



Back issues of and single articles published in *New York Folklore Quarterly*, *New York Folklore*, and *Voices* are available for purchase. Check the tables of contents for availability and titles. To request an article for purchase, contact us at info@nyfolklore.org. Please be aware that some issues are sold out, but most articles are still available.

Copyright of NEW YORK FOLKLORE. Further reproduction prohibited without permission of copyright holder. This PDF or any part of its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv or website without the copyright holder's express permission. Users may print or download article for individual use.

NEW YORK FOLKLORE
129 Jay Street
Schenectady, NY 12305
518/346-7008
Fax 518/346-6617
Email: info@nyfolklore.org
<http://www.nyfolklore.org>

Polish Papercutting:

Can a 19th-Century Folk Art Be Re-envisioned for the 21st Century?

BY BARBARA FRACKIEWICZ

Most certainly! What is Polish papercutting? *Wycinanki*¹ (vih-chee-NAHN-kee) is a traditional folk art, made by, and for, a community. It evolved in the mid-19th century, most distinctly in the Łowicz (WHOA-veech) region, 50 miles west of Warsaw. Folk artists created stars, ribbons, and thematic scenes to joyfully brighten their surroundings. These vibrantly colored, layered paper cutouts decorated whitewashed interior cottage walls and wooden ceiling beams. I saw these during a 1993 ethnographic tour of Poland at a *skansen* (SKAN-sen), an outdoor museum, in the town of Łowicz. The preserved cottages offered a sampling of old rural architecture, utilitarian implements, and the decorative arts. The classic folk art motifs of flowers, roosters, and other birds came from an era before electricity, the camera, the car, and the corner store. Each *wycinanka* was handcrafted. It was a unique expression of the folk artist's creativity. Often, it reflected traditional, regional characteristics.

Łowicz village life in the 19th century was vividly portrayed by Polish novelist Władysław Reymont in his 1924 Nobel Prize-winning *Chłopi* [The Peasants]. The narrative was set within the year's seasonal cycle of Church feast day celebrations. Jagna, the main character, was the village's most talented *wycinanki* artist. Her life, and metaphorically Polish culture and heritage, ended tragically, as

she was beaten and permanently crippled. The book was written at the end of an era, when European ethnographers had worked against the tide of the culturally destructive Industrial Age.

In the 20th century, foreign occupations, modernization, urbanization, and two world wars swept through Poland. *Wycinanki* survived by way of the souvenir market. Artists, independently, or in folk art collectives, created *wycinanki* for city dwellers and tourists, who framed them under glass. Ethnographic museums sponsored competitions. The art form also developed many branches. University of Warsaw students of Jastrzębowski's design classes, in the late 1940s London and New York City, pioneered elaborate, three-dimensional, paper-crafted storefront displays for top retailers. These inspired the 1960s and 1970s paper craft books of Pauline Johnson, and others. The momentum is visible in today's scrapbooking trends and in the diverse and elaborate paper arts of gallery spaces worldwide. In Poland, artists have often utilized the *wycinanki* modality for graphic design, book illustration, and theater set design.

Much of the following is excerpted from a 1924 book titled *The Methodological Teaching of Wycinanki* [*Metodyczne nauczanie wycinanki*], which I have translated and paraphrased. The author, Henryk Policht, self-published his instructor's manual in Krakow, and began:

To those who would wish to fulfill their task excellently, I wish to point out a way with this tome.... Teaching in a free, unstructured way does not meet the needs of students. Generally, only a few individuals develop somewhat, while a greater majority of children cannot keep up, and they become discouraged with their work. If the teaching of handcrafts, and so then the teaching of *wycinanki*, is to be useful for all the children, it must be structured. The systematic way should evolve from easy to complex projects and should develop the talents and abilities of the individual youth. Only this approach toward a task can be called teaching. A nonstructured, non-systematic approach offends and discourages both the instructor and student. (Policht 1924, 5)

Policht's first section, titled "The Goals of Educational Instruction" began:

The system of teaching up to this time has taxed the child's memory, but has not nurtured and expanded intellectual and physical capabilities. The student, instead of independently acquiring knowledge experientially, that is, grasping it directly from the main source of learning, nature and the general surroundings, has received ready, researched material. The memorized knowledge (dates, facts, formulas, and rules) were acquisitions that the student found meaningless. [The student] could not adapt these in a practical way, and faced with the challenges of life,



