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Antique art

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The Paper Cut Artistry of Margarethe von Glehn Luther is now on display at Glen Foerd.



MARIA POUCHNIKOVA / TIMES PHOTOS

Shear beauty: An old photograph of Margarethe von Glehn Luther sits by a box of scissors at Glen Foerd on the Delaware. About a dozen of her paper cuttings are included in a new exhibition, which coincides with the historical site's Christmas festivities.

The paper cuttings range in size from several inches to almost two feet. During her process, the cut paper typically curled, so Luther mounted the finished pieces to rice paper, bone or fabric, using toothpicks to flatten the paper and paint brushes to apply glue.

Using little more than paper scraps and tiny embroidery scissors, Margarethe von Glehn Luther elevated craftwork into an art form.

From her childhood in Estonia, through her time in post-war Germany and even after her move to the United States in the 1950s, the onetime Glen Foerd on the Delaware resident pursued her unconventional calling — cutting intricate designs from odds and ends of paper.

Luther commonly depicted Christian themes in those silhouettes, along with mystical creatures and botanical scenes. About a dozen of her paper cuttings are included in a new exhibition at Glen Foerd that coincides with the historical site's Christmas festivities. The presentation is called *Shear Beauty: The Paper Cut Artistry of Margarethe von Glehn Luther*.

“This was an artist who is associated with Glen Foerd because she lived here and worked here, but few people know about her really,” said Meg Sharp Walton, the executive director of Glen Foerd. “This may be the first public exhibition of her work.”

The riverfront estate is owned by the city and managed by a nonprofit conservation corporation. The holiday exhibition and weekend public tours will continue until Dec. 21, after which the site will be closed to the public through March.

The paper cuttings on display range in size from several inches to almost two feet. As a devout member of the Lutheran church, the artist depicted Biblical scenes and figures, particularly those involving the Christmas story, in many of the works. In fact, an image of the Madonna inspired her as a child to undertake what became a lifelong passion.



Born in 1909 in Estonia, a Baltic state that was then under control of the Russian Empire, Margarethe was about 12 years old and walking to a piano lesson when she passed a shop, peered into the window and saw a Madonna silhouette. She stopped and examined the striking figure before racing home and cutting a fairy using the aforementioned embroidery scissors and paper.

She continued to hone her skill throughout her youth. Eventually, she

married a fine wood carver named Ferdinand Luther. After World War II, the couple opened a craft shop in northern Germany.

Margarethe gained a following for her paper cuttings among members of the Danish royal family and prominent members of the Lutheran church. In the 1950s, she moved to the United States with her husband and two sons and worked at a public library, where she shared her creations with the young visitors.

When the last private owner of Glen Foerd, Florence Foederer Tonner, passed away in the early 1970s, the estate became a Lutheran retreat and the church hired the Luthers as resident caretakers. From 1970 to 1978, Ferdinand was the gardener while Margarethe guided visitors and catalogued Tonner's extensive art collection. Margarethe continued to create her own art as well.

Margarethe passed away in 2001.

While researching the mansion's historical gardens, Walton found among the mansion's archives a mythical story written by Margarethe. Walton learned of the paper cutting as well as Luther's other decorative art projects, including an illuminated (illustrated in paint) manuscript of the Christmas story from the King James Bible, along with hand-painted wooden ornaments that depict scenes from Grimm's Fairy Tales.

Walton contacted the family of Luther's eldest son, Lars, who donated items from the family's private collection for the exhibition.

"They have an amazing collection of her work," Walton said of the Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, residents.

One of Luther's paper cuttings was in Tonner's collection and is a permanent part of the estate's collection.

Paper cutting was not a new art form in Luther's time. In fact, historians have dated it as early as sixth-century China. The art spread throughout Asia and later Europe and the Americas.

But Luther developed her own techniques and style. Few if any paper artists have been known to employ the tiny embroidery scissors that Luther used throughout her lifetime. Though not designed for the task, the scissors allowed the artist to make millimeter-precise cuts.

"It's kind of crazy that someone with scissors could cut something so intricate," Walton said.



As for paper, Luther mostly used blueprint stock while in Europe. Later, she employed shelf liner because of its thinness, as well as the foiled paper from cigarette packs.

"She was very resourceful," Walton said.

During her process, the cut paper typically curled, so Luther mounted the finished pieces to rice paper, bone or fabric, using toothpicks to flatten the paper and paint brushes to apply glue.

"Other people did this. It was not uncommon," Walton said. "But it was unusual that she did it to such a high level."

Admission to the exhibition is free and open to the public. On Saturday, Dec. 6, the public is invited to the annual Christmas at the Mansion from 1 to 6 p.m. There will be musical and ballet performances by Settlement

Music School's Kardon-Northeast Branch and by Nazareth Academy Grade School's Chime Ensemble. Santa will visit during a 5 p.m. tree-lighting. Admission costs \$5. Glen Foerd is at Grant Avenue and Milnor Street.

Visit www.glenfoerd.org for information. ••

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