**Papel Picado**

_Papel Picado_ literally means “punched” or “perforated” paper. This traditional cut paper folk art is found throughout Mexico and the former colonies of Spain, as well as in the folk traditions of many other countries.

In Mexico the art has reached the pinnacle of expression. Papel picado can be found at every major holiday in the form of brightly colored cut tissue paper banners strung under the portals of homes and across the narrow streets of colonial villages. Banners of papel picado are charming announcements bearing messages on topics both sacred and profane. They are found at all celebrations such as baptisms, weddings, and funerals. They are also present at all national holidays such as the Day of the Dead, the feast day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, Christmas, and Independence Day.

The materials of papel picado are ephemeral. Papel picado banners will disintegrate in less than a month if left out in the sun, wind, and rain. Therefore, few historic examples of this folk art exist.

The Mexican art of paper-cutting is a marvelous synthesis of European, Asian, and Pre-Columbian artistic traditions. For 500 years the arts of paper-making and paper-cutting were confined to China. Historical writings name Ts’ai Lun, a Chinese court official, as the inventor of paper in AD 105. Paper-making and cutting made its way to Japan around 610 and Central Asia by 750. The Moors, who occupied Spain from 714 to 1492, traded with faraway China. The Moors introduced paper-making and paper-cutting to the Iberian Peninsula, establishing a paper-making mill in 1150. In observance of the religious law against graven images Islamic paper-cutting was primarily based on geometric and calligraphic expressions of scripture.
In the centuries that followed the flowering of Islamic culture in Spain, both paper-making and paper-cutting spread to the rest of Europe. In Germany it became known as scherenschnitte, in Poland as wycinanki, and in France as silhouettes.

When the Spanish arrived in Mexico there was already a tradition of paper making called amatl in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. The Native peoples of Mexico produced a type of paper by mashing the pulp of the bark from fig and mulberry trees between rocks. Once dry, the paper was cut with knives made from obsidian. The paper cuts made from amatl were primarily of a ceremonial nature and included images of the numerous Aztec gods and goddesses, a practice that was discouraged by their Christian conquerors. Among the Spanish, the word amatl became amate. Today amate continues to be used in Mexico, where one can occasionally find copies of codices and books, as well as reproductions of the ancient deities, made from the paper.

The Spanish introduced their culture, language, religion, tools, and designs to Mexico, all of which had an impact on the production of papel picado. Additional cultural exchanges between the Americas and Asia occurred during the sixteenth century. The galleons of Manila traveled the routes between China, the Philippines, and Acapulco, Mexico, with their exotic cargos of silk textiles and leather trunks. Among the precious trade goods was a very fine paper called papel de China (Chinese paper) that was used to wrap the fragile porcelains which made their way as far north as the Española Valley in what is now New Mexico. This paper, which oftentimes bore the stenciled designs for ceramics or embroideries, was used for various types of crafts including papel picado banners. Although the methods and tools have not changed much, papel picado continues to evolve as a living folk tradition in Mexico.

Much of the papel picado available in today’s folk art market comes from the village of San Salvador Huixcolotla, Puebla, which lies southeast of Mexico City. The tradition of paper-cutting is preserved in the talleres, small family workshops of two rival artisans’ families, the Vivancos and the Rojas, who maintain a spirit of fierce competition and pride in the art.
MOTIVATION

- Show students examples of Mexican papel picado (artifacts, photos or slides).
- Discuss the history of paper cutting in Mexico. Discuss how paper and paper-cutting designs have Native and foreign origins.
- Explain that you are going to make papel picado banners. Ask the following questions: What materials are used in making papel picado? For which holidays are papel picado banners created? What kind of designs would you like to use?

PROCEDURE

Making Papel Picado Using Scissors

1. Place your tissue paper in front of you so that the longest side is at the top. From the top of the paper fold down approximately one inch and form a crease. This first fold is called the “string fold”. The string will be glued inside this fold when you are finished cutting the paper. You must always remember to keep this fold in sight so as not to cut through it.

2. Turn your tissue paper over so that the “string fold” is facing down on the table. Bring the upper left edge over to the upper right edge and fold the paper in half forming a crease down the center.
3. Repeat the process of folding the paper in half lengthwise two more times, aligning and creasing the edges each time you fold.

4. Cut notches along side edge (A) and bottom edge (B) being certain to leave space between the cuts. For best control over the materials, sit up straight with the paper and scissors at eye level and rotate the paper rather than the scissors. It is advisable to provide small children with round-tip scissors.

5. Unfold the paper once to expose the side edges (C) and cut notches along this edge. Repeat this process with each of the side edges remembering to not cut through the “string fold”.

6. When you have finished cutting all your notches carefully unfold the banner leaving the “string edge” folded. Repeat steps 1 through 6 until you have 5 – 6 small banners cut from tissue.

7. Once you have completed your cutouts you will then glue them to a piece of string. Lay your cut outs face down on a table in the order that you would like them to hang. Make certain that the “string fold” is facing up. Measure and cut the string so that it is about 4 feet longer than the length of your paper banners. The best method is to stretch your string leaving a foot or more of spare string hanging down on both sides. Take your glue stick and carefully swipe it down both sides of the interior of the “string fold”. Holding both edges of the “string fold” place the cut paper over the string so that it fits in the crease. Using your thumb and forefinger run your hand down both sides of the crease so that the paper adheres to itself. Repeat this process with each of your cutouts leaving a space of about 2–3 inches between each sheet of paper. Think about color combinations and contrast as you hang each sheet.