PRIMER ON ARTISTS' BOOKS
Keith Dietrich
b. 1950, South Africa
Fourteen Stations of the Cross (detail)
Stellenbosch, South Africa: The Strange Press, 2007
Edition 5/14
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, 2014-8-1
What Are Artists’ Books?

Artists’ books can be a collaboration among artists, printers, bookbinders, poets, and scholars. High quality paper, superb printing, and excellent binding thoughtfully contribute to the overall appearance of the work. Sometimes a fine-art press commissions an artist to create the visual content of a book. These are known as artists’ illustrated books. However, there are also artists who create artists’ books independently. Artists’ books can be unique—that is, only one copy is made. Or they can be produced in editions of 2 copies, 20 copies, or 200 copies.

Rachid Koraïchi
b. 1947, Algeria
Les sept dormants: Sept livres en hommage aux 7 moines de Tibhirine
(The Seven Sleepers: Seven Books in Hommage to the Seven Monks of Tibhirine)
Arles, France: Actes Sud, 2004
Smithsonian Libraries

Susan Allix
b. 1943, England
Egyptian Green: Views from Egypt with the Writing of Amelia Edwards, Herodotus, Catullus, Ancient Coffin Texts & Various Other Descriptions
London: S. Allix, 2003
Edition 9/24
Smithsonian Libraries

Making Artists’ Books

The skills needed to make an artist’s book are diverse and specialized. They involve some form of art making, such as drawing, printmaking, graphic design, digital arts, or photography. Creating the book may also require the craftsmanship of fine-press printers, typesetters, bookbinders, and papermakers. This creative collaboration is the result of the intersection of the work of the artist with that of the craftsmen. These skill sets require a substantial investment of staff, space, and equipment with regard to studios, printing labs, and other support activities. In the Americas, more and more art schools, art centers, and workshops are providing environments to foster these activities. Consequently, book arts have flourished. Artists’ book production and promotion have proliferated in Europe, Asia, and some parts of Africa, especially South Africa. Some artists work exclusively as bookmakers and undertake all tasks of bookmaking independently. Other artists are occasional book artists.
Historically, artists in many parts of the world have created exquisite books, scrolls, albums, or large-scale folios. Think of illuminated manuscripts from the European Middle Ages, which are beautifully bound, often in leather; or Chinese calligraphy on silk; or Egyptian hieroglyphics on papyrus.

During the 19th century, illustrated folios were devoted to science and discovery. The size of these is impressive: oversized folios, called elephant folios, can be up to 23 inches in height (almost two feet). Atlas folios can be up to 25 inches. There are even double elephant folios, which can be up to 50 inches tall! Add to that the weight of the paper, binding, and cover, and you have a weighty publication.
Formats of Artists’ Books

While each artist book is different, there are frequently used formats. An artist may use multiple formats in a single work. Each format engages the viewer in a way that a conventional book does not. Opening an artist’s book engages you intimately—challenging you to explore not only the book’s content but also its physical and tactile qualities.

Pippa Skotnes, ed.
b. 1957, South Africa
Roderick Sauls, ed.
b. 1954, South Africa
Fritha Langerman, ed.
b. 1970, South Africa

On the Surface: Art and Technique of Relief Printmaking (detail)
Cape Town, South Africa: Katrine Harries Print Cabinet, 1996
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Accordian/Fold or Flutter Book

Typically the paper is folded in a zigzag manner, like the pleats of an accordion. An accordion-folded structure can be extended by joining more paper of equal length and width. The content—images and text—can be on either side, or on both.

Peter Clarke 1929–2014, South Africa
Bits and Pieces (detail)
Ocean View, South Africa: Peter E. Clarke, 2005–06

Gatefold

Artists use gatefolds to extend a page for artistic elaboration or to include a very large image. The viewer has to physically open and close the “gates.”

Keith Dietrich b. 1950, South Africa
Fourteen Stations of the Cross (detail)
Stellenbosch, South Africa: The Strange Press, 2007
Edition 5/14
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, 2014-8-1

Flip Book

A flip book creates the illusion of movement with sequential drawings, one to a page, each altered slightly to suggest movement or action.

