

Erika Mordek is fascinated by rare books, their perfume and the watermarks one finds in their papers. Working at the National Library of Australia in Canberra where she trained as a book conservator introduced Erika to the exciting and sometimes secretive lives of the rare books which have made their way to Australia.

'I have just completed the final corrections of text and images for my up coming publication *The Secret Life of Watermarks*,' says Erika. 'This book contains over 500 images of watermarks that have been found in rare books in the national collection in Canberra. I have been asked why I study watermarks. I believe their study can inform us on the history of non-indigenous people in Australia.'

Watermarks are fascinating in their secretiveness.

'If you go to the art store, many of the papers you will find for painting will have a watermark. It probably won't be embossed, and if you raise the paper to the light, you will see a brand. That has always been the aim of the watermark: to let the purchaser know that they are buying someone's particular paper – that is, if it isn't a forgery!'

The first marks on paper were cuts made on the paper as it was drying. These were reminiscent of the marks left on parchment. Watermarks, on the other hand, are marks made during the papermaking process. The dating of genuine papers from their watermarks is a study on its own.

The earliest known watermark has been traced to 1282 in Italy (Fabriano) and is comprised of the straight lines of a cross with circles. Papermakers would create designs on the paper mold by attaching thin wires to the mold. Designs progressed from crude line drawings to intricate filigree designs, ranging from animals, letters and faces. The mark comes about as the paper slurry, or stuff, is laid on the mold. Where it touches the raised wires, less stuff remains, leaving a thinner part on the new sheet of paper.

'It is the search that pushes me onwards. I want to find what lies under the words on paper. Sometimes the mark is unclear because the mold was worn and the stuff didn't leave a clear line. Sometimes the black ink, especially in 15th and 16th century books, is so dark and the type so thick that even the clearest watermark will hardly be visible,' says Erika.

The Venetian custom of separating the initials of the papermaker from the design of the mark was introduced in 1483 and remained very popular for a time.

It was in 1490 that the first mill was founded in England by John Tate with Tate's watermark being an eight-pointed star. It is interesting though that paper-making took many years before it would flourish in England with several of the first mills failing because of civil wars and the fear of contagion from the old rags used in the process during the plague. When skilled papermakers arrived with Huguenot refugees in the late 17th century the industry at last began to thrive and by 1700 there were 100 small paper mills in England.

Watermarks have been divided into four main categories, the first being the earliest and most simple — circles, knots,



Double headed eagle with wings displayed inverted and crown above Amsterdam 1644

THE SECRET LIFE OF WATERMARKS

ERIKA MORDEK



A bow between chain lines, Paris 1638

ovals, crosses, triangles and three-hill symbols, marks most easily formed by twisting and bending the wire. Then there are the thousands of watermarks featuring mankind, often of human hands. Botanical items form another group—flowers, trees and various plants, and then there are animals, whether domesticated or legendary.

'If, like me, you are curious about the world and a novice in the paper arts, then this is the book for you. It includes a potted history of papermaking and watermarks, a fold-out papermaking and printing timeline map, resources for further reading and research, and of course, hundreds of examples of watermarks made between 1500 and 1800 — marks that you can see for yourself on your next visit to the national library in Canberra.'



The Secret Life of Watermarks by Erika Mordek includes over 500 watermarks, some never seen before, available from theboxgirl@gmail.com

Reference: *Books & Documents: Dating, Permanence and Preservation* by Julius Grant, London, Grafton & Co. 1937

Left: Original faint watermark with white outline V in shield with acanthus leaves London 1693

