

PART CIRCUS, PART SACRED SPACE

Chinese paper cutting as fine art

Alexa Olesen

In 1984, a promising young artist named Lu Shengzhong began to make frequent trips to the Chinese countryside to do research on local folk-art customs. He was, at the time, studying for a master's degree in the department of folk art at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

One of Lu's favorite destinations was northern Shaanxi Province, an arid and very poor area abutting Inner Mongolia where homes traditionally are dug out of the yellow cliffs that make up the loess plateau. Here, the local people would invite the visiting student in and offer him the local specialty, dates soaked in wine. Sitting on a *kang* (a stone or concrete bed, with a small furnace underneath, upon which families both sleep and eat), he would watch peasant women create pomegranates, lotuses, peach blossoms, rabbits, roosters, and mice out of brightly colored paper, using scissors with large oval handles and lancelike tips. He was amazed by the intricate paper cuttings he saw produced in the small, remote villages, but



courtesy of Chambers Fine Art

the technique was not unfamiliar to him.

Lu grew up in Dayuji Village, Shandong Province, in an area known for its raw, heavyweight silk and its paper-cutting tradition. His mother, a down-to-earth, hardworking farmer's wife, was well-known in the village for her quick and precise hand, and Lu remembers, as a child, watching in awe as she fashioned flowers out of ordinary scraps of paper. He thought then that his mother's powers with scissors were nothing short of miraculous.

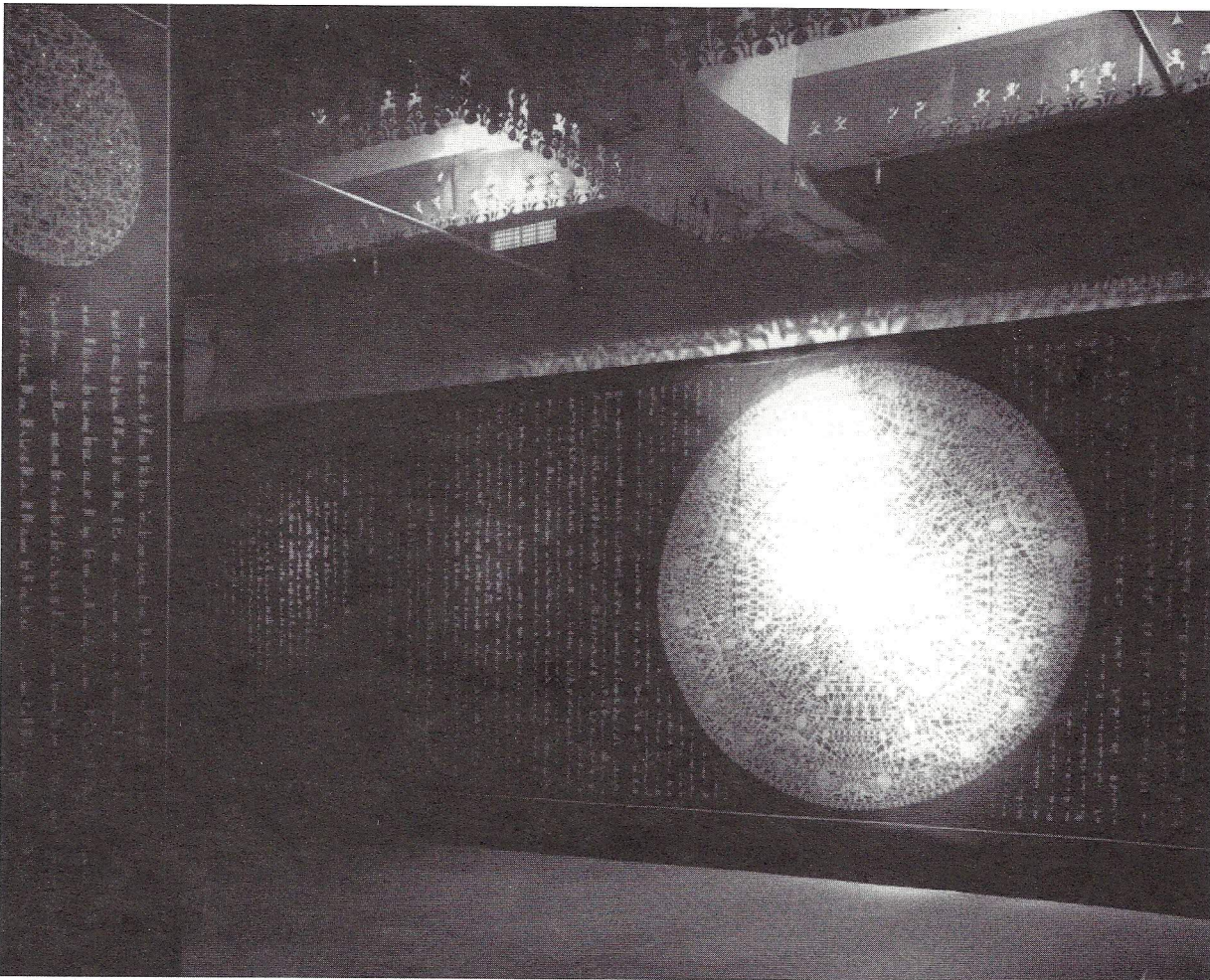
"When I was young, I used to practice paper cutting with my mother all the time," he said in an e-mail correspondence from his home in Beijing. "But once I got older and started to study the fine arts, I lost touch with that tradition. It wasn't until later that I rediscovered it, when I was studying for a master's degree at the Central Academy and I traveled to places like Shaanxi and saw these amazing craftspeople in small villages. There you can find the profoundly deep roots of Chinese culture and tradition, an abundance of ancient folk arts still surviving."

