2. Materials and design

Materials

Based on descriptions of paper-knives in English literature, illustrations in trade catalogues, and examples in price lists, the most common materials (apart from wood) appear to have been ivory, mother of pearl and silver. All three have the ability to be made smooth and thin but strong enough to be used to slit paper and card. Wooden paper-knives appear to have been made largely for souvenirs such as Mauchline ware, Tunbridge ware and Sorrento ware. Does this suggest that wooden paper-knives were at the lower end of the market and that silver, ivory and mother of pearl were considered more desirable?

Wood and stone

The origins of the use of paper-knives probably lie within the ancient history of monasteries and churches. Surely paper-knives would have been a commonly used item over many centuries. It's also possible that such paper-knives were made of simple materials such as wood or bone. There is an example of just such a humble wooden blade (age unknown) in the library of Winchester Cathedral in the South of England (fig. 2.1).

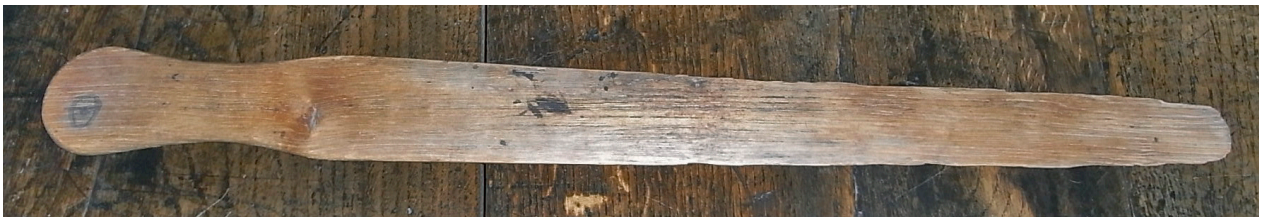


Fig. 2.1a. A simple wooden paper-knife from Winchester Cathedral, England. Possibly made by the church carpenter for the Library, this blade is almost 21 inches (53.2 cm) long and two inches (5.2 cm) wide.

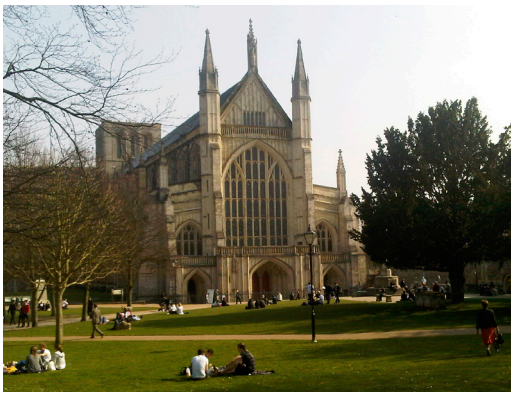
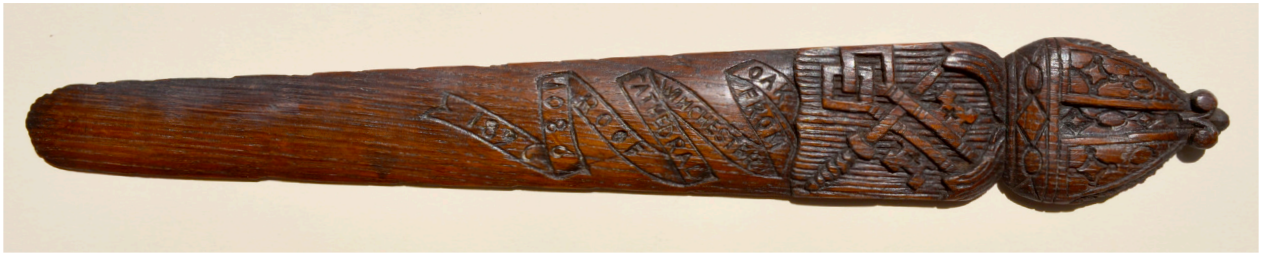
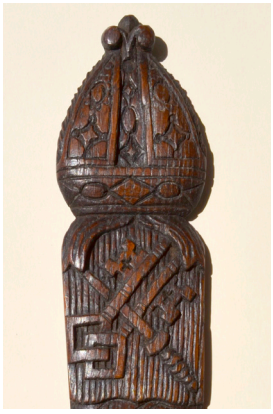


Fig. 2.1b. The entrance to the Church of England Winchester Cathedral.

