

PROCESS AND APPARATUS FOR MAKING PAPERMAKING BELT

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention generally relates to papermaking belts useful in papermaking machines for making strong, soft, absorbent paper products. The invention is also concerned with a method of making such papermaking belts. More particularly, the invention relates to papermaking belts comprising a resinous framework and a reinforcing structure joined thereto.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Generally, a papermaking process includes several steps. Typically, an aqueous slurry of papermaking fibers is formed into an embryonic web on a foraminous member, such, for example, as a Fourdrinier wire. After the initial forming of the paper web on the Fourdrinier wire, or forming wires, the paper web is carried through a drying process or processes on another piece of papermaking clothing in the form of endless belt which is often different from the Fourdrinier wire or forming wires. This other clothing is commonly referred to as a drying fabric or belt. While the web is on the drying belt, the drying or dewatering process can involve vacuum dewatering, drying by blowing heated air through the web, a mechanical processing, or a combination thereof.

In through-air-drying processes developed and commercialized by the present assignee, the drying fabric may comprise a so-called deflection member having a microscopically monoplanar, continuous, and preferably patterned and non-random network surface which defines a plurality of discrete, isolated from one another deflection conduits. Alternatively, the deflection member may comprise a plurality of discrete protuberances isolated from one another by a substantially continuous deflection conduit, or be semi-continuous (i. e., comprising a combination of the continuous and discrete network). The embryonic web is associated with the deflection member. During the

papermaking process, the papermaking fibers in the web are deflected into the deflection conduits and water is removed from the web through the deflection conduits. The web then is dried and foreshortened, if desired, by creping. Deflection of the fibers into the deflection conduits of the papermaking belt can be induced by, for example, the application of differential fluid pressure to the embryonic paper web. One preferred method of applying differential pressure is exposing the web to a fluid pressure differential through the drying fabric comprising the deflection member.

Through-air-dried paper webs may be made according to any commonly assigned and incorporated herein by reference U.S. Patents: No. 4,529,480 issued to Trokhan on July 16, 1985; No. 4,637,859 issued to Trokhan on Jan. 20, 1987; No. 5,364,504, issued to Smurkoski et al. on Nov. 15, 1994; No. 5,259, 664, issued to Trokhan et al. on June 25, 1996; and No. 5, 679,222, issued to Rasch et al. on Oct. 21, 1997.

Generally, a method of making the deflection member comprises applying a coating of liquid photosensitive resin to a surface of a foraminous element, controlling the thickness of the coating to a pre-selected value, exposing the coating of the liquid photosensitive resin to light in an activating wave-length through a mask, thereby preventing or reducing curing of selected portions of the photosensitive resin. Then the uncured portions of the photosensitive resin are typically washed away by showers. Several commonly assigned U.S. Patents which are incorporated herein by reference, disclose methods of making papermaking belts: 4,514,345, issued April 30, 1985 to Johnson et al.; 4,528,239, issued July 9, 1985 to Trokhan; 5,098,522, issued March 24, 1992; 5,260,171, issued Nov. 9, 1993 to Smurkoski et al.; 5,275,700, issued Jan. 4, 1994 to Trokhan; 5,328,565, issued July 12, 1994 to Rasch et al.; 5,334,289, issued Aug. 2, 1994 to Trokhan et al.; 5,431,786, issued July 11, 1995 to Rasch et al.; 5,496,624, issued March 5, 1996 to Stelljes, Jr. et al.; 5,500,277, issued March 19, 1996 to Trokhan et al.; 5,514,523, issued May 7, 1996 to Trokhan et al.; 5,554,467, issued Sept. 10, 1996, to Trokhan et al.; 5,566,724, issued Oct. 22,

1996 to Trokhan et al.; 5,624,790, issued April 29, 1997 to Trokhan et al.; 5,628,876 issued May 13, 1997 to Ayers et al.; 5,679,222 issued Oct. 21, 1997 to Rasch et al.; and 5,714,041 issued Feb. 3, 1998 to Ayers et al., the disclosures of which are incorporated herein by reference.

While curing of the photosensitive resin has proved to be an effective way of making the papermaking belt, a search for improved methods and products has continued. Now, it is believed that the deflection member may be made by at least several other methods which do not necessarily require the use of the curing radiation.

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide a novel process for making a papermaking belt by first, forming a desired pattern of a fluid resin in a molding member, and then transferring the resin from the molding member to the reinforcing structure and solidifying the patterned resin. Another object of the present invention is to provide a process that reduces the amount of the resin required to construct the papermaking belt comprising a reinforcing structure and a patterned resinous framework. Still another object of the present invention is to provide an apparatus comprising a molding member for forming a desirable pattern of the resin and subsequently transferring the patterned resin to the reinforcing structure of the belt being constructed.

These and other objects of the present invention will be more readily apparent when considered in reference to the following description, in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

A papermaking belt that can be made by a process and an apparatus of the present invention comprises a reinforcing structure and a patterned resinous framework joined thereto. The reinforcing structure has a first side and an opposite second side. Preferably, but not necessarily, the reinforcing structure comprises a fluid-permeable element, such as, for example, a woven fabric or a screen having a plurality of open areas therethrough. The reinforcing structure

This Sheet Has Been Replaced



may also comprise a felt. The resinous framework has a top side and a bottom side, the top and bottom sides corresponding to the first and second sides of the reinforcing structure, respectively. The resinous framework may have a substantially continuous pattern, a discrete pattern, or a combination thereof (i. e., a "semi-continuous pattern").

A process for making the belt comprises the following steps: providing a reinforcing structure having a first side, a second side opposite to the first side, and a thickness formed therebetween; providing a flowable resinous material; providing at least one molding member having a molding surface comprising a pre-selected pattern of molding pockets structured and designed to carry the flowable resinous material therein; continuously moving the molding surface at a transport velocity; depositing the flowable resinous material into the molding pockets of the molding surface; continuously transporting the reinforcing structure at the transport velocity such that at least a portion of the reinforcing structure is in a face-to-face relationship with at least a portion of the molding surface; transferring the flowable resinous material from the molding pockets of the molding surface onto the reinforcing structure; causing the flowable resinous material and the reinforcing structure to join together; and solidifying the resinous material thereby forming the resinous framework joined to the reinforcing structure. Preferably, the resinous material is transferred from the molding pockets onto the reinforcing structure in the predetermined pattern corresponding to the pattern of the molding pockets. Preferably, a step is provided of treating the molding surface with a release agent prior to depositing the resinous material onto/into the molding surface. When the reinforcing structure is in a face-to-face relationship with the molding surface, preferably the reinforcing structure contacts the flowable resinous material disposed in the molding pockets for a predetermined period of time sufficient to cause the flowable resinous material and the reinforcing surface to at least partially join together. The transferal of the resinous material from the molding surface onto

the reinforcing structure may be assisted by pressing the molding surface and the reinforcing structure relative each other.

An apparatus for making the papermaking belt has a machine direction and comprises a molding member having a patterned molding surface comprising a plurality of molding pockets. The molding pockets are structured and designed to carry a flowable resinous material therein. In one embodiment, the molding member comprises a rotatable molding roll having a circumference and a longitudinal axis of rotation perpendicular to the machine direction. The circumference of the molding roll comprises the molding surface. In another embodiment, the molding member comprises an endless molding band adapted to continuously travel in the machine direction.

