

Mattia Giegher and the first work published on folded centrepieces

by JOAN SALLAS I CAMPMANY

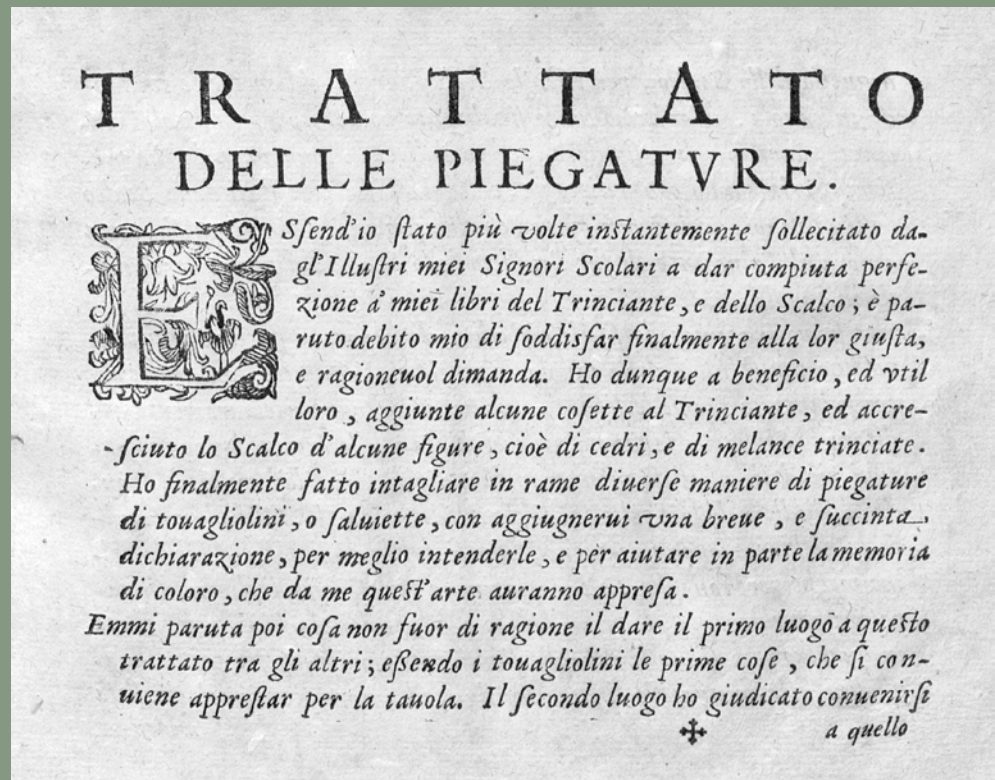
Mattia or Matthia Giegher, as German Matthias Jäger was known, was born around 1589 in Moosburg, the Duchy of Bavaria, and died roughly in 1632, probably in Padua, the Republic of Venice. He wrote the first published work on how to fold napkins and tablecloths.

There is very little information on Giegher's life and most of what there is has been gleaned from his own books, published in Padua in Italian. His surname means 'hunter' in German and, to make it easier for Italians to read, he changed the spelling to Giegher, which is how he is referred to in modern bibliography. This name change led some older authors to mistakenly refer to him as Geiger, which in German means 'violinist'. On the frontispiece of his last book, Giegher published the Jäger family coat of arms, with three hunting horns, a heraldic motif that appears on several gravestones at Johanniskirche, a 15th century church in Moosburg.

Frontispiece from
"Li Tre Trattati" with picture
of the author, family coat
of arms and carving tools.



Title of the treatise
"Trattato delle Piegature",
printed in "Li Tre Trattati".



1 GIEGHER, Mattia: "Il Trinciante". Padova: Martini, 1621

2 GIEGHER, Mattia: "Lo Scalco". Padova: Crivellari, 1623

3 GIEGHER, Mattia: *Li Tre trattati*. Padova: Guareschi, 1629

4 GIEGHER, Mattia: *Li Tre trattati*. Padova: Frambotto 1639

5 "Ecco dunque, che tu solo te n'hai differito il godimento: ma tanto più l'haura in grado, per la notabil differenza, che vi scorgerai da cert'altra Operetta, che forse ti fara capitata alle mani, più tosto mal abozzata, che in tutto ricavata da questo suo Originale, come pur potea farsi de chi non ha saputo senon dichiararsene altertando mal'auueduto imitatore, quantoch'era obligato di riserbarne la gloria al vero Autore, e contentarsi di non tacere quel, che ben noto ad vna Città intiera Rendine gratia al caso [...]"

