

Cut It Out: Papercutting Traditions and Beyond

Kanako Abe
A Messenger, 2022
Paper and botanical dye
Collection of the Artist
Photo: Courtesy of the Artist



Papercutting as a creative handcraft has roots in many cultures, including centuries-old examples from China, the Polish tradition of *wycinanki*, and the Mexican history of *papel picado*. Celebrating handwork and recognizing its potential to connect across time, space, and geography, this large-scale loan exhibition combines more traditional forms of papercutting with the work of contemporary artists who deliberately draw on—and expand upon—historical forms of “cutting.”

In simple terms, this exhibition features work by individuals who are

compelled by the ideas, processes, and/or traditions of papercutting. Some may have learned histories and techniques from family or mentors, while others may have art-oriented degrees or training and have decided to cultivate a love of papercraft in particular. While exhibitions celebrating papercutting are not unusual, *Cut It Out* uniquely creates a visual arc from the past to the present—particularly as it incorporates a concentration of historical *wycinanki* from regional collections as well as contemporary artwork. In addition to small- and large-scale works, the exhibition features paper cut lanterns by **Myra Su**, a puppeteer who will also incorporate shadow puppet performances throughout the run of the exhibition.

In the United States, folding and cutting paper to make decorative constructions has been a part of many people’s childhoods, whether in a classroom or home setting—think colored construction paper chains, paper snowflakes, or Valentine’s Day ornaments. Indeed, as a folk art, most papercutting traditions have roots in decorative practices. Modern practitioners often talk about learning from grandparents and previous generations who were creating pieces for interior design purposes—decorating the walls and windows of their family homes, for example. Those who embrace papercutting as a creative art form build upon this type of handcraft tradition, distinguishing their practice through enhanced labor and complexity in design or development; the addition of social, historical, personal, and cultural content; material exploration; and, sometimes, size.

Some techniques involve using a single piece of paper, often resulting in a piece that evokes lace or a web. Others involve layering multiple pieces of cut, shaped paper. Additionally, some practices involve multiple processes—including punching, clipping, tearing, and carving—as well as combinations of other materials. Scissors, shears, or Exacto knives are most often used to cut, and traditional *papel picado* practices utilize mallets and chisels.

While the works included in *Cut It Out* are made of paper, some contemporary artists have expanded beyond—utilizing approaches and a visual language that references more traditional work but incorporates a different material source (such as vinyl or plastic). This kind of experimentation isn't as novel as it may seem. For example, the Polish tradition of *wycinanki* has been linked to the cutting of holes or figures from bark, leather, cloth, or sheepskin. **Michael Velliquette**, who has used paper to create reliefs, collages, sculptures, and installations, also transfers the aesthetic and technique to heartier yet still cuttable materials such as Tyvek. Examples of this will be featured in Velliquette's *Intuitive Patterns*—an installation rooted in color theory, pattern-making, and papercraft—that will be installed in RAM's Windows on Fifth Gallery in summer 2026. About the project, he states: "This interplay of positive and negative space [will draw] the viewer's eye into a search for underlying structure—inviting visual contemplation of their logic and order. The multi-colored panels will add a vibrant band of color along the bottom edge of the building..."



Other makers featured reflect further interest in the processes and techniques of papercutting as well as a desire to both extend and expand upon heritage and tradition. While they do not all come out and say it, the connection to the hand—to handcraft—and the relationship of labor to production, is implicit in their explorations:

Kanako Abe, who creates lyrical cuts often connected to nature and dyed with organic material such as tea or rust, starts with a sketch. She then goes to work on a single piece of paper with a variety of knives—six to 60 hours later, she has a finished piece. Of her process, she states: "I don't have a chance to change the design once I start cutting, so I find it challenging...I have to think of the right patterns, controlling negative space, and make sure all the lines are connected so the art won't fall apart once it's finished."

Blanka Amezkua

Formally trained as a painter, my creative practice is greatly influenced and informed by folk art and popular culture, from papel picado to comic books. I combine traditional and contemporary art practices and techniques, as well as sociocultural-based mythologies and philosophies as a way to preserve evidence of the past, not for sentimental reasons, but as a form of nourishment for the creative spirit of the present...After experiencing COVID-19, I learned of the existence of the Codex de la Cruz-Badiano or the Aztec Herbal book in the Hispanic Society's library collection.

