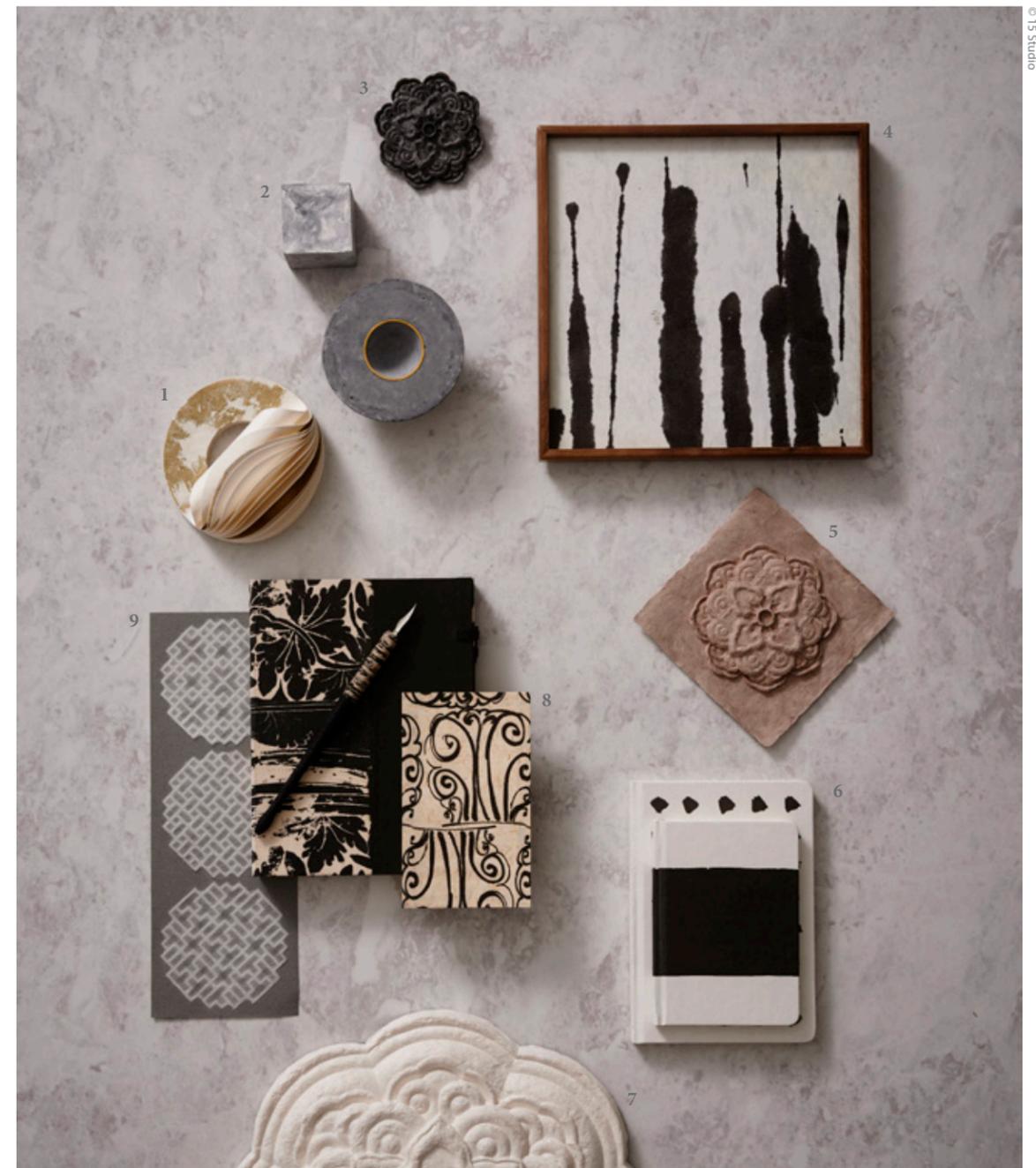
Clearly the value of Hanji is not limited to a mere writing surface that delivers narratives visually. In this audio application, the material is being uniquely used to carry and to disseminate a narrative through sound. As Hanji is being rediscovered for its raw possibilities, I anticipate more innovative evolution of this wonderful material. ☺



Contemporary designers are putting Hanji to use in a wide range of stationary items and decorative arts tailored to modern lifestyles. Their work adds a contemporary touch to traditional beauty.

오늘날 디자이너들은 한지를 활용하여 현대적 생활양식에 맞는 다양한 사무용품과 장식품을 만든다. 이들의 작업을 통해 한지의 전통적 아름다움에 현대적 감각이 더해진다.