Lu's trips to Shaanxi were somewhat nostalgic, but they were also a reaction against the contemporary art scene at the time. When Lu began his master's degree program, it was the early 1980s, and after three decades of socialist-realist painting and Soviet-inspired woodcuts, the art scene in China was beginning to change dramatically. New ideas from the West

Lu Shengzhong's paper-cut installations:

Poetry of Harmony
2000 (*opposite*)

Great Peace and
Tranquility
2000 (*below*)



were flooding in, and his fellow students at the Central Academy of Fine Arts were discovering Sartre, blue jeans, rock music, and Dada.

Lu, feeling overwhelmed and alienated by these trends, decided to look to his own roots for inspiration. In a recent catalogue essay, he explained his reasons for embracing folk art rather than pop art:

With the ending of the Cultural Revolution, China opened its long-closed doors to the outside world. "The moon in the West is brighter than the one in China." The public tried to imitate the West, the model for those Chinese who were eager to succeed. It was a very interesting time but it did not, in my opinion, leave behind much of lasting importance. Artists, too, tried to copy the West in so many ways. . . . Thus in the mid-1980s, I walked away from the cultural confusion of the time and turned back to the villages, to traditional Chinese folk art.

Lu turned back to the villages for inspiration and began to experiment on his own with paper cutting, but he did not drop out of the burgeoning contemporary Chinese art scene altogether. Nor was he alone in exploring traditional means of expression. Many other Chinese artists and writers in the 1980s participated in what became known as the Xungen, or "Searching for Roots," movement, which sought to infuse contemporary art forms with the sincerity of folk art and the spirituality of Eastern mysticism. Lu used what he found in the countryside, the paper-cutting medium, to create contemporary art installations the likes of which had never been seen before.

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In October 1988, his first major exhibition opened in Beijing at the National Art Gallery of China. Wu Hung, a professor of art history at the University of Chicago, has described the 1988 show as a "grand spectacle" and "a temple filled with totemlike images, footprints suspended in midair, and silhouette patterns accompanied by illegible writing."

What amazed audiences about Lu's work then, and what amazes his audiences even today, is the combination of enormous scale and minutely intricate detail. Although his works had already been shown in Russia, Germany, Australia, Japan, Korea, and Brazil, it was not until the fall of 2000 that Lu's first U.S. show was held, at a new gallery in New York's Chelsea district, Chambers Fine Art.

Two large galleries were filled with both hanging and freestanding seven-and-a-half-foot-tall black scrolls upon which red paper cutouts had been mounted. The top portion of each of the scrolls was taken up with a carefully cut circular design within which tiny red figures ran, jumped, danced, or simply sat in repose. Beneath the central disc were long red trails of images that from a distance looked like calligraphy, or, perhaps, hieroglyphs. They were, in fact, the scraps of paper left over from cutting out the top motif. What appeared to be text would not yield on closer inspection. With each glance, a new image seemed to surface: birds in flight, scorpions, IUDs, bats, hats, crowns, skeletons.

Running the entire length of one wall was a piece titled "Great Peace and Tranquility." In the center was an enormous circle made up of tiny cutouts. From a distance, the orb resembled a fiery planet, and up close,

echoed the dominant motif in traditional Chinese architecture, of courtyards radiating out from a central compound where the emperor resided. The piece also brought to mind the depictions of the interrelatedness of the worldly and ethereal realms found in Aztec and Tibetan cultures, as well as Dante's *Inferno*. Some figures in the piece seem human, others are clearly angelic or demonic. Again, the scraps of paper left over from cutting out the central motif were arranged on either side of the central image, and, at first glance, resembled calligraphy.

courtesy of the artist



Holland Cotter, in the *New York Times*, described Lu's work as "at once whimsical and hushed, part circus, part sacred space." Art historian and curator of Chinese art Britta Erickson characterizes his installations as "powerful, obsessive and very idiosyncratic, with an overall mesmerizing quality."

Lu's work is quietly disturbing. Encountering virtually acres of fine detail and realizing that each bit was cut from wisps of rice paper with scissors can give viewers a queasy, sinking feeling, as they imagine how much time and effort each piece must have taken.

