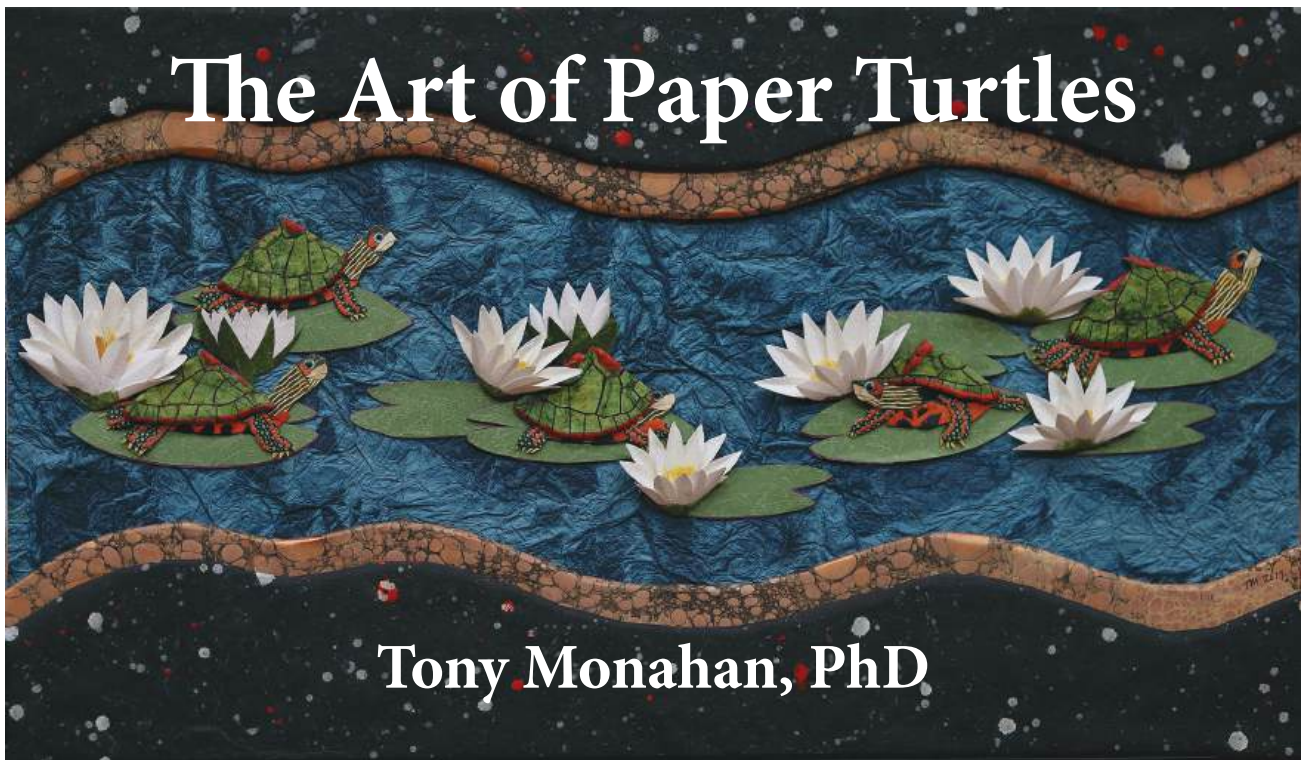


The Art of Paper Turtles



Tony Monahan, PhD

“Washing of the Water” includes paper *Pangshura tecta* yearlings.

My initial attraction to turtles was from an art perspective. Obviously, their shells make them unique in the animal kingdom. Moreover, their brilliant colors and patterns – especially in the Box, Painted, and Spotted Turtles of my youth – made them a particular draw to my eyes. Like a lot of us turtle lovers, I had them as pets when I was a kid. But the extensive travel of my adulthood made pet-keeping unsustainable. Nevertheless, I never lost my fascination of these shelled beauties. In spring, 1997, I completed my first fine art piece with acrylic paint on canvas.

Within a year, I began working with papers.

Paper Structure Art

The medium of Paper Structure consists of multi-layered papers and mat board cut, shaped and structured with glue, screws, nuts and bolts. The advantages for me were: a) I could use both of my hands to cut and sculpt, b) I could build to three-dimensions (preferable to making turtle shells), and c) unlike painting, I don't always have to be on my game – meaning, there are always things that need to be cut out (scales, scutes, claws, eyeballs, etc.) that don't take the type of consistent precision that painting does.

