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PAPER—It Is More Than That: A Syntax for Thorough Descriptions

INTRODUCTION

The Menil Drawing Institute building opened in the fall of 2018 after many years of planning. It sits intentionally near the center of the more than 30-acre campus of the Menil Collection. The entire building is dedicated exclusively to drawings. The paper conservation studio is located in its Northeast corner; there is a curatorial suite, visiting scholar's offices and courtyard, generous storage for drawings, and offices for a dedicated registrar and art handler. It includes exhibition space, and at the heart is the Janie C. Lee Drawing Study Room.

Every detail of the chapel-like room was thought through very deliberately, and during the planning, care was taken to design for diffuse raking light. Complete control of the lighting is possible, with capability of going from total darkness to a wide range of both artificial light and UV-filtered daylight from skylights at the sides and the center of the room. It offers an exquisite setting for studying the subtleties of drawings.

Drawings tell a graphic story that is—in a visual sense—deeply dependent on the substrate on which they lie. There is an intimate relationship between drawings and paper. Artists engaging with paper must choose from an astonishing array of substrates. The design of the study room promotes focused engagement with the artworks and appreciation of nuances of paper.

LANGUAGE AS TEACHER

The study room is a haven for scholars, a classroom for students and a forum for museum members. A casual viewer might look at an artwork and see graphite on paper. A conservator could look at that same artwork and see graphite on the felt side of a moderately-textured, medium-weight, cream, handmade antique laid paper with red fibrous inclusions, deckle edges and a crescent watermark at the lower right corner.

Conservators study paper history and paper-making practices. They appreciate the extensive variety of papers in

their care and how the differences in sheets impact resulting artworks. People often refer to paper as being flat, but that simply is not true.

Paper is three-dimensional. To fully appreciate its beauty or understand its behavior, this fundamental truth must be instilled into one's core of knowledge. There is nothing that illustrates that more dramatically than a light and shade or chiaroscuro watermark (fig. 1).

There are many physical qualities that contribute to the overall character each unique sheet of paper brings to a completed drawing. These characteristics, formulated together in a nuanced syntax for paper descriptions, bring to the forefront information that may otherwise only be found deep within an examination report, or perhaps not noted at all. An extended description of paper is meant to reside between a sparse public-facing medium and an analytical report. It incorporates details that are apparent from visual examination alone.

Recognizing and recording more qualities of paper during an examination encourages deeper looking and understanding. Aspects of paper that are regularly observed are organized in a standardized grammatical framework that can be referenced during examinations. If the many visual qualities paper possesses are put into words, it serves as a teaching moment, and students are likely to look more intently at subtleties of paper that might otherwise go unrecognized.¹

HISTORY

In 1996, *The Print Council of America Paper Sample Book: A Practical Guide to the Description of Paper* (fig. 2) was published in a limited edition of 500 copies (Lunning and Perkinson 1996). Containing 26 samples from a variety of papers, this guide provides a benchmark for standardized characterization of three qualities of paper, with simplified language for descriptors. Color, weight, and texture are described in these samples. It is a treasured resource in many conservation laboratories and print study rooms. This publication has often been used to aide in the descriptions of works of art on paper, and it is routinely referenced in notes to readers in scholarly publications on prints and drawings. It is the resource at the core of this project.²

Papers presented during the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC's 48th Virtual Annual Meeting, May 21–September 2, 2020



Fig. 1. A sheet of Fabriano paper with light-and-shade watermark, in transmitted light (Baker 2010, 107).

ELEMENTS OF CHARACTERIZATION

Sidedness of Paper

The method of producing paper often results in sheets with distinctively different surface qualities on opposing sides. The felt and wire sides of a piece of handmade paper can be quite different in appearance. Artists often make deliberate choices depending on their preferences. In the case of 18th-century French artist Jean Jacque Lequeu, this aspect of paper was a notable contributor to his compositions. He often included multiple lines of tiny script that followed laid lines perfectly. The importance of this relationship becomes obvious when viewing drawings where the text is horizontal with distantly spaced chain lines, and his script wavered without the precision of laid lines to follow.

Surface Texture

The Print Council of America Paper Sample Book provides a useful guide to characterize the degree of texture in paper.

