

# A Cut Above The Rest

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*Special to The Bulletin*

In the gatehouse of the Glen Foerd mansion in the Torresdale section of Philadelphia lives a tiny white-haired woman who talks to horseflies and holds whistling contests with mockingbirds.

The "outside world" passing through the 17-acre estate knows the white-haired woman simply as Mrs. Luther, the mansion guide. Visitors are charmed by her Old World discourse on the treasure trove of lithographs, paintings, sculpture, rare books, antiques, china and crystal in the mansion. But few are aware of Margaretha vonGlehn Luther's special relationship with the world of nature.

"Some people think I'm a biologist. Others call me an eccentric," says Margaretha, who is, in fact, a special kind of artist. She stoops to pluck a handful of wild grasses and



Bulletin Special Photo by Jill Kohles

## Guide Margaretha vonGlehn Luther.

extends her arm to study its composition.

"I don't know why it is, but the exotic plants and art objects here at Glen Foerd never seem to catch my eye. It is always the ordinary, the

commonplace, that I choose for my subjects."

Her eyes follow a flash of white tailfeathers. When the bird alights on a nearby branch, Margaretha

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Bulletin Special Photo by Jill Kohles

The Glen Foerd estate in Torresdale, Pa., is a treasure-trove of art and rare antiques.

# Magic At Her Fingertips

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whistles a Mozart theme and the mockingbird responds with a torrent of trills. Margaretha concedes musical defeat and holds out a reward to the songster. "Please help yourself to a raisin, Amadeus," she says formally. The bird accepts without hesitation.

"Perhaps I am eccentric," Margaretha muses. "But I talk to my subjects for a reason. I want to put them at ease, get to know them intimately. How else can I set them down properly on paper?"

"Setting them down" is a procedure quite out of the ordinary, because Margaretha vonGlehn uses neither paint nor brush. Her only tools are black paper and a pair of tiny scissors.

Technically, Miss vonGlehn is a silhouette artist. But her work is quite unclassifiable, for there is simply no word for what she can do with scissors.

"Silhouettes are categorized into two types," she explains. "The most common, of course, is portraiture. Anyone with a steady hand and an artistic bent can learn to cut a good silhouette portrait by tracing a profile shadow cast by light. Or it may be done freehand, as mine are.

"Then there is *scherenschnitte*." The German word rolls off her tongue with ease; Miss vonGlehn is fluent in four languages. *Scherenschnitte* is a decoratively designed silhouette cut freehand," she says. "The effect is very light, very lacy."

Miss vonGlehn's art is a cut above both categories. She plies her scissors in interior cutting so intricate that her finished work is usually mistaken for pen-and-ink drawings or silhouettes with white-paint overlay. In addition, she is the only silhouette artist in the world who has achieved a three-dimensional effect by sandwiching rice paper between layers of green or gray cutwork and black outline form.

"The interior cutting is what distinguishes my art from *scherenschnitte*," she explains. "I begin in the center of the paper, using scissors made by a German surgical instrument company to fit my fingers exactly. When I am finished, my lap will be full of thousands of tiny paper scraps."



The delicate lines of Jerome the horsefly are captured on paper.

Miss vonGlehn loves to tell about the day she saw her first silhouette. "I was 12 years old, and living in Germany because the Bolsheviks had driven us out of Estonia," she says. "On my way to a piano lesson, I stopped before a window displaying all sorts of art. In the center was a silhouette.

"I stood there on the sidewalk, and when I realized what it was, I was utterly transfixed by it. Then I turned and ran all the way home, the piano lesson completely forgotten. I didn't even bother to take off my coat; I went immediately to the desk for scissors and paper."

It seems significant that the first silhouette she cut on that day 55 years ago was a winged boy-creature, a little elf. To this very day, there is a fairy tale quality about her life as well as her art.

Forced to flee across Europe during two world wars, Margaretha clung to her most cherished possessions — her two little boys and her tiny scissors — until at last she found freedom in Gluecksburg, close to the border of Denmark. The emblem of this northern German town was an 11th-Century

castle where the Danish royalty resided. Margaretha found work in an art studio in Gluecksburg while she waited for word from her husband, who had been separated from her at the start of the war.

"The princesses who lived in the castle were bored to death," Margaretha remembers. "They visited the studio often. One day the crown princess bought a little madonna I had cut, and soon after that, other members of royalty asked me to do some silhouettes for them."

Today, Margaretha vonGlehn's silhouettes grace the splendid walls of the palace of the King of Denmark. In Rome, her favorite silhouette of St. Francis has a place of honor in the Franciscan headquarters. The president of the Hans Christian Andersen Society owns her silhouette of "The Nightingale."

Her work is valued by many private collectors in America. Philadelphia architect Lawrence Pollilo has hung the entrance hall of his Villanova home entirely in Miss vonGlehn's silhouettes.