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Super Adornatus – Decorated Papers and their Carriers. Historical and Contemporary Examples from the Collections of the German Museum of Books and Writing of the German National Library

Since the invention of papermaking, papers have not only been written, printed or painted on, but have also been refined using a wide variety of decorative techniques. Decorated papermakers or bookbinders designed handmade or machine-produced sheets with patterns or decorations; craftsmen and designers then processed these as binding or endpapers, as cover papers for paper goods or on furniture and instruments. Almost all printmaking techniques (such as copperplate engraving, lithography, or woodcut) were also used to produce decorated papers. The techniques of paper decoration (e.g. marbling, paste paper and sprinkle techniques or block printing) each require different carrier papers: for example, absorbent and wet-strength papers are needed for marbling, paste papers require a coated surface and embossing techniques need particularly resistant paper.

In the decorated paper collection of the German Museum of Books and Writing of the German National Library in Leipzig, there are numerous examples of different decoration techniques on a wide variety of carrier papers: Brocade papers of the 18th century on handmade rag paper and lithographed reproductions of the late 19th century on smooth machine paper, marbled Japanese papers from around 1900 or marbled papers, paste papers or stencilled papers by contemporary designers and artists.

The lecture will present examples of the connection between decorated paper techniques and the material aspects of the designed papers: from Japanese printed crepe papers to handmade sheets for traditional decorated paper techniques and modern industrial finishing techniques. Specific characteristics and properties of the papers used (materials such as rags or plant fibers, typical paper formats, surface structure, watermarks) are highlighted. A look at the current paper market and the problems faced by decorated paper makers in finding suitable papers for the various processes will eventually provide an insight into the present day.

Keywords: applied arts, decorated paper as well as the techniques, marbled paper, brocade paper, paste paper, paper history, paper finishing