The Church of England Winchester Cathedral was founded in the year 642. The current building (fig. 2.1b) is one of the largest cathedrals in England and has the longest overall length of any Gothic cathedral in Europe. The simple wooden knife in the library of Winchester Cathedral is made from a single sliver of wood, and in terms of design is nothing special. Some staff at the Cathedral suggest that it may have been made for the Winchester Cathedral Library by a local carpenter. Its age is unknown and it measures 21 inches (53 cm). There is no evidence to confirm that it was made for slitting folds of paper. However, it could certainly have done the task with ease.

Restoration of the roof of the Cathedral began in 1905 and some old oak timbers had to be replaced. The wood that was removed was put to good use by making souvenirs to raise money for the work. Items included paper-knives, and one example (fig. 2.2) has carved on it a fair representation of the Diocese of Winchester Coat of Arms, comprising a bishop's mitre above and two interlocking keys (representing St. Peter) and a sword (representing St. Paul) below. It is inscribed 1896. On the reverse is the inscription *Wm. Furneaux, Dean of Winchester 1903-1919*. Souvenir paper-knives from the old timbers of other cathedrals and churches include those from York Minster

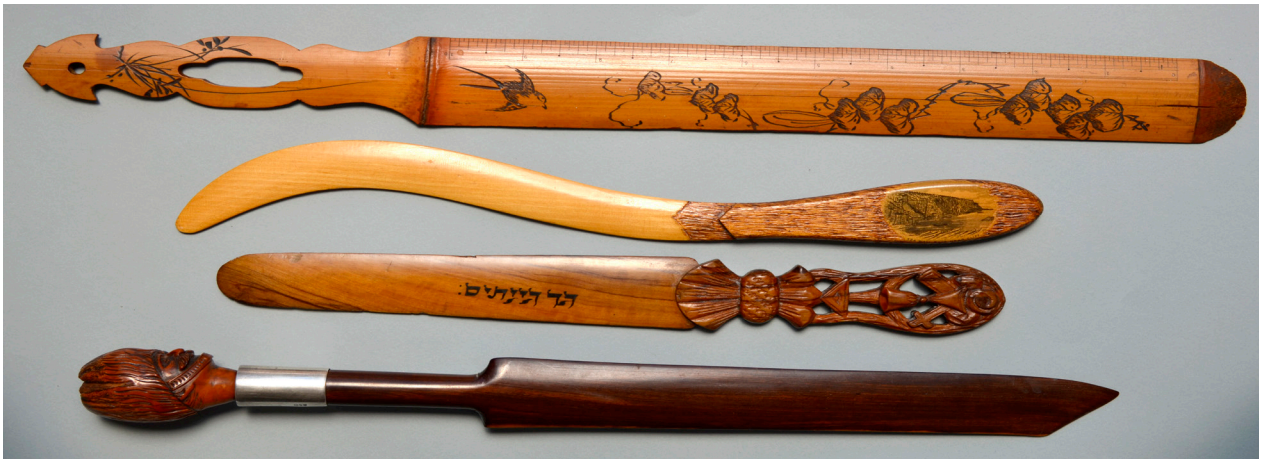




Right: Fig. 2.2a. Diocese of Winchester Coat of Arms; the likeness on a paper-knife.

Above: Fig. 2.2b. Wooden paper-knife from the timbers of Winchester Cathedral. Length 14 inches (34.5 cm).

Below: Fig. 2.3. Wooden paper-knives. From top to bottom: bamboo knife with a ruler; a curved (sickle shape) Mauchline ware paper-knife with poker work and transfer work; an olive wood paper-knife inscribed The Mount of Olives; a Samson Mordan paper-knife hallmarked 1881. The carved wooden soldier's head is a 'nut' or kernel from the Fibre Palm, native to Brazil, and the blade is walnut.



in England, and from Nelson Cathedral and St. Luke's Church (both in New Zealand).

Wooden paper-knives are not uncommon, and especially those made as Mauchline ware, Tunbridge ware, or Sorrento ware. It is interesting, however, that very few wooden examples appear in the trade catalogues. The Army and Navy Stores catalogue has one example made from 'whitewood'. Apart from olive wood and sycamore, there appears to be no particularly favoured wood used to make paper-knives. Olive, sycamore and pine seem to be the most commonly used woods for paper-knives. (fig. 2.3).

