Paste Paper Tutorial

Introduction
Paste paper is one of the oldest decorated papers used by bookbinders, and can be found in books that are centuries old. Going back hundreds of years (and continuing today), sometimes bookbinders would use up their leftover bookbinding paste by throwing some pigment into the paste and brushing it out on some paper to make decorative papers to then use in bookbinding. They would then make strokes or stipple patterns with a brush in the paste, or use a tools to draw or comb designs in the paper and let it dry. One of the distinctive qualities of paste paper is the rich 3-dimensional patterns and designs. This is achieved because when the paste is first applied to the paper and a pattern made in the paste, it is thick, with peaks and valleys. As the paper dries, the paste is sucked flat into the paper, leaving a 3-dimensional pattern on a 2-dimensional surface.

Making the Paste
There are as many recipes for paste paper as there are variations in paste paper design, and many of them can be found by doing a simple Internet search. Any of the recipes you find should work great. Some pastes dry smooth and shiny while other pastes are formulated for a more matte effect. As a general rule of thumb, I would rank pastes from glossy to matte in the following order: corn starch, glycerine, methyl cellulose, rice starch paste, wheat starch paste, wall paper paste. Also keep in mind that cooked pastes will typically dry smoother/shinier than raw pastes.

My favorite recipe for paste paper is Henry Morris' Paste Recipe, which dries smooth and shiny:

**Henry Morris Paste Recipe**
Mix one cup of cornstarch in 1 cup cold water. Boil 7 cups of water in a large pan. After the water is boiling remove the pan from the stove and add the cornstarch slurry without delay. While combining the slurry with the hot water, mix it with an electric beater to prevent lumps from forming in the paste. Beat the paste for a minute or so to make sure all the starch is mixed. The consistency will be like heavy syrup. Store the paste in a rust-free container, covered with a lid. Keep it in a cool place and the next day when it was become much stiffer, remove the skin on the paste and run it through a food processor. Add only enough water to allow the paste to swirl and form a vortex.

Adding pigment to paste
I typically use acrylic pigment from a tube, but other pigments such as tempera, tube watercolor or gouache, or even ink can be used. Place a cup of two of paste into separate containers (however much you want for a certain color) and add a teaspoon or so (or a squeeze) of pigment at a time until you have the color you desire. More pigment will make deeper, more opaque colors. Keep in mind that the more opaque the pigment, the more opaque the paste paper pattern will be, and the more transparent the pigment, the more transparent the pattern. Metallic acrylics add an interesting contemporary look/sheen to the papers, and I have discovered that sprinkling wet papers with walnut ink crystals or metallic powder also makes for some wonderful papers. As I’m sure there are pigments I have not thought of or mentioned, be creative!

Tools
Paste paper is essentially glorified finger painting, and this is where creativity comes in. An assortment of brushes of various shapes and sizes, especially stiff bristles, make wonderful textures, as do fingers. I would argue that if you only used two tools, Brushes and fingers are the way to go. Anything else you can find that will leave an interesting mark or texture when stamped or dragged across the paste will probably prove to be a great tool. I have used: Natural sponges;
foam stamps and rollers with patterns; the wheels on toy cars (can make very interesting tracks in the paper); spatulas and egg beaters; forks and spoons; rubber combs (found at a craft store) or your own combs made by cutting chinks out of some binders board; scrapers; and one of my favorites is a repeated pattern of a rosette cookie batter dipper. Once again, try things out. You are only as limited as your imagination.

Assorted tools for making paste papers: brushes, fingers, spatulas, combs, scrapers, patterned fried-cookie dippers. Be creative and find your own tools.

**Making the Paper**

It is best to have a large clean working space. I like to cut out a large piece of Mylar to make the papers on, this way the counter or table stays clean. I also like to have a large roll of paper towels and a spray bottle on hand for clean-up of my workspace after each paper. I typically use Mohawk superfine, but any text-weight paper will do. Colored papers show through the paste and are also very pretty.

I start by laying my paper out on my clean mylar surface. I like to dampen the paper with a spray bottle or a sponge to completely relax the paper, but the paste can also be applied directly to the paper, which causes it to be absorbed more deeply and leaves colored stains behind as you scrape the paste, which can be an interesting effect. Next, I apply color to the paper. Typically I just plop spoonfuls or glops from my brush fairly uniformly across the paper. Just as adding several pigments to a watercolor increases the depth of a painting, I typically like to use 2-3 colors of paste (even if the colors are similar, such as all greens or blues) in my papers (unless I am going for one solid, uniform color). Next, I brush the colors across the whole paper, and the colors start to blend together. The more you brush, the more the colors will blend into one color. Just the bristle marks alone will be beautiful, and if you are happy with the paper, you could stop right here.

Alternately, you can stipple pattern into the paste with the brush, or use your fingers, the combs, scrapers, etc to make interesting patterns or textures. As mentioned before, this could also be a good time to sprinkle the wet paper with ink crystals, which will darken and soak into the paste, making gorgeous dark speckles in the paper. Once you are satisfied with the design (and I find that the less I work the paste i.e. the faster I make the design the better the paper tends to turn out), set it aside somewhere to dry. Clean your mylar workspace and start over with another paper. Once I've made a paper I love, I like to make at least one or two more identical papers so that later when I go to use the papers for a bookbinding project, I have enough paste paper to complete the project.

Paste papers made using brush strokes and fingers
Left to right: spatula; egg beater dragged across the paper; rosette cookie mould stamped repeatedly; the handle of a screwdriver rolled on the paper; and the rim of a drinking glass repeatedly stamped and lightly dragged.

Additional Techniques:

Pull-papers are made by brushing pigment onto a paper, and then folding the paper in half while the paste is wet. A pattern can be drawn onto the folded paper (the side with no paste) with fingers, a stylus or the back of a brush, and then the paper is unfolded. A beautiful pulled pattern is the result.

I like to make a striped pattern across the paper by putting globs of colored paste in a line all across one side of the paper. I then take a scraper and pull the pigment across the whole paper. The result is colorful stripes across the paper with a lot of the white of the paper showing through.

Layers of paste:
Once one color and design is down, go back and apply little accents of color from a brush or tool. Or, one color can be applied in an even coat, then dried. You can then return and do an additional pattern on top, This is especially striking if the second pattern is made with a comb, since it removes the color and reveals the color underneath.

Combs are incredibly versatile and a favorite tool for many paste paper makers. Try different things with the combs: Dragging them across the paper in a straight line, wavy; then maybe try coming back and combing across the paper in a perpendicular or diagonal pattern across the first lines.

Most of all, use your imagination and have fun!

Drying the papers
It is useful to keep in mind that the more papers you make in a single sitting, the more space you will need to dry them. When we would make these in bookbinding class at BYU, we would line the entire hallway with a long roll of newsprint and lay the papers out to dry overnight. Papers can also be hung from a clothesline or laid out on a drying rack. Just make sure that if you are drying the papers indoors, there is something to catch any colored drips. The papers will curl up and cockle as they dry. Don't worry—this is normal. When the papers are used to cover a book, they will relax again (I like to very lightly mist them before I glue them out to help them relax) and dry perfectly smooth. You can iron the papers so that they store more easily.
Books bound using paste papers

Cleanup
Enough said. Unfortunately, making paste papers tends to be messy (the bigger the mess, the more the fun, right?) It is really ideal to clean up your brushes etc in warm soapy water immediately. As long as you take good care of your tools, you should be able to reuse them again and again.