1. Broaches, using Hanji adorned by metal, Ju Han-jin, Clessidra 2. Diffusers made from Hanji, GREATMINOR 3. Broach, dyed with traditional ink, Kim Bin, MEEETS 4. Naturalistic patterns adorn tray made from Hanji, DECART, sold by ILSANGYEObACK 5. Hanji greeting card with traditional patterns, MEEETS, sold by havebeenseoul 6. 'Hanji notebook: Sumuk', Kim Hyeon-ju 7. Pure white Hanji ornament, Kim Bin, MEEETS 8. Traditional notebook, bookcase and Hanji pencil case, Ji Hui-seung 9. Hanji ornament with many possible uses, Seo Mil-ha



Types of Hanji handicrafts



© Ha Ji-hoon

Dakjonggi Dolls

Dakjonggi dolls are made out of paper made from the bark of the mulberry tree. Making a *dakjonggi* doll can be a time consuming process. Artists wind multiple plies of paper around a wire frame, the figure growing and growing with each layer. The final layer is the skin, followed by clothes made from the same paper. The only materials used are paper and paste. Colors are created using natural dyes. It can take up to three months to complete a single doll.

Because of the skill and time required to make them, the dolls have become increasingly rare. One good place to see them is the Daol Art Center in Yangpyeong, Gyeonggi-do. Run by artist Kim Sun-mi, the gallery not only has exhibits, but also offers classes on doll-making.



© Korea Craft & Design Foundation

Jiseung

Jiseung is Korean paper weaving. Paper is twisted into cords, which in turn are woven into baskets, shoes, purses, chamber pots and other household items. Rice glue is used to waterproof the products; lacquer is sometimes

applied as well. In the olden days, when paper was more valuable, waste paper was commonly used for this craft. Like many traditional arts, the *jiseung* process is long and arduous. Accordingly, only a handful of artisans keep the craft alive.



© Kyungjuon Museum

Jijang

Jijang involves applying layers of paper to the inside and outside of a wood frame, often bamboo. Soybean extract, persimmon tannin, painting, writing or lacquer is applied to finish the item. Sometimes, however, several layers of paper are put together to create thick, almost leather-like surfaces, especially after they've been varnished with lacquer.

This method is used to make boxes, arrow quivers, eyeglass cases, wicker cases and rain covers for hats. Indeed, the word *jijang* means, literally, "storing things with paper."

There are several ways to decorate *jijang* items. The most common involves applying cut patterns over the colored paper.



© Korea Craft & Design Foundation

Jideung

In the days before electricity, lanterns were used for light.

Paper lanterns, or *jideung*, were made by applying paper to frames made of iron, brass, bamboo or other kinds of wood. Hand-held lanterns, or *jojokdeung*, were designed in such a way as to provide light in all directions. Translucent Hanji produces a nice, warm light, perfect for pleasantly illuminating interior spaces.

Jideung is one of the more popular Hanji crafts. Many Hanji artists produce paper lanterns that blend a traditional style with a modern sensibility.



© National Folk Museum of Korea

Jiho

Jiho is often used to make household goods such as boxes, containers, gourd



© Kim Taeyeon's Traditional Arts Flower Association and KOKDU MUSEUM



dippers or traditional masks. It was also commonly used in mountain villages to make jars to store the village's communal grain. The artisan tears up mulberry paper, placing the little pieces in water. They then knead the pieces in glutinous rice starch and paste them on a mold. Once dry, the piece is removed from the mold and finished with lacquer or paint. For decorative items, colored paper is sometimes applied. Perilla oil or soybean oil is sometimes used, too, to keep insects away.

Waste paper was often used for this craft. In the old days, when it was difficult to obtain household goods, farming families made frequent use of this technique, which resulted in products that were light but strong. In modern times, however, the craft almost disappeared with the proliferation of cheap metal and plastic goods.

Jihwa

Jihwa is the making of paper flowers. In the old days, though loved the vitality of flowers, they couldn't obtain real flowers all year round because of Korea's climate, with its four distinct seasons. To overcome this, artisans took to making artificial flowers, including ones made of paper. Paper flowers were often used at palace events and Buddhist and shamanist rites. In the days of Joseon, they were awarded to the person who got the highest score on the Confucian civil service exam. Families used them to celebrate fortuitous events, including important birthdays. They were also placed on funeral biers. Even just two decades ago, one could find many kinds of *jihwa* on a funeral bier.

Artisans produce *jihwa* by cutting or folding paper into several layers. Thanks to its cost, availability and ease of use, Hanji is the preferred material. Nowadays, you can find *jihwa* in shamanist rites. Shamans consider *jihwa* to be mediators between humans and the spirit world. ☯