

AT THE CUTTING edge

Popular from 18th century France to Victorian times and beyond, even in the 20th century silhouette cutters could still be found plying their craft in seaside towns throughout Britain. Today, there are few silhouette cutters left, and one of them is John Speight, a third generation papercutter. He talks to Emma Newrick about scalpels, seagulls and the future of silhouette cutting.

Although John arrived via a rather circuitous route, he is the third generation of his family to practice the art of silhouette cutting. 'In 1921 my grandfather, Arthur Forrester, saw Mr Baron Scotford cutting silhouette profiles. The traditional way of doing this is with a pair of scissors and a piece of paper that is black on one side and white on the other. You look at your customer in profile, and without drawing, you cut their profile out freehand. It only takes about 30 seconds or so. My grandfather thought he could do it and had a go at home. As it turned out, he was right. So he set up in business as a silhouette artist and over the course of his career had studios at Bournemouth, Weston-Super-Mare, Blackpool and Brighton. He tended to cut at the seaside resorts during the summer and move to cities for the winter. I understand he was in Fenwick in Newcastle for a period.'

There is a frame in John's studio at Kirkharle Courtyard entitled 'Three generations of silhouette cutting.' It contains a selection of notes and photographs, one of which shows John's grandfather with Morecambe and Wise in 1953, the year they came to the attention of the BBC. The photograph was taken by John's uncle. John continues, 'My grandfather had a long career and when he died his son John, my uncle, took over his studio on Brighton pier and continued cutting until the late 1970s.'

At this point, however, the papercutting tradition in the family temporarily ceased, after the death of John's uncle. At school, John loved art, and hoped to go on to art college and study graphic design. However, graphic design was changing and he was advised against doing a course. Instead, he went on to do A levels and then to forestry college. He worked for Voluntary Service Overseas as a forestry advisor in East Nepal, but on his return to the UK he found that forestry had changed. 'There was new machinery and the forestry companies wanted managers fresh out of college with the relevant knowledge and qualifications. So I ended up unemployed.'

A chance conversation with his grandmother was to change the course of John's career. 'I asked her how the idea of silhouette cutting came to my grandfather and as I asked a highly detailed picture of a silhouetted ballerina practising at a window with lace curtains flashed into my head. A couple of weeks before this I had found a carrier bag full of my grandfather and uncle's paper and I immediately realised that if I drew a complicated design like this on the white side of the paper, I could cut it out, and then turn the paper black side up. In this way I could produce silhouette designs rather than the traditional profiles.'

Over the next few days John experimented using razor blades, proving to himself that the idea was sound, although he needed a better cutting tool. 'Eventually I found a Swann Morton scalpel which I loved. It isn't designed for the job and I now have a permanent groove where the blade digs into my finger every

day, but over the years I've got so used to it that I wouldn't consider changing to modern craft knives even though they'd probably be easier to use. Of course, when I say I've stuck with the same scalpel, I mean the style of it. Blades only last about an hour or so and the handles too wear out over time. His only tools are a scalpel, two triangular set squares, which he uses for cutting straight edges, and a cutting mat.

John's first designs were of Bamburgh Castle and Holy Island and were exhibited in the Gate Gallery in Alnwick, where you can still find his work. 'I've been cutting for 21 years and I've cut tens of thousands of pictures (it's difficult to tell how many, but it is probably well over 50,000) and so the change in style has been slow but sure. I still have my very first papercut and you wouldn't know it was of Dunstanburgh Castle if I didn't tell you! I put one of my first pictures next to Rooks, one of my finest papercuts, the other day and got a real shock at how much my cutting had developed. I guess it's just like getting older. When I started papercutting I looked young. Now I don't. I didn't notice that change happening either!'

Perhaps surprisingly, he has never experimented with using scissors to create his work, which he admits is strange as most of the world's papercutters use scissors. 'I suppose it's because at the time I started I didn't know about any other cutters, so I went to Newcastle and looked for a tool that I thought might work. The scalpel looked right. When I tried it I decided to stick with it. This seems to be in my nature.' John has literally suffered for his art. 'A scalpel is potentially very dangerous, and I have had some rather nasty job-related injuries – I put the scalpel right through my finger once. I should have chosen scissors!'

For his subject matter, John takes inspiration from the world around him. 'I live in rural Northumberland so I'm spoilt for wonderful views. I particularly like woodlands and the coast but I don't have a favourite view as such. There is one element that I'm particularly fond of though: I love to watch seagulls soar. They probably aren't the most popular bird from a birdspotter's point of view, but I think their long white wings and the way they fly is majestic. Their movement is something that I doubt I could capture properly in a silhouette papercut, but one design I intend to have a go at is seagulls following a trawler. I've wanted to design this for many years but never seem to get round to it. Maybe the time has arrived!' From those first tourist-friendly views of coastal castles, his portfolio has expanded to include iconic views of the North East, such as Durham Cathedral and Castle, and the Angel of the North, as well as locations further afield – his sharp eye and scalpel has also produced a portrait of the Eiffel Tower. Other subjects include wildlife, trees, aircraft and even a range of sports. He tries to avoid looking at other artists' work, not wanting to be influenced by them. 'I want my work to be an expression of my ideas rather than a mishmash of other people's.'