Like many other Germans who were drawn by the Italian Renaissance just before the Thirty Years' War, in 1616, at the age of 22, young Giegher moved to Padua, then part of the Republic of Venice, where he learned Italian customs of carving, table setting and napkin folding. From the beginning of the 15th century, these activities were very important in the Italian courts, and Giegher studied them in Padua, where he compiled them in treatises on his experience as a carver in "Il Trinciante",¹ as a server in "Lo Scalco",² and as a napkin folder in "Trattato delle Piegature". Although the first and second treatises were published separately, the third was bound with the first two and published under the title *Li Tre Trattati*, in 1629,³ and posthumously in 1639,⁴ when the publisher warned of plagiarism in the book's prologue. This fact, although not denied, has never been substantiated.⁵

Li Tre Trattati is dedicated to Burcardo Ranzovio (Burkhardt Rantzau) of Sasdorf (probably Sassendorf, Bavaria), who at the time was the councillor for law students from the 'German nation' at the University of Padua. At that time of religious reformation, the political, social, cultural and trade relations between Bavarian Catholics and the Italian states were very close, with both courts often hosting banquets showing off their power in opulent table ceremonies. During the 16th century, many important Italian carvers like Cristoforo di Messisbugo, Domenico Romoli, Bartolomeo Scappi, Giovanni Battista Rossetti, Vincenzo Cervio and Cesare Euitascandalo mention the use of artistic napkin folding in their books. However, Giegher was the first to describe this art in words and images for teaching and creative purposes. The vast majority of authors from the 17th and 18th centuries who referred to the art of napkin folding drew directly or indirectly from Giegher's book as their main



Cover of the book "Li Tre Trattati" by Mattia Giegher (1629).

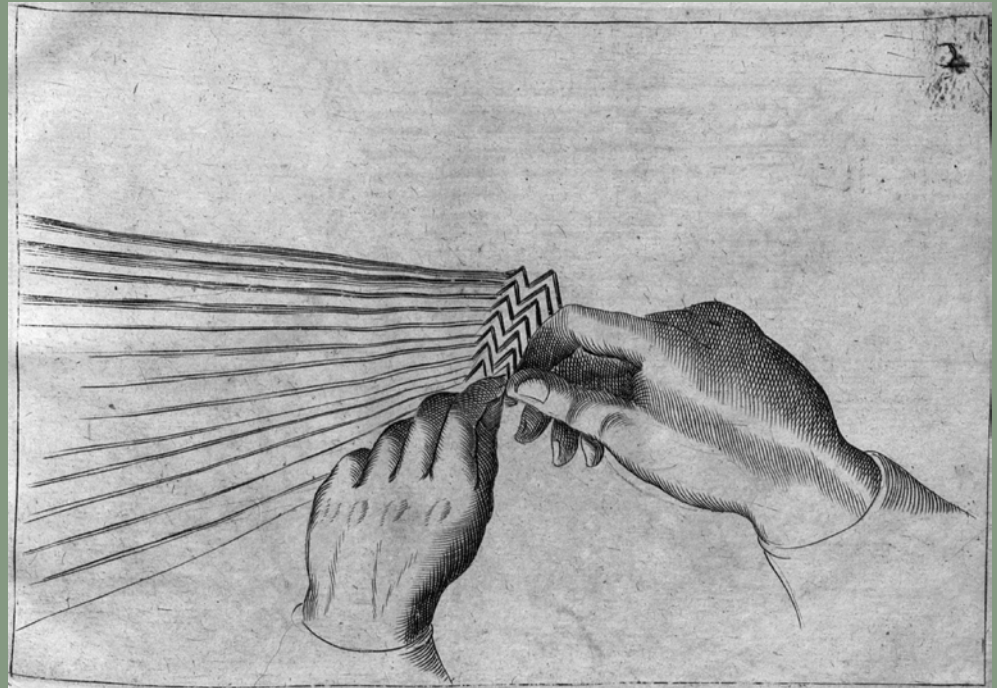
- 6 FUNKE, Friedrich Kaspar: *Leichtfaßlicher Unterricht in der Kunst: Die Servietten bei Gastmahlen auf eine geschmackvolle und sehr zierliche Weise zu Teller-Aufsätzen zu brechen*. Erfurt: Friedrich Bartholomäus, [1845]
- 7 KLETT, Andreas: *Neues Trenchier - und Plicatur - Büchlein*. Nürnberg: Loschge, 1677
- 8 PALLIOLO, Paolo: *Le feste pel conferimento del patriziato romano a Giuliano [di Lorenzo] e Lorenzo [di Piero] de' Medici* [in Campidoglio] narrato da Paolo Palliolo, fanese.