The behavior of mediums is greatly influenced by this quality of paper. Very smooth surfaces allow for even washes of wet mediums and straight unbroken lines of dry mediums. In contrast, rough surfaces often collect dry mediums at the high points of the paper and leave voids in the deeper profile. Wet medium applied in a dry brush manner may

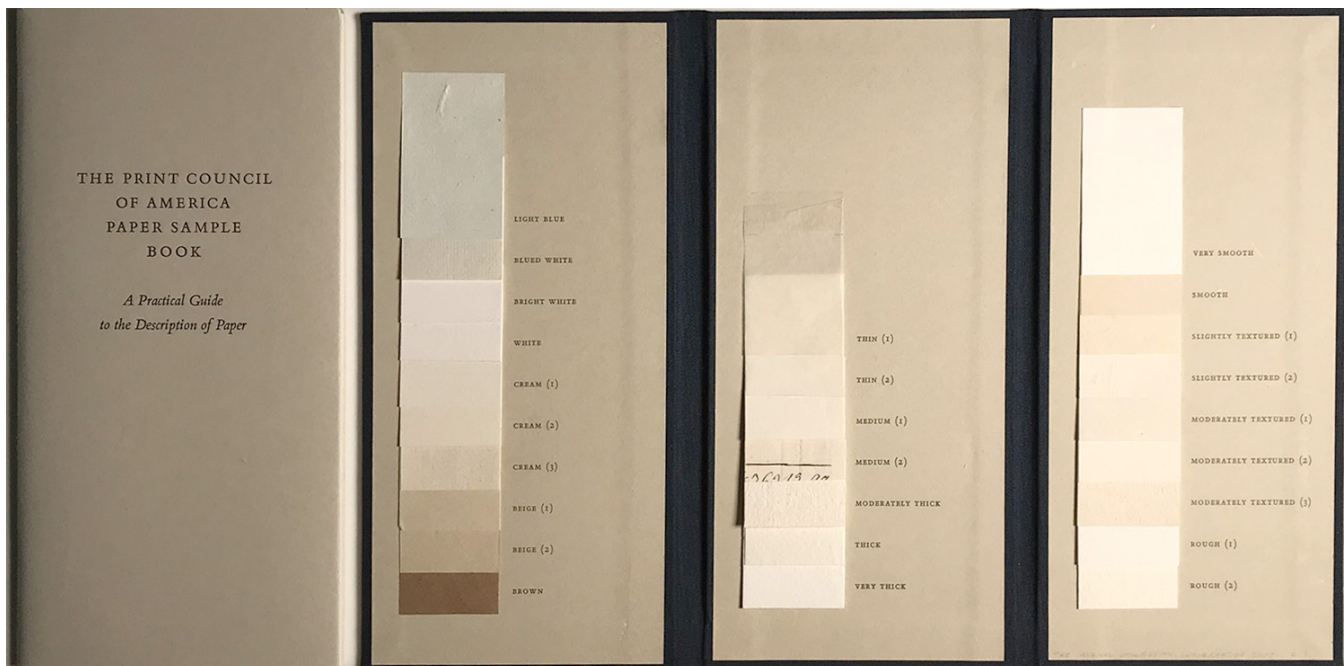


Fig. 2. *The Print Council of America Paper Sample Book: A Practical Guide to the Description of Paper*. Paper samples demonstrate variances in color, weight, and texture of paper (Lunning and Perkinson 1996).

behave similarly, resulting in skips in the medium. A very wet application can result in washes gravitating to the crevices of the paper surface, leaving less medium at the high points. Resulting differences in appearance can be striking and recognizable at a distance.

Weight

The weight or thickness of a paper can be measured precisely, but *The Print Council of America Paper Sample Book* serves as a generalized standard that is particularly useful when it is not possible to measure a drawing. An example of paper weight influencing drawings can be seen in a series of Jackson Pollock drawings that were made on thin, stacked papers. The ink applied to the top drawing flowed readily through the sheet, depositing ink on the underlying paper. Those marks began the making of the next drawing (O'Connor and Thaw 1978, 283).

Color

Lunning and Perkinson (1996) again provide a benchmark for describing color. Ideally, color would also be measured with a spectrophotometer, in which case data would appear in the body of an examination report. It can be tricky referring to color, as many times the current color of a paper does not reflect the original color. When the original color is known and a transition has occurred, both colors can be described. There are many reasons a sheet may change color, and the purpose here is not to fully describe, as in the body of a report, but rather to clarify the artist's intent. This is most important when the change that has occurred is a radical one, such as a blue paper becoming brown in appearance. When evidence exists to document the original color, it is truer to the artist to describe the color of the sheet when artwork was created than the color resulting from damage.

Preparation

There are many ways the surface of paper can be altered or prepared. Burnishing compresses paper fibers and can impart a sheen to paper surfaces. Many different coatings are used to prepare papers for drawing, particularly in the case of metal-point drawings, which generally require a hardened surface. There are many methods and types of preparation, treatment, or coating of paper, and descriptions can be as detailed or cursory as one wants.