Stone would seem an unusual material to use for paper-knives, yet there are several examples in the collections of the Minnesota Historical Society. These are made of Dakota pipestone, or catlinite. This is a soft red rock considered sacred by many American Indian tribes. In Minnesota, the stone is protected and can be quarried only by American Indians at the Pipestone National Monument. A variety of objects have been made from it, including paper-knives, and this was largely for the tourist trade in 1880-1900. Most items in the Minnesota Historical Society collection are pipe bowls.

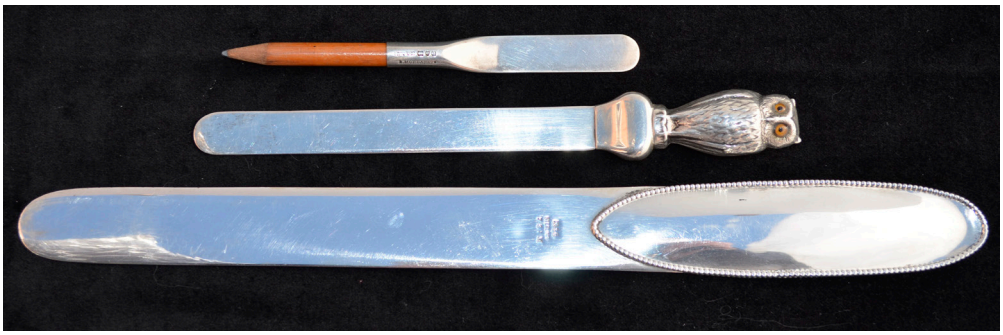


Fig. 2.4. Silver paper-knives. From top to bottom: Samson Mordan and Co., London, 1898 (3 inches, 7.5cm), excluding the pencil; Asprey, London, 1912 (7½ inches, 19cm); Gorham, USA, 1904 (12 inches, 30cm).

Metal

It is notable that the many paper-knives advertised in trade catalogues were made of silver (fig. 2.4). Although some are made entirely of silver, that metal seemed to have been the favoured material for the blade. Presumably this was because of the known smooth properties of silver. There is also the possibility that repeated use of the silver paper-knives helped to keep the blade relatively sharp. Some silver paper-knives must have been very fashionable, having been made by the well-respected firm of Samson Mordan and Co. and sold under the British luxury brand of Asprey. The same is true of Gorham sterling silver paper-knives made in the early 1900s. The sophisticated yet simple Gorham design shown here is most elegant. Gorham also made silver paper-knives with ornate handles.

Silver blades with handles made of other materials were not unusual. What may be unusual is the example (fig. 2.4) of a pencil top with a silver blade, which surely could only have been intended to be a very small paper-knife.

Other metals used to make paper-knives were, bronze, brass, copper, pewter and steel. A particularly beautiful example is the French bronze Art Deco paper-knife designed around 1928 by Lucien Bazor (1889-1974). He was the Chief Engraver at the Paris Mint from 1930-1958. It consists of a nude female holding a child. Bronze

