A Perfectly Period Paper Box
Adapted from the Hours of Catherine of Cleves

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A Perfectly Period Paper Box

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*A cardstock gift box based on an illustration in the Hours of Catherine of Cleves
(New York, Pierpont-Morgan Library, MS M.917 – p. 306, "Saint Agatha")*

Like many of you, I had pondered the many delightful little objects that our medieval forbearers produced, but I'd never given much thought to how those objects were stored or presented as gifts. What a surprise it was, then, to discover a delightful little fold-up gift box, perfectly illustrated among the pages of the Hours of Catherine of Cleves!

This book of Hours was created in the northern Netherlands around 1440. It was made for Catherine of Cleves, the Duchess of Guelders, who married Arnold of Guelders, in 1434. Its artist, known only as the "Master of Catherine of Cleves," is known to have worked between 1438 and about 1460. This allows us to date our little box with certainty to Dutch cultures as early as 1440. If this cut-and-fold box is not the artist's invention, we can comfortably back-date the box by a decade or two, at least.

The box appears on a page devoted to Saint Agatha. As the patroness of forging and casting, she is associated with volcanoes and, by extension, gemstones. The gift boxes appear in the bottom border of the page, the opened ones containing gold and gemstone jewelry.
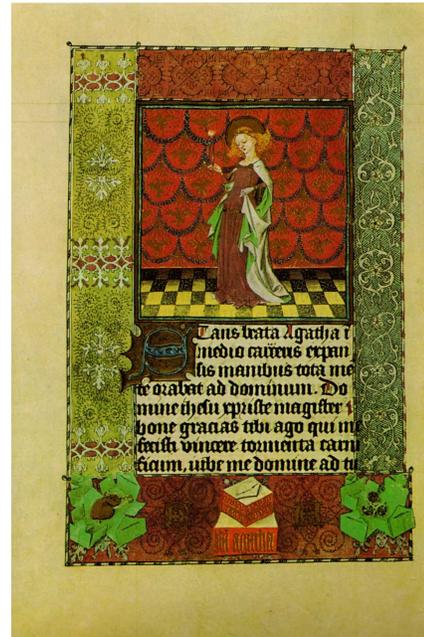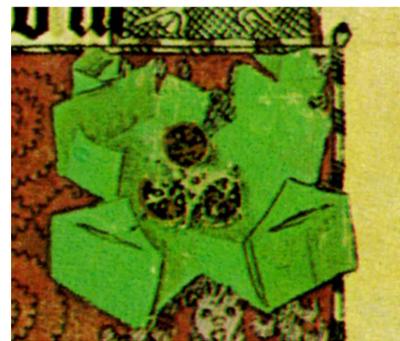

*Saint Agatha, page 309
Hours of Catherine of Cleves*

open box

stacked boxes

open box

Two boxes are shown completely closed, a smaller box stacked atop a slightly larger one. Two more boxes are shown open and unfolded, allowing us the see the cutting and folding pattern.

To reconstruct a pattern for the box, I studied the illustrations of the opened, unfolded boxes and sketched out a pattern on graph paper. I assumed the sides to be three-fourths as high as they are

wide. The opened boxes display roughly this ratio, but the closed boxes are noticeably squatter. The pattern can be adapted to different height-to-width ratios, and will work for very squat boxes, all the way up to a perfectly cubic box.

Cutting and Assembly

To make the box in class, you will use cardstock with the pattern pre-printed on it. When cutting and assembling the box, please refer to the pattern page, which has each section labeled and the folds numbered.

Step 1: Score all fold lines using a scorer and straight edge. These are the THIN lines on the pattern page. All folds are formed inward, so by scoring on the printed side, the lines will wind up on the inside of the box. What can you use to score the cardstock? Empty ball point pens work well; so do knitting needles!

Step 2: Make the two slits, using an X-acto knife or very small scissors. These slits need to be wide enough to accept a double-thickness of the card stock (about 1/16th inch).