Hand or Machine Made

Differentiating between handmade and machine-made papers can be useful when it is not otherwise obvious. The purpose of this syntax was not to force an artificially complex description of paper but to create a placeholder for language to be incorporated into as needed. There are times when specifying machine or handmade seems redundant, in which case it could simply be omitted from the description.

Sheet Formation

The manner of formation is one of the few qualities of paper often referenced in public-facing mediums, usually simply laid or wove. Extended medium descriptions may specify in more detail the difference between antique or modern laid or wove papers, and characterization of dandy roll patterns (Baker 2010, 94–105) (fig. 3).

The specifics of formation are critically important when comparing the work of individual artists. Identifying similarities between poorly formed wove sheets, or papers with peculiar spacing of laid and chain lines, can help establish connections between drawings in distant collections.

Origin

When a specific papermaker or mill is known, that is valuable information to include in a description. Perhaps only a country of origin is known. Often it remains a mystery, with other characteristics serving as clues. If a particular product line is known, that information could also be included.

Type

Arguments can be made against naming paper by type. Definitions of paper form and function may vary from place to place or time to time. If paper type were the only point of reference, the characterization could certainly be considered inadequate.

However, as incorporated into this larger descriptive framework, it cannot hurt—and may help clarify meaning

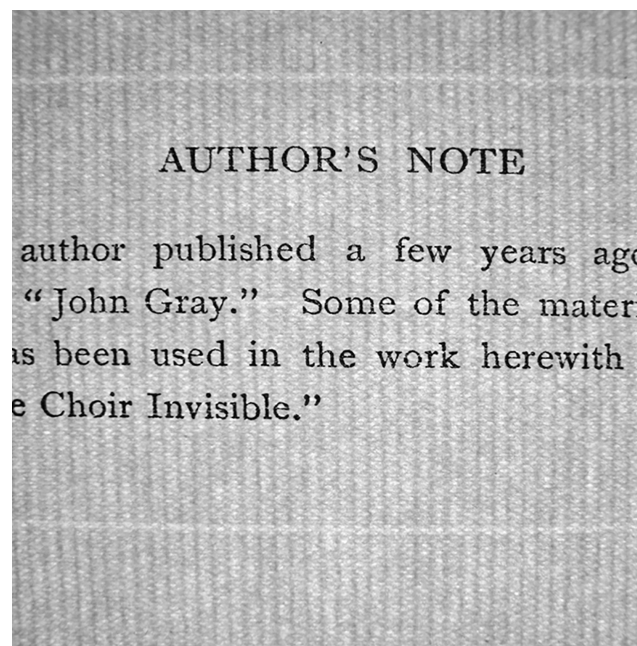


Fig. 3. Laid pattern produced by a dandy roll, with underlying wove pattern from fourdrinier wire (Baker 2010, 104).

for future scholars. The fact that an incarcerated artist drew on a Manila envelope in prison speaks to a probable shortage of materials, and it produces an instantly recognizable picture in one's mind to state that type directly. Similarly, describing a sheet as being on ruled notebook paper paints a clear picture. The *Art & Architecture Thesaurus* (Getty 2004) lists a number of papers by function and form, but the list is not complete by any means. The Menil Collection paper laboratory is building a glossary based on the collection that can be a reference in-house. Terms describing type can be meaningless or misleading if not defined by text and example.

Substrate

In a public-facing medium, the only word likely to make an appearance would be the substrate itself—usually paper.³

Paper conservators are increasingly confronted with a wide variety of substrates with limited resemblance to paper—such as drawings on leaves, or polyester film. Unconventional drawing substrates may be related only loosely to this syntax for paper description.

Details of Formation

In the course of paper formation, inclusions may be incorporated into the sheet by design or accident. Colored fibrous inclusions lend a special quality. Woody or iron inclusions can result in characteristic damages to paper. Mechanical distortion to the sheet in the form of a papermaker's tears or backmarks may be present (Farnsworth 2018, 17). Optical brighteners detected in examination are included here.

Edges of Sheet

The character of the edges of a drawing sheet are worthy of note, whether there is a simple description of a deckle or torn edge, or hand-cut edge. When the nature of the paper is to have a machine-cut edge, it would not necessarily be specified, such as with a modern graph paper. At times, the edge speaks more to the creation of the paper, and at other times the drawing itself. This Mondrian sketch is on the back of an envelope torn open in such a way it seems to speak to the urgent need to produce this composition in a hurry (fig. 4).

