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Martha Link Walsh - Paper Artistry from Hand to Heart

by Barbara Malinsky

"I thought my destiny was to work with computers at IBM!" Martha Link Walsh had just graduated, in the 1960's, with a degree in mathematics from Bucknell University and was certain that the corporate giant would welcome her with open arms. When it didn't, she now knows that it was a blessing in disguise. Happily ensconced in her unique, charming studio and retail shop in Branford, she is content to pursue her cut-paper artistry on her own terms.

Walsh's interest in paper cutting began during her eight years of teaching middle school mathematics - first in Delaware and then in her hometown of Branford. Her mother had introduced her to the craft after attending a meeting of the Early American Industries Association at the Ephrata Cloister, a farm museum in Pennsylvania that displayed the German style of paper cutting brought here by the Pennsylvania Germans.

The craft has many practitioners throughout the world, each culture contributing a unique style. Walsh explained, "Traditional paper cutting is a study in positive and negative spaces as well as the connection of a design graphically and physically

(from one piece of paper). Using scissors or knives to create a graphic sculpture, the design is born by cutting away the background from the piece of paper. This two-dimensional art becomes sculptural, too, as shadows are created when it is mounted to a frame. Another style of the form is the layering of colors. Whether it is folk art or contemporary art, the colors create the images and dimension in a more painterly manner."



After eight years of teaching, Walsh asked for and received a yearlong sabbatical that allowed her to travel the world exploring the various folk forms of the craft. In true bohemian fashion, she traveled throughout Europe while living in her car. She noted that the Pennsylvania German style uses white paper and painted religious symbols and is symmetrical while the Germans were more illustrative, cut on black paper, and were asymmetrical; the Swiss excelled at exquisite detail- all done on black paper.

In Poland, she was surprised to see all the layers of colored paper that are cut with sheep shears. This was a completely different approach to the art form. "Their designs are pure folk art - primitive elements that are passed on from generation to generation. One design staple is a central tree with something on either side. Medallions, roosters, or flowers are a frequent theme in many of their works. They've also developed a banner style that illustrates day-to-day life. I'm so





happy that I made that journey." Poland, she also discovered, had a tradition of "cutting bees" much like American quilting bees. The

Japanese tradition is called kirigami that is more of a reverse procedure where a positive space is carved and used as a stencil that is rolled with ink to apply the design.

With a hands-on, encyclopedic knowledge of the art form but with no formal art training, Walsh launched her own methods using her European experience as reference. She never tried to copy any of those specific styles but developed her own techniques because of her clients' requests. They wanted paper cuttings that told stories about them and commemorated special events in their lives so she chose to be stylistically eclectic.

She never did return to teaching but started her artistic career in a small 100 square foot studio in Branford's Bittersweet Farm; later

moved to Stony Creek and is now at her present studio and retail space on Main Street in Branford. Entering the gallery, a wonderful sense of creative energy permeates the air. The retail space displays an inviting and varied selection of ready-made items for sale like ornaments, note cards, framed art, lampshades, and room dividers as well as examples of custom pieces. Surrounded by such a variety of cut paper models, you may ask whether they can be so varied, humorous, decorative, and emotive. Yes, they can! Walsh's enthusiasm adds to the excitement of discovery. She may be out front in the shop engaging clients or in the rear designing and carving in her airy atelier. Her passion fills the space.

Her capacious workshop includes a large light box, drawing table and framing area "Over time, I have developed my own style of design; I



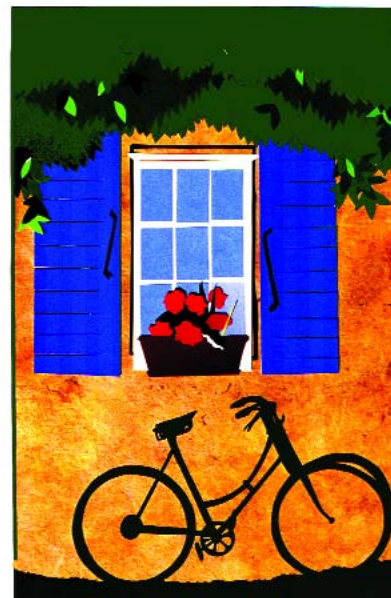


Artist and client discuss the imagery important to the recipient and agree on a concept. Walsh then heads to the drawing board where she creates that first sketch - a rough "cartoon" which is mutually agreeable. The final draft is converted to a fully developed pencil drawing - done in reverse so that, after incising and mounting, the pencil markings will not be visible.



Walsh started her career using delicate scissors but sometimes the humidity of her former studio permeated the paper making it too limp for scissoring; she now uses a surgical scalpel that incises. The completed composition is mounted to an archival quality board and serves as the master from which other related articles are produced. The one-of-a-kind, principal work can now be scanned to create

enjoy creating both the one-piece and the color-layering styles, and use both techniques as a form of story telling. Much of my work is commissioned art that speaks to elements of a personal story that illustrates a family event that creates an heirloom. I use historical, mythological, and traditional symbols in all my work so that they hold messages for everyone to absorb. Telling stories through images and memories can last for generations."



The custom process begins with a client's request for some commemorative piece - a wedding announcement, a birthday, anniversary, or retirement- something that will communicate a family story.

scanned to create invitations, note cards, ornaments, or anything else the client desires, and then custom framed.

For Walsh, her skills of designing and cutting are secondary to her ability to create a kind of visual biography in paper. "Just as an author pens a story, I seem to be able to capture the personal story of a bride and groom, a retiring teacher, a new grandchild, or the life of a couple celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary in paper. They are a testimonial that captures the spirit of the moment in time and event of one's life. What at first glance seems quite simple, when studied one realizes the complexity of the story and of the cutting.

One realizes that the complexity echoes the multi-dimensions of life. The additional fact that the entire image is cut from one piece of paper and that all the parts are connected as a whole duplicates the feelings that all we do is connected to who we are. My evolution has been through the commissioned work and in some part, through my exposure to the various styles, but I do feel that what I do is unique. The cuttings that are designed for someone are acknowledging that uniqueness and giving them a memory visualized."

She commented that the loyalty and satisfaction she receives from her customers is because of that personal connection between artist and client - that little bit of magic and wonder about the entire process from conceptualization to completion. "As I love to say, they are cut by hand and given from the heart."

Visit the Martha Link Walsh Gallery at 188 North Main Street, Branford, CT 06405, 203.481.3505 or marthalinkwalsh.com

