

Mastering Mounting



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Handling Decorative Papercuts

An interesting topic is papercuts. I'm not referring to a painfully sliced finger from a freshly cut window mat, but a centuries-old folk art. The intricacies and delicate nature of these artworks have been a joy to view, a source of history, an enjoyable pastime, and a bane of many a custom framer.

Papercutting involves a design that has been laid out with a balance of positive and negative space to allow for artistic del-



Photo 1: White Bamboo—This is a small white papercut from tissue-thin mulberry or hosho paper, I purchased in Chinatown, San Francisco about 20 years ago for \$2.00. It's still in good shape after years of handling.

icacy and openness while still holding together after being cut. The basic materials are thin paper and a cutting tool, either scissors or a blade. The paper can be layered in multiple colors or just single sheets. It is time-intensive and requires careful handling (see Photo 1).

Even with these simple basic elements, this craft has developed into a highly popular art form, often brought back from trips to Europe and Asia. It's also being practiced in the United States.

History of Chinese Papercutting

Papercutting is one of the oldest and most enduring art activities in China, where it is known as *chien chih*. The earliest samples come from the Han dynasty (206 B.C. to A.D. 220), when gold and silver foils were used instead of paper.

Cutting techniques have remained somewhat constant for centuries. However, papercutting in China has numerous regional differences. Prior to the development of modern transportation and communications, many areas were isolated and people relied on their own resources to decorate their homes. Papercuts were used not only to decorate walls, windows, and lanterns, but also to depict images of what families hoped for in life and death.

One of the most important annual events for a Chinese family is the celebration of the New Year. During this time, people want to placate the gods and ensure health and continued prosperity.

The papercuts from the Shaanxi province in central China were of a single color and often illustrated subjects in everyday life. The image in Photo 2, for example, depicts farmers' need for strong sheep. The strength came out of forceful papercutting techniques, which still maintained the imagination for creative interpretations of stylized hair, leaves for ears, and a lack of three-dimensionality.

The red family in Photo 3 was designed for wall decoration. It features an organic interpretation of the natural growth of children from the root of parents and the interconnection of nature.

In northeastern China, the Hebei province style of papercutting was very different than in the Shaanxi. Vivid colors and multiple layers were used to depict stories, and these images were often displayed in windows. The papers used were, and continue to be, metallic foils as well as thin, dyed papers. They can be light fugitive which leads me to believe these images, which were displayed in windows, were replaced often.

This is important to consider when framing. It is most likely the visible light that gives the paper its color and fades it more than the UV rays. This said, coated and UV-filtering glazing may not deter fading as we might hope.

As mentioned earlier, when communications were limited, history was recorded in this way. Only scholars could read or write so these became the traditional methods for passing down history.

For example, the brightly-colored and detailed papercut of goldfish and lotus seen in Photo 4 is a wish fulfillment symbol for fertility in a new marriage. Again, it is cut with much openness so it will allow the sunlight to flood in.

An ancient story is told in the papercut seen in Photo 5. When passersby saw the old man fishing from a rock they wondered why he held his rod three feet above the water. He said it was to attract the attention of the emperor during his visit. His ploy was successful, and he was made prime minister.

Time-Consuming Craft

Though it may be true that many Asian papercuts target the tourist trade, are very inexpensive, and

most likely mass-produced by machine, the fact that there are artisans continuing to show the old methods and traditions keeps these types of fine crafts in the forefront.

When in China, I had the pleasure of seeing numerous craftspeople at work. Some may have



Photo 2: Blue Sheep—A single color example from China's Shaanxi province. Since this piece was used for pasting into a window the white cutaway space is rather large to allow more light through.



Photo 3: Red Family—This image shows the concept of the ideal family (two sons and a daughter), and is designed for wall display. The daughter is in the middle, perhaps still unborn, while the boys grow like apples from either side of the parental tree.

been “worker bees,” copying or tracing patterns or images, but nonetheless the craft continues.

The young man in Photo 6 is using the traditional methods of placing a pattern on top of the colored paper, then cutting through both to achieve the design. It takes him three days to execute this particular design of “prosperity.”

He is in a shop in Shanghai that sold both framed and

unframed papercut images ranging from 5"x7" to 20"x30". Most were produced in solid, single, primary layer colors of red, blue, yellow, and black. There were also gold and silver images. The most popular were the size seen in Photo 6—about 11"x14"—which sold for approximately \$18.00 USD.

In the close-up detail seen in Photo 7, notice the pattern is stapled to the red under papercut and that the craftsman is cutting with a pointed knife much like a #11 Xacto™ knife. By the way, framed pieces were pressed against the glass in a narrow unmattd frame and sold for around \$25.00 USD.

Papercutting Around the Globe

China is not the only country that boasts of the ancient tradition of papercutting. In Japan, papercutting is called *monkiri*. As I mentioned in my articles on Japanese Scroll Mounting (*PFM*, April and May 2001), the houses in Japan are often constructed with very thin walls. Papercutting provided lightweight, decorative, and colorful possibilities for decoration.

Papercutting, however, is not just found in Asia. In Germany and Switzerland, it is known as *scherenschnitte*. In Poland, it is called *wycinanki*, and the Dutch call it *knippen*. In Jewish cultures, it is part of religious artwork and holiday celebrations. And I remember cutting snowflakes from folded paper back in kindergarten, a long time ago.