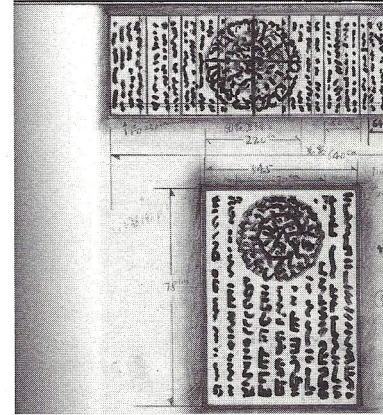
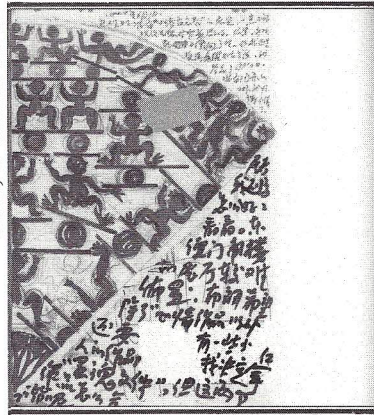
The feeling is assuaged somewhat when we learn that Lu has assistants, mostly dedicated students, who help him out. After Lu has planned a work, he and his team do the cutting, then carefully lay out the design on a table, and, finally, using rice glue, mount the finished product on a

*Lu Shengzhong,
cutting figures
from wisps of
rice paper*

long sheet of black paper.

Lu claims he has never cut himself in the course of all the paper cutting he does. He also says that using scissors is just like using a paintbrush, with perhaps one crucial difference. "When you are cutting paper, it is much harder to fix mistakes. Once you've made your cut, you cannot put it back together again. You have to have a very high level of mental and emotional concentration when you are working, and because it is unfor- giving, the work itself is an excellent record of the artist's state of mind during the creative process."

courtesy of Chambers Fine Art



From Lu Shengzhong's
sketchbook

Lu now teaches at the Research Institute for Folk Art Studies, a department of the Central Academy of Fine Arts, where he himself studied in the early 1980s. He is a very paternal teacher, deeply involved with his students' lives and work. He also continues his research and scholarship on Chinese folk art and has edited a number of volumes on Chinese paper cutting.

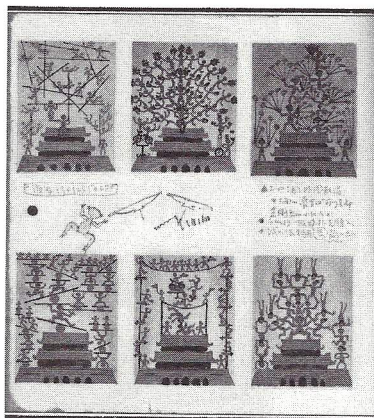
Paper cutting—thought to have originated in the fifth century—is one of the quintessential folk arts of China. Because of the rarity of paper, it was originally a hobby exclusive to the court, but by the fifteenth century, paper had become more available, and paper cutting had become a part of everyday life. In the countryside, young men would scrutinize the scissor-work of local girls when deciding whom to marry. Paper-cut replicas of valuables were burned or buried with the dead; paper cuttings festooned homes, flew in parades, and were given as gifts for weddings and on holidays. During Chinese New Year, in particular, paper cuttings were, and still are, pasted everywhere, on windows, walls, doors, lanterns, columns, and, nowadays, even car windshields.

"It's a low-class, traditional, popular art," explains Wu Hung. "There's a sense of it not being high art. In terms of time, it's not contemporary but more related to the past. In terms of place, it's not urban but more related to the countryside. And it's thought of as a female tradition. All of these associations are still quite alive."

Chinese academia has had a bittersweet affair with the folk arts. While Chairman Mao elevated and politicized folk songs, folk art, and folk dance, and forced intellectuals to learn from the common people, a back-

lash against the idealization of peasants and peasant culture followed the Cultural Revolution. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s—following Deng Xiaoping's dictate that "To get rich is glorious"—people in China were too concerned with modernization and commercialization to pay much attention to their folk art heritage. In the art world, fortunes were pegged not to paper cuttings or handicrafts, but to the newly imported trends known as New Wave, avant-garde, and pop.

Lu, however, was busy flouting this trend. Like a salmon swimming against the current, he went back to his roots, to preserve, document, and



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revitalize folk art. But, says Wu Hung, Lu wasn't doing this for political reasons, or out of any sentimental allegiance to Mao's philosophy of "art for the People." "He's not talking about the People with a capital P. It's more that he himself is from the countryside and it's a personal mission, not an ideology."

His art is inspired not by Mao, but by his mother and other peasant women like her, for whom paper cutting is a natural form of expression. As Lu writes, in an essay entitled "The Way Forward" published in the catalogue for the New York exhibition of his work:

Working in the traditions of folk art, I met many amazingly creative village women who reminded me of my own talented and hardworking mother. I cannot reexperience the lives or spiritual journeys of these peasant women, but their intelligence and devotion have encouraged me to walk a road of my own.

However, Lu intellectualizes about his work in a way that those women do not. He continues:

The "empty world" that I experience when cutting paper is beyond ethnicity, region, or social structure. This world is as big as the universe, and as small as I am.



Alexa Olesen is a Brooklyn-based writer who spent several years studying and working in China. She has written about Chinese art and culture for the *New York Times*, *ARTnews*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and the *Village Voice*.