Marks

A chop mark, blindstamp, or watermark is always worth describing. Any estate stamps applied with ink would be included with a medium description. If a drawing were pricked for transfer, that would also fall into this category. When describing the location of marks, a standardized reference is used.

SYNTAX

The familiar features presented earlier are arranged in the following order to maintain a standardized syntax. With each



Fig. 4. Piet Mondrian, *Study for a Composition*, ca. 1940–1941. Charcoal and gouache on paper, 11 × 9 in. (27.9 × 22.9 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston.

aspect having an assigned location, in the unlikely event that every characteristic is known, they each will easily fall into place. When aspects are unknown or irrelevant, they will be left out.

[Drawing medium] on [side of paper] of [surface texture], [weight], [intensity of original color], [transition if relevant] to [current color], [preparation], [hand or machine made] [formation], [paper mill or country of origin] [product line] [type] [substrate] with [specific feature], [details of edges] and [marks] at [location]

The text in the preceding extract is entered into the autotext feature of a software program. After being quickly inserted into working documents to give cues, it is deleted when the description is complete.

Examples

Examples include brown ink on the wire side of slightly textured, medium-weight, cream, antique laid paper with hand-cut edges, and partial watermark of top of a crown at lower right edge, as well as graphite pencil on the printed side of smooth, medium-weight, cream, wove, Eugene Dietzgen Co. Graph paper with holes punched along left edge.

PHILOSOPHY OF USE

When approaching new drawings or revisiting ones that have been in the collection, this strategy of defining the papers is applied as possible. Conditions of examinations dictate how much information is available. A drawing cannot be fully examined until it is removed from its frame; in reality, that is not always possible. Overmatted drawings with fully painted surfaces reveal very little about the underlying substrate. What is learned from a visual examination is included in the extended medium descriptions for the drawings.

All of these paper characteristics have appeared in descriptions in historic records; however, without a standardized framework, there was no consistency. The syntax was finalized after consultation with Menil publication editors, who have a growing interest in artwork characterization that is more fully descriptive than our streamlined public-facing form. The purpose of this thorough description of paper is for conservation reference first and foremost. Undoubtedly, there would be changes should these extended mediums ever be incorporated into publications. The extreme care given to the reproduction of the images of drawings results in publications where the character of the drawings is so beautifully illustrated that a description of any sort seems almost unnecessary.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Medium Description

Descriptive Terminology for Works of Art on Paper: Guidelines for the Accurate and Consistent Description of the Materials and Techniques of Drawings, Prints, and Collages (Ash et al. 2014) was published online and therefore is an incredibly democratic resource for the standardization of medium descriptions. This is the starting point for any consideration of the topic. The Menil Collection paper laboratory copy is in a three-ring binder, interleaved with blank pages. Conversations and debates between curators, editors, and conservators sometimes result in stylistic variations to the guidelines. In those cases, the interleaved pages are marked up to reflect Menil adaptations, with references to the participants in the conversations.

Paper-Based Photograph Characterization

Occasionally, paper based photographic materials are prominent as components of drawings. In those instances, a different characterization framework specific to photographs is referenced (Burandt and McGlinchey Sexton 2019). A comprehensive list of physical attributes of photographs and a grammatical structure to create a formula for consistent description of photographs with a high level of detail is provided. These descriptions, through text alone, produce a clear picture of the materiality of the photographs, and invite the reader to visualize the subtle nuances that make each image unique.

CONCLUSION

Standardization of terminology is a satisfying form of organization. It assures that any collaborator in a conservation studio setting can produce a relatively consistent description of complex and subtle materials. Providing a clear framework for examination is helpful for interns learning to look at works of art. The level of detail included is a reminder to slow down and appreciate all of the subtle detail, and look for clues to deeper understanding of the artwork. Using these standardized guidelines together during examination of drawings invites a thorough and consistent exploration of paper. The resulting description allows readers to build a richly nuanced vision of paper and medium through text alone. With a pandemic putting distance between people and collections, these sorts of deeply descriptive characterizations may be more meaningful than ever.

*In the end we will conserve only what we love;
we will love only what we understand;
and we will understand only what we are taught.*

Baba Dioum, 1968

In fond memory of Liz Lunning.

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NOTES

1. Menil membership programs offer many opportunities for the conservation department to interact directly with enthusiastic museum members. Conservation talks are usually very well attended. Connecting with the public, and helping the public connect with the art, is a rich experience.
2. Elizabeth Lunning was a former paper conservator at the Menil Collection.
3. Public facing mediums for prints at the Menil Collection describe process only and do not mention the substrate unless it is something other than paper.

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