



*An abandoned paper mill above the town of Amalfi. All photographs by the author, except where noted.*

## Living Museums of Papermaking in Italy, Part 1

Lynn Sures

*This article will appear in two parts, published in consecutive issues. This issue's installment focuses on paper museums in Amalfi; the Winter 2002 issue will cover facilities in Bevagna and Fabriano. ED.*

In several different regions of Italy, devoted people are operating museums of papermaking, keeping alive the machinery and methods used there continuously since the thirteenth century. Amalfi, in Campania, is the site of the historic Amatruda and Cavaliere papermills, and the unique Museum of Paper. La Valchiera, an engrossing reconstruction of a medieval mill, is located in Bevagna, in Umbria. The Museum of Paper and Watermarks is in the famed paper city of Fabriano, in Marche.

### Amalfi

Amalfi, built into a mountainside, is exceptionally picturesque: against a background of blue sky, houses dot the mountain, interspersed with flourishing terraced citrus groves. In medieval times the Amalfi valley was called the *Valle dei Mulini*, Valley of the Mills. A walk up the Via delle Cartiere brings you to the Cartiera Antonio Cavaliere, followed by the Museo della Carta, and finally the Cartiera F. Amatruda. Until forty or fifty years ago, the papermill street was an open waterway, and raw materials and bales of paper were carried by mule to the ships below in the port. Today the water is covered by the street. Climbing beyond the town, the road follows the stream, and one encounters vast structures in ruin. They are all papermills. On a thirty-minute hike one sees mills without roofs, their walls crumbling. Inside lies evidence of vats and beaters. I was told there are remnants of twenty-two mills in this valley. Located in rugged terrain without overland transportation ties to large cities, the Amalfi mills were left behind by industrialization and victimized by nature. Subject to a seasonally variable water supply anyway, they could not withstand periodic catastrophic floods, such as one in 1954 that destroyed thirteen of the sixteen mills then active.

The merchants of the maritime republic of Amalfi had been trading with Sicily and with the Arabs in North Africa since the tenth century. By the twelfth century, paper was being used in Sicily. Lucio Amendola of the Amatruda mill says that paper pro-

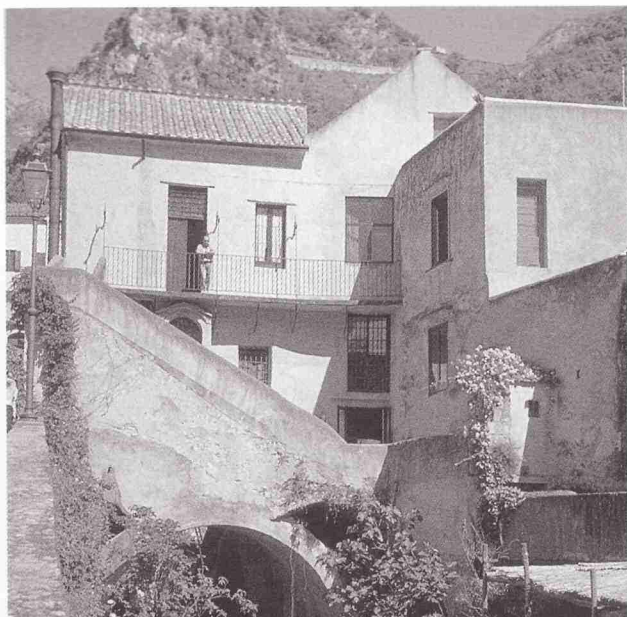


*Water wheel at the Museo della Carta.*



*A concrete, tile-lined vat at the Museo della Carta.*

duction in Amalfi dates to around 1200: "The Amalfitani ...traded with the Arabs...[and] understood the importance of this means of communication." Jose Imperato of the Museo della Carta also believes that papermills were established in the Valley of the Mills by the early 1200s. They exported their paper to the various kingdoms of the time. The Amalfitani believe the mills in the valley were the first in mainland Italy to make paper, although few documents are available. Emperor Frederick II, the King of Naples and Sicily in 1221, forbade the writing of official documents on paper, ordering that the more familiar and trusted parchment be used instead. A document dated 1268 mentions cotton bought to transform into reams of paper. (Cotton was a principal trade item for the Amalfitani, and cotton cloth mills were gradually converted into papermills.) Finally, a deed from the thirteenth century mentions stone vats along the Clarito River in Amalfi. Papermaking is substantiated in Amalfi by the late fourteenth century: a document of 1380 indicates a mill where cotton pulp and paper were made.



*Amatruda Mill.*



*Workers at Amatruda inspecting sheets to be folded to make envelopes. Photograph courtesy of Cartiera F. Amatruda.*

## Amatruda

The Amatruda family has lived in the same valley since at least 1198. Current owner Lucio Amendola describes the Amatruda ownership of the mill as documented to 1400, possibly even earlier. He hopes one or both of his teenage children will one day work at the mill and continue the tradition, which he married into.