The apparatus further comprises a means for depositing the flowable resinous material into the molding pockets of the molding surface, a means for moving the reinforcing structure in the machine direction such that at least a portion of the reinforcing structure is in a face-to-face relationship with at least a portion of the molding surface, and a means for moving the molding member in the machine direction such that the flowable resinous material is transferred from the molding pockets onto the reinforcing structure, preferably in a pre-selected pattern. The apparatus preferably further comprises a means for solidifying the flowable resinous material such as to form the resinous framework joined to the reinforcing structure.

In one embodiment, the molding pockets of the molding surface form a substantially continuous pattern, in which instance the resinous material is transferred onto the reinforcing structure in a substantially continuous pattern. In another embodiment, the molding pockets of the molding roll form a pattern of discrete molding pockets, in which instance the resinous material is transferred onto the reinforcing structure in a pattern comprising discrete resinous protuberances. An embodiment is contemplated in which the molding pockets of the molding surface form a combination of the substantially

continuous pattern and the discrete pattern, a so-called "semi-continuous" pattern.

The resinous material may, in some embodiments, extend outwardly from the first side of the reinforcing structure after the resinous material has been deposited onto the reinforcing structure. The molding pockets have a depth therein, which may differentiate throughout different parts of the molding surface. The present invention allows one to make the belt in which the resinous framework has differential thickness throughout the belt's plane. At the same time, the present invention allows one to construct the belt in which the top side of the resinous framework and the first side of the reinforcing structure lie in substantially the same plane.

The flowable resinous material is preferably selected from the group consisting of epoxies, silicones, urethanes, polystyrenes, polyolefins, polysulfides, nylons, butadienes, photopolymers, and any combination thereof. In one preferred embodiment the fluid resinous material comprises a photosensitive resin. The fluid resinous material may comprise a thermosensitive resin, such as thermo-setting or thermo-plastic material. Preferably, the fluid resinous material is provided in a liquid state. The fluid resinous material may be deposited onto/into the molding surface by first, contacting the molding surface with the flowable resinous material and second, removing excess of the flowable resinous material from the molding surface as the molding surface is moving.

The apparatus further may comprise a means for pressing the reinforcing structure and the molding surface relative to each other for a predetermined period of time, thereby facilitating the transfer of the resinous material from the molding surface to the reinforcing structure. In one embodiment, the apparatus comprises a backing roll juxtaposed with the molding surface to form a nip therebetween. In another embodiment, the apparatus comprises a backing sheet juxtaposed with the molding surface. The backing sheet is structured and

designed to move in a face-to-face contacting relationship with at least a portion of the reinforcing structure. Preferably, the backing sheet is tensioned.

In one embodiment, the molding surface comprises a predetermined pattern of recesses. The recesses are structured and designed to receive the reinforcing structure therein. This embodiment provides the belt in which a substantial portion of the bottom side of the resinous framework is elevated above the second side of the reinforcing structure. That is, the belt has a distance formed between the second side of the reinforcing structure and the substantial portion of the bottom side of the resinous framework. During a papermaking process, this distance provides leakage between the belt and a dewatering papermaking equipment, thereby eliminating a sudden application of fluid pressure differential to a paper web disposed on the belt and mitigating a phenomenon known as "pinholing." The distance between the second side of the reinforcing structure and the bottom side of the resinous framework may differentiate throughout the plane of the belt.

The apparatus may further comprise a means for solidifying the flowable resinous material, such as, for example a curing device comprising a source of UV radiation, for curing the resinous material comprising a photosensitive resin. Optionally, a step and a means may be provided of controlling a thickness of the resinous material joined to the reinforcing structure to at least one pre-selected value.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a schematic side elevational view of one embodiment of a process and an apparatus of the present invention, the process shown comprising a multi-step process shown in **FIG. 1**.

FIG. 2 is a schematic side elevational and more detailed view of a fragment 2 of **FIG. 1**, showing a papermaking belt being constructed at a first step of the multi-step process shown in **FIG. 1**.

FIG. 2A is a simplified top plan view, taken along lines 2A-2A of **FIG. 2**.

FIG. 3 is a schematic side elevational and more detailed view of a fragment 3 of **FIG. 1**, showing a papermaking belt being constructed at a second step of the multi-step process shown in **FIG. 1**.

FIG. 3A is a simplified top plan view, taken along lines 3A-3A of **FIG. 3**.

FIG. 4 is a schematic and partial side elevational view of one embodiment the process and the apparatus of the present invention, showing a molding roll and a belt being constructed.

FIG. 5 is a schematic and partial side elevational view of another embodiment of the process and the apparatus of the present invention, the apparatus comprising a molding nip formed between the molding roll and a backing roll.

FIG. 6 is a schematic and partial side elevational view of still another embodiment of the process and the apparatus of the present invention, the apparatus comprising two backing rolls and a support sheet wrapping around the molding roll.

FIG. 7 is a schematic side elevational view of another embodiment of the process and the apparatus of the present invention, showing a reinforcing structure wrapping around a portion of the circumference of the molding roll and entirely recessed therewithin.

FIG. 7A is a schematic and more detailed view of a fragment 7A of **FIG. 7**, showing the papermaking belt being constructed using the process and the apparatus shown in **FIG. 7**.

FIG. 7B is a fragmental and schematic planar representation of a view taken in the direction of the arrow 7B of **FIG. 7**, showing one exemplary embodiment of the circumference of the molding roll, comprising a pattern of molding pockets for receiving a flowable resin, and a pattern of recesses for receiving the reinforcing structure, two patterns being mutually interposed and having equal depths.

FIG. 8 is a schematic and partial side elevational view of another embodiment of the process and the apparatus of the present invention, showing the

reinforcing structure wrapping around a portion of the circumference of the molding roll and partially recessed therewithin, the apparatus comprising three backing rolls juxtaposed with the molding roll and contacting the reinforcing structure.

FIG. 8A is a schematic and more detailed side elevational view of a fragment **8A** of **FIG. 8**.

FIG. 8B is a fragmental and schematic planar representation of a view taken along the lines **8B-8B** of **FIG. 8A**, showing one exemplary embodiment of the circumference of the molding roll, comprising a pattern of molding pockets for receiving a flowable resin, and a pattern of recesses for receiving the reinforcing structure, two patterns being mutually interposed, the molding pockets having a depth greater than that of the recesses for the reinforcing structure.

FIG. 9 is a schematic partial cross-sectional view, taken along lines **9-9** of **FIG. 9A**, of one exemplary embodiment of the papermaking belt which may be made using the process and the apparatus of the present invention, the belt comprising a substantially continuous framework joined to the reinforcing structure, and a plurality of discrete deflection conduits.

FIG. 9A is a schematic top plan view taken along lines **9A-9A** of **FIG. 9**.

FIG. 10 is a schematic partial cross-sectional view of one exemplary embodiment of the molding roll of the present invention, comprising a plurality of molding pockets having differential depths.

FIG. 10A is a schematic planar representation of a plan view taken along lines **10A-10A** of **FIG. 10**.

FIG. 11 is a schematic partial cross-sectional view, taken along lines **11-11** of **FIG. 11A**, of an exemplary embodiment of the papermaking belt which may be made using the molding roll shown in **FIG. 10**, the belt comprising a plurality of discrete protuberances having differential overburdens.

FIG. 11A is a schematic top plan view taken along lines **11A-11A** of **FIG. 11**.

