

Astonishing sculptures made from nothing but plain paper

 edition.cnn.com/style/article/astonishing-sculptures-made-from-nothing-but-paper/index.html

Jake Wallis Simons, for CNN

August 29,
2014

Written by **Jake Wallis Simons**, for CNN

Airplanes. Hats. Boats. Maybe fortune-tellers. For most of us, that summarizes the extent of our paper sculpting repertoire. But a new generation of artists is tearing up the rulebook when it comes to what paper can be made to do.

Foremost among them is Li Hongbo, the Chinese artist who has become an internet sensation. Videos of his sculptures -- which can be pulled apart and replaced, creating uncanny effects -- have been viewed millions of times online.

"I make a big stack of paper, and stick each sheet to the ones above and below it with thin lines of glue," he says.

"Then I carve the block of paper using a chisel, as if it was wood. When the sculpture is finished, you can manipulate it and it creates some extraordinary illusions."

Paper is one of the most ancient man-made materials in the world. The oldest known fragments date to the 2nd Century BC, and were found in China.

It is fitting, perhaps, that the foremost innovator of paper sculpture hails from the Middle Kingdom.

But the trend is a global one, with artists from the United States, Russia, South Africa, Brazil and Germany all committing themselves to working with the material.

What lies behind this new trend for sculpting paper? CNN talks to three leading paper artists to find out.

Li Hongbo, 39, Beijing, China

"My obsession with paper started by accident. I had no money at art school, and paper was cheap and easy to find.

But it didn't take me long to realize that paper presents huge possibilities that people don't normally consider, and I decided to try to put my own language into paper.

As a Chinese person, I played with paper toys very much as a child, and was surrounded by paper lanterns and other examples of origami.

I went on to study folk art, and did a lot of research into the Chinese tradition of paper art. I would go to markets and buy lots of paper decorations, to give me inspiration.

That's when I came up with the idea of combining paper with movement.

Paper is such an everyday, familiar material, that people don't think too much about it. Everywhere there is writing paper, packing paper, wrapping paper, even toilet paper.

So when you use it in a different sort of way, people are quite surprised.

It's such a basic material that they are astounded by the possibilities. It causes people to rethink daily things -- maybe we can have another perspective on the humble things in life."



No Ink: Schubert uses a secret technique to create his detailed images Credit: Courtesy of Simon Schubert

Simon Schubert, 38, Cologne, Germany

"The story of me and paper began when I was studying philosophy and literature, and I worked a lot on Samuel Beckett.

I was thinking about how he reduced language and took away as much as possible.

I decided to mirror this in visual art, and develop a drawing technique of taking away as much as possible but still making an image.

The first picture I made was a portrait of Beckett.

I took the wrinkles in his face and scored them into the paper with a metal tool.

This was drawing without ink.

That was how it began.

Paper is the simplest material around, and that quality attracted me.

As a sculptor I had previously made very large and complex pieces, using wood, steel, plaster, and all kinds of classical materials.

I felt that it was just getting bigger and more spectacular, and it was getting out of hand.

I didn't like the idea of going to an exhibition and finding that all the pieces were competing for your attention.

So I decided to go in another direction: being as simple and quiet as possible.

I use special, metal tools, but I have never revealed exactly which ones. It is a secret."



Lee uses only a paper and knife for her cut outs Credit: Courtesy of Bovey Lee

Bovey Lee, 38, Pennsylvania, USA

"I chose paper because it's the first material that I ever knew.

I used to practice a lot of calligraphy when I was 10, and working with paper evoked a sense of nostalgia for my childhood.

There's something very innocent about paper.

Everybody feels like they know it, and the more that people can relate to a material, the more successfully you can connect with your audience.

My work is very labor-intensive and time consuming.

I work with a knife and have to go slowly, as if I make a mistake there's no going back.

Most of my ideas are very intricate, and a single piece can take me anywhere from several weeks to several months.

The one that took the longest was Atomic Jellyfish, which took me four months.

When I started working with paper, I didn't know any other artists who were doing it.

But many more people are starting to get involved now.

There are paper artists in Switzerland, the USA, Japan, France, China, the Netherlands... paper is such an international and universal medium.

It crosses all cultural boundaries.

The overall message is that paper is not dead, despite all the digital tools we are using now.

People have a strong emotional attachment to paper, and we are celebrating this by using it in a creative way."