Cottages at a *skansen*, an outdoor museum, in Łowicz, Poland, 1993. Photo by Barbara Frackiewicz.

became helpless. A person's life is a series of riddles (puzzles or enigmas), which must be unraveled with one's wit and experience. The child, essentially from the first moments of their existence, has the abilities to observe and study nature and life's manifestations, in other words, the abilities to acquire information experientially. This is similar to how people acquire work experience. So, the school's obligation should be a rational, progressive continuation of such knowledge acquisition. What the student acquires experientially will last a lifetime. (Policht 1924, 7)

Years ago, I discovered Policht's book at the nearby Villa Maria College Library. Major sections include: Distinctive Features of Design; About Color; Formation of an Aesthetic Sense; and *Wycinanki* Techniques. Diagrams fill 135 of the 230 pages. Designs are not divided into

Poland's regional styles. Weekly projects are suggested for the first through seventh grades. Policht was an instructor at the State Teacher's School of Education in Krakow. His philosophies and *wycinanki* teaching methods are startlingly lucid. I copied the book for personal reference, since it was otherwise unavailable then and long out of print. Policht also copublished an instructor's drawing manual for the seventh grade. He is not widely known in Poland, now.

The next paragraphs here are an amalgamation of Policht's writings.

Wycinanki exhibit a beauty of rhythm, symmetry, and harmony of color. On the intellectual side, *wycinanki* can awaken the creative talents, fire the imagination, and help form an aesthetic sense. It is the creative imagination that synthesizes new forms. "Newness delights the eye with its unfamiliarity.... This newness is an

elevated and necessary factor in a person's psychic life, because it is a necessity for the soul" (Policht 1924, 12). "The result of correct systematic instruction is an ever growing love for tactile/physical work and a respect for it" (Policht 1924, 10). "If young people learn to value and love their own work, then they will be able to respect the work of others" (Policht 1924, 207).

Policht recommends a direct approach, a "drawing with scissors," à la Matisse, surely. The technique: open the scissors wide before cutting. No special tools are required; neither is lots of time needed to create a design. It is appropriate for a small child's hands. Scissors are available in most homes. Only *wycinanki* fulfills all the requirements for a truly accessible handcraft. Skill development starts with folding, creasing, and cutting. There is counting, geometry, and use of a ruler.

Policht emphasized that “certain vocabulary should be regularly repeated during lessons: symmetry, symmetrical, and axis of symmetry” (Policht 1924, 122). And so, these concepts can be learned experientially, rather than just cognitively through word descriptions.

Policht believed that it is best to initially teach children basic forms that are known to them. Yet, the teaching of *wycinanki* should not be based exclusively on patterns, which stifle the creative instincts and self-expression. Through the senses, we acquire an impression of the objects around us in the real world. We see their movement, shape, color, size; we feel their weight, texture, etc. Our sensory observations can be accurate or not, and our efforts to more fully know these objects is essential and natural. These sensory perceptions are made more real and more accurate with a visual and tactile observational method. Policht believed that it is our duty as educators to be concerned with the refinement of these sensory skills. There are practical reasons. Abilities evolve for observational skills, for working independently, for experiencing workflow, and for perseverance through the technical difficulties of finishing the task. I would add: and for release of expressive energies. The development of precise observational skills transfers directly to work in the sciences, such as chemistry and physics, and to work in the manufacturing industries. I would add here: and to work in the skilled trades.

Policht described many *wycinanki* projects to engage students. There are Christmas tree ornaments (miniature baskets, boxes, geometric solids, and crystalline forms), each decorated with *wycinanki*. Today’s advanced students of geometric solids could be directed to James Sawyer’s 2014 tome, *De Revolution VII: Encyclopedia of Six Dimensions*, Volume 1, which mathematically and dimensionally redefines atomic and crystalline structures along many axes of symmetry (Sawyer 2014). Returning to regular classroom applications for *wycinanki*, there are:

paper curtains; stencils for posters, calendars, and pamphlet design; embroidery and rubber stamp design; book cover design; book illustration; and *découpage* for wooden boxes, bought or constructed. Silhouettes may include nature’s forms: fruit, flowers, mushrooms, birds, or animals, cut from a non-fraying fabric and glued, sewn, or appliquéd onto a background. These are exercises to internalize the forms, to remember them, and to feel their beauty. Silhouettes of people can bring familiarity to shape, movement, and proportion.