Step 3: Cut out your box! Cut only along the HEAVY lines. If you are using an X-acto knife and straight edge, save the outer edge cuts for last. It is easier to do the interior cuts while the box is still attached to the surrounding cardstock.

Step 4: Remove the waste triangles.

Step 5: Fold up the boxes, following the numbering on the pattern page.

Step 6: Close the inner and outer top closures. To do this: fold the little triangles on the insertion tab; insert the tab through its slot on the opposite side; unfold the little triangles on the insertion tab.

Transferring the pattern onto your choice of material:

Photocopiers are not period, but they are wonderful! Simply photocopy the pattern unto any cardstock. Enlarge or reduce to make different sized boxes.

For a more period method of transferring the pattern, place the pattern on top of your chosen material and make pinpricks at each intersection of the lines. Be sure to prick through both layers. You can even do several layers of material at a time this way. Then, use a straight edge to connect the pinpricks on your target material.

Materials – Paper Cardstock:

Paper products were available in the Netherlands by 1440. Paper mills had been established in France by about 1340, and in Germany by 1390.[1] A reference to decorative paper cutouts is found in the mid-fourteenth-century Middle English text of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight:

> So mony pynakle payntet watz poudred ayquere,
> Among þe castel carnelez clambred so þik,
> Þat pared out of papure purely hit semed.[2]

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[1] *Medieval Manuscript Manual*. Department of Medieval Studies, Central European University. http://www.ceu.hu/medstud/manual/MMM/index.html

[2] Andrew, Malcom and Ronald Waldron, eds. *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript*. Exeter, UK: University of Exeter Press, 1996. Citation courtesy of Mistress Elianora Mathewes.

Translation by Mistress Elianora Mathewes:

So many scattered pinnacles were painted everywhere
Among the castle battlements, clustered so thick,
That completely cut out of paper they seemed.

Chaucer described paper cutout decorations on the feast able in the Parson's Tale, which dates from the 1390s:

Also in excesse of diverse metes and drynkes, and namely swich manere bake-metes and dissh-metes, brennynge of wilde fir and peynted and castelled with papir, and semblable wast, so that it is abusioun for to thinke.[3]

Translation by Mistress Elianora Mathewes:

Also in the excess of varieties of foods and drinks, particularly those meat pies and stews, burning of wild fire and painted and adorned with battlements of paper and similar waste, so that it is an absurdity to think of it.

My guess is that the boxes depicted in the Catherine of Cleves illustration were made out of a heavyweight paper, much like modern card stock. In period, linen fiber would have been the normal content, but cotton rag cardstock might have been made as well.

Parchment:

Parchment: Parchment was certainly available, but rather expensive. Smallish waste cuts would have been perhaps an inexpensive source of material for these boxes.

Decoration:

The closed boxes in the illustration show red and gold painting on the sides only. The opened boxes appear to be made of green-dyed paper or parchment, although the coloring may be the manuscript artist's invention rather than an accurate depiction of an actual green box.

Keep the "Creative" in S.C.A.! Use any decorative technique you like to decorate the outside. You could cross-stitch onto the cardstock base, stencil, paint, block print (this includes rubber stamping!).

Giving a special token? Write a "secret message" on the inside of the box!

Make a box scroll! Decorate a larger box, and fill it with a rolled up award scroll.

Make a puzzle box award scroll! Fill a decorated box with progressively smaller nested boxes, each having a portion of the award scroll text written on it. Use the inner most box for the signatures, or to contain the award badge (or both!).

Think outside the box!