FIG. 12 is a schematic side elevational view of another embodiment of the process and the apparatus of the present invention, the apparatus comprising an endless molding band.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

A representative papermaking belt **90** which can be made in accordance with the present invention is schematically shown in **FIGs. 9, 9A, 11, and 11A**. As used herein, the term "papermaking belt," or simply "belt," refers to a substantially microscopically-monoplanar structure designed to support, and preferably carry, a web thereon during at least one stage of a papermaking process. Typically, modern industrial-scale processes utilize the endless papermaking belts, but it is to be understood that the present invention may be used for making discrete portions of the belt **90** or stationary plates which may be used for making web handsheets, rotating drums, etc.

As **FIGs. 9 and 11** show, the belt **90** has a web-contacting side **91** and a backside **92** opposite to the web-contacting side **91**. The papermaking belt **90** is said to be macroscopically-monoplanar because when a portion of the belt **90** is placed into a planar configuration, the web-side **91**, viewed as a whole, is essentially in one plane. It is said to be "essentially" monoplanar to recognize the fact that deviations from absolute planarity are tolerable, while not preferred, so long as the deviations are not substantial enough to adversely affect the performance of the belt **90** for the purposes of a particular papermaking process.

The papermaking belt **90** which can be made in accordance with the present invention generally comprises two primary elements: a framework **50a** (preferably, a hardened polymeric resinous framework made of a flowable polymeric resinous material **50**) and a reinforcing structure **40**. The reinforcing structure **40** has a first side **41** and a second side **42** opposite to the first side **41**. The first side **41** may contact papermaking fibers during the papermaking process, while the second side **42** typically contacts the papermaking

equipment, such as, for example, a vacuum pickup shoe and a multi-slot vacuum box (both not shown).

The reinforcing structure **40** can take any number of different forms. It can comprise a woven element, a non-woven element, a screen, a net, a band, a plate, etc. In one preferred embodiment, the reinforcing structure **40** comprises a woven element formed by a plurality of machine-directional yarns interwoven with a plurality of cross-machine-directional yarns, as shown in **FIGs. 9** and **9A**. More particularly, the woven reinforcing structure **40** may comprise a foraminous woven element, such as disclosed in commonly-assigned U.S. Patent No. 5,334,289, issued in the name of Trokhan et al., on August 2, 1994, and incorporated by reference herein. The reinforcing structure **40** comprising a woven element may be formed by one or several layers of interwoven yarns, the layers being substantially parallel to each other and interconnected in a contacting face-to-face relationship. Commonly-assigned U.S. Patent No. 5,679,222, issued to Rasch et al. on October 21, 1997 is incorporated by reference herein. Commonly assigned U.S. Patent 5,496,624, issued on March 5, 1996 in the names of Stelljes, Jr. et al. is incorporated herein by reference to show a suitable reinforcing structure **40**. The papermaking belt **90** may also be made using the reinforcing structure **40** comprising a felt, for example, as set forth in a commonly assigned Patent Application Serial No. 08/391,372, filed February 15, 1995, in the name of Trokhan et al. and entitled "Method of Applying a Curable Resin to Substrate for Use in Papermaking," which Application is incorporated herein by reference.

The reinforcing structure **40** of the belt **90** strengthens the resinous framework **50a** and preferably has a suitable projected area into which the papermaking fibers can deflect under pressure. According to the present invention, the reinforcing structure **40** may be fluid-permeable as well as non-fluid-permeable. As used herein, the term "fluid-permeable" refers to a condition of the reinforcing structure **40**, which condition allows fluids, such as water and air, to pass through the reinforcing structure **40** in at least one direction. As one

skilled in the art will readily recognize, the belts comprising a fluid-permeable reinforcing structures are typically used in through-air-dry processes of making a paper web. An example of the non-fluid permeable reinforcing structure 40 is shown in FIGs. 11 and 11A.

As shown in Figs. 9, 9a, 11, 11a, the reinforcing structure 40 is joined to the resinous framework 50a. The resinous framework 50a comprises a solidified resinous material 50, i. e., the resinous framework 50 is a solid phase of the fluid resinous material 50a. In that sense, the terms "resinous material 50" and the resinous framework 50a" may be used interchangeably where appropriate in the context of the description. The resinous framework 50a has a top side 51 and a bottom side 52 opposite to the top side 51. During the papermaking process, the top side 51 of the framework 50a contacts the papermaking fibers, and thus defines the pattern of the paper web being produced. The bottom side 52 of the framework 50a may, in some embodiments (FIGs. 7 and 7A), contact the papermaking equipment, in which embodiments the bottom side 52 of the framework and the second side 42 of the reinforcing structure may be disposed in the same macro-plane. Alternatively, a distance Z may be formed between the bottom side 52 of the framework 50a and the second side 42 of the reinforcing structure (FIG. 8A).

Another embodiment (not shown) of the framework 50a may comprise the bottom side 52 having a network of passageways that provide backside surface texture irregularities, as described in commonly-assigned U.S. Patent 5,275,700 issued on January 4, 1994 to Trokhan, which patent is incorporated by reference herein. The two latter embodiments of the framework 50a -- one having the distance Z between the bottom side 52 of the framework 50a, and the other having the backside texture irregularities -- beneficially provide leakage between mutually-contacting the bottom side 52 of the framework 50 and a surface of the papermaking equipment. The leakage reduces, or even eliminates altogether, a sudden application of the vacuum pressure to the paper web, thereby mitigating a phenomenon known as pinholing.

A first step of the process according to the present invention comprises providing a reinforcing structure **40**. As has been explain above, the reinforcing structure **40** is a substrate that may comprise a variety of different forms, such as, for example, a woven fabric, a felt, a screen, a band, etc. A more detailed description of the reinforcing structure **40**, particularly one comprising a woven element, is found in commonly-assigned U.S. Patent 5,275,700 incorporated herein by reference. Regardless of its specific embodiment, the reinforcing structure **40** has a first side **41** and a second side **42**, as best shown in **FIGs. 4, 7, 7A, and 11**. In the formed papermaking belt **90**, the first side **41** faces (and in some embodiment may contact) the papermaking fibers during the papermaking process, while the second side **42**, opposite to the first side **41**, faces (and typically contacts) the papermaking equipment. As used herein, the first side **41** and the second side **42** of the reinforcing structure **40** are consistently referred to by these respective names regardless of incorporation (i. e., prior, during, and after the incorporation) of the reinforcing structure **40** into the papermaking belt **90**. A distance between the first side **41** and the second side **42** of the reinforcing structure forms a thickness of the reinforcing structure, designated herein as "**h**" (**FIG. 9**). In the preferred continuous process of the present invention, the reinforcing structure **40** continuously moves in a machine direction, indicated in several figures as "**MD**." The use of the term "machine direction" herein is consistent with the traditional use of the term in papermaking, where this term refers to a direction which is parallel to the flow of the paper web through the papermaking equipment. As used herein, the "machine direction" is a direction parallel to the flow of the reinforcing structure **40** during the process of the present invention.

The next step of the process of the present invention comprises providing a flowable resinous material **50**. As used herein, the term "flowable resinous material" refers to a wide variety of polymeric resins and plastics that can achieve and maintain under certain conditions and/or for a certain period of time, a fluid, or liquid, state sufficiently to be molded into a structure having a desired

configuration, and then solidify, and preferably cure, to form the framework **50a**, as has been explained above. The flowable resinous material **50** of the present invention may comprise a material selected from the group consisting of: epoxies, silicones, urethanes, polystyrenes, polyolefines, polysulfides, nylons, butadienes, photopolymers, and any combination thereof.

