

# Exhibition story

By curator: Sissel Guttormsen

Karen Bit Vejle creates images of air and paper. Using a pair of scissors as a tool, she cuts her own multi-faceted world into the paper. The works are formed from a large, continuous piece of paper that is folded one, two, and three times, and then cut using only a pair of scissors. Every single scissor cut is carefully planned, as the slightest mistake can have disastrous consequences for the finished result. This is a slow art of painstaking patience that demands the utmost concentration. The distinctive character and development of paper cutting has been much overlooked in the history of art. Many may call themselves paper cutters, but few count themselves true artists of the discipline. It is in this rare category that Karen Bit Vejle is at home. Her form of expression, psaligraphy, literally means the art of drawing or painting with scissors.

Paper has great potential as creative material. It can be cut and shorn into patterns, folded into one- or three-dimensional figures, or soar through the sky in the form of fantastic kites. Ever since paper was invented in China more than 2,000 years ago, the use of the material in art works has been significant. In fact, paper was used to decorate long before it was used to write. The oldest known paper cutting, stemming from the 500s, is a symmetrical circle from the Xinjiang province. *"I cut paper to summon my souls..."* said Chinese national poet Tu Fu some 200 years later.

In the beginning, when paper was still something of an exclusive item, paper art was primarily practised by members of imperial courts. Written sources speak of a number of paper cutters who demonstrated great variety in pattern and technique. The motifs were both purely decorative or contained scenes from everyday life. While professional paper cutters were primarily men who often worked together in workshops, a feminine tradition developed in the rural areas of mainland China. It was expected that every young woman would master paper cutting, and brides-to-be were often judged on the basis of their skill with scissors. Paper cutting is still a highly valued form of folk art in China. Doors and windows are decorated with colourful and spectacular cuttings for special occasions.

The art of paper cutting spread with the Silk Road to the rest of the world during the 1300s. From India we know the Sanjih tradition, a ritual cut that is associated with the adoration of the Krishna figure. In various countries such as Japan, Mexico, Poland, Germany and Switzerland, paper cutters made considerable contributions to Christian and folk art. In Jewish tradition stemming from Turkey, Russia, Ukraine, and elsewhere, paper cutting has played a central role in

mysticism and symbolism, where religious texts are often incorporated in the work.

Paper later became a more affordable item, a product that most could afford to acquire. Paper cutting therefore became an art form accessible across the spectrum. And from less costly paper grew the most fantastic works of art and decorations.

One variant of paper cutting is known under the name silhouette cutting or shadow outlines. The origin of the silhouette as an idea goes all the way back to classical antiquity, but became established as a form of art in Europe in the late 1600s. The name was taken in honour of the French finance minister Etienne de Silhouette (1709-1767). His favourite hobby was cutting profiles and portraits in black paper. It has been claimed that Johann Kaspar Lavater's text from the 1770s on human physiognomy stimulated interest in this activity, as the book was richly illustrated with silhouettes. The silhouette caught on and became fashionable, even in royal circles where several members of the court would spend time cutting out portraits and landscape scenes.

Travelling silhouette cutters made a good living from this popular art form and visited towns large and small to cut out silhouettes, family portraits and scenes from everyday life for a reasonable fee. It was much less costly than having one's portrait painted. Meanwhile, it became increasingly common in the 1800s to paint silhouettes instead of cutting them. With the introduction of portrait photography, interest in the silhouette waned.

Paper cutting's strong position in Karen Bit Vejle's homeland of Denmark can be linked to the tradition of sending *Gækkebrev*, a type of traditional letter sent at Easter containing a riddle. The forerunner to this custom was the German "Binding letter," which was also seen in Norway in the 1600s. If one received a binding letter on his or her birthday and could not manage to solve the riddle included in the letter, the recipient was obligated to hold a dinner gathering. A *gækkebrev* is a little paper cutting with a verse inside. It would be sent in the spring when the snowdrops were twinkling up from the ground. Since this often took place around the Easter season, the *gækkebrev* became a tradition closely associated with this holiday. *Gække* is a word for snowdrop in Danish, and a little snowdrop is supposed to be included in every *gækkebrev* – as a messenger of the coming spring. The *gækkebrev* was sent to a person one was fond of or in love with, and the sender left his or her name conspicuously absent. If the recipient managed to guess who had sent the letter, the sender either had to offer a kiss, an Easter egg, or a ticket to the theatre. In the opposite case, the recipient had to offer the same.

*"Cutting is the fledgling beginning of poetry..."* wrote Hans Christian Andersen in a letter to a good friend in 1867. He was undoubtedly the most well-known paper cutter in Scandinavia during his time, and certainly helped contribute to the great popularity of the art form in Denmark. H.C. Andersen was an excellent paper cutter and not only considered cutting a delightful diversion, but also a challenge for the spirit. He was therefore never without a small pair of scissors that he kept together with his pen.

It is said that while H. C. Andersen would also tell an exciting story while he cut paper. The story ended when the cutting was complete. As a finishing touch he would unfold the folded paper and reveal the content to his audience – a magical moment.