I’ve developed a classroom activity: the making of a Łowicz flower design to decorate a card (see sidebar, “A Polish Paper Cutout by Barbara Frackiewicz”). Here, I would like to make suggestions and observations. A lesson might include an introduction to artist copyright law. A lesson could be connected to the language arts, if a message were written inside, and an envelope addressed. The long lost art of a pen pal friendship, local or worldwide, could be revived. Such correspondence activities would concentrate and direct thoughts, and teach patience and penmanship. This would also delight the United States Postal Service and restore philately. A child requires abundant exposure to natural wavelengths of light, and a strong palette of colors (found in nature and in *wycinanki*), for proper physiological development. Alas, today’s young people rarely venture outdoors, overdo screen time, and even develop early myopia.

From experience, I’ve learned the following about teaching a *wycinanki* class. It can end with an “instant gallery,” whereby participants display their artwork on one table to share their fun. A project can be a *wycinanki* classroom mural on any subject. A papercutting activity is not readily suitable for the outdoors, due to unforeseen conditions of wind, rain, and humidity. Time constraints usually limit *wycinanki* activities. For example, a one-time, 40-minute art period hardly allows for a background presentation, a demonstration of a hands-on project by the

artist, the completion of the project by the students, a clean-up, and a sharing activity.

There are many related topics for classroom consideration. In the 19th century, paper was scarce and precious. In the 20th century, paper became ubiquitous, and then, often just trash. In the 21st century, the enormous harvesting of forests and tree plantations for paper pulp is increasing and worrisome. Yet, there is plentiful paper for making *wycinanki* everywhere: old notebooks, newspapers, and magazines. What is the history of papermaking? Printing? Papercutting? Stencil design?

What is the history of sacred and secular knowledge transfer via papyri and paper media? A worldwide tour to answer these questions could start in Egypt, China, the Middle East, Europe, Mexico, Japan, or Indonesia.

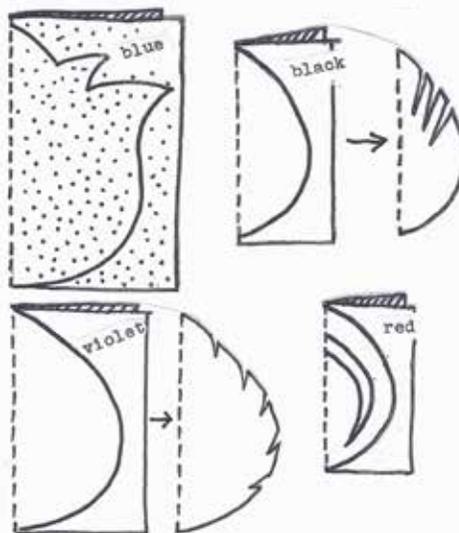
To summarize, in today’s terms, this would be cross-curriculum and cross-cultural learning, and even systems thinking. A caution: Internet searches yield myriad examples of the paper arts, but not all paper cutouts are sorted, tagged, or described properly. Your librarian will be happy to help you find books about this art form.

Crystallographers, computer scientists, artists of all kinds, quilters, mosaic designers, architects, and mathematicians study patterns and symmetry. I believe that all STEAM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math] subjects could be taught with *wycinanki* lessons. A successful artistic parallel is the Japanese national art of *origami*. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has hosted Japan’s *origami* experts at the graduate student level to help evolve engineering applications such as satellite solar panel design.

For me, *wycinanki* have helped nourish a sense of rootedness in my Polish culture and heritage. Today, when school budgets are crunched, art instruction disappears. Policht has offered a path to an accessible art form, taught in a methodological way. The art form easily allows a deep dive into the conscious/

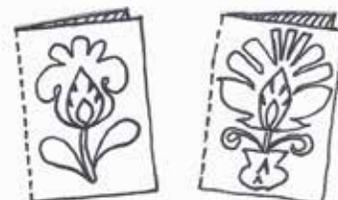
unconscious creative wellspring. My proposal: teacher education could include a comprehensive background, and lessons, for teaching *wycinanki* in elementary and high school classrooms.