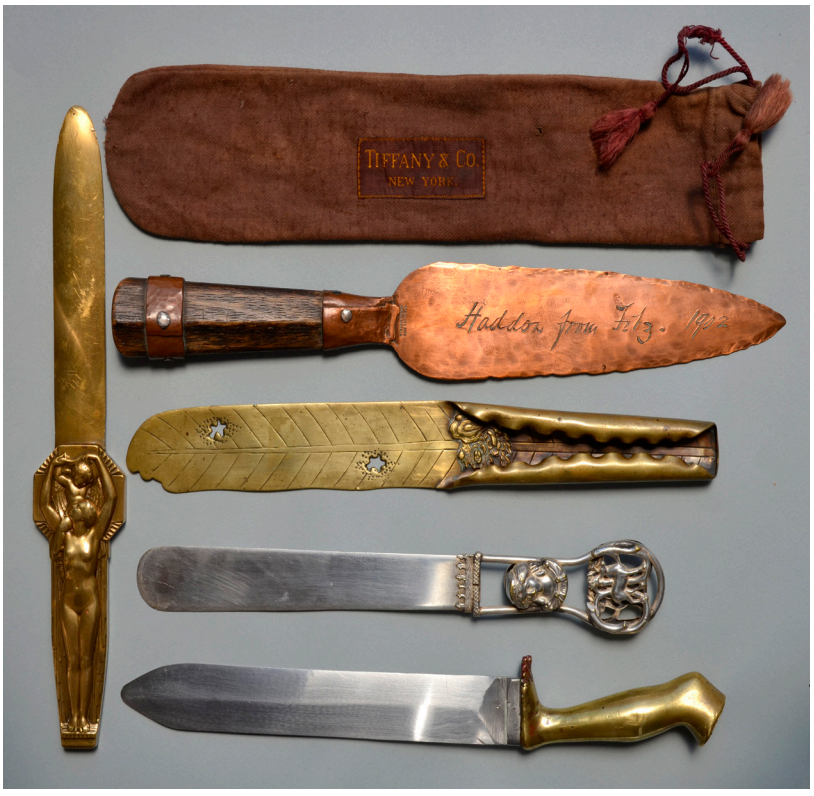


Fig. 2.5. Base metal paper-knives. Left: French bronze Art Deco paper-knife, signed Lucien Bazor (1889-1974), circa 1928. Top to bottom: Arts and Crafts copper paper-knife from Tiffany and Co., New York, inscribed 'Haddon from Fitz', 1902 (12 inches, 30.5 cm); brass paper-knife in the form of an aging leaf including holes made by insects; nickel blade with silver plated handle; steel blade with a brass handle in the form of a lady's leg.

and brass examples are not surprising but copper would seem to be an unusual choice (fig. 2.5). In the early 1900s, Tiffany (and Liberty) specialised in desk accessories and items targeted at businessmen and women. An example is the copper paper-knife (fig. 2.5). This would have been a product of the cottage industry and was made at the end of the Arts and Crafts movement. This was a movement that originated as a rebellion against machine-made goods. The sheath (bag) would possibly have been taken at the time from Tiffany's Jewellery Department.

Horn, ivory, bone and mother of pearl (nacre)

An extremely fine example of a horn paper-knife was made by the eminent French designer René Lalique (1860-1945), a master craftsman in glass design and a designer of jewellery and items for the office. This example was sold by Christie's in 2012 and dates from about 1906-1908. The Art Nouveau style depicts a realistically carved fish swimming among weeds. It is 20 inches long (51 cm) by 1⅞ inches (48 cm), and signed Lalique for René Lalique (fig. 2.6). It is described as a paper-knife (and is illustrated) in *The Jewels of Lalique* (p. 203), edited by Yvonne Brunhammer (1998).

Fig. 2.6. An Art Nouveau-style horn paper-knife by René Lalique. Image reproduced from *The Jewells of Lalique*, edited by Yvonne Brunhammer, and published in 1998 by Flammarion, Paris.

Trade catalogues illustrate many examples of ivory and bone paper-knives. Some are made entirely of ivory, while others have handles made of different material (fig. 2.7).

