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# Running with Scissors

In art and design alike, the sweetly sinister old craft of cut paper is new again.

By **CLAIRE LUI**

SNIP, SNIP: THE WORLD has gone Edward Scissorhands on us, showering cut paper everywhere and scattering mesmerizing bits of shadow and light. With a few cuts and nicks, artists are transforming plain sheets of paper into artworks of astonishing complexity. Cut paper has become a prominent visual trend over the past few years, evolving from humble folk art to fodder for major museum exhibitions and books. The Museum of Modern Art in New York recently closed a show of works from its own collection that used paper in inventive ways, and in September, the design publisher Die Gestalten Verlag released *Papercraft*, an entire book dedicated to stunning new pieces made with paper.

This fall, cut paper will get a a multi-floor tribute at New York's Museum of Arts and Design (MAD). The exhibition, "Slash: Paper Under the Knife," is "not a show about cute paper," according to MAD's chief curator, David McFadden. Rather, it will emphasize the sophisticated turn the craft has taken in recent years, showing works that demonstrate a level of artistry that McFadden describes as "drawing with scissors."

Almost all countries have a tradition of cut paper. There is the Swiss German *scherschnitte* ("scissor cuts"), which first appeared in the 1500s and was continued in the U.S. by the Pennsylvania Dutch from the 18th century onward. Mexico has its own version, the centuries-old folk

art *offpapelpicado* ("perforated paper"). In England and France, silhouettes were wildly popular in the 1880s; and in Indonesia, shadow puppets have long been used to convey traditional Hindu myths. These variations have all spawned their own contemporary interpretations.

The democratic qualities of paper—readily available, cheap to buy, and easy to mold and cut—make it an ideal canvas for dreamy groves of cut curls and fronds, as well as for nightmare visions of macabre darkness. The newest incarnation of the trend taps into the craft's ability to convey both the innocence of childhood—with its cutout snowflakes and valentines—and the nightmare flip side of that fairy tale, in one fell swoop.



"Most of my work is based on my daily observations." Paper is affordable and ephemeral—qualities that several artists mention as reasons behind their fondness for the material. "It's not very precious, and it's not something that lasts forever," says Danish artist Peter Callesen. Jen Stark—one of the artists in this genre whose pieces burst with color—started working with the material because of its low price and inherent sculptural traits. "I decided to get something inexpensive but with potential," she says.

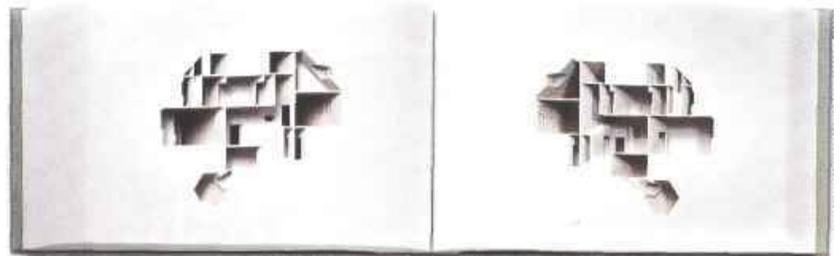
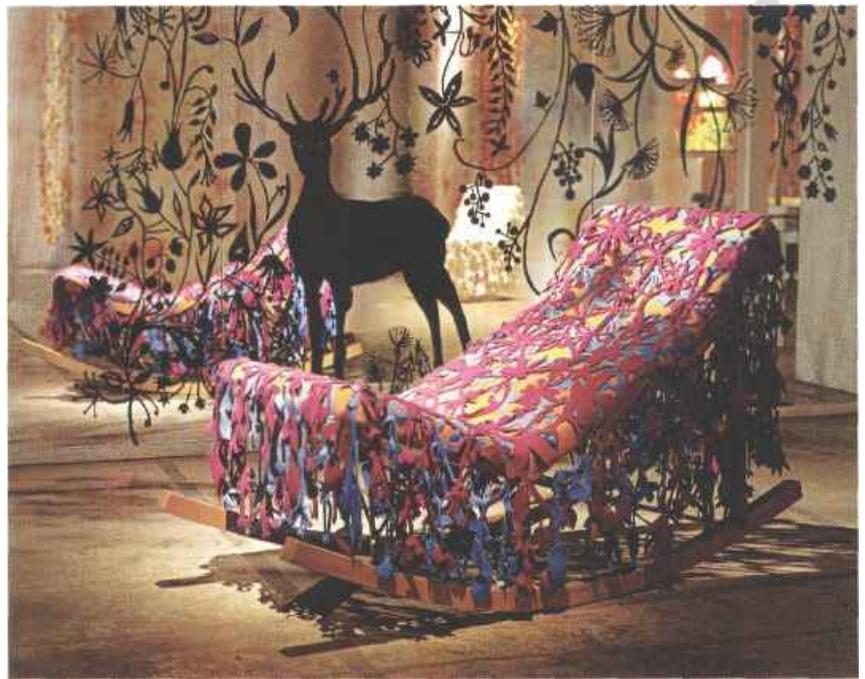
Unsurprisingly, editorial, fashion, and advertising clients have come a-wooping at the doors of cut-paper artists, hoping for a bit of their whimsical beauty to sell the product or news of the day—even if that news is grim. The delicate yet haunting cutouts of artist Andrea Dezso (whose cut-paper work appears on page 43) have illustrated dour editorials in *The New York Times*, including one entitled "To Resist Hitler"; the illustration's pretty cutouts of trees and flowers are laced with smokestacks and prisoners being sent to internment camps. Dezso's cover for Susan Faludi's 2008 book, *The Terror Dream: Myth and Misogyny in an Insecure America* continues Walker's vocabulary with racial stereotypes. The cut-paper piece frames cowboys and Indians against the burning towers of September 11.