source. To understand the art of napkin folding Giegher explains in "Trattato delle piegature", published as part of *Li Tre trattati*, we must take into account four important aspects:

Firstly, it is not only about learning how to fold napkins for wiping hands and mouths. It is, above all, about creative sculptures using folded napkins, called folded centrepieces (*trionfi da tavola*, in Italian) and covering the table with folded tablecloths and food with folded napkins. From the 16th century, centrepieces were made with edible items, such as butter, sugar, pasta, etc., as well as non-edible materials like wood, wax, tragacanth, napkins, etc. Starting in the second half of the 17th century, the former were known in German as *Schauessen* and the latter, *Schaugerichten*. In the first third of the 17th century, there were also centrepieces combining the two, like for example sugar statues dressed in folded napkins. With the advent of European porcelain in 1709, this material was used to make the same subjects as the centrepieces from the 16th century, gradually replacing them until, after the French Revolution, they had disappeared completely. Even though the last known book on folded-napkin centrepieces was published in 1845 by F. K. Funke,⁶ taking models originally published by A. Klett in 1677,⁷ we can't frame it as part of Baroque table culture, as it had already died out.

Centrepieces made of folded napkins began to be used in the early 16th century by courts in northern Italy, probably the Florence of the Medici's. The first document that mentions artistic napkin folding dates from 1513.⁸ The complexity of the main folding techniques (*fan*, *curved and*, especially, *sachets* and *herringbone*) show the influence of Florentine tailors of the time, who used very similar methods. From the second half of the 17th century, these activities

Illustration from “Trattato delle Piegature”, showing proper hand positioning when using the spinapesce or herringbone folding technique.