The examples of the suitable liquid resinous material **50** comprising silicones, include, but are not limited to: "Smooth-Sil 900," "Smooth-Sil 905," "Smooth-Sil 910," and "Smooth-Sil 950." The examples of the suitable liquid resinous material **50** comprising polyurethanes, include, but are not limited to: "CP-103 Supersoft," "Formula 54-290 Soft," "PMC-121/20," "PL-25," "PMC-121/30," "BRUSH-ON 35," "PMC-121/40," "PL-40," "PMC-724," "PMC-744," "PMC-121/50," "BRUSH-ON 50," "64-2 Clear Flex," "PMC-726," "PMC-746," "A60," "PMC-770," "PMC-780," "PMC-790." All the above exemplary materials are commercially available from Smooth-On, Inc., 2000 St. John Street, Easton, PA, 18042. Other examples of the liquid resinous material **50** include multi-component materials, such as, for example, a two-component liquid plastic "Smooth-Cast 300," and a liquid rubber compound "Clear Flex 50," both commercially available from Smooth-On, Inc.

Photosensitive resins may also be used as the resinous material **50**. The photosensitive resins are usually polymers that cure, or cross-link, under the influence of radiation, typically ultraviolet (UV) light. References containing more information on liquid photosensitive resins include Green et al., "Photocross-Linkage Resin Systems," J. Macro-Sci. Revs Macro Chem. C21 (2), 187-273 (1981-82); Bayer, "A Review of Ultraviolet Curing Technology", Tappi Paper Synthetics Conf. Proc., Sept. 25-27, 1978, pp. 167-172; and Schmidle, "Ultraviolet Curable Flexible Coatings", J. of Coated Fabrics, 8, 10-20 (July, 1978). All the preceding three references are incorporated herein by reference. Especially preferred liquid photosensitive resins are included in the Merigraph series of resins made by Hercules Incorporated, Wilmington, Del. A most preferred resin is Merigraph resin EPD 1616.

The examples of thermo-sensitive resins that can comprise the resinous material 50 of the present invention include, but are not limited to: a group of thermoplastic elastomers Hytrel® (such as Hytrel® 4056, Hytrel®7246, and Hytrel®8238); and Nylon Zytel® (such as Zytel®101L, and Zytel®132F), commercially available from DuPont Corporation of Wilmington, DE.

Preferably, the flowable resinous material 50 is provided in a liquid form. The present invention, however, contemplates the use of the flowable resinous material 50 which is provided in a solid form. In the latter instance, an additional step of fluidizing the resinous material 50 is required. The flowable resinous material 50 is preferably supplied to a source 55 which provides for the proper conditions (such as, for example, temperature) to keep the resinous material 50 in a fluid state. As used herein, the term "fluid" refers to a condition, state, or phase, of the resinous material 50, in which condition the resinous material 50 is capable of flowing and which allows the resinous material 50 be deposited onto a three-dimensionally-patterned surface such that the resinous material 50 substantially conforms to a three-dimensional pattern of the patterned surface. If thermoplastic or thermosetting resins are used as the resinous material 50, typically, a temperature slightly above the melting point of the material is desired to maintain the resin in a fluid state. The material is considered to be at or above the "melting point" if the material is wholly in the fluid state. A suitable source 55 is a trough schematically shown in several drawings of the present application. The trough may have a closed end bottom and closed side walls and outboard side wall. The inboard side wall of the trough may be open allowing the flowable resinous material 50 disposed therein to freely contact and communicate with a molding member 20, as described herein below. If the resinous material comprises a thermoplastic resin, the source 55 and the molding surface 21 are preferably heated to prevent premature solidification of the liquid resinous material 50.

The next step of the process comprises providing a molding member 20. As used herein, the "molding member" 20 is a structure designed to receive the

fluid resinous material **50** and then transfer the resinous material **50** onto the reinforcing structure in a predetermined pattern. In the preferred continuous process, the molding member **20** may comprise a variety of different embodiments. In embodiments shown in **FIGs. 1, 4-8, and 10**, the molding member **20** comprises a molding roll **20a**, while in an embodiment shown in **FIG. 12**, the molding member **20** comprises a molding band **20b**. Regardless of its embodiment, the molding member **20** has a molding surface **21** having a three-dimensional pattern thereon, and structured and designed to receive the flowable resinous material **50** such that the flowable resinous material **50** substantially conforms to the three-dimensional pattern. Preferably the molding surface **21** comprises a pre-selected pattern of molding pockets **22** therein, as best shown in **FIGs. 4, 7, 7B, 8, and 10**. As used herein, the "molding surface" **21** is a generic term referring to all exposed surfaces of the molding member **20**, including an inherent surface, such as an external (the most elevated) surface of the band **20b** (**FIG. 12**), or an external (corresponding to a greater diameter) circumference **21a** (**FIGs. 4, 8, 10**) of the roll **20a**, as well as inner surfaces of the pockets **22** (**FIGs. 4, 7, 8, 10**). The molding surface **21** is a surface onto which the fluid resinous material **50** is deposited. In a preferred continuous process of the present invention, the molding member **20** continuously moves at a transport velocity thereby carrying the resinous material **50**. One skilled in the art will readily appreciate that in the embodiments (**FIGs. 1-8, and 10**) comprising the rotatable molding roll or rolls **20a** (**20a'**), the transport velocity comprises a surface velocity measured at one of the circumferences of the molding surface **21**. In **FIGs. 1, 4-7, and 8**, a direction of rotation of the molding roll(s) **20a** (**20a'**) is indicated by an arrow "A." In the embodiment (**FIG. 12**) comprising the molding band **20b**, the transport velocity is a velocity of the band **20b** measured between supporting rolls **25** and **26**.

As used herein, the "molding pockets" **22** refers to a pattern of depressions, or cavities, of the molding surface **21**, which are designed to transfer the fluid resinous material **50** from the source **55** to the reinforcing

structure **40** and to deposit the fluid resinous material **50** onto the reinforcing structure **40** in a pre-determined pattern. The molding pockets **22** may comprise a substantially continuous pattern in the molding surface **21**, as best shown in **FIG. 7B**; in this instance, the resinous material **50** is transferred onto the reinforcing structure **40** in a substantially continuous pattern. As used herein, a pattern is said to be "substantially" continuous to indicate that minor deviations from absolute continuity may be tolerated, as long as these deviations do not adversely affect the process of the present invention and the performance and desired qualities of the final product -- the papermaking belt **90**. **FIGs. 2A** and **9A** show two different exemplary embodiments of the papermaking belt **90** having a substantially continuous resinous framework **50a**, made by using the continuous pattern of the molding pockets **22**.

Alternatively, the molding pockets **22** may comprise a pattern of discrete depressions, or cavities. In the latter instance, the resinous material **50** is transferred from the molding pockets **22** to the reinforcing structure **40** in a pattern comprising a plurality of discrete protuberances. An exemplary papermaking belt **90** having the resinous framework **50a** comprising a plurality of discrete protuberances outwardly extending from the first side **41** of the reinforcing structure **40**, is schematically shown in **FIGs. 10, 11, and 11A**. A pattern (not shown) comprising a combination of the substantially continuous molding pockets **22** and the discrete molding pockets **22** is also contemplated by the present invention.

