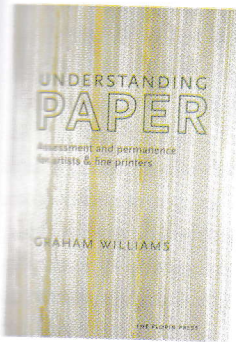


BOOK REVIEWS

Unless otherwise noted all books are hardback



Graham Williams, *Understanding paper: assessment and permanence for artists & fine printers*. Charing, Kent: The Florin Press, 2021. 235 × 155 mm. Pp. 134. ISBN 978-0-906715-21-5. Paperback, £17.65; full cloth with a dust-jacket, £37.75. Colour illustrations.

This volume has rich information throughout, opening our eyes to the problems of selecting paper for fine printing and art. Its companion, *A collection of printing from woodblocks* (a portfolio of sheets of various kinds of paper printed with wood-engravings in a limited edition of seventy-five copies), must be acquired separately, but the book stands apart as a useful manual by itself.

The sub-title of the volume mentions assessment, permanence, artists and printers. The assessment takes up much of the text, showing how it is done and revealing its problems – mostly why assessments may be inaccurate. There are several reasons: variations in testing methods, imprecision in delineating what a sheet contains, the many ways papers are described, variables in testing conditions, and much more. Permanence cannot be claimed for any papers, given the many processes and materials they are made from and their conditions of storage. Williams explains that how papers are to be used, and prepared for use, can vary from one printer to another, and within the work of each printer from one press-run to another. He emphasises that in any batch of paper from a single mill, there could be variations from one sheet to the next, variations in furnish, sizing, thickness, handling, storage, and so forth.

Williams, an artist and printer, was looking for papers ideal for his work, and needed uniformity in his sheets so that he could achieve uniformity in his art and printing. He engaged two testing companies, in Great Britain and the United States, to analyse what his papers were made of, regardless of what the manufacturers told him.

He said he could not trust the mills to give him accurate information. The assessments were startling. In a section he calls ‘The fibre vanishes – a mould-made mystery’, he discusses a paper he commissioned that was to be made of 70% hemp and 30% flax. ‘The English laboratory found 35% chemical hardwood, 46% cotton, 17% hemp and 2% flax’ (p. 65). A second sample of the same paper, sent to labs in England and the States, showed similar results, revealing that fibres can be processed in several ways, recycled and thus processed again; and then again – making it impossible to identify the source of the materials. Artists may ask for (and be told they are getting) a stiff, strong paper made from hemp and flax, but they may receive sheets in which these fibres are barely discernible. The implications for selection and use are great. And who better to record and explain the results than an artist/printer whose hands-on work gives a clear and authoritative study?

The book has chapters on ‘Looking and feeling’; ‘Permanence and degradation: scientific standards’; assessing papers for ‘permanence and suitability in the workplace’; what science can reveal about papers; a case-study of Williams’ efforts to get papers tested; various kinds of paper analysis; the results of such analysis on a selection of papers; and a chapter on ink. From scores of example I could use to indicate the depth and the authority of the text, Williams’s knowledge of ink will do. Chapter 9, ‘Black letterpress printing ink’, begins:

The printability of any paper is heavily dependent on the printing ink used, as well as the skill, technique and equipment employed in printing. The majority of the papers I assessed could not be seen in their best light until I had researched changing bought inks, and made inks from scratch. ... This chapter ... deals with how printing inks can be altered to make them suitable for hand letterpress printing. All my research used dampened paper.

Williams thus discusses pigments, black inks, and modifying commercial ones, and gives a recipe for a stiff black ink that represents the forty-first one he made. We sense that we are in the hands of someone with

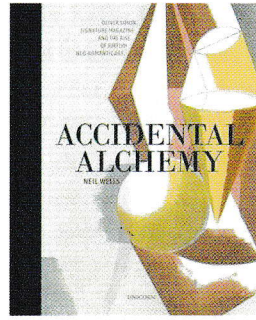
extensive expertise, someone we can trust to guide us in ink selection and use. We feel this about everything in this book: trusting the author to guide us based on his hands-on experience. The book is filled with sound practical advice.