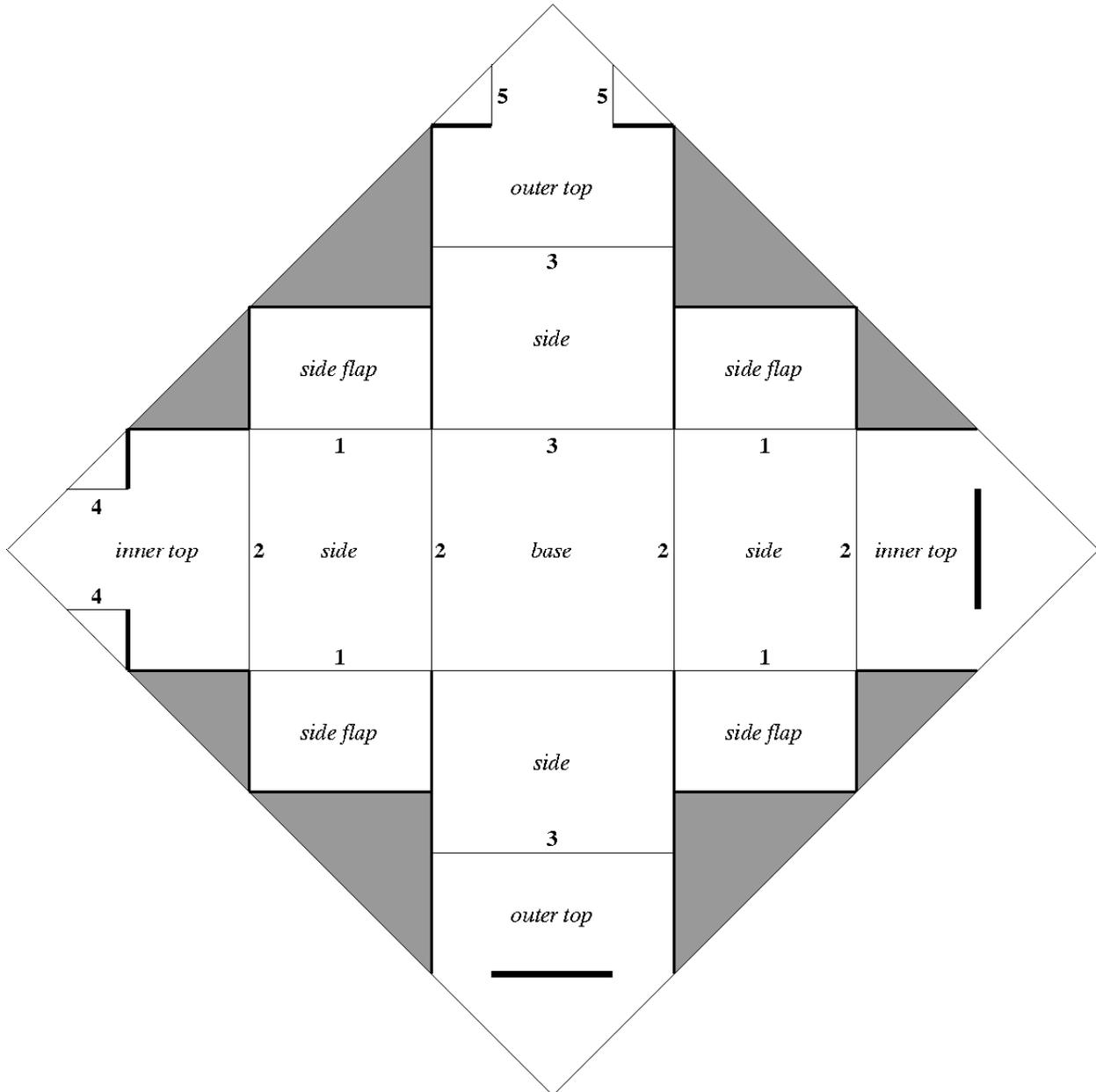Come up with your own unique use for a "perfectly period paper box"!

Bibliography

The Hours of Catherine of Cleves. Introduction and Commentaries by John Plummer. George Braziller: New York, 1966, 2002.

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[3] Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd. ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1987. Citation courtesy of Mistress Elianora Mathewes.