The framework **50a** which is "angled" relative to the first surface **41** of the reinforcing structure **40** is contemplated in the present invention. As used herein the term "angled" framework **50a** refers to a framework **50a** in which -- if viewed in a cross-section -- acute angles are formed between the first surface **41** of the reinforcing structure **40** and longitudinal axes of either discrete deflection conduits -- in the instance of the continuous framework **50a**, or discrete protuberances -- in the instance of the framework **50a** comprising a plurality of discrete protuberances. These embodiments are disclosed in commonly

assigned patent applications Serial No. 08/858,661, and Serial No. 08/858,662, both applications entitled "Cellulosic Web, Method and Apparatus For Making the Same Using Papermaking Belt Having Angled Cross-sectional Structure, and Method Of Making the Belt," and filed in the name of Larry L. Huston on May 19, 1997, the disclosures of which applications are incorporated herein by reference.

The molding pockets **22** have at least one depth designated herein by a symbol "D." The depth **D** generally defines a thickness of the resinous material **50** deposited from the molding pockets **22** onto the reinforcing structure **40**. As used herein, the term "depth" of the molding pocket(s) **22** indicates an extent of the geometrically-distinct depression(s) into the molding member **20**. As an example, **FIGs. 10** and **10A** show a fragment of the molding member **20**, comprising a molding roll **20a**, having a plurality of discrete molding pockets **22**. An inherent portion **21a** of the molding surface **21** is that portion of the roll's external circumference which is not affected by the molding pockets **22**, typically a portion of the roll's circumference corresponding to the roll's greater diameter. In **FIGs. 10** and **10A**, the inherent portion **21a** is a continuous portion of the external circumference encompassing the discrete molding pockets **22**. **FIGs. 10** and **10A** also show that each molding pocket comprises two geometrically-distinct depressions, a first depression **22a** (relatively larger) having a shape of a rhombus, and a second depression **22b** (relatively smaller) having a shape of a circle, as best shown in **FIG. 10A**. The first depression **22a** has the first depth **D1**, and the second depression **22b** has the second depth **D2** greater than the first depth **D1**, and consequently the molding pockets **22** have two depths **D1** and **D2**, as shown in **FIG. 10**. It should be understood that the foregoing examples are intended only for the illustrative purposes, and not for the purposes of limitation. Virtually an unlimited number of shapes and their permutations of the molding pockets **22** having differential depths may be used in the present invention. While **FIGs. 10** and **10A** show the geometrically-symmetrical molding pockets **22**, it is to be understood that geometrically-

asymmetrical configurations (in plan view as well as in a cross-section) may be used if desired (not shown). "Angled" configurations of the molding pockets **22** may be used to produce the "angled" pattern of the resinous framework **50a**, as explained herein above. Furthermore, embodiments (not shown) may exist of the molding pockets **22** in which the relationship between a specific depth **D** and a geometrically-distinct configuration is not apparent, or even impossible to establish. The process of the present invention allows one advantageously to create almost any desired shape of the resinous framework **90** by providing the correspondingly-shaped molding surface **21**.

The next step of the present invention comprises depositing the flowable resinous material **50** into the molding pockets **22** of the molding surface **21**. Generally, in a preferred continuous process, this step comprises first, contacting the molding surface **21** with the flowable resinous material **50**, and then removing excess of the resinous material **50** from the molding surface **21** as the molding surface **21** is moving. Preferably, the excess of the flowable resinous material **50** is removed into the source (trough) **55** of the resinous material **50**, thereby reducing, or even eliminating, waste of the resinous material **50**. Any suitable depositing means known in the art may be used in the apparatus **10** of the present invention to perform this step. As used herein, the term "depositing means" refers to anything capable of transferring the fluid resinous material **50** from a bulk quantity to the molding surface **21** in required dosage. The term "deposit" refers to a transfer of the fluid resinous material **50** from the bulk form (provided, for example, in the trough **55**, described herein above) and dose the fluid resinous material **50** onto the molding surface **21** and/or into the molding pockets **22**, such that the fluid resinous material **50** fills the molding pockets **22** in a substantially uniform manner. Removing of the excess of the resinous material **50** from the molding surface **21** may be accomplished by wiping and/or scraping the excess material from the molding surface **21**.

The next two steps comprise continuously transporting the reinforcing structure **40** at the transport velocity such that at least a portion of the reinforcing structure **40** is in a face-to-face relationship with at least a portion of the molding surface **20**, and transferring the flowable resinous material **50** from the molding pockets **22** of the molding surface **20** onto the reinforcing structure **40** in the pre-selected pattern. Preferably, the portion of the reinforcing structure **40** facing the molding surface **20** contacts the molding surface **20** for a predetermined period of time. In the embodiments in which the molding member **20** comprises the molding roll **20a**, the predetermined period of time during which the molding surface contacts the reinforcing structure **40** is defined by the transport velocity, a diameter of the molding roll **20a**, and a wrap angle λ , shown in FIGs. 1, and 4-6. With reference to FIG. 4, as used herein, the term "wrap angle" defines an included angle λ formed between two imaginary radii $r1$ and $r2$, the radius $r1$ connecting the longitudinal axis (or a center of rotation) F of the molding roll **20a** and a point $f1$ at which the reinforcing structure **40** first contacts the molding surface **21**, and the radius $r2$ connecting the longitudinal axis (or the center of rotation) F of the molding roll **20a** and a point $f2$ at which the reinforcing structure **40** last contacts the molding surface **21**. A part of the circumference between the point $f1$ and the point $f2$ defines a resulting contact zone K , i. e., an area of contact between the molding surface **21** and the reinforcing structure **40**. In the embodiment of FIG. 12, in which the molding member **20** comprises the band **20a**, the resulting contact zone K comprises a first (circumferential) contact zone $K1$ and a second (planar) contact zone $K2$. The resulting contact zone K preferably comprises a solidification segment of the process, i. e., a segment where the resinous material **50** solidifies such as to sufficiently join to the reinforcing structure **40** and retain its shape after disengagement from the molding surface **21**. The resinous material **50** does not have to completely solidify in the solidification segment, and may retain some flowability after exiting the solidification segment, as long as the resinous material **50** is capable of

sufficiently retaining its shape acquired while the resinous material **50** was associated with the molding pockets **22**.

According to the present invention, the resinous material **50** is maintained in a sufficiently fluid state prior to its deposition onto the molding surface **21**. Preferably, the resinous material **50** should be fluid enough to uniformly fill the molding pockets **22**. In some embodiment, solidification of the resinous material **50** may begin right after the resinous material **50** has filled the molding pockets **22**. In FIG. 4, an angle α schematically indicates a pre-solidification segment of the molding surface **21** after the resinous material **50** has been deposited onto the molding surface **21** and before the reinforcing structure **40** and the molding surface **21** meet in a face-to-face relationship (prior to reaching the point **f1**). One skilled in the art will appreciate that for a given resinous material **50**, the desired level of viscosity of the resinous material **50** prior to reaching the point **f1** is defined by several factors, including the design and transport velocity of the molding surface **21**, relative geometry of the reinforcing structure **40** and the molding surface **21**, the length of the resulting contact zone **K**, and other conditions of the process and parameters of the apparatus **10**. Preferably, the viscosity of the resinous material **50** is greater at the pre-solidification segment of the molding surface **21**, defined by the angle α , especially when the resinous material **50** reaches the point **f1**, relative to the viscosity of the resinous material in the trough **55**.