The Codex de la Cruz-Badiano was made by Nahua knowledge keepers in the 16th century. In the middle of a global pandemic, I had the opportunity to sit with this book about healing, our physical selves and the collective body.

With a degree as a scientific illustrator, **Lucrezia Bieler** blends a love and concern for nature with the dedication to an exacting technique. Bieler uses a single sheet of paper (and scissors) to create complex narrative scenes with animals or humans and animals combined. She states: "The material and the production process reflect the delicacy and also fragility of nature. All things are interconnected and interwoven and have an impact on each other."

Carolyn Guest

Growing up on a Vermont farm, cutting paper for entertainment and pattern making was one of my favorite pastimes. While in Poland as a young adult on the International 4-H Youth Exchange program I learned about the "art" of papercutting. This has taken me back to Poland and many other places to study with folk artists. I use papercutting to retell stories and illustrate rural Vermont. My primary cutting tool is sheep shears (13 1/2 inch). I have chosen to cut with sheep shears in honor of my Polish teachers and all the women in my family who have had to make do with what they have.

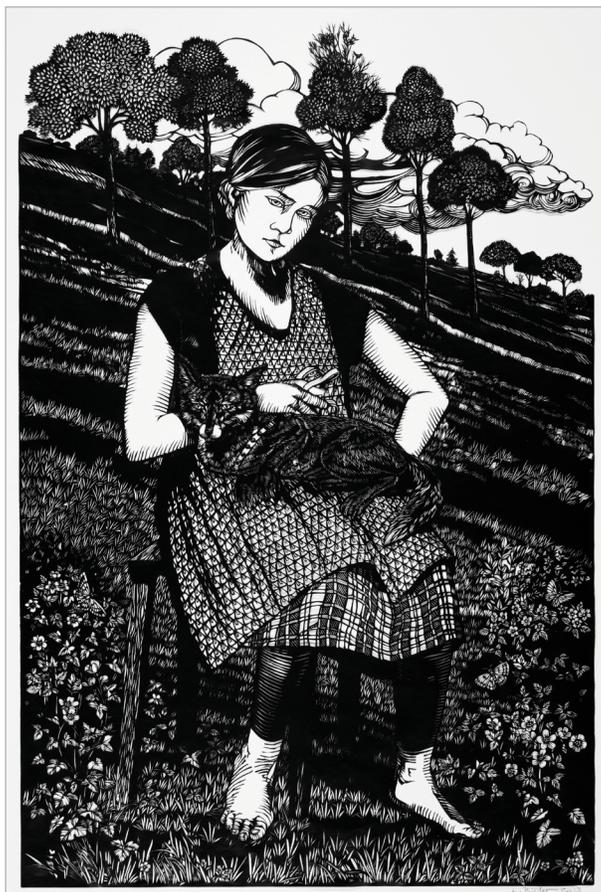
While her family encouraged her to value Polish customs as she grew up, **Bernadine (Bernie) Jendrzejczak** did not begin to create *wycinanki* until she was an adult. Jendrzejczak learned *wycinanki* with members of Polanki—the Polish Women’s Cultural Club of Milwaukee—and a visiting Polish artist. Similar to other makers, she is influenced by several traditional regional styles but blends them with her own design and subject matter interests. This exhibition also includes work by Jendrzejczak’s niece, Zea Melton—a tangible example of the generational exchange of handcraft.

Hannah Kohl

Each piece starts with a single cut. As the hours fly by, thousands upon thousands of snips combine to create the finished product. Sometimes, the piece of paper that falls away isn’t readily visible to the naked eye. As I work, the picture in my mind shifts and grows, accommodating the changes that are taking place on the page. Sometimes, I see the whole picture all at once, other times it emerges piece by piece as I go. If something goes wrong, I just change the design. Unless I’m working on architecture or a replicating a specific font, I don’t draw things out. I just go for it.

Sonja Peterson

The slow process of cutting stories into visual networks is an action that fulfills a need to reexamine and unravel histories of the endless matrix of power structures and systems in today’s world and retell stories of their making. I focus on the environment and where we humans fit within it.



The works’ structural integrity is, at times, reliant on its interconnectivity; if elements disconnect, the entire system is in threat of collapsing.