9 ANON.: Aanhangzel, van de volmaakte hollandsche Keuken-Meid. Amsterdam: Steven van Esveldt, 1746

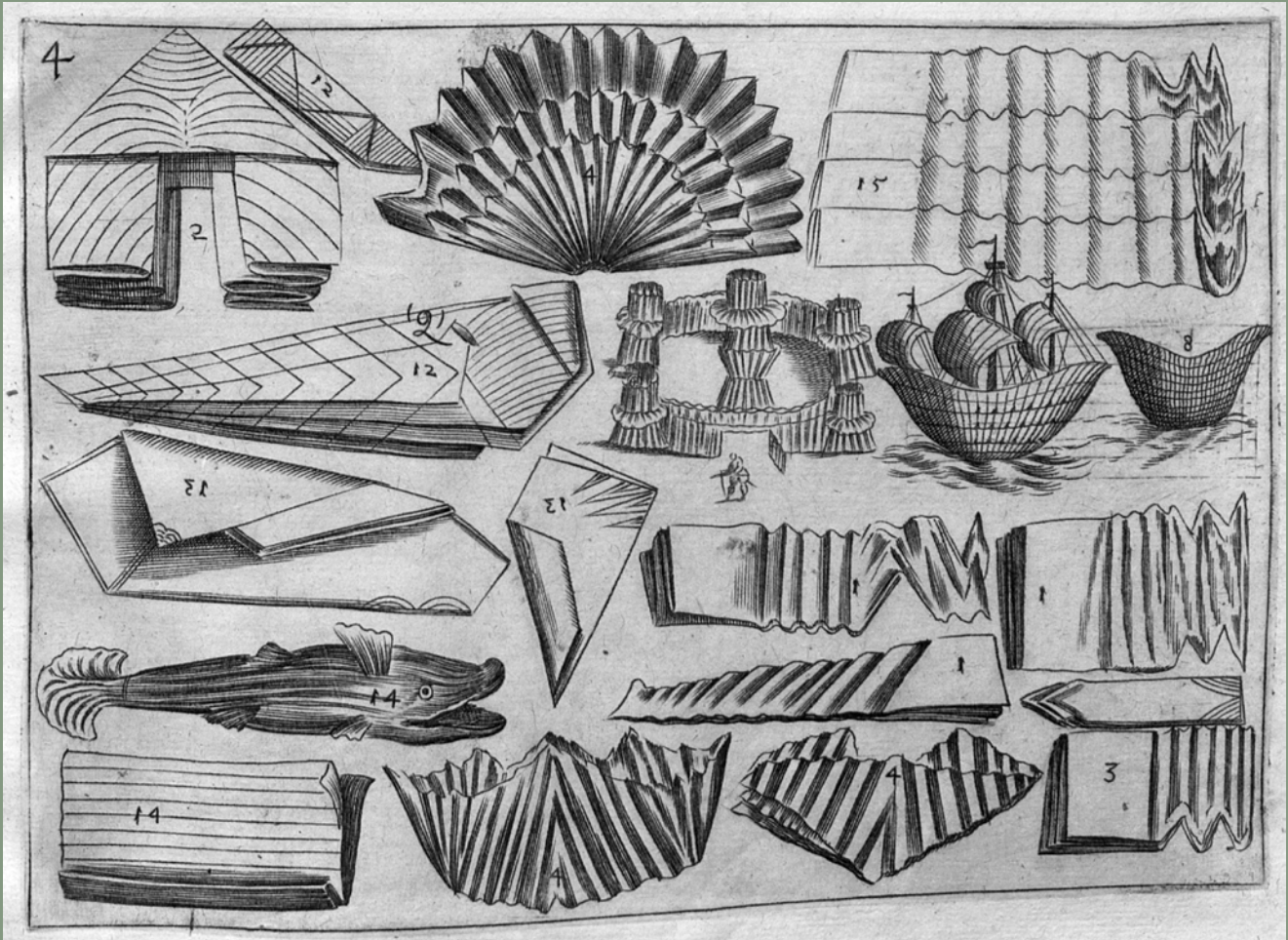
spread to other countries, mainly in the German-speaking world, through illustrated publications by Georg Philipp Harsdörffer, Andreas Klett, Andreas Glorez and Johannes Schalch, among others.

The limited documentation published during the Baroque era on artistic napkin folding in France, Spain and England is indicative of the fact that the practice had not spread as extensively to these countries. Sources from the Baroque era say that, above all in France, this activity wasn't very well received.

Secondly, Giegher's book is not for learning how to fold napkins from a series of folding instructions, which it also includes (although mainly based on hand position), but to learn the culture of folding and practice the techniques each folder can use to come up with their own creations. The author of the book doesn't show the models for them to be folded, but to convince us of the great things a folder can do if they learn and properly combine the folding techniques shown. From the early 15th century through the middle of the 18th century, folding models were designed exclusively for each banquet. The idea of using the same style of folded napkins for different banquets only came about after the first step-by-step folding instructions were published in 1746,⁹ alongside the expansion of porcelain.

Thirdly, Giegher and the other folding teachers of his time used paper to learn and practice folding techniques, as it allows the folder to correct mistakes without losing its stiffness. Once they had learnt the techniques, they used starched linen fabric. This explains why, in the Western world, folded napkins often have the same foundations, techniques and folding sequences as folded paper items, such as the troublewit. Napkin folding, therefore, must be considered part of the wider folding arts, alongside folded paper and other materials. So, the main element of the folding arts isn't the material being folded but the fold itself, and especially the creative folds.