Materials

I have collected a large assortment of papers over the years including hand-made marbled, fiber-based, bark and cork, printed, colored, scale and alligator skin, and a variety of Thai Unryu (tissue-ribbon) papers. I do not paint or color papers. I use what I have to fit my scheme. I categorize papers by texture, then color. I also use mat boards of various thickness to help boost depth and provide dimension.



“The Fibonacci Procession” is built on seven levels with dimensions of 1”x 1” x 2”x 3”x 5”x 8”x 13”x 21.”



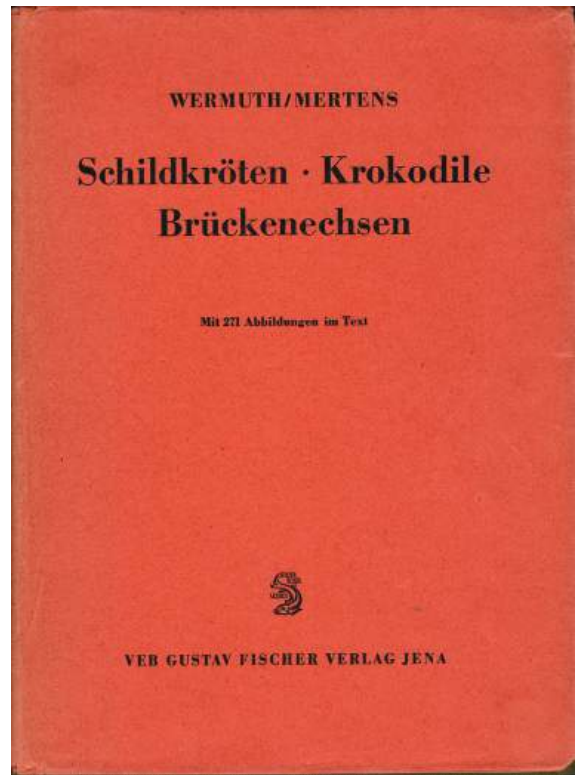
Paper Structure art requires a varied collection of colored, patterned, and textured papers.



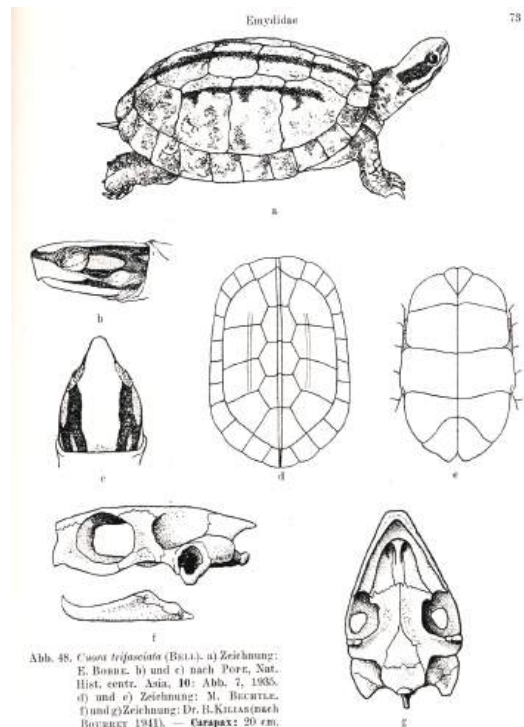
Tools of the trade include knives, scissors, glues, dental tools, screws, nuts, and bolts.

Tools

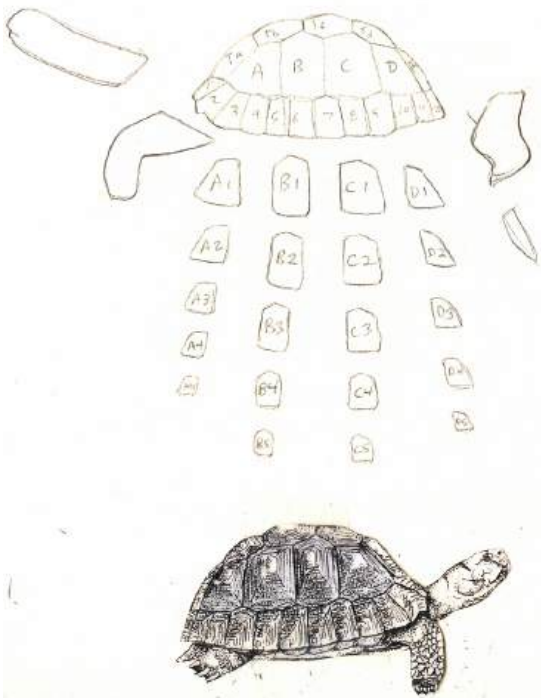
A lot of my work can be described as intricate. Some pieces have paper turtles smaller than your average pinky finger. For detailed work, I use scissors, X-Acto knife (#11), tweezers, glue brushes, and various dental tools. I also use lighting and plenty of magnification.