Karen Bit Vejle's magical cuttings in the travelling exhibition *Scissors for a brush* are rooted in a tradition that has known a long journey through history. But she has created a personal style and technique that are entirely her own. For more than 30 years she has been absorbed, fascinated, and deeply committed to this art form that developed from small, simple snowflakes to unusually large and highly complex image cuttings. She is one of very few in Europe who can cut at such an advanced technical and artistic level. There is a great degree of humour in Karen Bit Vejle's world of imagery; humour and the ability to identify joy in small things. Just as often, though, she confronts deep seriousness and themes intended to invoke involvement and reflection. Her works are captivating surprise packages. By meeting Karen Bit Vejle's images of air and paper we can find ourselves both surprised and inspired!

Karen Bit Vejle

### *I cut paper because I just can't stop myself*

My heart and soul are at peace when I have the scissors in hand and the paper dances between the blades. Time stops and every time I open a cutting I feel the same sense of anticipation as when I opened the very first one. I wonder what it will look like? Did I manage to achieve the cut I had in mind? It is just as exciting every time – just like opening up an exciting gift.

I have finished a number of cuttings over the course of nearly 40 years, and as I never had anywhere else to keep them, they have just remained hidden underneath my rugs. They might have stayed there forever, if a colleague had not happened to look under my rugs and find them. He thought they should see the light of day. Ever since, these paper cuttings have taken on a life of their own and started a crusade for the rediscovery of paper cutting – a journey that I hope will bring a sense of wonder and happiness, and a breath of adventure to everyone

who visits the travelling exhibition *Scissors for a brush*. If my papercuts can manage to make you stop and wonder for just one instant, I think that would be wonderful.

Many ask: How did you get started cutting paper?

Do you remember when you yourself were a child, sitting together with your family, cutting Christmas decorations in December? The atmosphere was like nothing else, was it not? There was something slightly magic in knowing that a flat piece of paper could turn into flowering angels or snowflakes. This is how it was for me from the very beginning – at the kitchen bench in my childhood home in Denmark, where we had our own tradition of cutting out *gækkebrev*. Around Easter all Danish children used to cut out small paper cuttings that were adorned with the first signs of spring; snowdrops, as we called them. I loved to cut out *gækkebrev* and was skilled with scissors. From *gækkebrev* I learned the basic techniques for paper cutting: You take a sheet of paper and carefully fold it one, two, three, perhaps four times. Then you clip away to your heart's content. But you have to be careful and think along the way, because if you cut in the wrong places, then the whole thing will fall into pieces. There were many, many times I watched my work amount to nothing because I had been overly eager and cut in the 'wrong' places. But you can learn from these mistakes, and along the way I eventually learned the code as to how all the lines of the paper cut are linked to each other in an intricate and complex network. You have to keep a close eye on what you're doing, because if you cut the wrong way, then it's all over!

Until I was 16 I thought that paper cutting was only something done for holidays such as Easter and Christmas. But one beautiful summer day in Tivoli park in Copenhagen, a whole new world opened up to me. By a tree next to the Tivoli pond I saw a man who was sitting in the sun cutting out paper silhouettes with motifs I had never before seen. I was enraptured, and stood there staring for a long time, watching the man as he manoeuvred his scissors to bring forth the most beautiful little paper cutting. I was so taken with the idea that I went right home and got my mother's sewing scissors, and I have never let them out of my sight since.

Many say: You must have a special type of scissors to be able to make those cuts, or perhaps you cut with a knife?

A knife, never! Paper cutting can only be done with scissors! I use regular, everyday scissors. There's nothing special about them.

But you do use a special type of paper, right?

No, all you need is regular old paper. Copy paper, for example, is just perfect. That's what I used myself for many years in the beginning. But the A4 format placed a natural limit on size, and I eventually went on the hunt for larger sheets of paper. It was not so easy to find, but when I spent a year at the end of the 1980s living in Tasmania, I happened to come across black, white, red and blue paper that was fairly thin and on large rolls. From there the cuttings gradually grew larger and larger.

Many people wonder where I learned paper cutting and they are quick to suggest that I was inspired by Japanese and Chinese cutting.

As far as I know, there are no schools where you can learn the secrets of psaligraphy. You can only take out the scissors and start practicing, cut after cut after cut. There are paper cutting traditions in China, Israel, Poland, Austria and India, and Hans Christian Andersen's small paper cuttings are well known in Denmark. My own personal sources of inspiration lay in endless reflections on time, eternity, sorrow, grace, happiness, and love. It is also rooted in the ornamental work of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, but perhaps in music more than anything. When I work, the scissors are always accompanied by music. The cuts find their natural rhythm in the idiom of the arabesque, and the folding technique creates the paper cut's symmetry. The same basic rule can be found in the way that a piece of music is constructed – in repetitions and modulations over themes. The early works of the exhibition bear testimony to my desire to explore the mathematics of ornamentation, where my later works are more motivated from a contemplative perspective.

Many people want to know how long it takes to cut out an image.

When I am about to do a cutting I spend a very long time visualising and memorising the design of the cut. Both technique and image composition must be entirely complete in my mind before I can put scissors to paper. Once I have the image clear in my mind, I draw guidelines on the paper and then I begin working with the scissors. When I created the commissioned work "1897" for the Britannia Hotel in Trondheim, the actual clipping took 250 hours and consisted of 240,000 cuts. Add to this the time I spent on research and planning. The most time-intensive cut to this day, however, is 'The Fifth Season,' which I spent six months working on.

Psaligraphy is a slow and time-intensive affair, but I enjoy every minute of it, and time spent with scissors and paper has become my catharsis!