

# *Paper Cutting*

American Folklife Center/The Library of Congress  
Washington, D.C.

## Paper Cutting

Paper cutting is an art, a folk art, and a craft. For nearly two thousand years papercuts have been employed in the patterning of textiles, to create shadow theater puppets at modest cost, in portraiture, and as decorative devices in their own right. They are found in museums and in country cottages. They have been made by kings and commoners, by anonymous craftspeople and individuals famous for their artistry with paper and cutting tools.

Cutting paper probably originated in China, where paper itself is said to have been developed by Ts'ai Lun in the early years of the 2nd century A.D. The Chinese used papercuts made and sold by "pilgrims of the lakes and rivers" as embroidery designs, gluing the papercuts to the fabric and embroidering overtop. They employed papercuts to pattern dyed cloth and porcelain. They also cut flowers, animal representations, good luck charms, and images from folk tales to adorn their windows and decorate their homes. These were renewed each year for the Spring Festival. Because paper itself is impermanent, the earliest traces of papercuts are the designs for which they served as patterns.

Many of the ways in which the Chinese used papercuts emerged in other cultures as well. In nearby Japan crest cutting or *mon-kiri* was employed in the 11th century to create family emblems that were used to pattern textiles and to identify family possessions. Papercut stencils also became the basis for some Japanese lacquerwork designs.

In Renaissance Europe papercut stencils were used to produce the ornamental borders around wall paintings in Gothic cathedrals. The patterns were later copied by rural craftspeople for stencils used to paint designs onto wooden furniture. European blacksmiths and locksmiths also achieved symmetrical designs for door knockers, door plates, and ironwork using papercuts.

Cut designs traditionally ornamented Jewish marriage contracts or *ketubot*, produced first in 18th-century Italy and later throughout Europe. German cutwork, or *scherenschnitte*, and paint were combined to adorn all manner of personal messages, such as declarations of love and New Year's greetings, as well as official documents, such as birth certificates and marriage licenses.

Colorful papercuts called *wycinanki* began to appear in Poland in the mid-19th century. Those are often cut from different hues of paper and overlaid to create the design through collage. Like Chinese papercuts, they

were used to decorate windows, joists, and other parts of the house, particularly at Christmas and Easter. Many present-day Christmas decorating motifs may have originated with cutouts used in Poland to ornament the season.

Today there is a resurgent interest in papercuts, both contemporary and antique. Stencils and certificates from previous eras, their cutwork often embellished with painted designs, are found in museums and private collections. The artwork of some individuals is well known and highly prized. A major artist of the 20th century, Henri Matisse, devoted the last years of his life to the creation of cut paper art. Walter VonGunten is widely known for his finely worked papercuts which evolve from Swiss paper cutting traditions. Polish *wycinanki*, Mexican *papel picado*, German *scherschnitte*, and Chinese *jian zhi* are still actively produced to adorn homes and dress up festivities. Yet paper cutting continues to be an activity that anyone who wishes to see what can be done with a cutting instrument and a piece of paper can practice and enjoy.



## Tools and Techniques

### Fold-and-Cut Designs

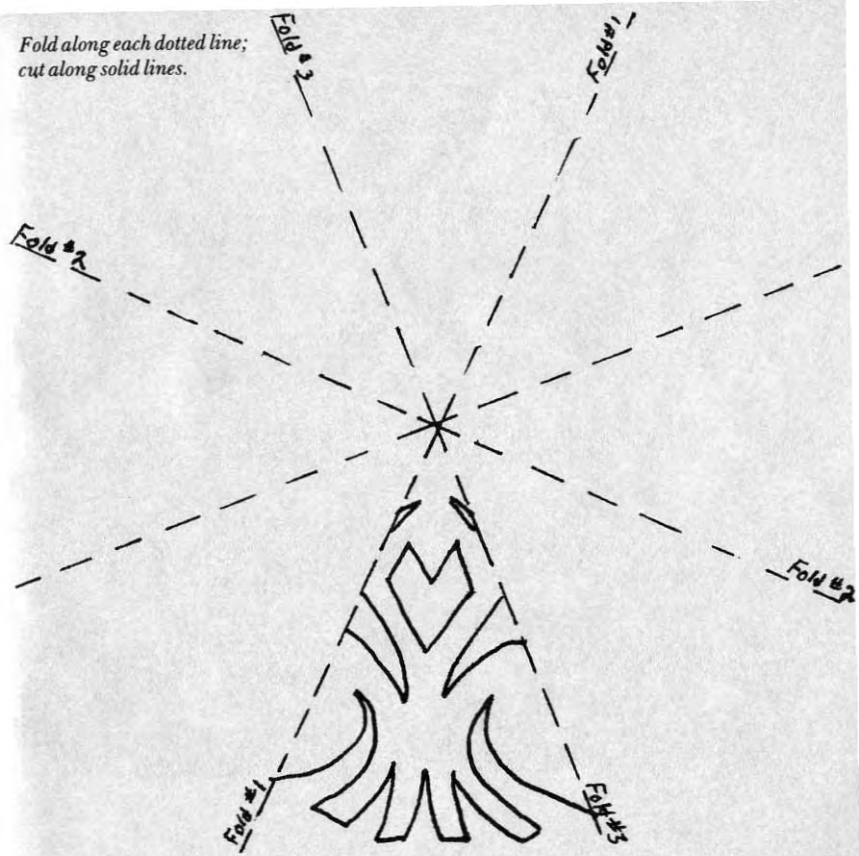
To produce a *fold-and-cut* design, simply fold the paper one or more times and cut it with a knife or scissors.