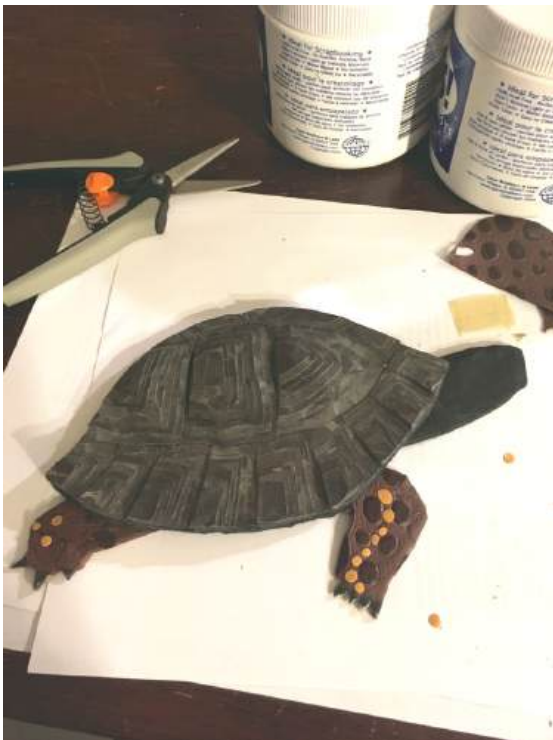
Primary template reference: “Schildkröten Krokodile Brückenechsen” (1962) provides schematic illustrations of over 200 turtle species.



Diagrams of *Cuora trifasciata*.



Tortoise template for five-layered carapace scutes leads to three-dimensional shells (below)



A digital image of “Turtles All the Way Down” is aboard NASA’s OSIRIS-Rex space probe, over 42 million miles from Earth.



Work in progress.



Completed piece, "Moonlight Drive" 15" x 15."

Artistic Inspiration

My work is primarily inspired by Belgium surrealist painter René Magritte. He was known to paint objects out of place, like a tree in the clouds, an apple floating in front of a man's face or a giant boulder filling up a bedroom. I usually endeavor to create art with surrealist arrangements rooted in nature. Overall, I consider my art to be educational, containing elements of geometry and mathematical sequencing, physics, astronomy, fantasy and folklore.

Anatomically-correct Turtles

I create templates for turtles and other objects in my work. My primary reference has been the

German book: "Schildkroeten Krokodile Brueckenechsen" (1961) by H. Wermuth and R. Mertens. The book contains schematics (carapace, plastron, and other illustrations) for over 200 turtle species.

Because this form of art is detailed and labor-intensive, I average only two pieces a year. But my dedication is pretty consistent – I'm always working on it. So stay tuned for more.



Completed in 2025, "Victoria's Tropical Paradise" took 264 hours to create.

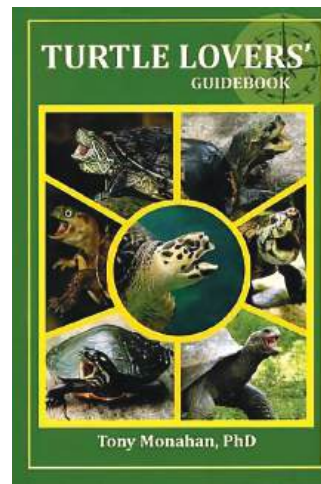


Baby softshell turtle heads.

Tony Monahan, PhD is a professional educator, writer and artist. He presently serves as Professor for the City University of New York. He has been creating turtle-centric fine art for 28 years with a goal of raising awareness of turtles and their conservation. In addition to paper structure, Tony creates acrylic on canvas paintings (during the humid months), photo collages, Shelleidoscope® art and photography. He is the author of *Turtle Lovers' Guidebook* (2024) and is currently working on the *World Book of Turtle Conservation*. His artwork can be seen at www.carapacedesigns.com.



Spotted turtle hatchling.



Editors note: The author's *Turtle Lovers Guidebook* (2024) is a must have for everyone who enjoys turtles!