Mounting Options

The thing we must keep in mind about these small fragile treasures is that although they may not cost much, they may have a great deal of

sentimental value and require proper care when framing. It's true that the papers used to create them may not be archival, neutral pH, or 100% cotton, but they must be treated like any other heirloom or collectible. It's not an expensive investment in Asian artistry, but perhaps a keepsake reminiscent of a \$5,000 trip to the Orient.

Right or Wrong

In my 1997 book, The Mounting and Laminating Handbook, I discuss two options for mounting these delicate images. The first is a time-intensive, wet glue approach and the second is spray adhesive. True, the spray is not a preservation approach to mounting, but it is a non-reversible choice.

Since 1997, I have embraced improved applications and a more desirable non-invasive method of encapsulation using sheets of clear polyester (a.k.a. Mylar-D). I am not going to stress the right or wrong approach. I will only give the basic information and outcome. The judgment call remains up to each individual framer and their client.

Spray Application

Delicate mountings may be well-suited for spray mounting techniques. The intricacies of papercuts with their multiple openings makes basic traditional wet, pressure-sensitive, and dry mounting techniques all rather unacceptable because the adhesive will be visible between the cutouts, as well as potential for artwork damage.

It is not possible to spray *directly* onto the papercut. Because of its delicate nature, it could become damaged. Great care should be taken when applying spray so as not to

puddle it or run it under the cuts to the front of the art.

It is therefore best to mist the spray adhesive from above, letting it gently settle onto the back of the art. This can be done by supporting the art with a piece of rigid paper stock folded like an accordion. This keeps the art from laying in the excess adhesive.

A single-sided, flat sheet of release paper may be used to create this accordion, which will in turn prevent additional bonding to the



Photo 4: Fish Bowl and Lotus—This window papercut of fish and lotus is a wish fulfillment symbol for fertility in a new marriage.



Photo 5: Fisher-man—This is an ancient story passed down through generations about an old man fishing from a rock to attract the attention of the emperor. Notice the delicacy and threading of the water creation.

support piece during adhesive application. For obvious reasons, do not use absorbent paper for the support.

Be very careful when handling this type of artwork. It is so fragile that even the draw of a cold vacuum frame or the clamped closing of a mechanical press can tear it.

Size and prepare materials. Select a spray that will reactivate and mount with the application of

heat, such as Vac-U-Mount™, Good Glue Spray™ or Sure Mount Spray™. Lay the papercut face down onto the accordion-folded support paper with the folds small enough to support all the loose cutout portions of the art.

After the adhesive mist has been applied, let it sit until completely dry and no longer tacky to the touch. Place it into position on mat-board backing and cover with clean release paper. Then, press with a small tacking iron to reactivate the spray and hold it in place.

Once again, do not place in a cold vacuum frame, hot vacuum, or hot mechanical press. Even the slightest shift of air during compression of the press can cause damage.

Wet Glue Application

A better alternative, much more in line with the dignity of this three-dimensional art, would be to apply small dots of acid-free PVA. Or better yet, cooked rice starch, methylcellulose, or wheat paste can also be applied as follows.

Depending upon the weight of the cut paper and the detail, the small dots should be ¼ the size of the head of a straight pin. Even a toothpick tip full of glue is excessive and might saturate the art. Less is more here. Apply as many dots as necessary to hold the cutting in position without causing sagging or undue paper stress.

Encapsulation

Earlier I mentioned the most preservational, least intrusive, and fool-proof reversible method of mounting—to suspend the papercut between two sheets Mylar-D. Once the sheets have been edge sealed with an acid-neutral, pressure-sensitive tape and any air has been com-

pressed from between them, static electricity will suspend the papercut between them. The tape-sealed edges may be hidden behind a window mat and above a colored background for contrast and completion.

21st Century Papercutting

The papercut seen in Photo 8 was mechanically produced using computer technology—a laser cutter and pre-adhesed decorative paper (in this case a piece of black Strathmore charcoal paper). It was produced some five years ago as a test product showcasing the potential for a new adhesive and its applications in art and framing. It is backed with a type of dry low temperature, dry adhesive prior to cutting and therefore ready to be mounted to the underlying Kinwashi paper by light heat application.

These laser cut images could potentially be produced on any thickness or texture of paper. Seems that even the ancient crafts that have survived centuries aren't safe from 21st century technology. There goes tradition.

The Final Cut

Though it may be true that a package of four Chinese papercuts of flowers and pandas may sell as a tourist attraction for \$5.00 USD, this doesn't mean that the scherenschnitte created by the German grandmother with her tiny cuticle-type scissors is any less of an heirloom. As much time may be spent creating these masterpieces as for an intricate needlepoint.

Their value is in what they stand for, what the culture producing them feels for them, and what our customers receive from them. It's probably safe to say that the monetary value of these imported papercuts is far less than the sentimental value a customer may hold for a construction paper snowflake cut by their kindergartner. And we, in turn, should treat them all like the priceless possessions they are. ■



Photo 6: This young man will work for three days on this papercut bowl of goldfish. Fish are the symbol of prosperity; the gold color of live fish stands for money.



Photo 7: In this close-up detail, notice the pattern overlay on top of the red paper underneath. The craftsman cuts using a common straight-edged knife.



Photo 8: This piece of black Strathmore charcoal paper was laser cut using contemporary Roland and Epson computer equipment. It is backed with a dry adhesive prior to cutting and ready to be mounted to the underlying Kinwashi paper.