

January 2004

The art of *scherenschnitte*

Feature article



Scherenschnitte. It's pronounced *SHARE-en-shnit-tah* and it's a mouthful of a word for such a simple concept. Literally translated from German to English, it means "scissor-cut." And cutting paper into decorative patterns is what it's all about, even though *scherenschnitte* practitioners frequently use craft knives in addition to, or sometimes instead of, scissors. But for such a simple concept, it's an art form that has thrived for centuries and taken root in a variety of cultures.

Though we probably didn't know it at the time, most of us got an introduction to *scherenschnitte* in grade school. Starting with a sheet of crisp white paper, we folded it into quarters or eighths and took up our round-tipped scissors. Guided by our teacher—or, if we were more adventurous, by our instincts—we snipped bits and chunks away from the edges and corners of the rectangle. Then, as if by magic, we unfolded a delicate, symmetrical snowflake. Paper, scissors, hands, imagination. That's *scherenschnitte* at its most basic.

Scientific illustrator, painter, and master paper cutter Rick Jones of Redwood City, California, first experienced *scherenschnitte* in just this way. And—again like most of us—Rick tucked his paper-cut snowflakes away in the "fond childhood memories" compartment.

There they stayed until, years later, he enrolled in a course in Mexican folk art. Among the course topics was paper cutting, (*papel picado*, literally "punched paper" in Spanish, and pronounced *pah-PEL pih-CAH-dough*). Rick was immediately touched and captivated by the elaborate images produced by Mexican paper artists. He picked up scissors and tried his hand.

The paper-cut images were complex and challenging, like his scientific illustrations, and they offered a new medium for the drafting skills he had honed for years. "Paper cutting was a natural extension of drawing," Rick says, since the patterns are usually drawn onto the paper before being cut

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out. Paper cutters less skilled at drawing may trace their images. Some—like Hans Christian Andersen, the famous Danish storyteller who often accompanied the telling of his stories with an impromptu *scherschnitte*—simply fold their paper and snip away freehand. (These intricate patterns make wonderful additions to scrapbook pages. These days, scrapbookers can purchase a wide selection of laser-cuts that emulate hand-made papercuts. Or, you can snip your own using patterns available online or at your local paper crafts store.)



Shaker Blessing



Shaker Blessing detail



Pacific Snowflake detail

But the allure for Rick was more than technique. He also found papercuts to be an ideal medium for exploring ideas or themes that interest him. He often gets his ideas from a phrase he comes across in his reading. “Shaker Blessing” (see illustration) is a good example. And he frequently draws his imagery from the life forms he depicts in his scientific illustrations.

Rick hasn’t lost touch with the allure of those magical *scherschnitte* snowflakes. He’s produced many more of them over the years. And now, he’s designed “Pacific Snowflake,” a new snowflake exclusively for you to download, print out, and use to embellish your winter-themed pages. Rick’s creation evokes the complexity of plump, fragile flakes whirling toward us in a big winter storm. Look closely and you’ll discover some marvelous creatures lurking about! To get you started, we’ve incorporated the new snowflake in this month’s featured project, the “Let It Snow” scrapbook page. And, while your scissors are sharpened and your fingers limber, check out this month’s HP Creative Scrapbook Assistant project, “Customized Paper Dolls.”

Stay snug, and happy snipping!

Learn more

Rick Jones fell in love with an art form whose history is long and rich. The art of paper cutting probably originated in China. Paper was first produced there in the first century A.D., and by 1000 A.D. *scherschnitte* was very popular among the Chinese. (Scissors of various kinds have been around since the fifth century B.C.)

Paper cutting spread widely, Rick points out, in part because the tools and materials are inexpensive and readily available. “In many countries,” he

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says, “papercuts were both decorative and practical. For example, they were used to decorate china cabinets, but also for window coverings.”

Many of us have paper-cutting blood in our cultural veins. In addition to China and Mexico, countries known for their paper-cutting tradition include Japan, Egypt, the Ottoman empire, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United States. There’s a strong history of *scherenschnitte* in Jewish culture, too. Cut paper artists from across the centuries have created a fascinating body of work displayed in art museums and galleries and in private collections around the world.

To get in touch with Rick Jones, just send him an email at rickjo@sonic.net.

To see examples of papercutting from a variety of times and places, and to learn more about this still-vibrant art form, you can start with the following books:

Scherenschnitte: Designs and Techniques for Traditional Papercutting, Susanne Schöpfer-Geiser, Lark Books, 1996.

Folk Art Designs from Polish Wycinanki and Swiss and German Scherenschnitte, Ramona Jablonski, Stemmer House, 1978.

Jewish Papercuts: A History and Guide, Joseph and Yehudit Shadur, The Judah L. Magnes Museum/Gefen Books, 1994.

The Amazing Papercuttings of Hans Christian Andersen, Beth Wagner Brust, Houghton Mifflin, 1994.

Mexican Papercutting: Simple Techniques for Creating Colorful Cut-Paper Projects, Kathleen Trenchard, Lark Books, 1998.



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