Dezso, whose work appears in MAD's show, cites the wave of renewed interest in handicraft as a reason behind cut paper's resurgence. "In the past, people who worked with materials, who made things by hand, were not taken as seriously," she says. "Art was supposed to be conceptual. Now it's acceptable to work with materials." The notion of craft's being merely women's work has also faded somewhat. As handiwork enters the fine art world, craftsmanship has increasing value. "People are intensely into the handmade thing right now," says Grace Bonney, founder of the blog Design\*Sponge. She points to the trickle-down effect of the trend, citing the dozens of Etsy.com sellers who are doing cut paper work. "Rob

**TOP** *Happy Ever After*, an installation by Tord Boontje for the Apri 2004 Milan design fair.

**BOTTOM** *Your House*, 2006, by Olafur Eliasson, published by the Library Council of the Museum of Modern Art, New York,

**OPPOSITE** Street art by Swoon in Berlin, 2005.



Ryan is a cult figure for those Etsy people," she laughs, "but now he's selling on Etsy!"

Ryan is arguably the person who, along with Walker, launched the cut-paper renaissance. When he started making cut-paper works in 2002, the London-based artist was one of the first to really modernize the tradition of *scherenschnitte*. Now one of the most sought-after artists of his kind, Ryan's work has graced Erasure al-

bum covers, *Vogue UK*, *Vogue Nippon*, Paul Smith fabrics, and that quintessential British institution, the Liberty Christmas windows. His cut-paper pieces are narratives intertwined with text, though his commercial clients often request his work for its more purely decorative function, seeking him out for his old-fashioned figures and nature-heavy scenes.

Like many cut-paper artists, Ryan prefers to keep all his cuts connected out of one piece of paper—a daunting task, but a rewarding one: "What I like is the process and the restrictions of paper cutting. If what you have to say is more important than how you say it, then this kind of work is ideal. It strips it to its bare basics."

Ryan says the popularity of Tord Boontje's cut-paper lamps, which were snapped up by the thousands in 2000 at retailers such as Conran, was an influential reference point for the explosion of cut-paper motifs in home goods and shelter magazines. Boontje himself has reflected on the appeal of cut paper and the way it translates in a modern age: "I like the idea that cutout-paper-making

is traditionally a very domestic activity, but now, with current technology like laser-cutting, photo-etching, and die-cutting, we can produce this industrially." He adds that he was inspired by "both Scandinavian and Eastern European traditional crafts, as they are very simple and domestic, as well as the Japanese paper-cutout tradition, for its sophistication."

Leaping off the page is cut paper's newest feat, as the craft stretches into three-dimensional and animated territories. Boontje's furniture is a commercial application of 3-D cut paper, while Olafur Eliasson, the Danish artist, created a project in 2006 for the Museum of Modern Art called "Your House," a 908-page laser-cut book that reproduced

Eliasson's own house in Copenhagen by cutting each page on a scale of 85:1 to the actual house. Writing about the project in an artist's statement, Eliasson says, "Space is no longer considered static but is seen as being of time, and engaging with space consequently becomes a temporal activity"—words that are reflected in the MAD show's series of animated films using cut paper, a cinematic niche that transforms the two-dimensional art form into motion graphics.

Kara Walker, whose work will be included in MAD's exhibition, says that she started cutting paper because she was "drawn first to the shadow and its psychological implications, and second to the act of cutting away material to find the form," emotions that are apparent again and again in the work of modern cut-paper artists. MAD curator McFadden sums up the everlasting appeal of cut paper, saying, "Paper is undervalued. We forget how much paper means in our lives, and these artists resurrect something that is valueless." ©



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—TORD BOONTJE