

Folk Arts Center of New England

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The "Some Other Folk Arts" (SOFA) Series

The Art of Jewish Papercutting with
Rachel Asarnow

Thursday, December 14, 2023

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Starter Paper Cutting Materials List

Dick Blick, Jerry's Artarama & calligraphy supply stores are great sources for supplies.

Cutting & Writing

- Fiskars Padded Exacto Knife
- Box of #11 exacto blades. I buy 100. I don't have a favorite brand.
- Self healing cutting mat
- Pencil (#2 is fine. Dark, hard leads are also good),
- sharpener,
- kneaded & white eraser
- Ruler

Paper

- For finished projects: Arches Hot Press 90 lb or other similar weight, hot press, acid free cotton paper.
- For practice: computer paper, other cheaper paper
- Carbon paper- You can buy it in sheets, but I prefer it in rolls. Dick Blick is a source.
- Pads of tracing paper

Tape

- Acid free artist's masking tape to tape tracing paper onto art as you trace

Jewish Papercutting Books (both are out of print):

- Papercutting: Reviving a Jewish Folk Art Paperback – Goldenberg
- Traditional Jewish Papercuts: An Inner World of Art and Symbol by Joseph Shadur

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Jewish Papercutting Tips - Rachel Asarnow rachel.asarnow@gmail.com

Make Copies- Xerox pages from books of old papercuts and blow them up as large as you can on a printer- maybe even just a smaller section- then practice cutting them out. You can also download images of papercuts from online. Keep in mind that if you make a copy of another artist's work you can't sell it.

Start Simple- You probably admire more complex pieces, but keep your early designs simple. Larger and simpler negative spaces and simpler drawings. Over time you can add more complexity.

Tracing- you can trace images from photos. Blow them up or shrink them down on a copy machine if you need to to get the size right, or draw them freehand.

Border- Draw a rectangle within your paper. The outside of it will be the border. You can do this first, or figure out the center image first, then add on a border. Your border may need a border around it's edge to make sure it doesn't fall apart.

Design Tips- Every point should ideally connect to one other point. You can break this rule at times, but if you do in too many spots your piece will become weak and more likely to fall apart or tear. Circles are harder to cut. You might try turning smaller circles into diamonds or squares when you're starting out, or drawing them in instead of cutting them out of your piece.

Sketching- I purchase large sheets of watercolor paper and make my sketches on tracing paper, adding and subtracting bits of tracing paper as necessary, using clear removeable tape. Once this is completed, I tape the top of the tracing paper using white or blue removeable artist's tape, onto the watercolor paper and tabletop, and then slip a piece of transfer paper in between the two. The chalky part of the transfer paper should be facing down. Trace over all your lines with a pencil. Make sure to keep it sharp. Once you're done, you can remove the tracing paper & transfer paper. Use a pencil and eraser to fix any messy lines or smudges, and to add in any things you may have missed. Now you are ready to cut.

Cutting-

Safety- cut to the side of the hand holding your paper down, not towards it. Take breaks- set an alarm if you need to, but every ½ hour to 40 minutes certainly, make sure to get up, stretch, shake your hands out, get a drink, etc. You should also change your exacto blades periodically, about every 45 minutes, to prevent dullness. Remember to put the top back on your blade when you put it down, to avoid injury. Blade disposal- put them in a box or stick them into something like a piece of corrugated cardboard as you go. You can also use masking tape and roll it around each successive blade. Do not throw them into the trash individually.

Round & curved shapes- turn your paper as you cut. If you turn your exacto knife blade you'll break the point.

Squares and triangles- cut from the point. Take your blade out at each corner and adjust the paper's angle.

If a piece of paper that you cut out is stuck by a little piece of paper, go back with your blade & cut that corner again. Do not just pull it. Either your piece will look a bit messy or it will tear.

Cut from the center out. Cut larger areas out first, then details.

Fixing mistakes- cut a little "bandaid" of scrap paper out. Put a dab of acid free tacky glue onto a piece of scrap paper, then glue it behind your mistake, holding the papers together that were cut apart. Once dry, cut any excess from the edges. Put a piece of wax paper behind as you make the repair so you don't get glue on your cutting mat.

Lettering- this is complex and really needs its own lessons. If you don't know calligraphy you can buy instructional books and blow up or shrink lettering to size using a copier, then trace the outline. Keep in mind that if you plan to cut out lettering you may need to alter it in order to keep the piece together. For example you might draw a line through a section of a letter. Look at examples of papercuts to get ideas. Also, it's important to think about whether you want your letters to be positive space, or negative space.