According to the present invention, an embodiment is contemplated in which the resinous material **50** disposed in the molding pockets **22** solidifies such that the surface of the resinous material **50**, which is in direct contact with the inside surface of the molding pockets **22** solidifies first, while the rest of the resinous material **50** disposed in the molding pockets **22** is still in the fluid state. Then, the surface of the resinous material **50**, which is at least partially solidified, functions as a shell for the rest of the resinous material **50** which is still fluid. This embodiment may be particularly beneficial in the process using the reinforcing structure **40** having void spaces therethrough, such as, for example,

a woven reinforcing structure **40**. When the reinforcing structure **40** contacts the resinous material **50**, pressure may be used to impress the reinforcing structure **40** and the resinous material relative each other, thereby "pushing" the resinous material **50** through the yarns of the reinforcing structure **40**, which yarns form its first side **41**, and into the reinforcing structure **40**, without prohibitively distorting the shape of the resinous material **50** deposited onto the reinforcing structure **40**.

Preferably, the time during which the molding surface **20** faces (and preferably contacts) the reinforcing structure **40** should be sufficient for the resinous material **50** to transfer from the molding pockets **22** onto the reinforcing structure **40**. More preferably, this time should be sufficient for the resinous material **50** to join, at least partially, to the reinforcing structure **40** in a pre-selected pattern (corresponding to the pattern of the molding surface **21**). For the successful transfer of the resinous material **50** from the molding pockets **22** onto the reinforcing structure **40**, a variety of means, alone or in combination, may be used, according to the present invention.

Preferably, a surface energy of the molding pockets **22** is less than a surface energy of the reinforcing structure **40**. Several ways exist of creating a surface energy differential between the molding pockets **22** and the reinforcing structure **40**. A material comprising the molding surface **21** may inherently have a relatively low surface energy, or can be treated to lower its surface energy. Alternatively or additionally, the molding surface **21** can be treated with a release agent **60** prior to the step of depositing the resinous material **50** into the molding pockets **22**. Examples of the release agent **60** include but are not limited to: "Ease Release™," "Permarelease™," "Aquallease™," and "Actilease™," available from Smooth-On, Inc. Although a source **65** of the release agent **60** is schematically shown as a trough in several drawings, it is to be understood that the release agent **60** may be brushed, sprayed, or wiped onto the molding surfaces, in which instances the source **65** may comprise a brush, a nozzle, or any other suitable device known in the art. FIG. 4, for

example, shows the source 65 comprising a nozzle. In some applications, it might be necessary to apply two or more coats of the release agent 60 to the molding surface 21. In some embodiments in which the molding surface has microscopic pores therein, it may be desirable to heat the release agent 60 or/and the molding surface 21 to facilitate penetration of the release agent 60 into the molding surface 21 thereby sealing the pores before depositing the resinous material 50 to the molding surface 21.

Other ways of causing the resinous material 50 to at least partially join the reinforcing structure 40 include applying pressure differential to press the reinforcing structure 40 relative to the molding surface 21 in the contact zone K, such as to cause a sufficient engagement between the resinous material 50 and the reinforcing structure 40. Typically, although not necessarily, the resinous material 50 does not "attach" to the reinforcing structure 40, but has to wrap around structural elements of the reinforcing structure 40 (such as, for example, individual yarns in a woven reinforcing structure 40), to "lock on" around them, thereby at least partially encasing some of them. Pressure facilitates penetration of the fluid or partially solidified resinous material 50 between the structural elements of the reinforcing structure 40. FIG. 5, for example, shows a backing roll 30 juxtaposed with the molding roll 20a to form a nip 23 therebetween. The reinforcing structure 40 is traveling through the nip 23 and is preferably pressed by the backing roll 30 against the molding surface 21 of the molding roll 20a. Preferably, the backing roll 30 rotates at a surface velocity substantially equal to the transport velocity of the reinforcing structure 40 at the nip 23. This embodiment may be beneficially used with the molding roll 20a having the molding surface 21 comprising a deformable, and preferably constant volume, material, as described in commonly-assigned and incorporated by reference herein U.S. Patent 5,275,700. The deformable, preferably constant volume, molding surface 21 provides an effective contact between the reinforcing structure 40 and the resinous material 50 because the reinforcing structure 40 can be "impressed" under pressure into the molding surface 21,

thereby facilitating joining of the resinous material **50** and the reinforcing structure **40**.

Alternatively, a circumference of the backing roll **30** may comprise a layer (not shown) of a deformable, constant volume, material. A barrier film **70** may be provided, as shown in **FIG. 5**, to protect the surface of the backing roll **30** from being contaminated with the resinous material **50**. The barrier film **70** may also comprise a deformable, preferably constant volume, material. Alternatively, the barrier film **70** is a flexible, smooth, and planar material easily conforming to the transporting configuration formed by the backing roll **30** and the support rolls **70a** and **70b**, about which the barrier film **70** is traveling in the direction indicated by an arrow "C." The barrier film is described in sufficient detail in commonly-assigned and incorporated by reference herein U.S. Patent 5,275,700.

In **FIGs. 6** and **12**, the reinforcing structure **40** pressed against the molding surface **21** by a backing sheet **77** under tension. In the embodiment of **FIG. 6**, the backing sheet **77** wraps around a portion of the molding roll **20a**. In the embodiment of **FIG. 12**, the backing sheet **77** is substantially planar and travels within the second contact zone **K2**. In both embodiments (of **FIGs. 6** and **12**), the backing sheet **77** is supported by and travels around support rolls **77a**, **77b**, **77c**, **77d** in a direction indicated by an arrow "C." In these embodiments, one or more additional support roll(s) (not shown) may be provided between the rolls **77a** and **77b** for an additional support of the backing sheet **77** and/or additionally to press the reinforcing structure **40** against the molding surface **21**.

FIGs. 7 and **8** show other exemplary embodiments comprising two (**FIG. 7**) and three (**FIG. 8**) backing rolls **30**. In such embodiments comprising more than one backing rolls **30**, the pressure applied to the reinforcing structure **40** may differentiate between the backing rolls. For example, in **FIG. 7**, a first backing roll **30a** applies a first pressure **P1** at a first nip **23a**, and a second backing roll **30b** applies a second pressure **P2** at a second nip **23b** to the reinforcing structure **40**. If desired, the pressure **P2** may be greater than the

pressure P1, or vice versa. Analogously, in FIG. 8, backing rolls 30a, 30b, and 30c may apply differential pressure to the reinforcing structure 40 at corresponding nips 23a, 23b, 23c, respectively.

FIGs. 7-8B show two exemplary embodiments of the apparatus 10, in which the reinforcing structure 40 is recessed in the molding surface 21. The molding surfaces 21 shown in FIGs. 7-8B has pre-determined patterns of recesses 24 for receiving the reinforcing structure 40 therein. In the embodiment of FIGs. 7-7B, the reinforcing structure 40 is completely recessed within the recesses 24 of the molding surface 21, the recesses 24 having a depth not less than, and preferably equal to, the thickness h of the reinforcing structure 40. In the embodiment of FIGs. 8-8B, the reinforcing structure 40 is only partially recessed within the recesses 24, the depth of the recesses 24 for receiving the reinforcing structure being less than the thickness h of the reinforcing structure 40. The pattern of the molding pockets 22 for receiving the flowable resinous material 50 is superimposed with the pattern of recesses 24 for receiving the reinforcing structure 40. In FIGs. 7-8B, a portion of the molding surface 21, which portion provides support for the reinforcing structure 40 is designated as 21R; and a portion of the molding surface 21 provides support for the resinous material 50 is designated as 21S. Preferably, a step of registering the reinforcing structure 40 with the recesses 24 is performed in the embodiments principally illustrated in FIGs. 7-8A.

