

# Scherenschnitte & Papercuts

## Traditional vs. “spooky folk” : An exhibition by Waltraude Stehwien and Jessica Richter

Sabine Doebel-Atchison / Summer Postillion 2019

Scherenschnitte is a unique art form that has been around for centuries in different forms in various parts of the world. In Europe the art form already gained popularity in the 17th century. Immigrants introduced it to North America. Initially, the silhouettes, or shadow portraits were very common and helped scissor cuts or paper cuts gain popularity. Over time it became more complex and included various other components. One thing that didn't change and that is essential to a scissor cut is that there are no unattached pieces. The entire scissor cut consists of one continuous piece of paper. At a later time, some varieties of layering and adding color developed. The exhibition Jessica Richter and Waltraude Stehwien: Scissor Cuts/ Scherenschnitte combines traditional and more contemporary works.

Since February 2019 the exhibition has been touring the province and is scheduled to make 20 stops in total. If you haven't had a chance to visit it, there is no need to worry. The scissor cuts and paper cuts will be on display throughout the province until early 2022 (Please check SGC or OSAC websites for dates and locations).

The contrast between the works of the two featured artists provides room for interpretation and discussion. A total of 21 art pieces are on display - 10 by Waltraude Stehwien and 11 by Jessica Richter. The exhibition is a partnership between the Organization of Saskatchewan Art Councils (OSAC) and the Saskatchewan German Council (SGC) and was initiated by SGC executive director Gabi Harrison.

Many Postillion readers know Waltraude Stehwien and her scissor cuts. After all, her scissor cuts were on the Postillion cover for many years until autumn 2013 and even today, with the little “Postillion man” on the cover, a piece of her work is part of every issue.



Waltraude Stehwien studied art in Halle, Germany, after the Second World War. In 1968 Waltraude immigrated to Canada where she settled in Saskatoon and raised her family with her late husband Fritz Stehwien, an artist himself. She had already begun creating scissor cuts as a teenager and today, at age 88, has accumulated an innumerable amount of scissor cuts in various formats. The reoccurring themes of her scissor cuts are cultural traditions, fairy tales, as well as the Canadian prairies. Examples of all three themes are represented in the exhibition. While the finished scissor cuts may all be unique in the end, they all started out with just a piece of black paper and a pair of scissors - Waltraude Stehwien is very specific about the scissors she uses - and the artist's creativity. About her style, Waltraude says: “I love the traditional form of scissor cutting. I force myself to stick to black and white. That's my challenge. However, I think it's also good when younger artists experiment with scissor cutting in other ways.” Asked, what her opinion is on the combination of scissor cuts/ paper cuts by a traditional and a contemporary artist in one exhibition, she responds that she liked the idea from the first time it was proposed. “To combine the works of two artists from different generations that have a more or less similar background, is very interesting.”

*When that ‘wow’ feeling that I get from being in the prairies is reflected back to me when I look at my finished artwork, then I consider it successful.*

Waltraude Stehwien

Waltraude Stehwien considers the exhibition a form of acknowledgement of her artwork and is so far very pleased with the outcome. She has visited two of the exhibitions so far and hopes to see a few more that are not too far away from Saskatoon. Shellbrook impressed her the most to this point as she really liked the setup and feeling she got from the exhibition. Each community will likely be a little different as the various venues provide a unique setting each time. From her experience in providing scissor cutting workshops in smaller communities throughout the province, Waltraude



and then began to evolve into something more sculptural as I explored it more!" Different from Stehwen, Richter uses an Xacto knife instead of scissors, which is also why she refers to her art as papercutting instead of scissor cutting. Asked, why she prefers a knife over scissors, Richter states: "I've actually always hated using scissors, even when I was a kid! I hated that with scissors, I felt you couldn't draw and had to follow lines and was always the kid in class who hated any art projects that had lots of cutting things out. I like that with an Xacto knife, it's like drawing. And I can also use heavier materials to create my sculptural pieces."

In her work Jessica Richter says she "[...] explores the complexities that can be a part of being German-Canadian, in particular when you have grandparents who immigrated from Germany after WWII." One of the pieces in the exhibition that has a special meaning to her is "Many Evils Have I Endured". She believes that "[...] it is important to talk about those experiences, and the experiences of people like my family. My grandparents survived unimaginable things, and sometimes I'm amazed at how they not only survived the Second World War, they then immigrated here and thrived here. So, a lot of my work is a love letter to them and this piece in particular is."

Stehwen knows that there is a high level of appreciation for exhibitions such as this one in those communities.

In contrast to Waltraude Stehwen's traditional approach to scissor cutting, the exhibition also shows paper cuts by Jessica Richter, who in her own words describes her style as "spooky folk". She says: "I tend to favor simple colors (red, yellow, black, white), bold outlines, and more otherworldly imagery. [...] I would describe my work as inspired by the traditional forms of papercutting – I'm inspired by the folk traditions behind it, especially as it's been primarily women who work with it but I've adapted it to fit more with my own personality and style of working."

*I love pushing the boundaries of what a medium can do and combining them all together.*  
 Jessica Richter

This exhibition by Jessica Richter and Waltraude Stehwen is definitely worth a visit, whether you are familiar with the art form or not yet. And maybe it will even spark an interest in you in trying to create scissor cuts or paper cuts. According to Waltraude Stehwen "...training your eyes to see black and white is essential. The most important thing is to be able to determine which parts should be black and which parts should be white, to correctly see what stays and what goes. It should be noted that both the white and the black areas are important. It always depends on what you want to express. There is no other art form which uses the contrast between black and white in this way."

Jessica Richter is a printmaker, drawer, sculptor, and paper cutter from Regina. As for papercutting, she says she started it only [...] "about three or four years ago during graduate school, for my MFA. I had entered school with ideas about exploring and embracing my German roots and family history after feeling shame over it for so long. When researching traditional German folk art, I came across papercutting. The visual style really meshed well with stenciling techniques used to create an image negative in silk screening, so my papercutting started with using it as a tool to do silk-screen prints



- PHOTOS**
1. Waltraude Stehwen (photo by Andy Dinnendahl)
  2. Waltraude Stehwen with her granddaughter Amanda in front of her art work in one of the exhibitions (photo by Anette Stehwen)
  3. I belong to winter by Jessica Richter (photo by OSAC, Instagram #osac2018)
  4. Jessica Richter working on one of her current projects "[...] a site-specific installation in an abandoned house [...] where she is [...] using papercutting and silk-screening on a larger level, turning them into sculptures that are part of a larger story within the house. " (photo provided by Jessica Richter)
  5. Set up of the exhibition in Moosomin (photo by Barbara Stehwen)