

# Paper Filigree

A Woman's Pastime Becomes Art

Joy Ruskin



**Garniture Set:** Garniture sets were used on mantels, and were generally made of porcelain or pottery (delftware). This set is completely covered in white filigree with colored and gold swags, and blue bases. The exposed wood is gilded. The central urn is 17" tall. This is the height of neo-classicism in paper filigree, dating from the late 18th century. Courtesy Florian Papp.



**In contrast to the Prisoner of War screen, p. 29, this one, done by a young lady c. 1790, is much more refined. It is on a white silk background and has a colored engraving of a mother and child. The elaborate frame and the delicate garlands of flowers add to its graceful feeling. Courtesy Florian Papp.**

As early as 1663, Samuel Pepys noted in his diary (on Thursday, 14 May) that “This day we received a basket from my sister Pall, made by her of paper, which hath a great deal of labour in it for country innocent work.” One hundred and fifty years later, in 1811, Jane Austen wrote in *Sense and Sensibility*, “I am glad,” said Lady Middleton to Lucy, ‘you are not going to finish poor little Anna-Maria’s basket this evening; for I am sure it must hurt your eyes to work filigree by candlelight.’ “Lucy insisted on continuing her paper filigree work so as not to disappoint the little girl, and “directly drew her work-table near her, and reseated herself with an alacrity and cheerfulness, which seemed to infer, that she could taste no greater delight than in making a filigree basket for a spoilt child.”

Quillwork, paper filigree, rolled paper, paper mosaic. These are some of the many terms that have been used to describe the art of rolling thin strips of paper into intricate designs which were used as decoration on tea caddies, fire screens, framed pictures, and small pieces of furniture. The inspiration for this work was gold and silver wire filigree. Paper cut into thin strips (about 1/8” wide) with gilded edges was an excellent imitation of this intricate art.

### History

The craft of paper filigree spanned centuries, and nations. The earliest known works were created by nuns, primarily on the continent. These were generally framed pieces with the filigree surrounding religious pictures or reliquaries. Many examples of religious paper filigree survive, most dating from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with



**Cribbage board with a lovely floral spray surrounded by crushed white glass. Courtesy Florian Papp.**



**Basket and close-up of date. This workbasket is dated 1789. Is it similar to the one Lucy made for the spoiled child? Courtesy Florian Papp.**



**This exquisite cabinet and stand is completely covered in paper filigree, with the exception of two oval silk panels on the doors which are painted with rural scenes. It is dated 1787, and stands 41" tall. Courtesy Florian Papp.**

religious prints at the center. Other early examples in England depict royal figures. Generally, the faces and hands were modeled of wax, and the surrounding paper work was dimensional and elaborate.

Most of the examples pictured here were made in England in the mid-to late eighteenth century into the early nineteenth, when such work was at the height of fashion. Diaries and other period references make it clear that paper filigree was taught to young ladies in schools as part of their "education." (It was also taught in American schools in Philadelphia, Boston and New York, but aside from some intricate sconces in a few museums, little is known about the craft in this country.)

The paper was generally purchased from a bookbinder, who would cut the paper to size and gild the edges. In many cases, the girls would dye the papers themselves. They would apply their rolled paper to boxes or screens or small cabinets specially prepared by a cabinetmaker, with recessed areas surrounded by pretty wood moldings which were often inlaid with exotic woods. They would often use a silk background, as can be seen on some of the items pictured. Other times, they would fill the backgrounds with mica, to create a glittery canvas on which to place their carefully-executed designs.

In 1791, at age 21, Princess Elizabeth, daughter of George III, worked on a box made especially for filigree work by Charles Elliott, a royal furniture maker. It had ebony molding, a lock and key, it was lined inside and out, and came with 15 ounces of filigree paper as well as an ounce of gold paper (obviously, for the Princess, the paper was pre-cut).

Boxes such as the Princess's were well constructed with the best materials, including special hinges and locks. But we often see humbler pieces, such as tea caddies, with ordinary hinges, no inlay to dress up the moldings, and a plain steel lock and key. These items were probably made by French prisoners of war in the British prison camps during the Napoleonic Wars. They tend to be a little cruder; that is, the paper might not be rolled as tightly, or the designs might not be quite as artistic. These works generally have the backgrounds filled in with tight coils of paper (although this technique was not exclusive to the prisoners).

## Technique

Today paper filigree is often called "quillwork" but the reason is uncertain. Some sources say that quills were used to roll the paper, but the tip of a quill is too thick for this to be accomplished with the refinement necessary. Others say that it refers to the Native American craft of embroidering with dyed porcupine quills. This makes more sense, but "quillwork" is still a confusing name for paper filigree.

As a restorer of paper filigree, I have used trial and error to determine the correct method for rolling the paper, and after reading some historical accounts describing the technique, I found that I am right on target!

The paper is rolled using a needle or a thin metal pin with a slit through the middle into which the end of the paper is inserted, and then rolled around. Today one can buy a board with various shapes on it (teardrop, different size circles and ovals, and ellipses), but I suspect that it was originally done by rolling the paper and then pinching it into the desired shape by hand before it was applied to the background. I actually prefer this method to using the board. The shaped paper was then pinned to the background after applying adhesive to the bottom, and left to set. Often borders included long strips of accordion-folded paper as filler between two straight strips. This accordion paper was also used extensively in many of the floral designs as filler in the leaves and stems. I have attempted to re-create this edging, and find it virtually impossible. Perhaps I don't have the eighteenth-century gift of patience, but it is more likely that some sort of miniature crimping device was used. When I saw a Victorian crimping machine, turned by a hand crank, used for cuffs and collars, I had an "Aha!" moment, and have since been looking everywhere for the miniature version which I am sure was used for this purpose.

## Paper filigree today

Two books on Georgian and Victorian crafts from the 1970s lament the demise of creating paper filigree decorations. However, when I began restoring boxes around 1990, many craft stores carried pre-cut paper strips in various lengths, as well as books describing how to make some basic designs. Since that time, it seems that paper filigree is everywhere. When I Googled "paper filigree" I got 148,000 hits, many

of which included references to “quillwork.” Today’s crafter uses the technique for wedding invitations or other special cards, picture frames, small boxes, and even jewelry.

A friend who travels to Vietnam every year with her professor husband often brings back some of the local crafts. This year she brought small round boxes covered with paper filigree! She had two other examples at home, which she allowed me to borrow and photograph for this article. The work is superb, and many of the designs (with the exception of the bamboo) could certainly have shown up in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. ■

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**References**

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Carson I. A. Ritchie, *Art in Paper*, A. S. Barnes and Company, NY, 1976.



Paper filigree picture. Girls often used the motif of a basket of flowers in needlework, watercolor theorems, and paper filigree. This folksy example is signed on the back, and reads, “Dun by Mrs. Spooner Yarmouth Aged 81 years.” Proof that ladylike crafts were not just for the young! Courtesy Florian Papp.



Four views of work box or writing box c. 1800, lined with pink paper. Courtesy Hanes & Ruskin.



This pole screen was probably made by a prisoner of war. Note the cruder work, and the way the background is completely filled in by loosely rolled papers. Also note the extensive use of accordion-folded, or crimped, paper. Courtesy Pook & Pook.



Religious picture, probably Italian, c. 1700, 26” x 22.” It features strong architectural elements with the central Madonna and Child beneath a coat of arms. The small niches under the columns most likely hold reliquaries. Courtesy Florian Papp.