Here Magdalena Gilinsky uses sheep shears to cut the preliminary outline for a Polish papercut made from a sheet of paper folded in half. Each side of the resulting papercut will be a mirror image of the other side. She cuts out as much paper as possible, while preserving enough of the fold intact that the two halves of the cut remain connected. The design of a papercut is actually created by the paper that is cut out, so one must be bold and remove lots of paper.

Soon the top of the papercut starts to resemble a tree, and the bottom begins to look like a rooster's tail. She works from the outside inward towards the fold, turning the paper over often to make sure that she doesn't cut through the spine of the papercut. "Some things are hap-



Fold along each dotted line;  
cut along solid lines.





*Fold along dotted line; cut along solid line.*

pening," says Magdalena, "but the nicest part is that you really don't know; and then you open it up, and it is *so* lovely." Next she adds a "bud of life" on the top and begins to "embroider" the edge.



"Now I'm going to take care of my bird. I'll cut him out a little, and then I'm going to feather his feathers." Once all the embroidery is done, the feathers are feathered, and the thick shapes are cut out to make them less "boring," the *wycinanki* is complete. It is opened up and then usually ironed lightly to get it even after all the twisting.



A *repeat* cut is started by folding a piece of paper in half, folding that diagonally into a triangle, and then cutting across the top to create a circular shape. The basic repeat pattern is begun by cutting out portions of the triangular shape. It is then refolded to create more repeated shapes. One must be careful not to cut through the point of the triangle. . . .



Once the underlying design is completed, flowers and petals are cut to be superimposed on the basic pattern. A piece of paper must be folded three times to create eight identical flower or petal shapes. If the paper is too thick, it can be folded twice, and then each side folded in. Thus, four cutout flowers can be made at a time. It is wise to use the original cutout as a pattern for the second set of four, to make sure all eight match as closely as possible. The center of the papercut is then decorated with circles of diminishing sizes, cut from pieces of paper folded in the same manner as the original underlying design. The excess paper trimmed off the original folded triangle can be cut out to create a frame for other papercuts.

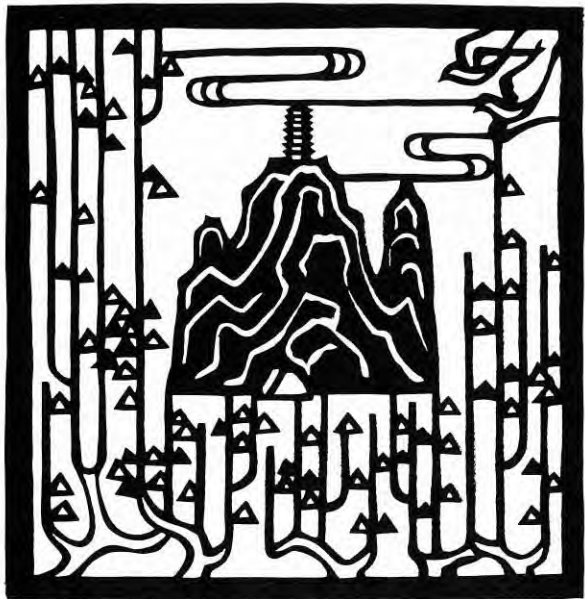


## Flat-Cut Designs

Papercuts can also be made with the paper laid flat on a cutting surface and worked with knives, punches, gouges, and other such instruments. A magazine, piece of cardboard, or section of wood is needed for a cutting base, and the paper can be attached to it with either transparent or masking tape. A needle and thread may be useful for fastening several layers of paper together to create more than one identical design at the same time. Pencil points or straight pins can be used to add textured details.

The result of these procedures will be a design without mirrored symmetry, as illustrated by the papercut from C. K. Chu's series "Scenes from Guilin."

—Brett Topping



### *Further Reading*

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## *Illustrations*

*Cover: single-fold Polish wycinanki by Magdalena Gilinsky.*

*Inside cover: sixteen-repeat Polish wycinanki by Magdalena Gilinsky, made from a sheet of paper folded five times.*

*Page 5: Polish wycinanki by Magdalena Gilinsky, made from a square sheet of paper folded in half, and then folded in half again.*

*Page 11: flat-cut Chinese jian zhi by C. K. Chu, one magic mountain from the series "Scenes from Guilin."*



1982

200/AFC/25