Six years ago, John took a studio at Kirkharle Courtyard, a collection of arts and crafts studios and boutiques in a converted 18th century farm courtyard – the birthplace of landscape architect 'Capability' Brown. 'Up until that point, I had been attending craft fairs around the UK. In the later years I was doing 42 fairs a year from Aberdeen to Portsmouth, and of course I had to cut all the stock in between them. When I married several years ago it made sense to share a studio at Kirkharle with my wife who makes handmade jewellery (www.spiritofcolourjewellery.co.uk). Kirkharle attracts people from the whole of Northumberland and also holidaymakers from all over the world, so the one thing that is guaranteed is that I meet interesting people, and it's from these visitors and conversations that most of my ideas spring.'

It was conversations with two of his customers that led to a new direction in John's work. 'An artist from New York visited my Kirkharle studio. She enthused for quite a while about the detail in my work, and when she left, the very next customer told me she had seen finely detailed papercuts in Switzerland. There is a very long-standing papercutting tradition in Switzerland and I know the work can be exceptionally fine, but the conversation revealed that

the papercuts the customer had seen were produced as a hobby. She told me that the time they would take to produce would have made them too expensive for a business venture. This of course is true for anyone selling handmade rather than mass-produced products for a living: you have to charge per hour, so if you want to be inexpensive yet still make a living you have to also produce work quite quickly. When this customer had left and the two conversations were spinning in my mind, I suddenly realised that the constraints of having to produce my pictures in a limited time meant I had never produced my best work. In fact, I didn't even know what my best work was! I knew that when I came to the end of my career I would regret not doing my best, so I decided that in my spare time I would create a range of pictures that pushed me to produce the best work that I could. My only rule was that I had to use my normal scalpel and set squares. So far I have produced four designs, the latest one of which is Rooks. I still have 15 years to go, so who knows what will happen...'

'My idea for Rooks was birds flying out of a tree and I knew that in the centre of Bamburgh there are trees with rooks' nests, so there was a good chance if I visited I would be able to get some good photographs. I always use photographs as source material because I want to produce accurately detailed papercuts. Papercutters usually produce patterns or folk art style papercuts but I've always wanted to do my own thing and I like accuracy, so I start by taking a lot of photographs.' He explains the process of creating the piece, 'My first drawing for the design was one tree with a lot of rooks, but it didn't look right, so I erased rooks one by one until it looked a bit more balanced. When I was happy with the final design I traced it. The tracing is my original drawing which I then print on the white side of my paper. Having cut the design out, I then tint watercolour paper with acrylic ink in the appropriate colour. In the case of Rooks I used grey ink. Finally I glue the papercut to the tinted watercolour paper. Rooks was started in October 2010 and the first cutting was finished in February 2011, but of course it was done in my spare time. In the Finest range I cut a maximum of ten pictures in each design.' The combination of the simplicity of the plain black silhouette, coupled with the complex fine detail of John's intricate papercutting, makes for a striking and beautiful artform. As the simpler designs in his portfolio are all made using the same techniques, each offers the opportunity to own a truly original piece. 'With my papercuts, you get exactly the same quality whether you're buying a large piece or a small piece. All the materials used are exactly the same. The only difference is that a lot more time has been spent cutting out the Finest picture and so it is more detailed.'

'With just a few skilful cuts, John suggests shadowy branches, cutting out the spaces rather than the outlines in a twist on the traditional silhouette'

Although John is modest about his work, it's clear that the medium takes great skill to achieve a deceptively simple effect. Many of his works are cut in one piece, with the exception of the birds, and with no shading, he has had to develop design principles that are quite different to many other media. 'The design has to hold together, but in silhouette you need to keep the pieces apart, and you need to lead the eye around the picture.' For example, Edge of the Forest shows two deer glimpsed through the trees, and much of the paper is black. With just a few skilful cuts, John suggests shadowy branches, cutting out the spaces rather than the outlines in a twist on the traditional silhouette. His grandfather and uncle would surely be proud that John is continuing the tradition of papercutting, and developing a centuries-old craft in a new and beautiful way.

John Speight, 1 The Stone Barn, Kirkharle Courtyard, Newcastle 01830 540428, www.silhouettedesigns.co.uk shop open Wednesday to Sunday only

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