

# Working With Parchment

by Diane Day, CPF

The terms vellum and parchment seem to be used interchangeably, or at least inconsistently. One person's parchment is another's vellum. In this article, parchment is used as a generic term for all such products.

According to materials from the library at Cornell University, parchment became commonly used as a writing surface in the second century B.C. due to a shortage of papyrus. It was made from goatskin or calfskin. The skins of most animals can be made into parchment, but sheepskin, calfskin, and goatskin are the types most commonly found.

Parchment is not a uniform material. According to Rick Cavasin, a professional parchment maker in Kanata, Ontario, the two sides of a hide are quite different. One side has hair and the hair follicles which form the grain. The other side is referred to as the flesh side because it has been against the flesh of the animal.

When parchment is made from the full thickness of the hide, its grain has a distinct pattern on one side because of the hair follicles. This pattern is similar to full-grain leather. A skin which will be used to make parchment can also be split into two layers. When a skin is split, the top layer is referred to as the grain-split since it contains the hair follicles. The bottom layer, or flesh-split, does not have the grain since the grain layer is removed when the hide is split.

Therefore, there are two broad categories of parchment. According to Cavasin, the first is those that have a marked grain because the grain layer has been left intact. Then there are the parchments with little or no grain because of the splitting or shaving of the hide. The two sides of a piece of parchment are similar in appearance if the grain layer has been removed. However, this process makes the parchment thinner and somewhat weaker.

## Making Parchment

There are numerous variations in how a hide can be made into parchment. The many manufacturing processes used over the centuries, coupled with regional varia-

tions, have made differences in the finished product.

Cavasin says that some of these differences are subtle, but others are considerable. In addition, a finished piece of parchment can be affected by several factors, including the type of animal, breed, age, and sex; the animal's health and time of year it was killed; the skill used in flaying and general handling of the hide; and the skill of the person making the parchment. Following are the basic steps for the parchment-making process.

1. Soak the hide in water for a few days to remove any extraneous materials. Change the water several times.
2. After it soaks in an alkaline bath for a week or two, scrape the hair off the hide.
3. Flesh the hide over a curved surface with a knife or, in modern tanneries, by machine.
4. Soak the hide again in lime to clean the skin and disperse grease.
5. Wash the skin several times to remove lime residue.
6. The skin is then stretched, dried, and finished. Stretch it on a frame that allows the tension to be controlled. Work the skin with various blades when it is both wet and dry to produce the desired thickness, and finish.
7. Materials, such as sandpaper and pumice, can be used to further smooth the surface. Sometimes sizings and other finishes are applied to further change the surface of the skin.

## Identifying Parchment

Cavasin says it can be difficult to tell parchment from papers that have been made to simulate the look and feel of parchment. When looking at larger pieces of parchment, it is easier to see differences in texture and vein patterns. When these features are absent or not easy to distinguish, it can be difficult to tell the difference with the naked eye.

The tactile properties of parchment are much more difficult to simulate. Some papers, however, do mimic the look of parchment quite well. Tests can be done to tell the difference, but when this is not possible, there are subtle visual and tactile clues to look for. Cavasin advises,

if you want to learn to distinguish parchment from paper, it is helpful to handle a variety of pieces known to be made of parchment.

One test a framer can use to determine if a piece is parchment or paper is to use moisture. According to Cavasin, you should wash your hands and dry them with a towel, leaving a little moisture on your skin. Then, carefully touch a corner of the piece. If you detect some tackiness, the piece may be parchment. Some parchments retain less of their ground substance (essentially glue) than others do. In other words, some parchments will feel tacky, while others will not.

Another test Cavasin suggests is to boil water and carefully bring the piece close to the steam. If the piece is parchment, it should curl and then uncurl when you remove it from the area near the steam. Be very careful as you do this because it is very risky. You do not want to cause any permanent damage.

A slight waviness or rippling is perfectly natural for parchment. When framed, parchment should be free to expand and contract with minor fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Some universities hand out a sheet with their “sheepskin” diplomas which suggest the non-preservation mounting by stretching (drumming) the skin. However the preferred method is preservation mounting, which includes Japanese paper hinges, corner pockets, mounting strips, and edge wraps, plus a window mat. ■

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*Thanks to Rick Cavasin for all his help with this article. An electrical engineer by training, he has been making parchment professionally, part-time, for over five years. He is self-taught and has made all his own tools based on what he has learned during the past 10 years, from studying ancient methods of parchment-making.*