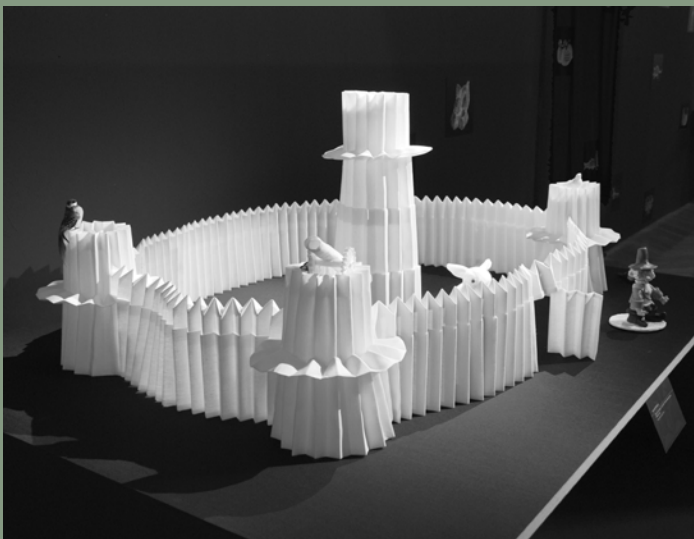
And, **finally**, in addition to their use on the table, folding techniques and materials, objects made of folded napkins aren't merely decorative. Above all,

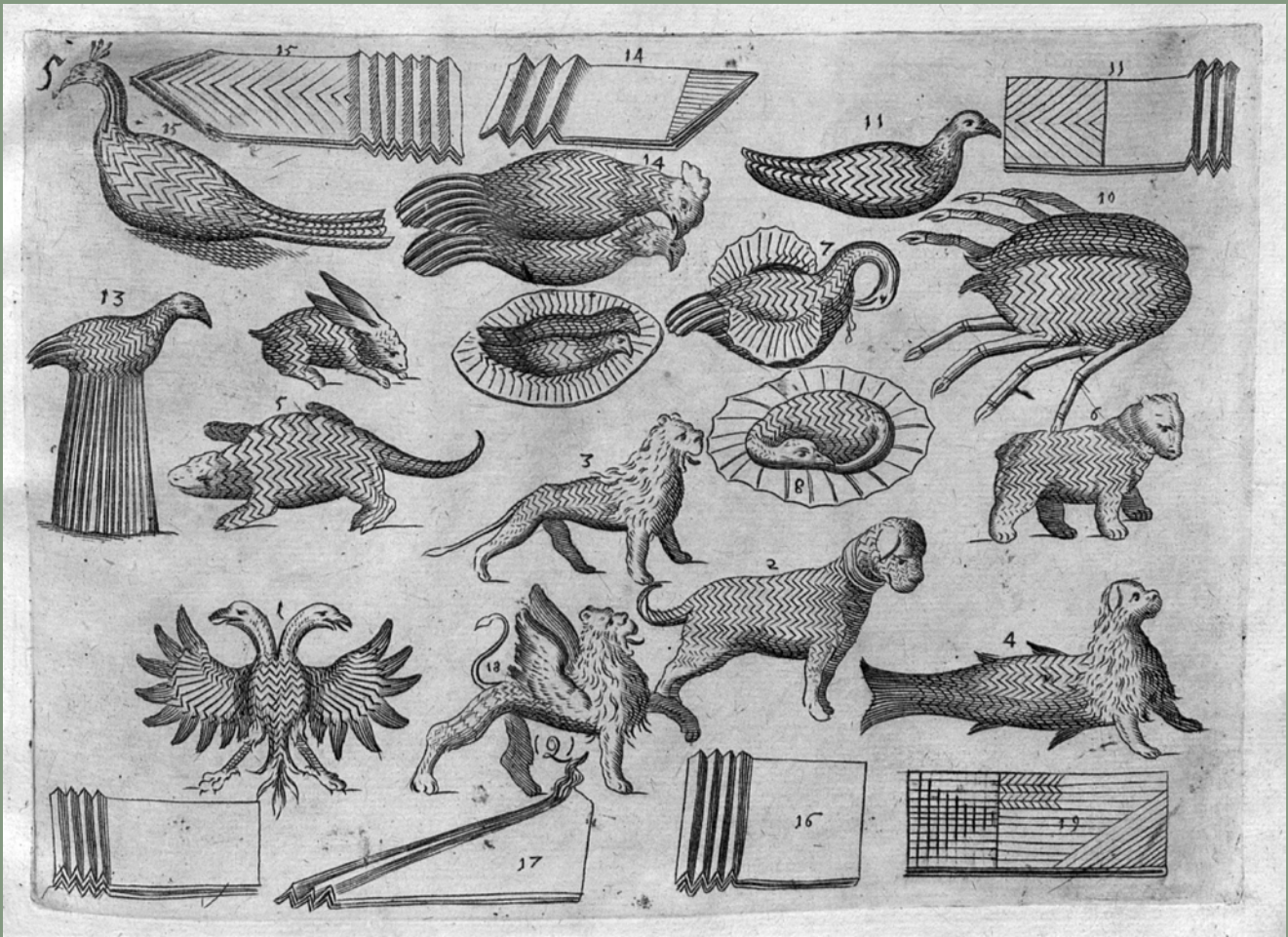


▲ Table 4 from "Trattato delle Piegature".

