

TEXT BY KATHRYN REHN



 LEFT: Sharyn's workshop in Mt. Vernon, Washington, where even the curtains are paper. The 1915 hand-set, hand-fed press (named "Alice" after Sharyn's grandmother who was born the same year) clickety-clacks as it prints out each card. BELOW: Birds get their own set of directions to the north-of-Seattle studio.



MEET *Sharyn*  
SCISSORHANDS



Sharyn Sowell snips out a brisk business with her hand-cut paper designs for cards, prints, dishes—even garden gates ➔





**ALL IT DESPERA-**

**tion,** but Sharyn Sowell and her husband, Russell, ventured a fishing vacation with their two toddler sons, Brian and Stephen, in tow. Picture the whole family in a rowboat, Dad casting the line, Mom struggling to quiet squirmy boys. Down to her very last diversion, Sharyn opened the tiny scissors on Russell's Swiss army knife and started storytelling while cutting out Noah's ark figures from empty lunch bags.

That was 16 years ago. Although Sharyn says her early two-by-two animals were awful, even indistinguishable, she'd discovered a passion. Papercutting was...fun! She kept her day job as a jewelry designer, but left no piece of paper in her path untouched.

"I used old telephone books, magazines, or while-you-were-out pads to cut shapes of animals, flowers, and children. Some people doodle, I cut." Even when her cutout cows began to look like cows and her paper roses virtually blossomed, she never dreamed this would lead to her future career. She simply snipped—then threw everything away.



 ABOVE: The sign over Sharyn's studio door, "Just Imagine," conveys her recipe for living. NEAR LEFT: Profiled reindeer adorn holiday cards. BOTTOM LEFT: Sheet music was turned into a lampshade and a violin cutting. A cluster of Sharyn's own metal printing plates gleam next to a case of wooden type.

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Sharyn cut these images freehand, including the scene of children frolicking in the snow; work in progress on Sharyn's desk—Mr. Grasshopper, a scissor-shaped cutting, phrases for inspiration; a holiday tableau is displayed against large wooden drawers of antique type. Under the mug is son Brian's first note to Santa; professional Swiss scissors shine like surgeon's tools. "The blades are so thin they can't be sharpened. I wear out a pair in six months."



## FROM MUSE TO MARKET

*Sharyn talks about turning art into business*

- **Separate your work and your home space.** Have a dedicated studio and business phone line so when a major client calls, your teens won't answer "Yo!"
- **Professionalism counts.** Delivering top quality work on time is absolutely essential. Holding yourself to high professional standards builds a solid reputation.
- Family and friends will adore everything you do, so **ask for outside, unbiased feedback**, no matter how humbling it is. Use that constructive criticism to correct your weaknesses and grow.
- Try not to get so focused on compensation that you forget to **enjoy the creative process.** >>



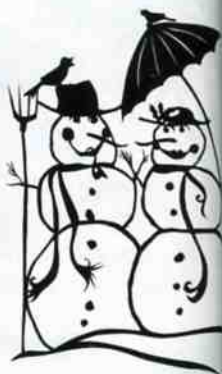
TRICKS OF THE  
ARTIST'S TRADE

CUT IT OUT!

*Papercutting tips from a pro*



- If you want to cut paper, first observe what's around you and **sketch profusely**. "That's how you learn. I once spent an entire day sketching the knees and feet of a friend's goat."
- Starting out, any **basic pair of sharp scissors** and piece of paper will do.
- Always **use acid-free materials**. "I met a nun who cut beautifully, but she forgot to use acid-free glue and her cuttings eventually deteriorated."
- **Experiment with subjects you love**; don't worry how they turn out. But do start with easy, simple shapes.



 ABOVE: A snipped snow family. LEFT: Sharyn recently doubled her studio space. New French doors face a garden that's asleep now, but in summer sunflowers and roses crowd the doorway. For the holidays, she tapes cutout snowflakes on the windows and hangs her mother's ice skates from the knob. The hybrid desk has old dairy barn drawers, a Formica kitchen tabletop, dining table legs, castors, and a vintage vanity mirror.



## IVE YEARS

ago, waiting for her son Stephen at school, Sharyn was cutting paper to pass the time. An art teacher happened by and, impressed, told her about the Guild of American Papercutters. "I didn't know other people did this!" she says, still amazed. With trepidation, Sharyn sent some of her cuttings to the Guild's Boston show. Bingo!

Now that she has a licensing agent in San Francisco, Sharyn's hand-cut designs have evolved into prints and posters, dishware and tablecloths, stickers and rubber stamps. A private client in Beverly Hills commissioned a 4-by-8-foot cutting of a garden scene, mounted behind Plexiglas, for a dining room mural. Another design became the template for an iron gate.

Every project begins with paper (usually black), scissors, and Sharyn's imagination. Amazingly, she always cuts freehand, and no two designs are ever alike. Clunky shears her mother bought at Woolworth's and kept in the kitchen drawer are her favorite tool, but she reaches for diminutive scissors when refining details.

As she creates her larger pieces, the cutting cascades onto her lap like a lacy shawl. It looks wispy and fragile, as if the slightest tug could obliterate hours of work. "By now, I know how much stress the paper can take," she says. "But if it rips, I just start over." ➤



**EACH FINISHED**

cutting is mounted, and if Sharyn wants to turn it into a card for her line, she has a metal printing plate made for "Alice," her antique press, and prints each image by hand.

"I'll never come to the end of ideas for new designs," says Sharyn, pointing to her inspiration—the rural fields beyond her studio. From there she can see goats, rabbits, cows, and endless rows of tulips when they're in season. Her windowsills bulge with abandoned bird nests, twigs, pods. "I pick stuff up like a I'm a magpie. Then I sketch it and recreate it in paper. We have to admire the little magical things around us everyday."

Some of her newer work takes on a more urbane tone, with whimsical cuttings of handbags and shoes, gowns, urns, plump chefs, and kitchenware.

"I'm self-taught," she affirms, "and that's my advantage. Not having a teacher gives me no one to imitate. I stumbled across my passion and found myself."

On one wall of her studio, in large, playful calligraphy, she has scripted "Wonders Never Cease." And Sharyn takes that to heart. 🐾

**TOP LEFT:** Cuttings are stored in labeled shoe boxes covered in decoratively edged paper.

**RIGHT:** Some of Sharyn's recent work. The reindeer and French shoe cuttings (on the left side of the tabletop) were snipped from a handwritten love letter, dated 1890, that Sharyn found in a thrift shop. Papercutting supplies are cached in an old toolbox (at right).

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READERS**

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Sharyn is offering two beautiful, intricate hand-printed images especially for our readers, based on her original cut-paper designs.

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