Multipart Book

Artists’ books with more than one piece or element may be housed in a box, an envelope, or some other container. When the packaging is opened, you can remove each piece and discover how they relate to one another and the story the artist is trying to tell.

Mary Hark b. 1956, United States
Listen, Listen: Adadam Agofomma: Honoring the Legacy of Koo Nimo (detail)
Minneapolis, MN: Take Time Press, 2011
Edition 10/50
Smithsonian Libraries

Digital Artists’ Book

Just as book formats have evolved since the invention of the printing press, so has digital media pushed the boundaries of what a book may be. Designers, illustrators, programmers, photographers, typographers, and other artists are exploring the potential of digital technologies to lend another element of interactivity to the artist's book experience.

Mary Clarke 1939–2011, South Africa
Air and Water Island (detail)
Ateliers Éric Claessens, 2002–06
Printed Matter of Melbourne 5/10,000,000 project, 2002-0-1-1

Altered Book

These books become vehicles for artists to create a work in which the original book is altered or amended with drawings, collages, texts, or die-cuts. Some artists make structural changes to other bindings or add pockets, pouches, or slits to which materials can be added.

Doug Beube Dates unknown, Canada
Left: Masking Language
Right: Masked Information
2015
Dictionary, book, metal, marble, wood
49.5 x 15.9 x 14.6 cm (19 1/2 x 6 1/4 x 5 3/4 in.)
Photograph courtesy the artist.

Recycled Fold or Flutter Book

Typically the paper is folded in a zigzag manner, like the pleats of an accordion. An accordion-folded structure can be extended by joining more paper of equal length and width. The content—images and text—can be on either side, or on both.

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Photograph courtesy the artist.
Alphabet books illustrate the letters of the alphabet or words beginning with those letters—"A is for Africa." They are a favorite genre for children. Artists have taken this juvenile genre to a higher aesthetic level, elaborating on the shapes and ornamentation of the letters.

Amir Brito Cadôr
b. 1976, Brazil
O Livro Dos Seres Imaginários (detail)
Belo Horizonte, Brazil: Andante, 2011

Smithsonian Libraries

Pop Up Book
Pop up books have moveable parts. Elements are sometimes referred to as paper engineering because the paper constructions can be quite complex, including intricate folds, tabs, die-cuts, and other mechanisms that create a three-dimensional effect.

Freya Diamond
Dates unknown, United States
Dolls of Africa
Santa Fe, NM: F. Diamond, 2011

Smithsonian Libraries

Exquisite Corpse
Exquisite = well chosen. Corpse = body—of a human, an animal, or a combination of both. Several artists make prints or drawings of a figure. Each figure is cut into three sections: head, torso, legs. The pages are bound to allow sections to be combined from different images. In the example of the collaborative Exquisite Corpse, each artist involved created two figures, one bound on the left and the other on the right side, allowing for even more diverse exquisite corpse combinations.

Robbin Ami Silverberg
b. 1958, United States
Kim Berman
b. 1960, South Africa
Emandulo Re-Creation (detail)
Johannesburg, South Africa: Artist Proof Studio, 1997
Edition 6/30
National Museum of African Art, museum purchase, 98-1-1

Smithsonian Libraries

Codex
A codex is a bound set of sequential pages—what we know as a book. Some artists choose this traditional format to create beautiful artists’ books that contain text, such as essays or poetry, as well as original artwork.

Pippa Skotnes
b. 1957, South Africa
Sound from the Thinking Strings: A Visual, Literary, Archaeological and Historical Interpretation of the Final Years of /Xam Life
Cape Town, South Africa: Axeage Private Press, 1991
Edition 13/50

Smithsonian Libraries
Enclosing Artists’ Books

Artists’ books can be packaged in many imaginative ways, not only to protect, but also to invite you to disclose what is inside. ■ Slipcases can hold one or several volumes.

