Papermaking gets to heart of Jaffe Center’s book collection at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton

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BOCA RATON — On paper, there are few places to match Florida Atlantic University’s Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts. In fact, the center is all about paper, books and what goes into their creation.

Founded by Arthur Jaffe, whose fascination was with books as objects, the center began in 2007. The papermaking lab at the T-6 building, built circa 1941, marks the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center’s first expansion outside of the Wimberly Library, where the Jaffes’ collection has resided since 1998. The Jaffes donated their private collection of 2,800 books made by artists. With the 2007 library expansion, the Jaffes’ collection became the core of the new 4,800-square-foot center, largely funded by a substantial gift that Mata Jaffe earmarked before her death in 2001. It is one of a handful of such centers in the United States.

The center is currently showing an exhibition on origami, the Japanese art of paper-folding.

Now the Jaffe Center has expanded into the World War II-era former radar building on FAU’s Boca Raton campus, where students can make that the most basic building block of books, paper itself. On a recent afternoon, center Director John Cutrone used a Hollander beater, a large and noisy machine, to reduce a pair of Arthur Jaffe’s blue jeans to tiny blue scraps. It’s an inside joke between Cutrone and Jaffe, a frequent visitor to his namesake center.

“He calls them dungarees,” said Cutrone. But Cutrone also favors the color of paper that blue jeans produce.

Once shredded and dumped into a vat of water, the denim becomes a pale blue slurry. Cutrone uses a fine mesh screen to scoop out a layer about the size of a sheet of letter paper. He stacks several of these sheets between layers of absorbent material and squeezes the water out with a powerful hydraulic press that he found in an FAU garage.

The sheets of newly made paper then spend the night between layers of cardboard on a wooden frame with two square house fans trained on them. They will be dry and usable paper by the following morning.

That’s all there is to it.

The word “paper” is derived from the name of the reedy plant papyrus, which grows abundantly along the Nile River in Egypt. Paper is made of such natural fibers as wood, cotton or flax, though adventurous paper artists sometimes add flowers and other plant material. As with so many inventions, the Chinese were the first to make paper about 2,000 years ago.

The papermaking building is not open to the public, but Cutrone is planning to offer workshops soon for the general public as well as students.

The exhibition, "Born from Folding: The Art & Science of Origami," continues through Feb. 25 at the Wimberly Library, FAU, 777 Glades Road, Boca Raton. There are related workshops and film screenings of “Between the Folds,” a 60-minute documentary that inspired the exhibition. The film will be shown at 2 and 4 p.m. on Saturday at the Jaffe Center. For more information, visit www.jaffe-collection.org.

The exhibition is on the first floor in the lobby atrium and at the Jaffe Center, where a portion of it can be viewed from outside of the center during regular library hours. The art inside of the Jaffe Center can be viewed Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Library visitors can park in the metered spaces at the library.

For more information, call the Arthur and Mata Jaffe Center for Book Arts at (561) 297-0455.