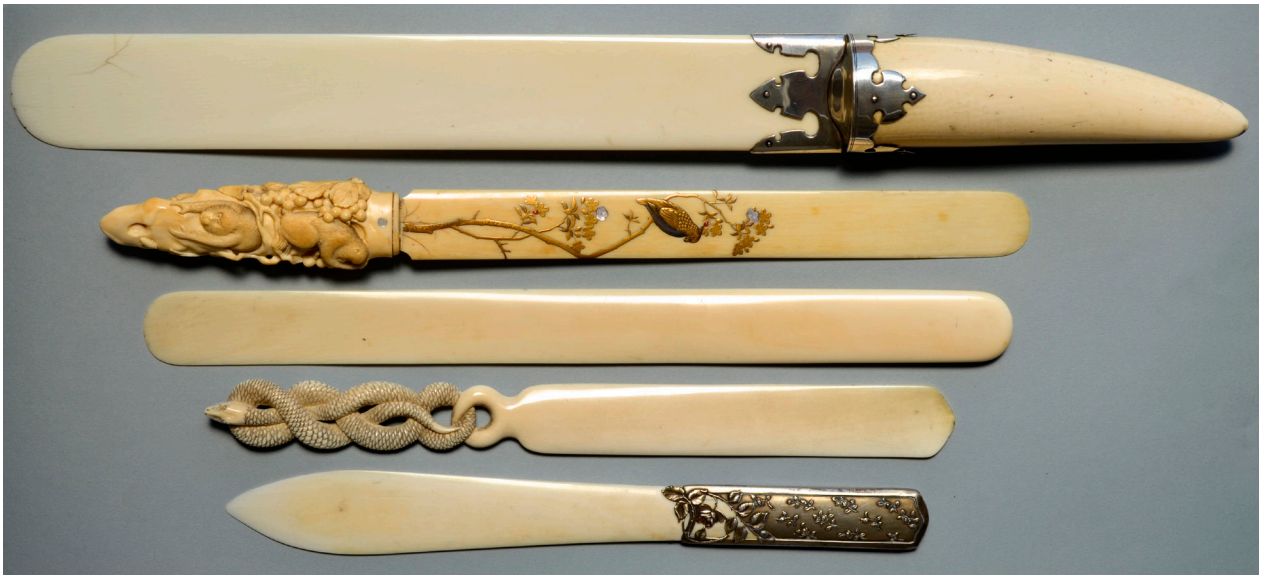


Fig. 2.7. From top to bottom: an ivory tusk paper-knife (1896), as advertised in the Army and Navy Stores Catalogues from around 1907 (21 inches, 54 cm); a Japanese ivory paper-knife, late 19th century, the handle carved with apes among grapevine on a rock and the blade gold-lacquered with trees inlaid with hard-stones in the Shibayama style; a plain ivory paper-knife (handle is on the right); paper-knife with a carved snake handle; an ivory paper-knife with an Art Nouveau-style silver handle.

Ivory, like silver, offers a very smooth surface. There has been only one living ivory paper-knife and in 1891 the tale was told in many newspapers around the world. A typical account was in the *Los Angeles Herald* of April 1891, in an article titled 'Self Acting Paper-cutter'.

> A Calcutta newspaper relates an incident which illustrates the magnificent way in which the Rajahs of India – or at least those of them who remain opulent and powerful – repay a small debt.
>
> Not long ago the Rajah Holkar of Indore, in paying a visit to the viceroy, the Marquis of Lansdowne, at Calcutta, was shown by the Marquis several of the London Illustrated London Newspapers. In cutting the leaves of these journals, Lord Lansdowne used an ivory paper cutter. The Rajah had never seen a paper cutter before and was much interested in the little instrument. "If Your Excellency will make me a present of it", he said "I will send you another in exchange". The Viceroy promptly gave his guest the paper cutter and the Rajah returned with it to his own dominions. Lord Lansdowne had almost forgotten the incident when he received notice that the Rajah's return gift was on the way, and he was presently astonished to have brought to him a young and handsome elephant, each of whose tusks had been skilfully wrought into the shape of a paper cutter. A servant brought some illustrated papers, at which the elephant seized them with his trunk and proceeded very skilfully to cut the leaves with his sharply trimmed tusks. He had been trained to this accomplishment under the Rajah's orders. The living paper cutter, it is understood, is still in Lord Lansdowne's possession, but it is not one of the ordinary furnishings of the Viceroy's library. For his customary opening of books and newspapers he keeps a less bulky implement.

That story would surely have been received, at the time and around the world, with considerable humour and possibly envy. Perhaps somewhere there may be a drawing or engraving of the living paper cutter with a pair of matching ivory blades.

Ivory may well have been a common material for paper-knives but mother of pearl also seems to have been favoured. This can be concluded from the numbers of mother of pearl paper-knives in trade catalogues, and also those mentioned in English literature (fig. 2.8).

Mother of pearl is also known as 'nacre' and is the material produced by some molluscs as an inner layer of the shell. It is strong and has an attractive iridescent property. There is no doubt that nacre has been used for centuries for many decorative purposes. Paper-knife blades made from nacre may seem to be delicate and easily broken. On the contrary, the material is resilient, smooth and makes a very attractive looking blade, particularly if contrasted with a silver handle.