Mark Attwood
b. 1966, South Africa
Joachim Schönfeldt
b. 1958, South Africa
Robert Weinek
Dates unknown, South Africa

GIF 2
Johannesburg, South Africa: The Artists’ Press
in collaboration with FIG Gallery, 1994
Edition 40/101
Smithsonian Libraries
Clamshell boxes fit tight as a clam, but open easily to reveal the hidden book.

Soft covers, such as leather or cloth, wrap around a book and can be opened by untying, unsnapping, or unhooking.

There are also very inexpensive materials, like cardboard, used to enclose books.

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**Themes of Artists’ Books**

Artists’ book themes are as diverse as art itself. Some tell stories, such as myths or folktales.

- **Mark Attwood**
  b. 1966, South Africa
  Coex’ae Qgam
  1934–2008, Botswana
  Thamae Setshogo
  b. 1971, Botswana
  Gqauqau: A San Folk Story from Botswana Told by Coex’ae Qgam (detail)
  Johannesburg, South Africa: The Artists’ Press, 1996
  Edition 52/100
  Smithsonian Libraries

- **Bessie Smith Moulton**
  Dates unknown, United States
  Tunisia
  Falmouth, ME: Bessie Smith Moulton, 2003
  Edition 7/25
  Smithsonian Libraries

- **Luan Nel**
  b. 1971, South Africa
  Paper: An Installation by Luan Nel at the Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet
  Cape Town, South Africa: Mark Coetzee Fine Art Cabinet, 1997
  Edition 82/200
  Smithsonian Libraries
Poetry is often paired with lithographs, drawings, etchings, embossed designs, or photographs. Artists may focus on biographical, autobiographical, or commemorative themes. They may address complex historical and cultural issues. Still others explore imaginary, playful, and whimsical content. Whatever the theme, artistic and aesthetic considerations are primary in the presentation of the content.

Judith Mason  
b. 1938, South Africa  
Wilma Stockenström  
b. 1933, South Africa  
Skoelapperheuwel, Skoelappervrou (Butterfly Hill, Butterfly Woman) (detail)  
Pretoria, South Africa: Omboni Editions, 1988, 2010  
National Museum of African Art, purchased with funds provided by the Annie Laurie Aitken Endowment, 2011-6-1

Locating Artists’ Books

Sources

■ Art libraries and some art museums
■ Book art centers, such as Center of Books Arts, New York, NY; Minnesota Center for Book Arts, Minneapolis; Pyramid Atlantic, Silver Spring, MD
■ Book art fairs, such as CODEX Foundation Book Fair, San Francisco, CA; New York Art Book Fair, NY
■ Fine-art presses and specialty book dealers

Websites

■ Artists’ Books and Africa  
SEARCH TERMS: artists books africa
■ “Artists’ Books—For Lack of a Better Name” by Angela Lorenz  
SEARCH TERMS: lorenz what is an artist book
■ Artists’ Books in South Africa  
SEARCH TERMS: south african artists books
■ Artists’ Book Thesaurus  
SEARCH TERMS: artists books thesaurus tumblr
■ The Century of Artists’ Books by Johanna Drucker  
SEARCH TERMS: drucker granary books
■ Smithsonian Libraries Artists’ Books  
SEARCH TERMS: smithsonian artists books

OP die heuwel van die skoolpers  
in die baie met meermie ligg  
in die welligheid van hare jour  
seren en pietars, moet men die wees  
na hare blywe en hare frutsel  
en hare losse klutse pollet  
winkelende, gezinslike, Gerrymenstalle  
en liefsteuk met patroontjies  
en hortenseer oor.
Colophon

A colophon is a statement at the beginning or end of a book that provides information about the makers, printer, type of paper, and typeface of the book.

This primer was developed in conjunction with the exhibition Artists’ Book and Africa, a project of the Smithsonian Libraries and the National Museum of African Art.

Artists’ Books and Africa

Janet Stanley, curator
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Migs Grove and Colleen Foran, editors
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