The volume concludes with a glossary of paper terms; some entries needed editing. The entry for dandy-roll calls it a 'smooth roll above the wet web of machine made paper that smooths its top surface', continuing 'Wires can be fixed to the surface of the dandy roll imitating the pattern of laid papers and watermarks of hand-made paper. When pressed into the top surface of the wet web of paper they leave permanent indentations'. No dandy-roll is perfectly smooth, and if it bears a wire pattern to create an artificial watermark the wires actually disperse some of the fibres as they settle onto the screen beneath, creating thin areas in the sheet to produce the watermark. The roll does not create 'permanent indentations', which, if they were produced after the fibres had matted, would be smoothed out in the calendar-stack of the fourdrinier machine.

Likewise, 'Folio' is defined as 'A sheet of paper folded once. Also a term that describes page numbers'. Strictly speaking, folio is a bibliographical format rather than a term for a sheet of paper, a folio volume being composed of gatherings made from full sheets of paper that have been folded once. Although page-numbers are sometimes called 'folios', this is a loose usage found in the worlds of publishing and journalism, and is best avoided in the contexts of printing history and bibliography. These are subtle points, like several others which arise from the sometimes inaccurate definitions in the glossary. There are also some problems with punctuation and grammar here and there, but they do not detract from the excellence of the text.

The volume sounds like the telling of a story, and in one sense it is: it accompanies the portfolio of samples and tells us the story of the papers with respect to the efforts Williams expended to learn about them. The tale of discovery about 'forensic evidence' will be captivating to any reader wanting to get good advice about paper selection and authoritative information about the contents of sheets, the assessment of paper, and why, at times, that assessment can be only modestly accurate or useful. Artists and printers need to peruse this fine book.

Sidney E. Berger



Neil Wells, *Accidental alchemy: Oliver Simon, Signature magazine and the rise of British Neo-Romantic art*. London: Unicorn, 2022. Pp. viii, 232. ISBN 978-1-914414-34-3. £30.00. Quarter cloth, with pictorial paper-covered boards. 128 colour illustrations.

This survey of Oliver Simon's journal *Signature*, which ran from 1935 to 1940 and then as a new series from 1945 to 1954, concentrates, as the sub-title makes clear, on the journal's articles on art, not those on typography and printing. This coverage distinguished *Signature* from the earlier journal *The fleuron*, on which Simon had cut his teeth as an editor: he was responsible for the first four numbers, between 1923 and 1925, before Stanley Morison took over for the last three, up to 1931. (Simon's *Fleuron* numbers were printed at the Curwen Press, where he worked for all his professional life, as was *Signature*.) Even in Simon's numbers of *The fleuron* such artists as were covered – Lovat Fraser and Simon's uncle Albert Rutherston – were not exactly cutting-edge modernists, and this trend continued for Morison's three numbers, with Laboureur, Naudin and Heinrich Holz. In contrast, the first numbers of *Signature* had articles by or about Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland and John Piper, some of them with more than one contribution. Later artists featured before the war included Picasso and Miró as well as Eric Ravilious, Barnett Freedman, Edward Bawden and Edward Ardizzone. The works were reproduced exceptionally well; in fact, they were often original lithographs, colour linocuts, intaglio line-engravings or etchings. In *Accidental alchemy*, Neil Wells ascribes the shortage of complete sets of the journal to the removal of the more valuable printed leaves by collectors and dealers.

Signature was a more modest publication than the sumptuous bound folio-volumes of *The fleuron*, but consisted of beautifully-printed slim limp-bound quartos that appeared three times a year – this was the meaning of its description as 'a quadrimestrial of typography and graphic arts'. The first series was in a uniform style, set in Monotype Walbaum: Simon had made Walbaum almost a Curwen proprietary face by importing a wide range of sizes from the Berthold foundry in Berlin, until

Monotype cut it for the first number had different title-letters. Berthold Wolpe, Re-

Simon's autobiography covered his life up to War (with a brief on wife Ruth's silver work). cott's *Typographical* likewise chronicled of the merits of *Accidental* story up to Simon's treated in colour, and can do how, after *The* product of a new already mentioned, Michael Ayrton, R. Nicolas de Staël and looks like an abstract. Although this side of scribed by Pat Gilmore Alan Powers in *Art*. *Signature* shines a ne-

Neil Wells's book Simon and his jour most prominently fe on the major contrib a great deal of infor the personal friends all. The research in is impressive, tho narrative: nearly a in the accounts of Sutherland. But the including print- and first series were pri second year, and to completed in spite the pressroom. Sim appointing sales fi accounts for the fi with assets valued b nearly 3,000 copies valued at nil for ac down to the mixtu ary art not appealin more likely the cor history.