The embodiment of the process shown in FIGs. 7-7B provides a novel and effective way of constructing a papermaking belt 90 having a "zero-overburden." As used herein, the term "overburden" refers the extent of elevation of the resinous framework 50 relative to the reinforcing structure 40. More particularly, the overburden comprises a distance formed between the top side 51 of the resinous framework 50 and the first side 41 of the reinforcing structure 40, as best shown in FIG. 9, where the overburden is designated as "OB," the thickness of the reinforcing structure 40 is designated as "h," and a caliper of the papermaking belt 90 is designated as "H." When the resinous framework 50a

extends outwardly from the reinforcing structure 40, it is said that the belt has the overburden. The term "zero-overburden" indicates that the web-contacting side 41 of the resinous framework 50 and the first side 42 of the reinforcing structure 40 are situated in the same plane. Because in the embodiment of FIGs. 7-7B the recesses 24 has the same depth as the molding pockets 22 do, the surface portions 21S and 21R are evenly situated relative to the greater external circumference 21a (or relative to the longitudinal axis of rotation) of the molding roll 20. Therefore, when the reinforcing structure 40 is registered with the recesses 24, and the resinous material 50 is deposited into the molding pockets 22, the resinous material 50 cannot extend beyond the surface portion 21R, and thus cannot extend beyond the first side 41 of the reinforcing structure 40 in the belt 90 being made, as shown in FIG. 7A.

FIGs. 8-8B illustrate another advantage provided by the present invention. Because in the embodiment of FIGs. 8-8B the reinforcing structure 40 is partially recessed within the recesses 24, there is a distance "Z" formed between the second side 42 of the reinforcing structure 40 and the backside of the resinous framework 50 when the belt 90 is formed. In a through-air-drying papermaking belt, the distance "Z" creates a leakage between the belt's backside surface 92 contacting the papermaking equipment (such as, for example, a vacuum box or a pick-up shoe) and the belt-contacting surface of such equipment. The leakage mitigates a sudden application of vacuum pressure to the paper web disposed on the belt 90, and thus reduces, if not completely eliminates, so-called pinholing. One skilled in the art will recognize that the term "pinholing" refers to formation of pin-sized holes, or "pinholes," in the web being dewatered, as a result of the sudden application of the vacuum pressure to the web and consequent separation of a certain amount of fibers from the web. Some of the fibers may completely pass through the papermaking belt, thereby causing, in addition to pinholing, clogging of the vacuum dewatering machinery with the papermaking fibers. Several commonly-assigned and incorporated herein by reference U.S. Patents disclose various

ways of mitigating or eliminating pinholing: U.S. Patent 5,776,311 issued July 7, 1998 in the name of Trokhan et al., U.S. Patent 5,744,007 issued April 28, 1998 in the name of Trokhan et al., U.S. Patent 5,741,402 issued April 21, 1998 in the name of Trokhan et al., U.S. Patent 5,718,806 issued February 17, 1998 in the name of Trokhan et al., and U.S. Patent 5,679,222 issued October 21, 1997 in the name of Rasch et al. are examples of such patents. The present invention provides another effective means for mitigating the undesirable pinholing.

One skilled in the art will appreciate that the pattern of the resinous material **50** transferred from the molding surface **21** onto the reinforcing structure **40** reflects the pattern of the molding surface **21**. Thus, if the molding surface **21** comprises a substantially continuous pattern of the molding pockets **22**, as shown in **FIGs. 7B** and **8B**, the resinous material **50** is transferred onto the reinforcing structure **40** in a substantially continuous pattern. If, on the other hand, the molding surface **21** comprises a plurality of discrete molding pockets **22**, as best shown in **FIG. 10A**, the resinous material **50** is transferred onto the reinforcing structure **40** in a pattern comprising a plurality of resinous protuberances, **FIG. 11A**.

The next step of the process of the present invention comprises solidifying the resinous material **50** joined to the reinforcing structure **40**. As used herein, the term "solidification" and derivations thereof refer to a process of altering a fluid to a solid, or partially solid, state. Typically, solidification involves a phase change, from a liquid phase to a solid phase. The term "curing" refers to a solidification in which cross-linking occurs. For example, photosensitive resins may be cured by UV radiation, as described in commonly assigned U.S. Patents 5,334,289; 5,275,700; 5,364,504; 5,098,522; 5,674,663; and 5,629,052, all of which are incorporated herein by reference. The thermo-plastic and thermo-setting resins require a certain temperature for solidification. Preferably, the step of solidification comprises curing of the resinous material **50**.

In some embodiments the process of solidification of the resinous material **50** may begin as early as immediately after the fluid resinous material

50 has been deposited onto the molding surface **21**. Preferably, solidification continues while the reinforcing structure **40** and the molding surface **21** are in face-to-face relationship (schematically shown as the resulting contact area **K** in the exemplary embodiment of **FIG. 4** and as the contact areas **K1** and **K2** in the exemplary embodiment of **FIG. 12**). A method of solidifying the resinous material **50** depends upon its nature. If a thermoplastic or thermosetting resin is used, solidifying comprises cooling the resinous material **50** transferred onto the reinforcing structure **40**. Photopolymer resins may be cured by a process of curing described in commonly assigned U.S. Patents 4,514,345; and 5,275,700, incorporated herein by reference and referred to above. The resinous material **50** comprising multi-component resins or plastics may solidify naturally, during a certain predetermined period of time, by virtue of being mixed together.

As an example, **FIGs. 6** and **12** schematically show a curing device **79** juxtaposed with the second side **42** of the reinforcing structure **40**. One skilled in the art will understand that, depending on the nature of the resinous material **50** and the method of its solidifying, the curing device **79** may be located in other locations, for example, be juxtaposed with the resinous framework **50a**, as schematically shown in **FIG. 4**. The examples of the curing device **79** include, but are not limited to: a heater for increasing cross-linking reaction rates or condensing rates for condensing polymers; a cooler for solidifying thermoplastics; various apparatuses providing an infra-red curing radiation, a microwave curing radiation, or a ultra-violet curing radiation; and the like. Commonly assigned patent application, Serial No. 08/799,852, entitled "Apparatus for Generating Parallel Radiation For Curing Photosensitive Resin" filed in the name of Trokhan on February 13, 1997; and commonly assigned patent application, Serial No. 08/858,334, entitled "Apparatus for Generating Controlled Radiation For Curing Photosensitive Resin" filed in the names of Trokhan et al. on February 13, 1997, and its continuation 08/958,540 filed on October 24, 1997 are incorporated herein by reference for the purpose of

showing several embodiments of the curing device 79 which can be used for solidifying the resinous material 50 comprising a photosensitive resin.