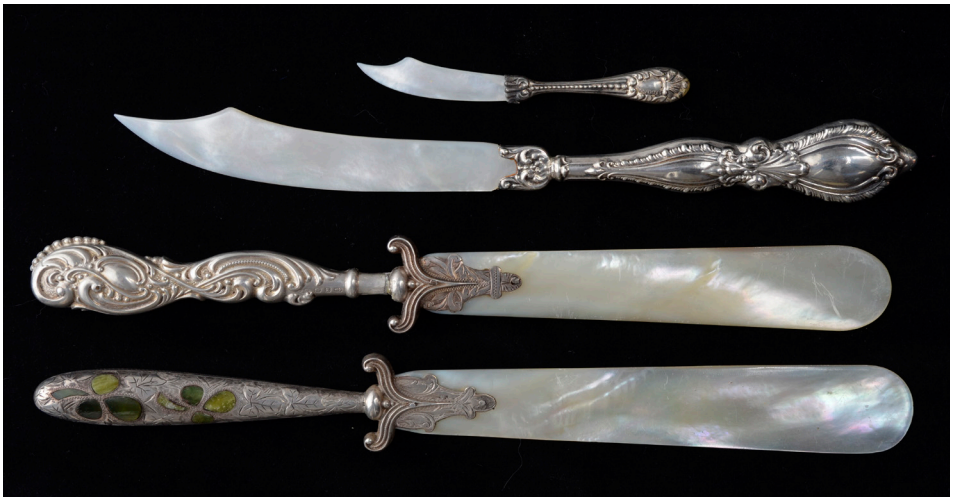


Fig. 2.8. Silver and nacre paper-knives. The top two are scimitar shaped knives marked sterling (3 inches, 7.5 cm; 7½ inches, 19 cm). Middle: C. and N. Birmingham, 1899 (8 inches, 20.3 cm). Bottom: Maker's mark not legible, Birmingham, 1901 (8¼ inches, 21 cm).

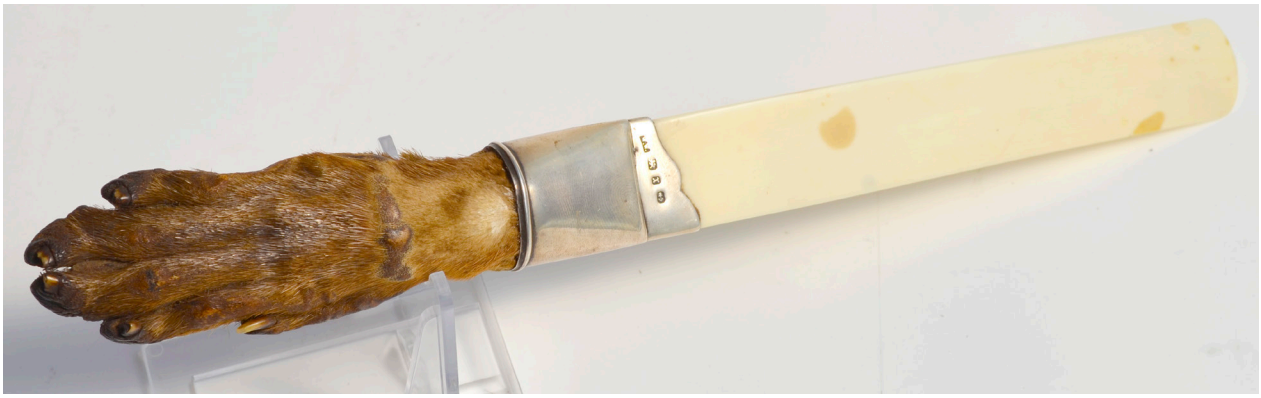


Fig. 2.9a. Ivory paper-knife with an otter's (*Lutra lutra*) foot handle (10 ½ inches, 26.5 cm).

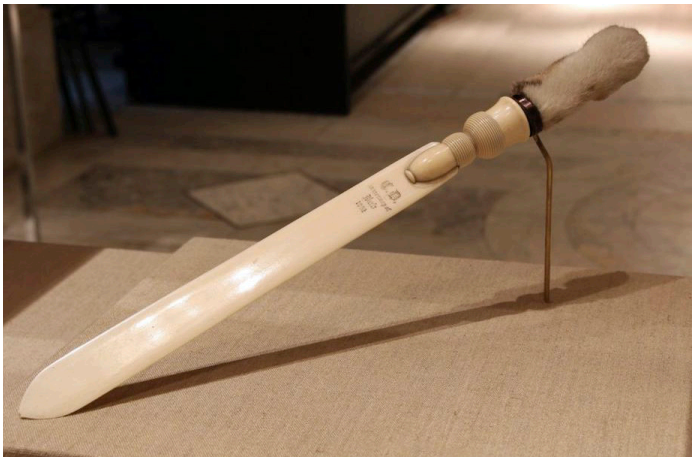


Fig. 2.9b. Charles Dickens' paper-knife, with the handle made from one of his beloved cat's paws. This is in the Berg Collection of the New York Public Library. Reproduced with kind permission of the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