Cartiera Amatruda is the last mill in the valley engaged in large-scale commercial production. Amendola remarks about this continuity and his family's contribution to the craft of his city: "...the proprietor (Luigi Amatruda), who died twenty or twenty-five years ago, spent all his life carrying a product that has the antique look using only slightly modern methods. ...he sold his property to reinvest in this papermill... Now his daughters and his widow have given themselves a moral reason to continue this activity, not because they had financial need...but in memory of their father who had spent his whole existence in this activity."

The historical memory of this valley and this industry continues. Amendola talked of the road that leads to the enormous, abandoned, crumbling mills that "decree the importance of Amalfi in paper produc-

tion...the paper industry died in a certain sense...This papermill has remained active in upholding the Amalfi tradition, due to the stubbornness of my father-in-law, good soul, who was impassioned with paper."

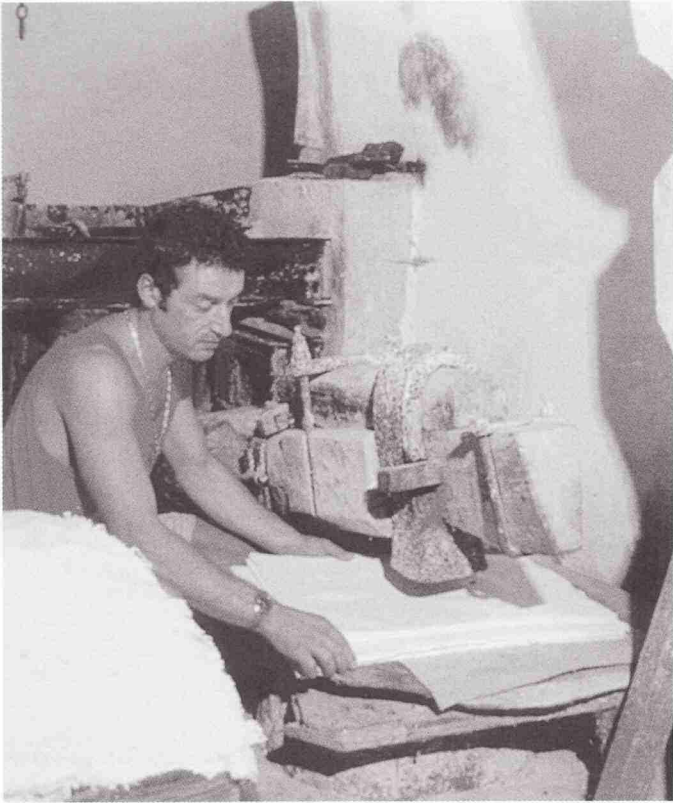
The ceiling of the old drying loft is hung with wooden poles and metal wires draped with paper, while the floors are stacked high with the mill's inventory. From business cards, stationery, and envelopes to sheets measuring 70 cm x 100 cm, the handmade paper is formed as single sheets, never machine-cut. Ovens now accelerate the drying and, in addition to handmade paper, Amatruda uses a papermaking machine, which cuts the production cost per sheet by as much as 75-80%. Up until ten years ago papermaking machines like the first one at the mill, dating to about 1830-40, were used here. Amendola explained, "But the iron produced rust, the wood rotted, and then almost of our production was thrown away." The machine was remade out of stainless steel.

Inside the mill a channel carries the river water used to make the paper. The water is filtered with a system of charcoal filters layered alternately with stone. Even though the water comes from a mountain stream, there are still impurities that need to be filtered out, including runoff from the lemon orchards above the town.

Old stone vats dating back to 1400, once used to ret the raw materials of paper production, sit in the oldest part of the mill. A press, three or four hundred years old and once used to express oil from olives, has been found useful for pressing paper. The lower story of the mill is original; the highest level, the drying loft, was built later.

One of my more sobering moments at the mill was spent in contemplation of the smoothing press. Driven by water power and gears, an enormous hammer was designed to pound repeatedly on a block of granite. By hand, a worker carefully moved the paper around on the block when the hammer was raised, so that the pounding would burnish the entire sheet.

On the wall behind the smoothing press is a fresco from 1800, representing the holy protectors of the papermill. With the Madonna and Jesus are depicted Saint Andrew, the patron saint of the city of Amalfi, and Saint Nicholas, the protector of the guild of papermakers. A mould with two half-moons (an ancient watermark of Arab origin according to Amendola) and the words "Amatruda" and "Amalfi" is found in the small papermaking demonstration area.



*A worker demonstrating the use of the water-powered burnisher at the Amatruda Mill. Photograph courtesy of Cartiera F. Amatruda.*

Amendola brought to our attention the antique tools and compared traditional and contemporary work conventions: "In olden times they did double shifts. At night, they went out with lanterns: the papermill was always active. Today we hold to normal hours, [as] established by law and we do a single shift."