Reference Pattern

5 **5**

outer top

3

side

side flap   side flap

1   **3**   **1**

4

inner top   **2**   side   **2**   base   **2**   side   **2**   inner top

4

1   **1**

side flap   side flap

side

3

outer top

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Step 2:   Make the two slits, using an X-acto knife or very small scissors. These slits need to be wide enough to accept a double-thickness of the card stock (about 1/16th inch).

Step 3:   Cut out your box. Cut only along the HEAVY lines. If you are using an X-acto knife and straight edge, save the outer edge cuts for last. It is easier to do the interior cuts while the box is still attached to the surrounding cardstock.

Step 4:   Remove the waste triangles.

Step 5:   Fold up the boxes, following the numbering on the pattern page.

Step 6:   Close the inner and outer top closures. To do this: fold the little triangles on the insertion tab; insert the tab through its slot on the opposite side; unfold the little triangles on the insertion tab.
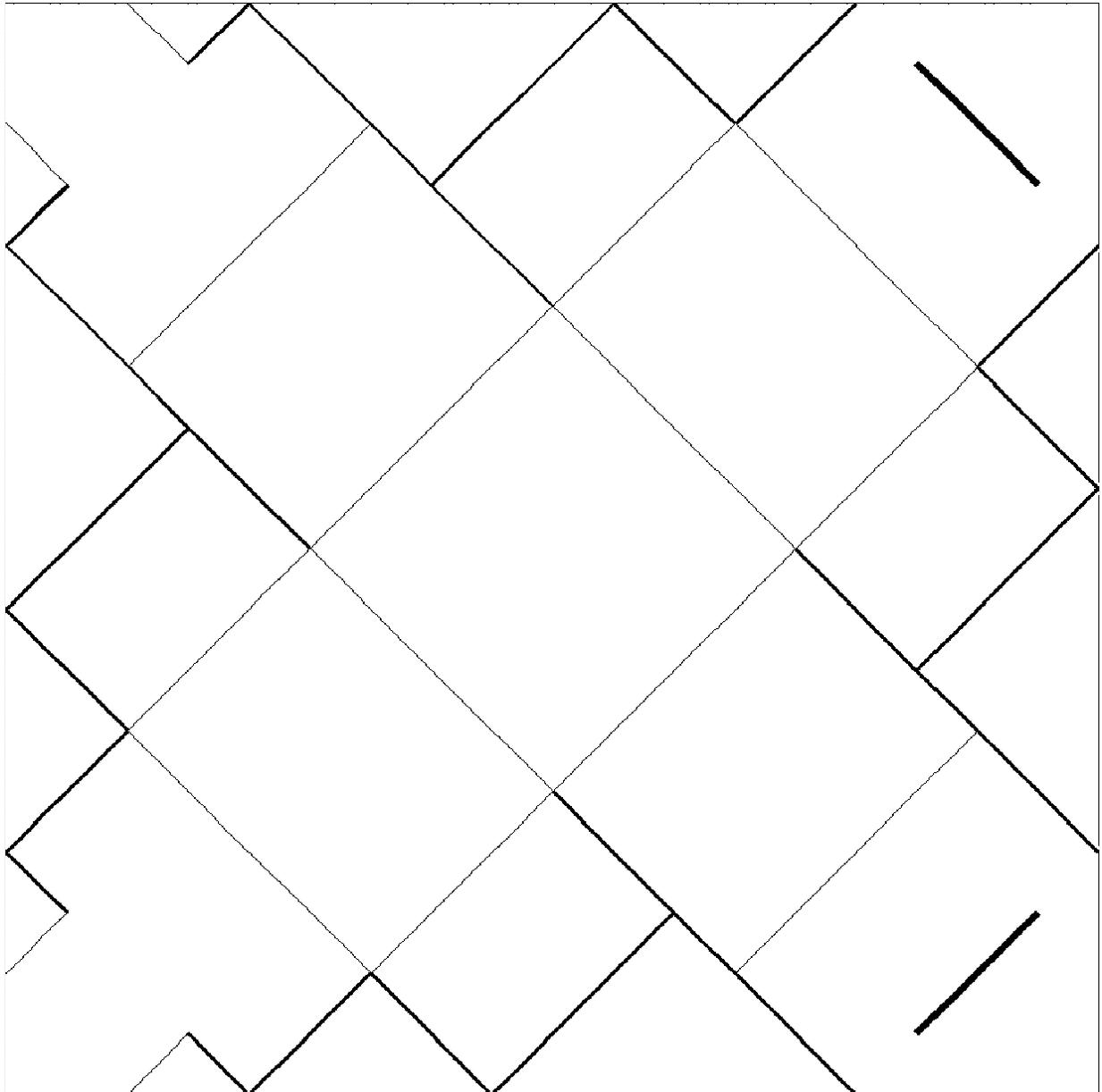
Pattern
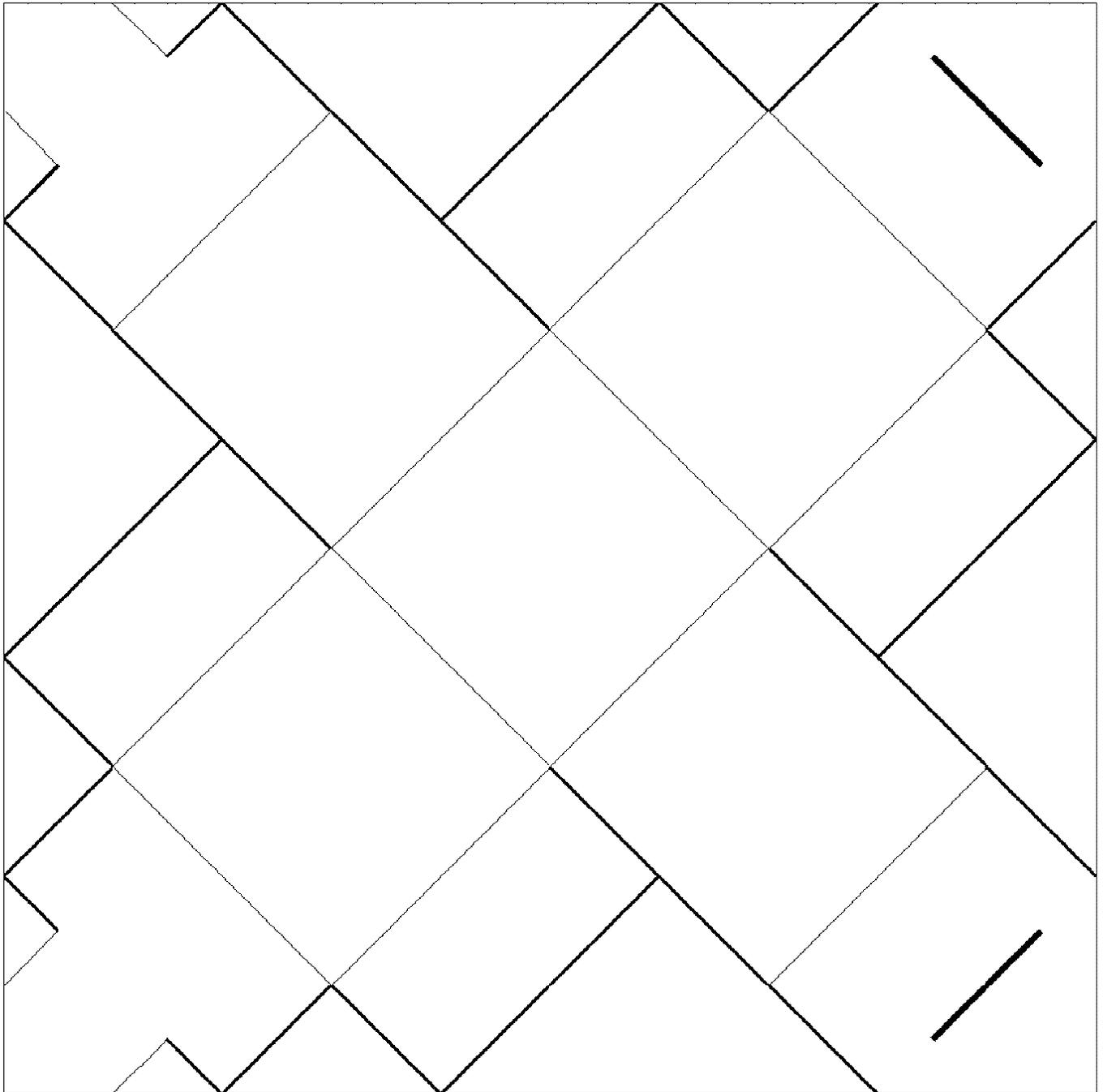
Finished base: 2 inches square
Finished height: 1 inch
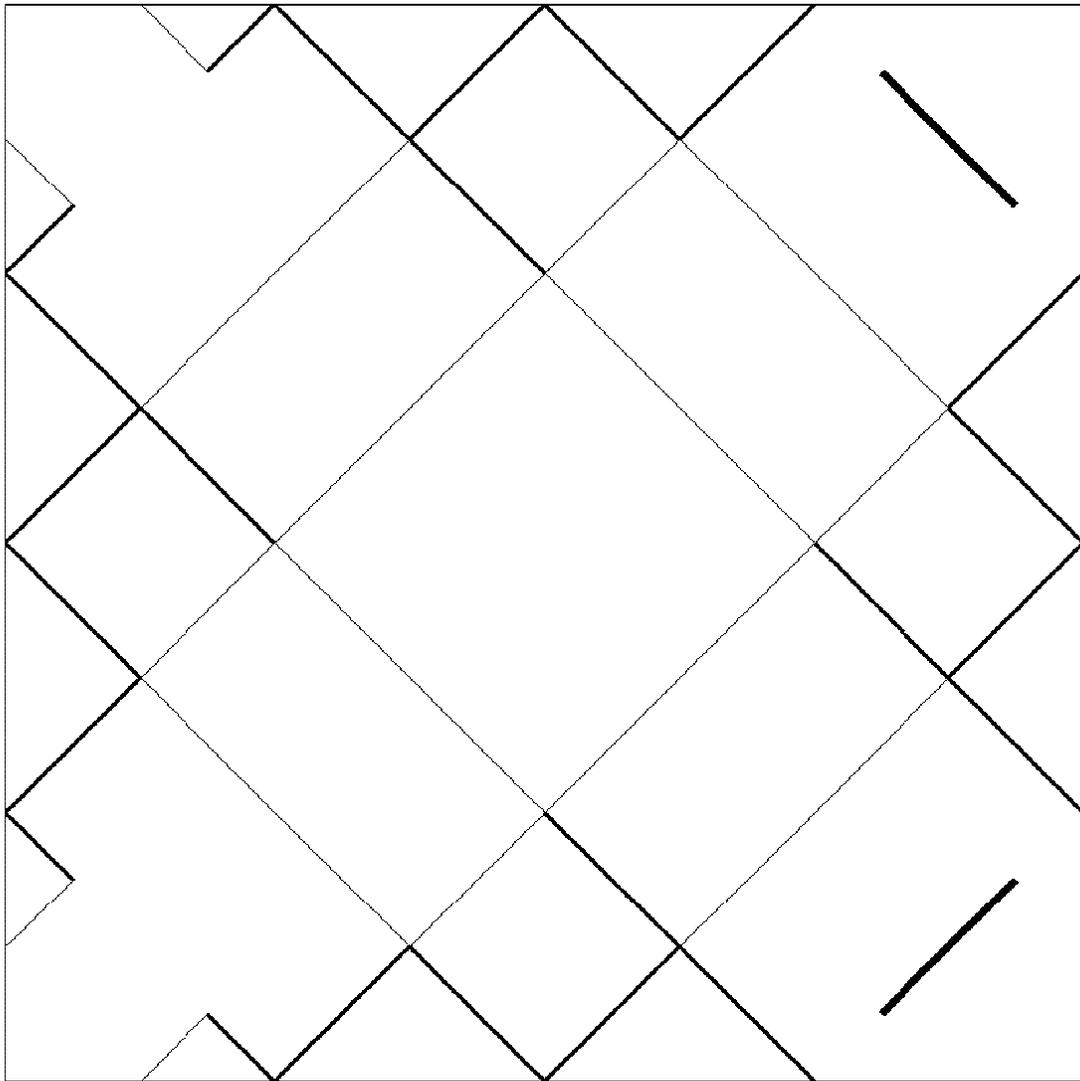
Pattern