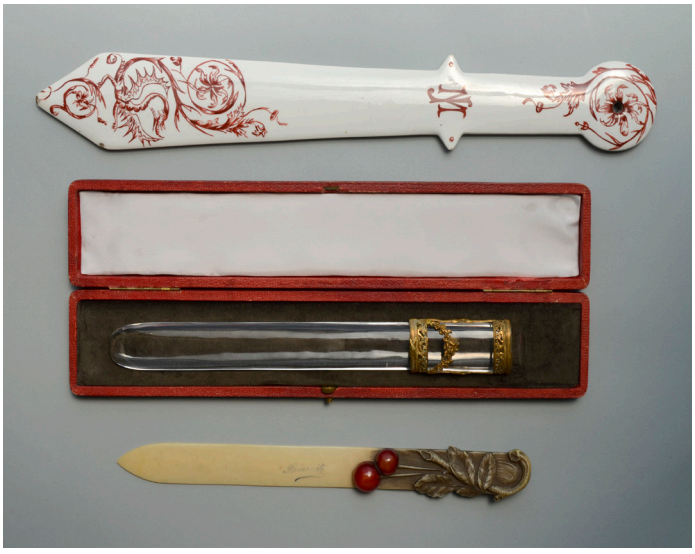


Fig. 2.10. Ceramic, glass and plastic paper-knives. The ceramic paper-knife is 15 inches (38 cm) long and 2⅛ inches (5.7 cm) wide at the widest point.

Other animal parts

The handles of some paper-knives were made from animal feet. These came from animals such as goats, rabbits, hares, badgers and otters. For example, there is one in the Army and Navy Stores catalogue that is described as a 'hare pad'. The 1897-98 example shown in fig. 2.9a is an otter's foot (*Lutra lutra*) but is similar to that sold by the Army and Navy Stores. Perhaps the most celebrated example is the paper-knife thought to have been owned by Charles Dickens (see p. 53) and which has a cat's foot for a handle (fig 2.9b).

Plastic, glass and ceramic

Plastic paper-knives appear not to be common. Is this because plastic was found not to be suitably smooth or is it because paper-knife use was declining at a time when plastic was being favoured? Glass paper-knives do exist and are usually found in desks sets. Perhaps a not unusual material, but on the other hand unsuitable in terms of safety? Were there ceramic paper-knives? James Mackay's *Encyclopaedia of small Antiques* (1975) does mention 'pottery and porcelain' handles. However, there appears to be no primary evidence to confirm whether or not the example shown in fig. 2.10 is a paper-knife. It certainly functions very well as a paper-knife.

Fabergé paper-knives

Surely the most revered name among all goldsmiths, silversmiths and jewellers has to be Peter Carl Fabergé. Indeed, some would say his work (and that of his workmasters) was goldsmithery *in excelsis*. It seems that many paper-knives (and paper folders) were carved in Siberian nephrite by Carl Fabergé.

I am most grateful to Wartski of London for the images, details, and provenance of three examples of exceedingly beautiful Fabergé paper-knives. The example on the left is attributed to the Chief Workmaster Michael Perchin. It is 7 7/8th inches (20 cm.) and dates from 1899-1903. It is decorated with a gold Rococo scrollwork mount set on one side with a gold rouble from the reign of Catherine the Great and on the other with a chased Romanoff eagle. The example in the centre (12 ¼ inches, 31 cm.) appears in an album of watercolour designs by Chief Workmaster Henrik Wigstrom dated September 1912. It is decorated with a *guilloché lilac* enamelled mount bordered with bands of opaque white enamel. This was purchased at Fabergé's London shop in 1915 for thirty pounds by the American heiress Mrs Leeds, who later married Prince Christophe of Greece. The example on the right (7 inches, 17.6 cm.) is by the Chief Workmaster Michael Perchin and is mounted in chased gold in the form of bat wings and set with rubies and moonstones. It was purchased by the Dowager Tsarina Mare Feodorovna in December of 1899.