► "Nave corredata", a galley with sails and wind. Reproduced by the author.

▼ "Castello". Napkin castle with white rabbits in its walls, live birds in its towers and a marzipan man standing in the entrance. Reproduced by the author.





▲ Table 5 from "Trattato delle Piegature".

► "Aquila". Double-headed eagle of the House of Hapsburg. Reproduced by the author.



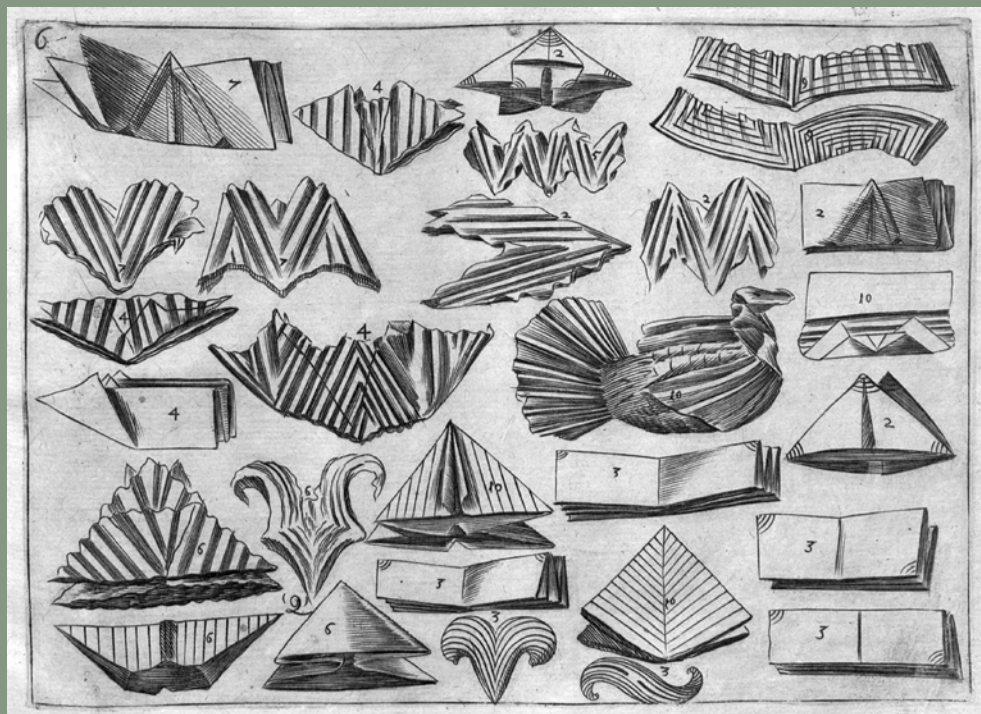


Table 6 from “Trattato delle Piegature”.

10 “le touaglie”, “saluiette sopra’l pane”, “organi”, “gigli”, “monti”, “ventaglio in due maniere”, “gli SS.”, “la corona doppia”, “li cappami”, “li dodici monti”, “li quadrangoli”, “le colline”, “la Naue”, “li copertoj da coprir le panatiere per signori grandi, e le trinciere”, “la mitra”, “il gallo d’India”, “li draghi”, “le rose, e’l rosmarino con la croce di Malta”, “li pesci”, “la corona del papa”, “L’Aquila”, “Il cane”, “Il Leone”, “Il castor”, “La testuggine o tartaruca”, “Vn’orso”, “Il pellicano”, “La salamandra [...] con la corona in testa”, “La fenice”, “Il granciporo, e granchio di mare”, “Li pippioni”, “l’vccello in sù la torre”, “Il gallo in sù la gallina”, “Il paone”, “vna gallina co’ suoi pulcini”, “vn fagiano doppio”, “San Marco”, “Il delfino”. There is an illustration of a rabbit but it is never mentioned, and “La fenice” is mentioned but there is no illustration of it.