Optionally, a step of controlling the caliper H (FIG. 9) of the belt 90 may be provided in the process of the present invention. The caliper H may be controlled to a pre-selected value by controlling the overburden OB, as has been explained herein above. Also, the caliper H may be controlled by controlling the depth of recesses 24 for the reinforcing structure 40 (FIG. 8A). Another way of controlling the caliper H comprises changing the thickness of the resinous material 50 after the resinous material 50 has been transferred from the molding surface 21 to the reinforcing structure 40, and after the resinous framework has been at least partially formed. For example, the thickness of the resinous material 50 can be adjusted by mechanical means known in the art. FIGs. 1 and 5 schematically show a caliper-controlling device 80 comprising two mutually-juxtaposed rolls forming a clearance 88 therebetween. By adjusting the clearance 88 between the rolls of the device 80, one can control the caliper of the belt being constructed. In the embodiments in which the resinous framework 50a is only partially solidified after having being formed between the molding surface 21 and the reinforcing structure, the caliper of the partially-formed belt may be slightly adjusted by causing the partially-formed belt to travel through the clearance 88. Alternatively or additionally, the caliper-controlling device may comprise a rotating sanding roll, a planing knife, a laser, or any other means known in the art and suitable for the purpose of controlling the caliper of the belt 90.

The process and the apparatus of the present invention significantly reduces the amount of the flowable resin that is required to be used in constructing the belt 90, and thus provides an economic benefit. The prior art's methods of making the belt, using a photosensitive resin and a curing radiation, requires application of a coating of the photosensitive resin to the reinforcing structure, curing selected portions of the resinous coating, and then removing (typically, washing out) uncured portions of the resinous coating. The amount of

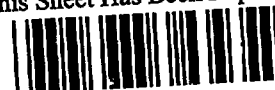
the resin being washed out is about from 25% to 75% relative to the amount of the entire resinous coating. In the present invention, the exact amount of the resinous material **50**, which is required for the resinous framework **50a** is formed into a pre-determined pattern of the molding pockets **22** of the molding member **20**. The excess of the resinous material **50** deposited onto the external (inherent) surface **21a** of the molding member **20** may be (and preferably are) easily recycled, by any means known in the art, into the source **55** of the resinous material **50**, thereby completely eliminating waste of the resinous material **50**. Furthermore, the process and the apparatus of the present invention allows one to create virtually unlimited number of three-dimensional patterns of the resinous framework **50a**.

The process of the present invention may have two or more steps. **FIG. 1** schematically shows a two-step process. At a first step, a resinous material **50** is deposited on a first molding surface **21** of a first molding member **20a**, and then transferred to the reinforcing structure **40** to form a first resinous framework **50a** (best shown in **FIGs. 2** and **2A**). Optionally, the caliper of the belt being made can be adjusted by the caliper-controlling device **80**. At the second step, a resinous material **50'** is deposited on a second molding surface **21'** of a second molding member **20a'**, and then transferred onto the web-contacting surface **51** of the resinous framework **50a** to form a second resinous framework **50a'** (best shown in **FIGs. 3** and **3A**). The steps may be repeated as desired.

**What is claimed is:**

1. A process for making a papermaking belt comprising a reinforcing structure and a resinous framework joined thereto, the process comprising the steps of:
 - (a) providing a reinforcing structure having a first side, a second side opposite to the first side, and a thickness formed therebetween;
 - (b) providing a flowable resinous material;
 - (c) providing at least one molding member having a molding surface comprising a pre-selected pattern of molding pockets to carry the flowable resinous material therein;
 - (d) continuously moving the molding surface at a transport velocity;
 - (e) depositing the flowable resinous material into the molding pockets of the molding surface, the step (e) preferably comprising:
 - contacting the molding surface with the flowable resinous material, and
 - removing excess of the flowable resinous material from the molding surface as the molding surface is moving;
 - (f) continuously transporting the reinforcing structure at the transport velocity such that at least a portion of the reinforcing structure is in a face-to-face relationship with at least a portion of the molding surface, preferably the reinforcing structure contacting the flowable resinous material disposed in the molding pockets for a predetermined period of time sufficient to cause the flowable resinous material and the reinforcing surface at least partially join together;
 - (g) transferring the flowable resinous material from the molding pockets of the molding surface onto the reinforcing structure, preferably in the pre-selected pattern;
 - (h) causing the flowable resinous material and the reinforcing structure to join together; and

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- (i) solidifying the resinous material thereby forming the resinous framework joined to the reinforcing structure, whereby the papermaking belt is formed.
2. The process according to Claim 1, further comprising the steps of:
providing at least one backing roll juxtaposed with the molding surface to form therebetween a nip for receiving the reinforcing structure traveling therethrough, and
rotating the backing roll at a surface velocity substantially equal to the transport surface velocity of the reinforcing structure at the nip.
 3. The process according to Claims 1 and 2, further comprising a step of controlling a thickness of the resinous material joined to the reinforcing structure to at least one pre-selected value.
 4. The process according to Claims 1, 2, and 3, wherein in the step (g) the resinous material is transferred onto the reinforcing structure in a substantially continuous pattern, in a pattern comprising a plurality of discrete protuberances, or in a pattern comprising any combination thereof.
 5. The process according to Claims 1, 2, 3, and 4, wherein in the step (a) the reinforcing structure comprises a fluid-permeable element, and preferably a woven fabric or a screen having a plurality of open areas therethrough.
 6. The process according to Claims 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, wherein in the step (a) the reinforcing structure comprises a felt.
 7. The process according to Claims 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6, wherein in the step (b) the flowable resinous material comprises a material selected from the group consisting of epoxies, silicones, urethanes, polystyrenes, polyolefins,

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polysulfides, nylons, butadienes, photopolymers, and any combination thereof.

8. An apparatus for making a papermaking belt comprising a reinforcing structure and a resinous framework joined thereto, the apparatus having a machine direction and comprising:
 - a molding member having a patterned molding surface comprising a plurality of molding pockets designed to carry a flowable resinous material therein;
 - a means for depositing the flowable resinous material into the molding pockets of the molding surface;
 - a means for moving the reinforcing structure in the machine direction such that at least a portion of the reinforcing structure is in a face-to-face relationship with at least a portion of the molding surface;
 - a means for moving the molding member in the machine direction such that the flowable resinous material is transferred from the molding pockets onto the reinforcing structure.
9. The apparatus according to Claim 8, further comprising a means for solidifying the flowable resinous material to form the resinous framework joined to the reinforcing structure.
10. The apparatus according to Claims 8 and 9, wherein the molding pockets of the molding surface form a substantially continuous pattern, a pattern of discrete molding pockets, or any combination thereof.
11. The apparatus according to Claims 8, 9, and 10, wherein at least some of the molding pockets have differential depths therein.

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12. The apparatus according to Claims 8, 9, 10, and 11, further comprising a means for pressing the reinforcing structure and the molding surface relative each other for a predetermined period of time, and preferably further comprising at least one backing roll juxtaposed with the molding surface to form a nip therebetween.
13. The apparatus according to Claims 8, 9, 10, 11, and 12, further comprising a backing sheet juxtaposed with the molding surface, the backing sheet being structured and designed to move in a face-to-face contacting relationship with at least a portion of the reinforcing structure.
14. The apparatus according to Claims 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13, further comprising a caliper-controlling device designed to control a caliper of the belt being constructed.
15. The apparatus according to Claims 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, and 14, wherein the molding surface further comprises a predetermined pattern of recesses for receiving the reinforcing structure therein.

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