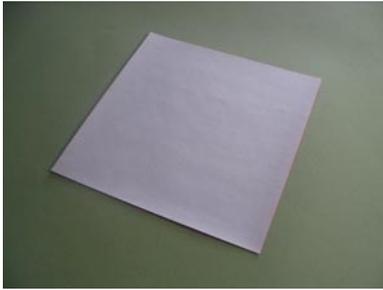**Finished base: 2 inches square**
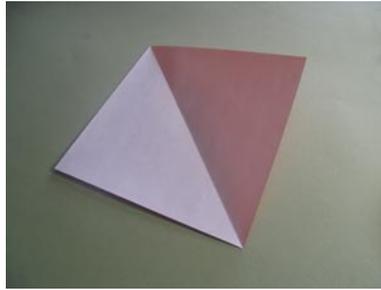**Finished height: 1-1/2 inches**

Pattern

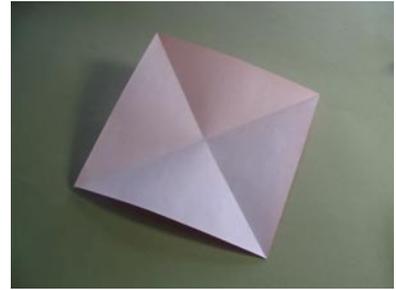**Finished base: 2 inches square**
Finished height: 2 inches

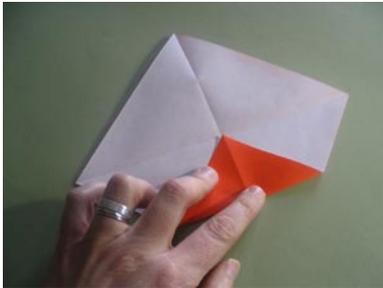## Drafting the 2:1 ratio pattern using simple folds:

Begin with a square sheet of paper.

Fold diagonally and unfold.

Do the same along the opposite diagonal. You have now marked the center of the square.

Fold one corner in toward the center point.
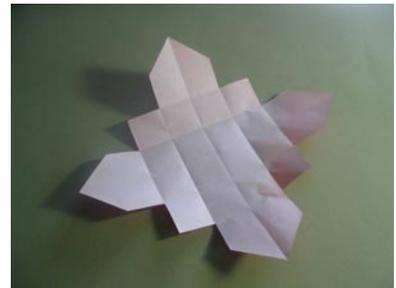

Repeat for the remaining corners.

Unfold.

Fold one corner up to the intersection shown, crease and unfold.

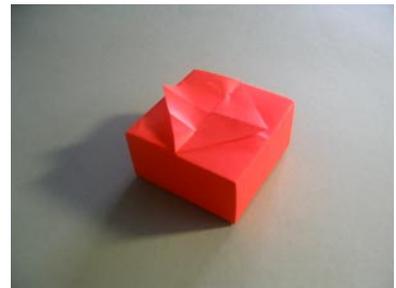Repeat for the other three corners.

Cut away waste triangles from sides.

Make remaining cuts.

Box with inner closure closed.

Finished box.