

Papercutting: Tips, Tools, And Techniques For Learning The Craft



It is traditionally believed that true paper was invented in China around 105 A.D. For several hundred years, it remained precious and scarce. When the Muslims captured Samarkand, a territory of present-day Russia, in 712 A.D., they learned from the Chinese living there how to make paper from flax and other fibrous plants. The first Arabic paper manufacturing operation started in Baghdad in 794 A.D. From there, the process was carried abroad, and by the thirteenth century, paper was being made throughout Europe, with linen rags as the raw material. Toward the end of the eighteenth century, a mechanized manufacturing process was invented using wood pulp, making paper more affordable and thus spreading its use by the late 1840s.

The earliest known papercuts were discovered in northwestern China and date to the Northern and Southern Dynasties (A.D. 386-581). The circular papercuts were probably intended as burial coins to be interred with the dead.

In the eighth century, as paper production became widespread and more affordable, papercuts became popular with the Chinese peasantry. Being illiterate, they used papercuts as a way of illustrating their many folk tales and symbols. Cutouts were placed on ceilings, walls, and doorway lintels, and were hung like curtains, expressing good luck, happiness, prosperity, and love throughout the year. Papercuts decorated plants, food (especially cakes), candles, fans, folding screens, furniture, corners of mirrors, and gift boxes. They were worn in women's hair in the form of flowers and butterflies, and adorned temple offerings. The most popular color was red, the symbol of happiness.

Distinct styles emerged in each region of the country. Because there are no strict rules of design, the folk cutters were free to experiment with the form without particular regard for realism. Though some women created their own designs and styles, most worked within a tradition their mothers and grandmothers handed down. They produced several white copies to be used and some saved patterns for the next generation. It was fairly common for the excellence of a young girl's papercuts to be judged by a

terflies, and adorned temple offerings. The most popular color was red, the symbol of happiness.



Chrysanthemums and Parrots. Zhang Jigen, a native of China's Jiangsu Province, was born in 1921 and began cutting at age twelve. He cut without a copy or draft and was known as "the man with the magic scissors." PRIVATE COLLECTION

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