11 “piramidi”, “castelli”, “pagoni”, “aquile”, “igni”, “struzzoli”, “leoni”, “cerui”, “dragoni”, “vn Satiro”, “vn Marte”, “Vn’Ercole,

they had symbolic meaning, which German baroque called *Sinnbilder* (images with meaning), in line with the purpose of the banquet, event, location, guests or hosts. With a social and communicative purpose, as well, the symbolism of the folds must be recognised, reflected on and discussed by the participants. So, folding professionals were trained not only in technique and artistry, but also in culture and the humanities, including recurrent themes like heraldry and mythology. On top of knowing how to fold, a folder also had to be able to propose what to fold so it could be approved by their masters.

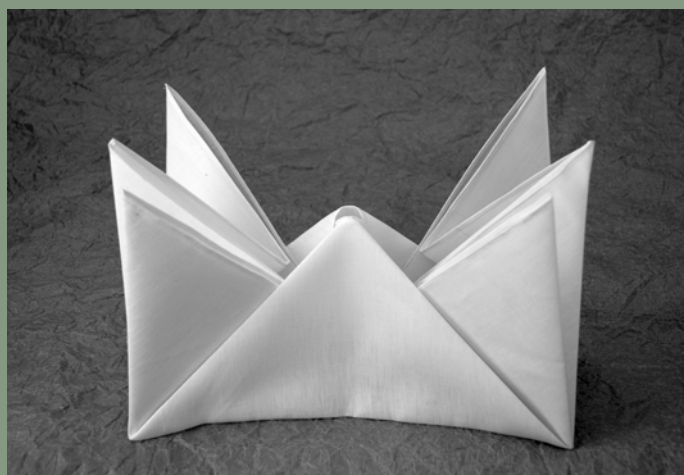
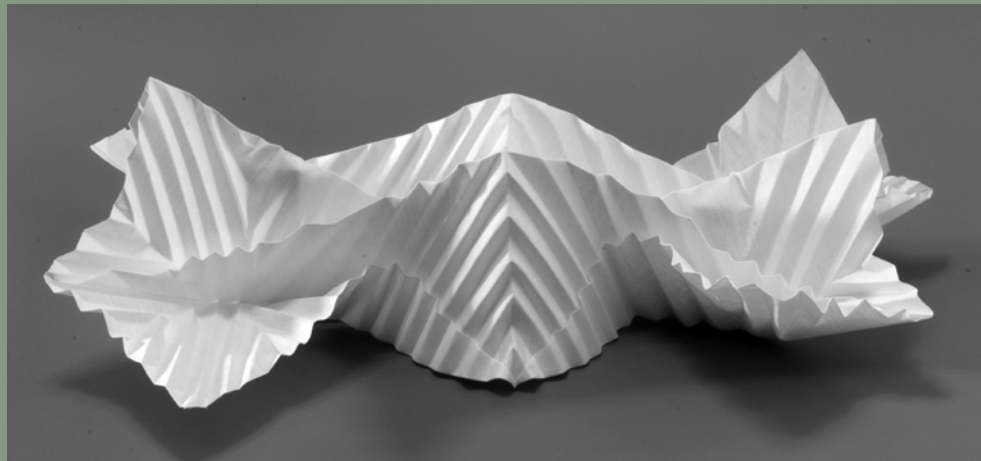
In “Trattato delle Piegature”, Giegher includes a list of many folded centrepieces and illustrations of heraldic, animal, ecclesiastical or mythological subjects.¹⁰ He also mentions other centrepieces made of wax, pasta or folded napkins,¹¹ without specifying which material was used for each one. This leads us to believe they were made of a combination of materials. Both the names and all the illustrations of each of the folding subjects proposed by Giegher and other Baroque authors must be analysed and interpreted with the help of experts in many fields, such as symbolism, cuisine, textiles and philology, as well as folding experts, of course, which we will at some point cover in another article.

As often happens with books that are used and not just read, very few copies of Giegher’s books remain, especially of the first edition of *Li Tre Trattati* from

che sbrana la bocca al
lione”, “Vn’Europa sul toro
con le mani alla corna”,
“Vn’Elena Troiana adornata
di veste, e capelli d’oro”,
“Vna Venere ignuda”,
“Vna Pallade ignuda”,
“Vna Giunone ignuda”.