Sam Wrôbel, who studied with Polish papercutter Doris Sikorsky, parallels traditional *wycinanki* shapes and compositional approaches such as symmetrical balance, but inserts personal narrative and content. As Wrôbel states: “works you see here are all cut from paper by hand with scissors and/or shears in this tradition [*wycinanki*]. I incorporate traditional motifs and styles with my own interpretations of my rural Louisiana life, my travels, and other personal and political inspirations. In this way, I aim to bring this centuries-old tradition into modern times.”

Janelle Washington

Using paper as my medium, I unearth forgotten or untold stories that highlight the struggles and perseverance of Black people in America. I explore themes of history, identity, family, and feminine beauty in Black culture... Working with a simple sheet of black or white paper and a box of blades, I cut multifaceted designs to weave stories of strength, perseverance, and pride. Using paper reminds me of my ancestors and how a transformation can occur from humble beginnings, creating something extraordinary.



Makers whose works are represented include: Kanako Abe, Blanka Amezkua/ Rene Mendoza, Lucrezia Bieler, Jupi T. Das, Jennaca Leigh Davies, Kasia Drake-Hames, Bronislaw Duda, Maria Gleń, Carolyn Guest, Bernadine (Bernie) Jendrzejczak, Felicja Kazmierczak, Hannah Kohl, Ryszarda Klim, Czesława Konopka, Zea Melton, Marianna Muras, Władysława Muras, Sonja Peterson, Roma Starczewska-Murray, Myra Su, Merle Temkin, Michael Velliquette, Kara Walker, Janelle Washington, Carey Watters, and Sam Wróbel. Additionally, historical works by unidentified papercutters are included.



Sam Wróbel
Creole Cowboys, 2018
 Paper
 Collection of the Artist
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

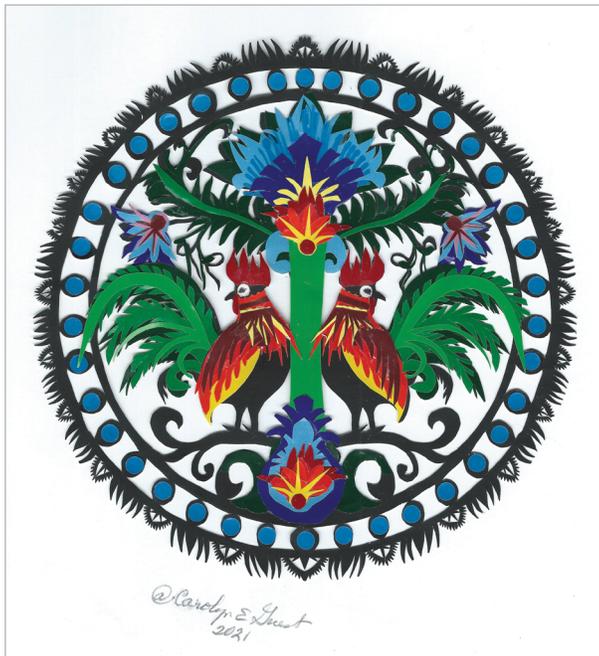
(page 2)
Blanka Amezkua and Rene Mendoza
Hierbitas de saberes (Tiny Herbs of Knowledge), 2023
 Tissue paper
 Collection of the Artist
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(page 3, top right)
Lucrezia Bieler
Lazy Sunday Afternoon, 2013
 Paper
 Collection of the Artist
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist

(page 3, bottom left)
Janelle Washington
Golden Blossoms, 2023
 Paper, tissue paper, and gold leaf
 Collection of the Artist
 Photo: Erik Patton

Considered a distinctive folk art, the Polish papercutting tradition of *wycinanki* is given weight in this exhibition as it represents strong links to Polish culture in this region of the Midwest—extending from Chicago to Milwaukee. First used to decorate homes and things of daily life and similar to other papercutting traditions, *wycinanki* has been practiced for generations in Poland and it has been shared abroad. With regional preferences, traditional motifs include birds, flowers, stars, farm life, and cultural events. The presentation of this exhibition and this gallery guide has been supported in part by a major grant from the Walter S. Smolenski, Jr. and Sr.

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Lena Vigna
 RAM Director of Exhibitions and Collections

Carolyn Guest
Spring Proclamations, 2021
 Paper
 Collection of the Artist
 Photo: Courtesy of the Artist



Cut It Out is part of **Handwork 2026**, Craft in America's nationwide semiquincentennial collaboration showcasing the importance of the handmade and celebrating the diversity of craft that defines America.



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