



Papercutting Traditions Glossary

Cut It Out combines more traditional forms of papercutting (particularly *wycinanki*) with the work of contemporary artists who deliberately draw on—and expand upon—historical forms of “cutting.” The following techniques lay the groundwork, directly or indirectly, for the work on display in this gallery.

Jewish Papercutting

Reaching the height of its popularity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Jewish papercutting is a traditional form of Jewish folk art. The practice was often used to embellish documents such as *ketubbot* (marriage contracts) or created for decorative use in the home or cultural festivities. Artists utilize both figures and cut words as part of their subject matter. Papercutting traditions exist for both Ashkenazi and Sephardic Jewish communities, however, some regional differences such as the types of cutting tools and paper vary depending on what country the pieces were created in. There are not many extant examples of historical Jewish papercutting, as many were destroyed during World War II and the Holocaust; however, the practice has seen a resurgence in recent years.

Jiǎnzhǐ (Chinese)

Dating back to the second century, *jiǎnzhǐ* is one of the oldest and most popular folk arts in China. In fact, the oldest known surviving example of a decorative paper cutout from anywhere in the world is attributed to being from sixth century China. Prior to the invention of paper by Cai Lun in 105 CE, ancient Chinese artisans used silver and gold leaf to create similar cut patterns which have been found in burial sites. As paper was an expensive resource, *jiǎnzhǐ* was created by those from wealthy families and could be used as part of a bridal dowry to show familial status. Once paper became more affordable, the practice grew—now, *jiǎnzhǐ* is practiced throughout the country by the general population and is created for decoration, festivals, and to commemorate life events such as marriage and childbirth. Red paper is traditionally used for its association with various festivities and representation of happiness and luck in Chinese culture, however other colors can be used as well.

Kirigami (Japanese)

Kirigami is an adaptation of *origami* (the Japanese art of folding paper) in which the artist both cuts and folds a single sheet of paper to create a design without the use of glue. Using strategic folds to cut the paper, sometimes the folds are incorporated into the finished product to add depth and dimension to a three-dimensional result, while in other examples, the folds are temporary and the end result is flat.

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Papel Picado (Mexican)

Papel picado ("perforated paper" or "punched paper") is a traditional Mexican folk art made by cutting elaborate designs into sheets of tissue paper. Oftentimes, 40–50 sheets of colored tissue paper will be stacked together and the artist will use a guide or template, a small mallet, and chisels called *fierrito* ("little irons"), to cut through the stack of sheets. The cut designs are often strung together into a banner and displayed for both secular and religious occasions. For example, during *Día De Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) observation, *papel picados* are often incorporated into *ofrendas* (altars) or hung throughout the streets. Traditional designs include floral patterns, skeletons, and birds. In modern day practice, alternate materials such as plastic, mylar, foil, or coated papers are used for increased durability; however, many artisans still prefer the traditional tissue paper.

Psaligraphy

Psaligraphy ("the art of drawing or painting with scissors") is a practice similar to other western European forms of papercutting—sometimes, it is used as a term to generically describe the cutting of silhouettes. Denmark has a notable *psaligraphy* history as the home to fairy-tale author Hans Christian Andersen, who was a prolific papercutter, sometimes telling stories to a live audience while producing papercuts to accompany them. *Psaligraphy*, like other forms of papercutting, is a slow art. The works are produced from a large, continuous sheet of paper cut with a small pair of scissors, requiring a great amount of planning from the artist.

Scherenschnitte (Swiss/German)

Scherenschnitte ("scissor cuts") is the German and Swiss art of papercutting which began in the sixteenth century. In the eighteenth century, the practice was brought to the American colonies when Swiss and German immigrants settled in the Pennsylvania area. Traditional uses included silhouettes, valentines, and the embellishment of documents such as marriage or baptismal certificates and birth announcements. *Scherenschnitte* was also used for narrative purposes—German papercutters created silhouette pieces based on folk tales and Swiss papercutters used the form to create depictions of landscapes and local traditions. *Scherenschnitte* often utilizes rotational symmetry—a type of symmetry where identical forms rotate around a central point—which is achieved by cutting the paper while folded to create a continuous design. Today, *scherschnitte* artists still use the traditional tool of scissors, but also experiment with other cutting implements such as sheep shears, craft knives, or even surgical tools.

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Silhouette

Silhouette is the practice of creating an image of a subject in profile depicted through a solid shape in a single color, usually black, presented on top of a contrasting background, usually white. The interior of this form is featureless. While silhouettes can be created in various media, including a sketched outline which is filled in using paint, the first use of the term was to describe cut paper. Because the practice emerged prior to the invention of photography, silhouettes, sometimes called “shadow cuttings,” were a quick way to capture someone’s likeness without sitting for a full portrait and became a novelty that could be purchased from travelling artists. The practice of cutting portraits from black card was popular in the mid-eighteenth century, however, the term silhouette was not used for the object or the practice until the nineteenth century. Prior to this, the art form was often referred to as “profiles” or “shades.” Other similar practices have been used throughout art history to depict figural forms such as those in Greek black-figure pottery.

Wayang Kulit (Indonesian)

Wayang, also known as *wajang* or *wayang kulit*, is a traditional Indonesian silhouette puppet theatre performance which uses flat stick-mounted puppets made from cut paper or leather to project shadows created by a lighted cloth screen. The audience can watch the performance from both sides of the screen. The puppets—also called *wayang*—are accompanied by instrument performance and are sometimes combined with human actors to tell a story. While the practice originates in Java, Indonesia, the art can also be found in Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Malaysia. It can be traced back to the spread of Hinduism, when leather puppet art called *thalubomalata* was introduced from Southern India, and many performances tell the stories of the Hindu epics the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Performances are held during rituals and ceremonies, but may also be performed for visitors or tourists.

Wycinanki (Polish)

Considered a distinctive folk art, the Polish papercutting tradition of *wycinanki* became popular in the mid-nineteenth century, originating from shepherds using sheep shears to cut holes or figures from tree bark, leather, or sheepskin. First used to decorate peasant homes and things of daily life and similar to other Slavic papercutting traditions, *wycinanki* has been practiced for generations both in Poland and abroad. In the twentieth century, *wycinanki* were a popular travel souvenir and were also acquired by many museums. With regional preferences dictating stylistic differences, traditional motifs include birds, flowers, stars, farm life, and cultural events. There are two main regions associated with *wycinanki* production, each with distinct qualities. Kurpie region *wycinanki* are typically a single color and are cut from a single sheet of paper, whereas Łowicz region *wycinanki* use multiple colors and tend to be narrative or expressive certain themes.