Finishing and Painting-

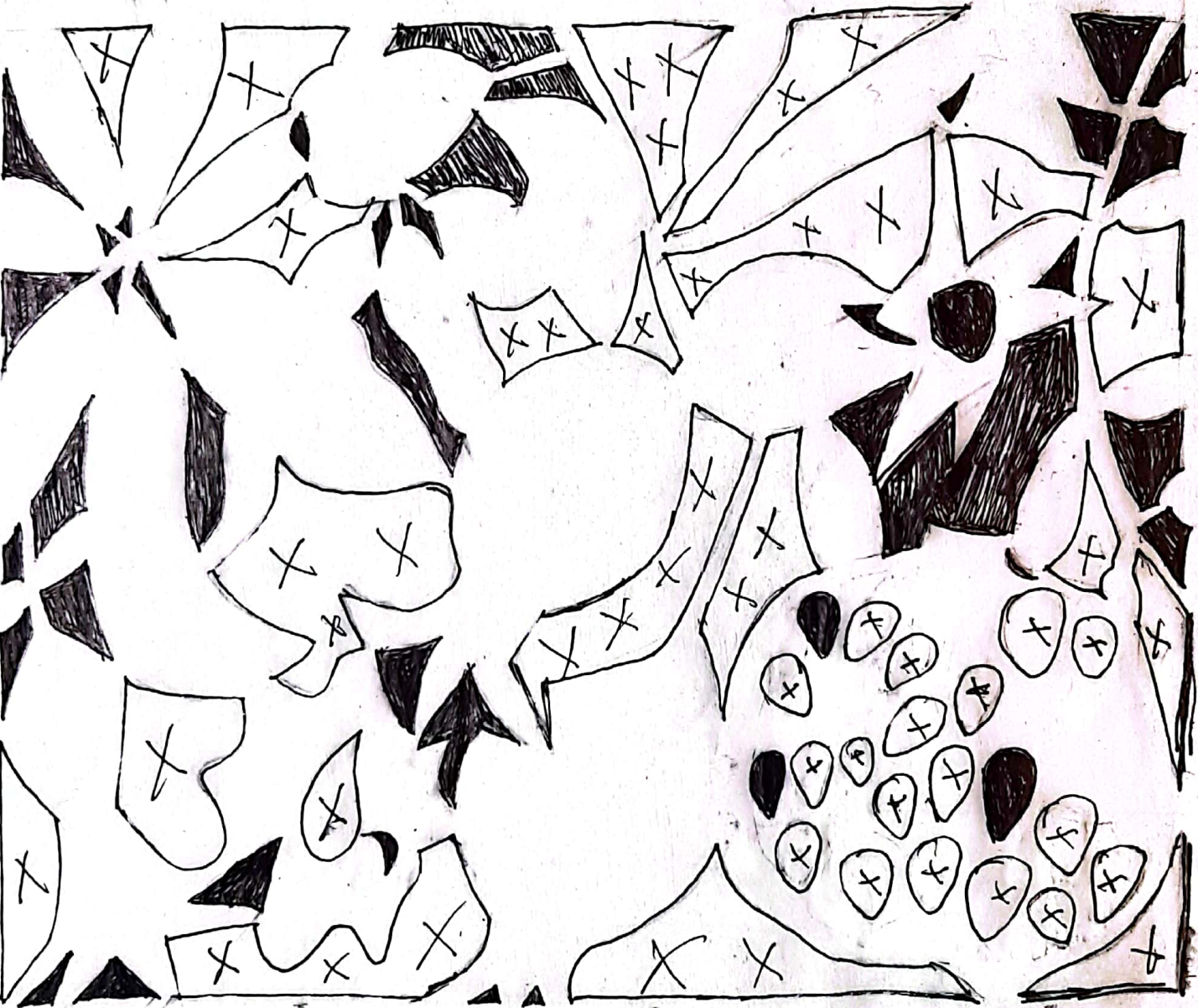
Important—If you plan on painting your piece it's easier to "block" or "stretch" the watercolor paper before you trace your drawing onto it. We are not learning about that process together, but you can google. This is to prevent the paper from buckling when you paint it. You'd block it, then untape it from that surface, as you need to put a cutting mat behind your paper. You can just tape your paper down on a table with wide painter's tape, brush water on, remove it with a paper towel, then let dry. You might need to do a section of the paper over again. It takes a while to get the hang of the process.

Tape the edges of your paper down onto a surface.

Traditionally these pieces often had a light tan/ brown/ yellow ink wash, and then sections were colored over that, using watercolors. Details might be added in using waterproof drawing ink and calligraphy pen. You could also try markers with tiny points, colored pencils, or gel pens if they're waterproof. There might also be religious or superstitious inscriptions, or the artist's signature. Feel free to experiment with other paints as well.

Backing- you can paint your backing paper and then it will become a more active part of your piece. You can also chose a plain color or black and white piece of paper to put behind it. Finally, there are foil papers to play around with and glue behind all or part of your piece.

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