Read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read—or by the knowledge of the great saint Paraleipomenon—I tell you beforehand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without much reading, by which your reverence knows I mean much knowledge, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motley emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions, and truths which still lie mysteriously hid under the dark veil of the black one.

[Tristram Shandy III.XXIX]

In the fall of 2019 I taught my eighteenth-century novel course as an exercise in slow reading, taking a tactic I had used before: putting a canonical work of fiction into the context of the other voices in the literary marketplace, and the circumstances of its making. For such a course, *Tristram Shandy* is an ideal central text. It was published over nearly a decade, among other significant literary innovations (*Millennium Hall, The Castle of Otranto, The Female American*) and important world-shaping events.

*Tristram Shandy* itself was at the forefront of technological innovations, both as copyright protection and as bravura performance. What John Mullan has called the “stuff” of *Tristram Shandy* are among the most accessible ways into the text.

Moreover, this “stuff” has served as the inspiration for generations of writers and other artists. The Laurence Sterne Trust has commissioned a variety of artistic projects inspired by Sterne’s work, often on the publication anniversaries of the volumes of *Tristram Shandy*. *The Black Page* (2009), *Emblem of my Work* (2011), Craig Dworkin’s *Chapter XXIV – The Missing Chapter* (2013), *Paint Her to Your Own Mind* (2016), and Tom Gauld’s myriorama *Endless Journey* (2016). Many are still available in physical form for purchase, and/or are available through online galleries.

The “motley emblem” of the marbled page has become particularly closely tied to the novel: the cover of every volume of *The Shandean* features a different marbled page taken from a copy of the novel (you can see all of them [here](#)). Princeton’s copies and a slideshow at *The Atlantic* are also available for students to examine, even if they do not have access to a costly first edition.

Marbling is enormously painstaking, particularly in the way the first edition went about it: folding the edges of each leaf in order to dip only a central area, drying, and then refolding and dipping on the opposite side. Many early editions either created imitation marbled sheets, pasted down trimmed marbled paper to fit, or dispensed with the sheet entirely. Not until 1935 did anyone attempt to reproduce the effort (you can read T.M. Cleland’s account of his 1935 attempt [here](#)). Unlike the black page, which, as Whitney Trettien has noted, is a long-standing mourning convention, marbling a single leaf – let alone in such a way as to leave a margin that allows the marbling to mimic the text block’s dimensions – is impossible to perform in the traditional setup of a handpress lockup. Like other illustration techniques that required special handling, the leaves would have been incorporated into the rest of the text block during binding – one of the many ways Sterne used labor-intensive techniques to distinguish his volumes from those of his many imitators.

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1 Or, in the case of the 1998 volume, the “DIRECTION to the BOOKBINDER” on the relevant page in The Works of Laurence Sterne.
Of these techniques, marbling is one of the easier (and more pleasurable) techniques to introduce into the classroom. It is also a tremendously useful way of making tangible Peter J. De Voogd’s own words about the marbled page: “Each marbling is unique, as is each reading of *Tristram Shandy*. It is fitting that your copy of *Tristram Shandy* is different from mine, since your subjective experience of the book is different.”

Happily, I have collaborators who are enormously supportive of weird stuff I try out: my colleague Special Collections Librarian Greg Schmidt is the one who identified an under-used library kitchen as a potential space, and with the blessing of his boss Aaron Trehub, we ran our sessions there. We did two trial-runs with volunteer graduate students during the summer before running the first full class.

In evaluations and discussion after the end of the *Tristram Shandy* class, students identified it as a highlight of the course. Two students’ final creative projects were inspired by the workshop: one produced a diptych of acrylic-poured paintings produced in the spirit of the marbled page, and another produced a collage of marbled sheets. I also ran demonstrations when we hosted the Aphra Behn Society/Frances Burney Society meeting in November, and several students from the class volunteered to help with the demonstrations to have more time with the activity.

The workshops have been so popular with students and faculty that I have offered further demonstration classes, with more planned. As our Library is in the middle of designing our new Maker Space, we are hopeful that we will soon be able to “ascend” from the basement kitchen into workspace in that area. Most of the needed materials (aside from the optional drying rack) store compactly in about the size of a shoebox, depending on how big your trays are.

**Preparatory Readings:**

Discussed earlier in the course:


Discussed that week:

- *Tristram Shandy* Volume III (discussed in the prior class meeting)

Day’s Reading:

- Examples of the early marbled pages: Princeton’s copies, a slideshow at *The Atlantic*, *Emblem of my Work* (2011)

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What You Need

Space requirements:
- Access to a sink is near-necessary for this project.
- **Flat table space.** If you're doing a demonstration for students without a hands-on component, you can get away with a fairly small footprint. Once you’re working with students, you'll want as much as you can manage. We had three stations on a metal table about 8 feet long and 3 feet wide, which allowed all of the students to make at least one attempt at marbling in 50 minutes.
- **Large trashcans** are also extremely useful once you’re working with a group, especially if you are using a lot of newsprint as your underlayer.
- **Some place to put wet items** (either via clothesline or art rack, see below).