Lastly, I offer this addendum: excerpts from Charlotte C. Acer's marvelously researched book, *Psychic Rape in the Classroom: How Our No-Arts Curriculum Augments the Urban Crisis, Volume 1*. "[T]oken aesthetic adventures may be lost on students whose families have not prepared them for observation, concentration, extended attention spans, or a variety of books, music, art materials or other activities that could defer their allegiance to Media Madness" (Acer 2005, 24). Acer defines Media Madness as the '3 V's' of "vice, violence and vulgarity" that promote short attention spans and encourage street crime and irresponsible sex. "The main reason for hands-on arts for young at-risk children is ... its ability to facilitate joy, feelings of success, and physiological comforts that could counteract students' troubled lives and help them see the world beyond their limited environs. Better test scores are a bonus" (Acer 2005, 22). "In a democratic society, the school's task is to 'turn on' students at their own individual talent-levels by offering a variety of activities that develop in them a desire to inquire, research, analyze, introspect and reflect, to encourage in them self-expression and creativity that leads into an appetite for knowledge (Acer 2005, 115). "Harvard's Graduate School of Education reported [... in 2005] that teachers who have 'come into the system in the last 15 to 20 years' may not understand the intrinsic value of arts in EC [Early Childhood]—**because of their own lack of knowledge of arts, and of arts exclusion in graduate studies for teacher education**" (Acer 2005, 100). "I hope to convince policy makers and the public that removal of activities which benefit each child's mind, body and spirit...adds to our country's acceleration of juvenile crime by restricting imaginative and kinesthetic activities that could release students' media-inspired negative



POLAND

Wycinanki (vih-chee-NAHN-kee) is the Polish folk art of papercutting. This is a card decorated with a flower in the Lowicz style. Needed: scissors, colorful papers, pencil, glue, and stiff white background paper for the card. Vocabulary: symmetry, symmetrical, and axis of symmetry. Notes: Cut out all your shapes first, including a stem. Glue the stem onto the card. Then glue the other paper shapes in layers. Try your own designs!



A Polish Paper Cutout by Barbara Frackiewicz

energies into joyful, legitimate...activities for mind and body" (Acer 2005, vi). ▼

Note:

1. The Polish word, *wycinać* (vih-CHEE-nutch) means to cut out; *wycinanka* (vih-chee-NAHN-kah) is one cutout, and *wycinanki* (vih-chee-NAHN-kee) is more than one cutout; hence, the name of the traditional folk art of Polish papercutting is *wycinanki*.

References

Acer, Charlotte C. 2005. *Psychic Rape in the Classroom: How Our No-Arts Curriculum Augments the Urban Crisis*, Vol. 1. Buffalo, NY: OCELS Publishing.

Policht, Henryk Michał. 1924. *Metodyczne nauczanie wycinanki*. Kraków: self-published.

Sawyer, James G. 2014. *De Revolution VII: Encyclopedia of Six Dimensions*, Vol. 1. Buffalo, NY: Six Dimensions Design.

Barbara Frackiewicz has taught *wycinanki* classes at the Polish Community Center of Buffalo, the Castellani Art Museum, Young Audiences of Western New York, and other venues. For six years, she wrote a weekly, illustrated column about Polish culture, including *wycinanki*, for the *Am-Pol Eagle* newspaper. Her parents and aunt, displaced from Poland during the Second World War, deeply cherished and passed along their cultural heritage.

Join or Renew your New York Folklore Membership to Receive *Voices* and other Member Benefits

For the General Public

Voices is a peer-reviewed scholarly journal, published twice annually. Join New York Folklore and become part of a community that will deepen your involvement with folklore, folklife, the traditional arts, and contemporary culture. As a member, you'll have early notice of Gallery special exhibits and NYF-sponsored key events. Members receive a discount on NYF Gallery items.

For Artists and Professionals

Become a member and learn about technical assistance programs that will get you the help you may need in your work:

Mentoring and Professional Development
Folk Artists Self-Management Project
Folk Archives Project
Consulting and Referral
Advocacy
A Public Voice

Membership Levels

Individual

\$ 50.00	Basic Membership
\$100.00	Harold W. Thompson Circle
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Organizations/Institutions

\$ 75.00	Subscriber
\$100.00	Partner
\$150.00	Edith Cutting Folklore in Education

Please add \$20.00 for non-US addresses.

For payment, choose the option that works best for you:

Use our website, www.nyfolklore.org

or mail a check to us at 129 Jay St., Schenectady NY 12305;

or call the NYF business office, 518-346-7008, to pay with a credit card over the phone.