► Napkin to cover food folded with the sachet technique. Reproduced by the author.

► Individual napkin with seven points. Reproduced by the author.



12 Germany: Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel (M: Oe 311), Universitätsbibliothek Eichstätt-Ingolstadt (18/1 E 777e), Uwe Frenzel private collection. **Switzerland:** Universitätsbibliothek Basel (AP V 31a). **England:** British Library, London (D-7953.a.1.)

13 Germany: Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Oq 10332), SLUB Dresden (Putz.17 8 61), Herzog August Bibliothek Wolfenbüttel A: 133.9 Pol.), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München (Res/Oecon. 710). **England:** British Library [1037.c.13 (. 1)], V&A, National Art Library (86.U.23), The Wellcome Library, London (2829/B/1), National Library of Scotland (Newb.551). **Catalonia:** Arxiu PaDoRe, Badalona (ID4052). **United States:** Morgan Library & Museum, New

York (ID173056), New York Public Library (*KB1639), Indiana University - Lilly Library (TX885.G45 T78). **France:** Bibliothèque National de France (V-11149), Institut Européen d'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Alimentation, Tours (641.013 GIE), Bibliothèque Mazarine, Paris (8° 29336 [Res]). **Italy:** Biblioteca Universitaria di Padova (BOT.4.198).

1629, of which there are only five copies.¹² Of the 1639 edition, there are at least twenty copies.¹³ A reproduction was published without citing the original source.¹⁴ Many modern academic publications show some of the images published in “Trattato delle Piegature”, but only one has them all.¹⁵ Georg Philipp Harsdörffer [1607-1658] and Georg Greflinger [ca. 1620-677] published a German translation of the information and illustrations from Giegher’s “Trattato delle Piegature” in 1649¹⁶ and 1650,¹⁷ respectively. While Greflinger plagiarised Harsdörffer, the latter most likely drew from the original sources

Switzerland: Bibliothek Bern UB (MUE Römisch V 94). **14 Bologna:** Arnaldo Forni Editore, 1989, ISBN 9788827127674, very poor resolution. **15 SALLAS, Joan:** Gefaltete Schönheit. Freiburg/Wien, 2010 / Folding Beauty. Seul: Jong ie nara, 2018. Images from the original copy at Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich.

16 HARSDÖRFFER, Georg Philipp: *Trincir-Buch*. Nürnberg: Fürst [1649].

17 GREFLINGER, Georg: *Höfliches und Vermehrtes Complementier-Büchlein*. Rinteln: Petro Lucio, 1650. 1648 edition, also published in Rinteln by Petro Lucio, doesn't include Greflinger's plagiarism of Harsdörffer.

18 GERSTL, Doris:
*Vorschneidekunst und
Tafelfreuden*, published in
*Georg Philipp Harsdörffer und
die Künste*. Nürnberg: Hans
Carl Verlag, 2005.

19 HARSDÖRFFER,
Georg Philipp: *Vollständig
vermehrtes Trincir-Buch*.
Nürnberg: Fürsten.

when he was studying law at the University of Padua and probably learned of Giegher's works shortly after his death. Harsdörffer included the German translation in his work *Trincir-Buch*, published without the author's name or a date. Dr Werner Wilhelm Schnabel, a professor at Friedrich–Alexander University Erlangen–Nürnberg (Germany) ventured that this early edition, often dated 1641, was actually published in 1649.¹⁸ The hypothesis seems plausible, as this edition was probably published after the great Nuremberg Peace Banquet at the end of the Thirty Years' War, held in that city in 1649. For the event, Harsdörffer was responsible for the many centrepieces made of folded napkins. This supposition is further bolstered by the fact that Greffliger did not copy Harsdörffer in his 1648 edition. In subsequent editions,¹⁹ published in 1652, 1654, 1657 and 1665, Harsdörffer expanded on Giegher's folding proposals, including 12 individual napkins, 24 centrepieces and two tablecloths. Translating Giegher's work into German was surely no easy feat, as not all of the Italian folding terms had equivalents in German. As a result, Harsdörffer had to coin many new terms, which knowing his personality he was probably quite happy to do. ●