Materials:
- We used **Dharma Trading Company’s Marbling Class Kit**, which is only now showing signs of depletion after a half-dozen run-throughs with anywhere from 5-20 people. The kit includes:
  - 9 (2 oz.) bottles of Jacquard Marbling Colors - Yellow, Orange, Red, Violet, Blue, Turquoise, Green, White, Black
  - 1 (2 oz) bottle of Synthetic Gall
  - 1 lb. of Alum (for pre-treating the paper or fabric)
  - 4 oz Carrageenan (quick-wetting marbling medium for making the "size")
  - cotton fabric (2 yds. of 61" cotton sheeting)
  - 10 droppers for applying paint
  - easy-to-follow instructions (which we followed to the letter)
- **Cheap trays.** Disposable baking trays work just fine, but it's nice to have white or clear trays if you can find them, so that the colors of the inks are legible. We used a three-pack of sturdy white plastic trays. As long as something can hold about an inch of liquid, and is wider than what you intend to marble, it's fine.
- **Cheap blender.** You can get away without this, but you really don’t want to. Whisking, stirring, straining was a clump-filled nightmare during our first attempt, and while it didn’t ruin the final outcome, it was a pain. Carrageenan is nontoxic (it’s used as a common food thickener), so the blender isn’t wholly sacrificed to the cause.
- **Tarp, plastic sheeting, or newsprint** to cover your work surface and under your drying area. Newsprint is obviously the best combination of environmentally-friendly and easy to clean up, though if you have time to let a reusable tarp dry, so much the better. We tried very cheap plastic tablecloths once, and they did not survive.
- **Plenty of paper towels.** This isn’t so much a “messy” process as it is “wet as heck.”
- If you intend to prepare paper in the traditional manner, you’ll need a **bucket** to hold the alum and water solution.
- **Toothpicks, brushes, combs, etc.** are all useful to have to manipulate the inks. Greg made a marbling comb out of toothpicks taped to a paper folder, which has been surprisingly popular – and sturdy!
• **Clothesline and clothespins** to hang drying items, or an **art drying rack**. The former is cheap but drippy (and what we used), the latter is tidy but more expensive (and we are planning to get one).

• We didn’t use **gloves** but you might want to – marbling ink requires intense scrubbing to remove.

**Choice of Medium:**

• **Paper.** Dharma (and other sources) recommended rice paper (Masa or Hosho) or otherwise unsized paper. We tested inexpensive Hosho paper treated with alum in our first run, which worked fine, but is extremely thin and tears easily – not great for nervous beginners. In our second run-through, we invited participants to bring their own materials to experiment with. None of these items had been pretreated with alum. We found that standard copy paper worked just fine, and cardstock was particularly vibrant. The challenge with both, it should be noted, is that because the paper does not become fully saturated, it is impossible for the student to tell whether there are any air bubbles under the sheet. On the other hand, because it doesn’t become fully saturated, it’s easier to lay the items flat to dry.

• **Cloth.** Because the kit came with cotton, we tested it, with strong results. I then purchased bulk handkerchiefs, which are hemmed and cut to size, saving time. Alum-treated fabric must be used as soon as possible, because the alum degrades the fabric until it is washed out as part of the marbling process. We have also experimented with unalumned handkerchiefs, and there is not a noticeable difference (though there may be over time). One student brought a tshirt to attempt – while the tray was not big enough to marble the entire shirt, we did get an interesting shoulder effect!

• **Book Edges.** Dipping the edges of a book or notebook is surprisingly easy, as long as the text block is kept tightly together to prevent liquid from creeping further up the pages and the dip is swift and careful. We had several students and colleagues do so to their books, with beautiful results.

**Method:**

**Day Before Class:**

• If you are preparing material with alum, you’ll want to do so the night before. Ideally the items will dry flat, but in the second round I tumbled the prepared handkerchiefs on low heat in my dryer with no noticeable difference in final outcome.

• Ideally, you’ll also mix the size the day before (or earlier). The ratio is 2 TBS carrageenan to a gallon of water. We mix in our blender, which scales the ratio down to about 1.67 L water to 1.5 tsp carrageenan. We are still experimenting with our size, so your mileage may vary. The size should be stored in a refrigerator and can last a week or more. Once used, it is safe to put down a sink drain.

**Before Class:**

• Setup your space with tarp.

• Place trays with plenty of space for bottles of ink, palettes, droppers, etc.

• Fill trays with size, leaving some space at the top for splashing.

• String clothesline or ready the drying rack.
Class time:

I start with a brief (five minute) introduction to marbling history: this could also be achieved through strategic use of YouTube videos, which abound. I then walk through a demonstration of marbling: scattering ink across the tray of size, manipulating it with a stick or rake, and placing a sheet of paper down and demonstrating how to pull the sheet off, rinse, and hang to dry.

Students are then let loose to explore. I encourage students who wish to keep their marbled creations to write their name on the back of the sheet in pencil prior to marbling, or to take a photograph of the marbled page. Both techniques are useful in identifying whose is whose later. However, it is common that many of the pages will be either unsatisfactory or just more than the students wish to keep, which allows you to keep some samples for future courses.

The expectation is not that they will be able to recreate patterns they’ve seen but gain a sense of the complexity of the task Sterne asked of his collaborators. *Tristram Shandy’s* original marbled pages in Volume III were created by carefully folding the leaf such that only a very specific section would come into contact with the ink tray. These individual leaves were then tipped into the book. On some first editions, the folds on page 169/170 can still be seen. One could attempt to replicate the process by handing students octavo-sized sheets of paper and encouraging them to attempt to replicate the technique. I then often note later editions would take less time-consuming tactics: cutting large sheets of marbled paper to size and gluing them into place, for example.

After class:

- Empty the remaining used size into the sink with hot tap running. (You can keep unused or fairly ink-free size in the refrigerator for about a week, if you wish)
- Rinse trays, eyedroppers, palettes, etc. We are able to leave items to dry in this space, so we place items on newsprint or paper towels in a consolidated area.
- Wipe down tarp and allow to dry (or dispose of newsprint)

Next Day:

- Everything should be dry within hours, and definitely by the next day.

Links used:
https://www1.gifu-u.ac.jp/~masaru/first_editions.html