

# PAPER CARVER

BY ROBIN JAY



# The amazing artistry of Canadian paper sculptor CALVIN NICHOLLS



Camping, hunting, hiking, canoeing, skiing and snowshoeing dominated Calvin Nicholls' life in Canada well into his 20s. His family camped for weeks every summer when he was a boy, the memories of which gave him a keen interest in observing the habits and behaviors of various forms of wildlife.

"I applied these skills at an advertising agency for a short time, but quickly ventured out on my own seeking the adventures I witnessed in the small businesses operated by my extended family while growing up," he said. "In 1983, I hired paper sculpture artist Jonathan Milne to add his unique flair to a menu design for a well-known Toronto restaurant. The project was a big success, and from that point, I could not resist the allure of the art form. It took me back to a class in art school in which we considered the possibilities of paper as a medium. Never expecting back then that paper would reach out to me again, I was hooked as I experimented with

"Building blinds in my bow-hunting days allowed close encounters with deer, foxes and a myriad of other animals that wandered under the tree stand or past the ground blind. Although proficient with the bow, I chose the camera when the big moments arose, opting to record the moment without realizing that these would become the reference for my future artwork," Calvin told *South Florida Opulence*.

## THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING A SCULPTOR OF PAPER

The graphic design program at Sheridan College in Oakville, Ontario, provided Calvin insights into balance and flow, positive and negative space and mostly of communicating.





Greater Bird of Paradise



tools and papers, eager to provide my own take on this technique and to offer it to my design clients."

Calvin said his portfolio evolved gradually, directing him to birds. "A corporate client requested an eagle-like bird, and as I cut my first feathers, images from my miles and miles of hiking the rural and forested areas around home as a boy rushed to mind. Soaring hawks, game birds, swallows that lined the hydro wires, and waterfowl exploding off the pond became potential subjects.

"The layering of feathers was such a natural fit for the art form and it felt good developing my own direction out of respect for the paper artists who came before me. It was this 'dove-tailing' of my interests in wildlife and the outdoors that propelled me into experimenting with feathers and, gradually, fur. Animals I was familiar with or fascinated by became easy subjects to get lost in as I spoke to biologists and sifted through my 35mm slide archives."

As Calvin gained confidence in his fine-art skill of paper sculpturing, he turned his attention in 1990 to testing interest in his work at art shows and galleries in the hope of creating another revenue stream to augment his design business.

"It flourished and my years of sketching, carving, model making and photography combined in what has become a most unexpected and satisfying art adventure," Calvin said.

**THE MAGIC BEHIND CALVIN'S PAPER ARTISTRY**

"People might be surprised that the development of the drawings and idea take as long or longer than the sculpture itself," Calvin explained. "Every sculpture begins the same way. An idea or inspiration in the field

or studio gets me out taking photographs and sketching. Discussions with photographers and biologists brings another level of understanding of species that I've observed for years or of those I have only seen in captivity or on video. Either way, I attempt to gain an understanding of the subject before any sketching begins.

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*The cutting and tooling process is indeed cathartic, but also very physical. I have accumulated a large collection of handles and blades to provide variety in the working position and grip. It's never tense really. I simply enjoy it and time d-i-s-a-p-p-e-a-r-s.*  
”

– Calvin Nicholls



Boreal Owl



Hedgehog





*WB4 Buffalo*

"I go to great lengths to finalize my drawings, which I trace so as to allow constant attention to the glued-down parts vs. the desired effect established in the final drawing. Understanding the form of every component and how to capture it in low-relief is a challenge. Often the sculpting process feels like – no, IS – the reward for all of the hard work done in preparing for each and every cut.

Simplifying the planes of the body is critical as I seek to facilitate paper as my medium. Complex curves are possible, but with limits, so planning the scores, folds, cuts and curls offer the best opportunity of a reasonable representation of my subject. Archival papers of varying thicknesses are used to depict flowing hair and structure while assuring generations of viewing due the inherent resistance to airborne acids that would discolor acidic everyday papers.

"Specifying paper for my graphic design projects over the years gave me an introduction to the finest mills in the world. Many of the papers I use now are handmade by artisans in Europe, Japan and North America.

"Detail decisions in the final drawings are kept close at hand as I cut and assemble the often tiny bits into a robust body-form that has established the topography of the piece. I catch myself every once in a while placing an individual hair with tweezers (something I vowed I would never do), but more often strands of hair are grouped where possible as the flow of the surface texture allows."

### **THE UNIQUE USE OF LIGHT**

Calvin continued, "Working in modeling lights, I watch the light play over the surface of the paper, and it's during this attempt at

harnessing the light that the necessary highlights and shadows are created. The two-dimensional result of my photographs comes after hours of lighting and test shots. I love watching the light play over the surface. It never ceases to amaze me how that subtle transition of highlight to shadow even such reduced overall depth can create such a powerful illusion of full form."

### **PRESERVING THE ART**

"This is an aspect that is most misunderstood," Calvin said. "The sculptures are incredibly strong. The thousands of glue joints combine for an overall strength that defies the perception of the base material. Many of the handmade papers I use are in fact almost impossible to rip. All possess archival qualities, first from being acid free due to the nature of the manufacturing process, and secondly from being resistant to airborne acids in everyday life."

### **THE REWARD**

"At play I tinker and create. Each and every connection that results from this art form enriches my life. I am so grateful for the doors that have opened for me and, thankfully, I had just enough confidence to walk through. As I learned so early in my journey, art communicates. To enjoy the process and to see it bring joy to others sometimes seems to be the greatest gift of all." ●

*To see more paper sculptures by Calvin Nicholls, visit [www.calvinnicholls.com](http://www.calvinnicholls.com)*



*Hummingbird*