

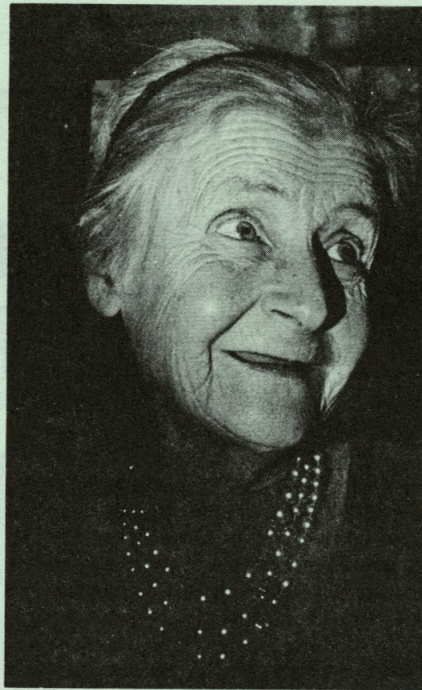
1911

A Special Kind of Artist

Using scissors, she turns scraps of black paper into intricate silhouettes of religious scenes

MARGARETHA: A special kind of artist

By Bonnie Dalzell



Margaretha von Glehn Luther

She is just a wisp of a woman, and visitors to the Lutheran Center for Education and the Arts at Glen Foerd in Philadelphia sometimes scarcely notice her. But Margaretha von Glehn Luther, the mansion's guide, is one of the rarest of the myriad treasures in the Victorian home that was bequeathed to the Lutheran Church in America in 1967.

Working without pay, Margaretha conducts as many as 60 tours a month in spring and summer when Glen Foerd is at its loveliest. People attending conferences, meetings and retreats delight in her Old World discourse on the awesome collections of etchings, paintings, sculpture, rare Bibles, china and crystal in the mansion. Garden-club visitors admire her flower arrangements, made chiefly from rare varieties of roses cultivated and cared for by her husband Fred who, with just one helper, tends the gardens in the 17-acre estate.

In the winter, however, when tours are fewer, Margaretha turns to her life's love and work, begun more than half a century ago in Europe. Margaretha von Glehn Luther is a very special kind of artist. She uses neither paint nor brush, but with tiny scissors and a scrap of black paper she creates art silhouettes of such delicate intricacy that her work is often mistaken for pen-and-ink drawings.

In her cozy sitting room in the Glen Foerd gatehouse, Margaretha plies her scissors with imperceptible snipping motions as she tells about

the role that the church has played in her life. It is a wonderful story—a fairy-tale, handsome-prince, happily-ever-after story. Margaretha unfolds it as magically as the shape of Noah's Ark that is forming on the paper in her hands.

"A Madonna was my original inspiration," she begins. Her eyes travel to a graceful unframed silhouette of a Madonna wreathed in stars which stands on the mantle. "A Madonna something like that one, which I have made for Pastor Hackenberg of Trinity Lutheran Church in Havertown. It was Pastor Hackenberg's best friend, Pastor Frederick Otto, who brought Fred and me to America.

"But wait," she says; "I am ahead of my story. We must begin with the Bolsheviks."

In 1917, when the Russian czar was murdered, the von Glehn family was forced to flee its native Estonia. Margaretha's father placed her in the care of a German farmer who promised to tutor and care for her until the danger had passed.

"One day when I was about 12 years old I was on my way to a piano

lesson," Margaretha recalls. "I passed a store window displaying all sorts of art objects. In the very center was a Madonna, stark and beautiful in black and white. I stood there for a long time, looking at it.

"When I realized that the Madonna was not a drawing but was cut from paper, I was utterly transfixed. Never before had I seen a silhouette. Never had I even imagined that such a thing could be done.

"Finally I turned, the piano lesson completely forgotten, and I ran all the way home."

Not even stopping to remove her hat and coat, Margaretha seized a pair of embroidery scissors and some paper. She began to cut. "I know what I am going to do," she told herself happily. "I know what I must be."

From that moment on, Margaretha was rarely without her scissors as she worked to perfect her art. Through all the perils of the two world wars, Margaretha von Glehn Luther crisscrossed Europe with her most precious possessions—her two little boys and her scissors.

Her husband Fred, whose uncle was a descendant of Martin Luther, was separated from her for many years, compelled to serve as a Russian interpreter. There were times when Margaretha thought she would never see him again. But one wonderful day he strode into the tiny town of Gluecksburg in the northernmost tip of Germany. He was free from the prison camp. He was home to stay.

In Gluecksburg, in the shadow of an old castle dating back to the

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eleventh century, Margaretha and Fred worked together in an art studio. She cut silhouettes for the princesses of Mecklenburg and for the Danish royalty who left their castle to visit her. Fascinated, they watched as Margaretha's scissors cut perfect likenesses in profile.

Fred worked hard at carpentry and carving. But both feared there would not be enough money to properly educate their sons Lars and Holger.

"We wanted very much to come to America," Margaretha explains. "But at first, only skilled laborers were permitted. Then President Eisenhower expanded the immigration laws to include people of art and culture, and Pastor Otto came to Germany from Fremont, Ohio, as a representative of the Lutheran Church in America. I shall never forget the day he came to interview me."

When Otto first saw Margaretha's silhouettes, he didn't believe she had cut them. "No one could make such pictures with scissors," he declared. Later, convinced of Margaretha's unique talent, Otto arranged to sponsor the Luthers' trip to America. Then he asked Margaretha to cut a crucifix for his church.

The crucifix was the first of many silhouettes that Margaretha cut for Otto. And through the vehicle of the Chantry Music Press in Springfield, Ohio, knowledge of her work began to spread in America. Otto asked her to make art silhouettes that could be reproduced on the covers of sheet music published by Chantry. American composer Edward Beebe was so



inspired by the crucifix silhouette that he wrote a new church anthem and dedicated it to Margaretha.

As a token of appreciation for all that Otto had done for her, Margaretha made a silhouette triptych of the Christmas story. Soon Chantry was selling reproductions of the beautiful piece. Chantry also published Christmas cards of Margaretha's silhouettes.

Recently, Otto's friend, Pastor Willard I. Hackenberg, has become Margaretha's best church patron.

"You see what it says here about the artist?" Hackenberg notes eagerly, pointing to the fine print on the back of a card. "It says that Margaretha is 'a great contemporary master of this difficult scissors art.' Well, I'd say she's the greatest!"

There are many who would agree. Margaretha von Glehn Luther's silhouettes hang in the King of Denmark's palace and in the Franciscan headquarters in Rome. The president of the Hans Christian Andersen Society owns her pictorial version of "The Nightingale." Margaretha's church, Holy Communion on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia, displays yet another of her talents—ancient lettering with illuminated capitals on parchment—created in memory of Florence Tonner who owned Glen Foerd.

As important to her as all the accolades and awards, however, are the invitations from Pastor W. Carter Merbreier, star of the "Captain Noah" children's television program broadcast daily in the Philadelphia area. Margaretha always brings along her scissors. And when she sits down to cut a picture and make up a story about it, you may be sure that, like her own life story, it will end "and they lived happily ever after." ■

