

THE ART OF SAMUEL RANDLETT

Interview by Laura Rozenberg



Sam Randlett (83) was part of the network that set the foundation of modern origami. He also wrote two seminal books, *The Art of Origami* and *The Best of Origami*, both published in the early 1960s. And he is also remembered for having helped define the system of diagramming, a set of conventions that was first devised by Akira Yoshizawa, and improved with contributions by Sam Randlett and Robert Harbin.

He lives in Wauwatosa, WI, not far from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee where he has been a professor for many years. He still teaches music and continues folding “in exchange for a smile.” He was married three times (the first two wives died) and he has one son. “Mine is a family of engineers,” he says. “My grandfather, my father and my son, all engineers. I am a piano teacher, but an engineer at heart.” That mindset, he agrees, got him into paperfolding some 60 years ago.

I had the pleasure and honor to interview Sam Randlett by phone during the summer of 2013. Here are the excerpts of our conversation.

You were quite young when you started folding.

Before I started folding, I was interested in magic. I wanted to show my wife the structure of a truly beautiful magic card trick. It's name was “You Do As I Do.” I was interested because magic suited my personality. My interests have been music, piano playing, piano teaching, magic and origami.

What did all these things have in common?

For one thing, tight structures. Much done with little. The magician doesn't care about fooling friends—he couldn't care less about fooling friends. It's all about the beauty of the trick. Same with origami. You take a piece of paper and turn it quickly into a boat or something and people say *ahh!* It's like magic. Of course, it is like magic, something has been created out of nothing. A piece of paper is practically nothing. It's done by beautiful engineering. This appeals to a personality who likes magic.

So I became aware of paperfolding through magic, through a book called *Paperfolding for Beginners*, by William D. Murray and Francis J. Rigney. I had that one, and then a Robert Harbin book, and then the Isao Honda books. At that point there appeared a notice in the local newspaper that a lady who did paperfolding from New York would be in Nashville. So I wrote the lady a note. She said she and her husband were going to be in Nashville on such-and-such a day, so why not join us for dinner? So we had dinner with Lillian Oppenheimer and her husband.

And after that you began corresponding with Lillian Oppenheimer.

Lillian put me in touch with other paperfolders as well—Neal Elias, for example. He said he was not very creative in origami, so I said maybe we can do origami and magic, and that's what we did.

Akira Yoshizawa is widely recognized for having developed the modern system of diagramming the

steps with lines and arrows. You and Robert Harbin also worked on the system. What exactly were your contributions?

There were some strange things in the Yoshizawa drawings. For example, he would have an arrow coming out where it meant push in. Gershon Legman, with whom I corresponded about these issues, said ironically that there may be a philosophical reason for that. So one of the principal purposes of the *Art of Origami*, the book I wrote, was to simplify the system and make it available in English. The Yoshizawa system was a good one and that system had to be used in other books. Even if you didn't know Japanese, you would not have any trouble understanding the diagrams.

Then Gershon Legman really contributed with one thing: he suggested that instead of calling them preliminary bases, we should call them preliminary folds. It's a good idea because you liberate yourself from the limitation of the origami bases.



The Art of Origami (1961) and *The Best of Origami* (1963) by Sam Randlett, two essential books for paperfolders in the early days of modern origami.

Did you simplify what Yoshizawa had done?

I organized the system of origami bases. I gave them names—for instance, the fish base. I cleaned the excesses of Harbin. I used Yoshizawa notation, which Harbin had done. I don't know if I was necessary, I don't know if I did anything that Yoshizawa couldn't have done, but Yoshizawa's books were not in English.

You made this available for everybody.

Yes, that's precisely it.

As a musician, do you find origami has something in common with the way music is annotated?

There is a whole tradition of notation in music. So musicians are very much aware of notation and its problems. I knew there would be problems in origami, so I tried to simplify the system. We had about 50 different kinds of arrows and so forth, and I was "No, no, you want a simple system!"

Did you draw your own diagrams?

I had had a mechanical drawing course in high school. I knew how to use India ink, and my wife, Jean, had a very good eye. So I showed Jean how to use the pens. We were in the same room. We were together all the time. I did the layouts, and Jean did the drawings.

In a letter to Gershon Legman, on April 4, 1959, you wrote, "Start with an inscribed geometrical pattern, fold along the lines, and see what happens."

In today's lingo, you were talking about crease patterns. That was incredibly advanced at that time.

Some of the younger folders today believe that we in the 50s and 60s were stupid. I have to say, we were not stupid. We saw that certain things could be done but we had other business to do first.

Like what?

Invent models for fun.

So you didn't follow on the idea of pre-conceived crease patterns?

I didn't do much with this idea, but it was perfectly clear. Gershon Legman's reply was that he didn't know if he could derive models out from crease patterns. Well, it was apparent to me that if you had a crease pattern, you might—if you wished—instead of fiddling around with the paper, be able to turn it into such-and-such shape.

The idea that you could inscribe the model before folding was in your mind.

Precisely. Sure. Oh, yes.

More or less what Robert Lang and others started doing several years later.

I wrote Lang a letter saying he should write a book, which he did. I think I bear some small responsibility for this book (*laugh*). When it came out, I immediately bought one and told (George) Rhoads. And Rhoads said, "What I might have done if I had had this!" There is an article in *The Origamian*, by Fred Rhom—he is a truly great engineer—he was worried the people may get stuck with the idea that everything comes out of a handful of origami bases. Those bases (the fish base, the bird base, and others) are very useful, but can also be limiting.

The crease patterns are more liberating?

It would take you to a higher level of engineering, of course. But if you, on the other hand, fiddle with a piece of paper, you may find things that you wouldn't have found if you were proceeding rationally with a crease pattern.

Both the doodling approach and the rational approach are equally acceptable to you?

Sure. All you want is a result. Do you proceed toward a goal? Fred Rhom always proceeded toward a goal. Neal Elias always proceeded toward a goal from the beginning. Once you see something in the paper, then you proceed toward that goal to the best of your ability. Improvisation becomes calculation at a certain point.

In another letter from the 50s you said that Yoshizawa was working in the principles of paper maché. Did you say that because he moisturized the paper?

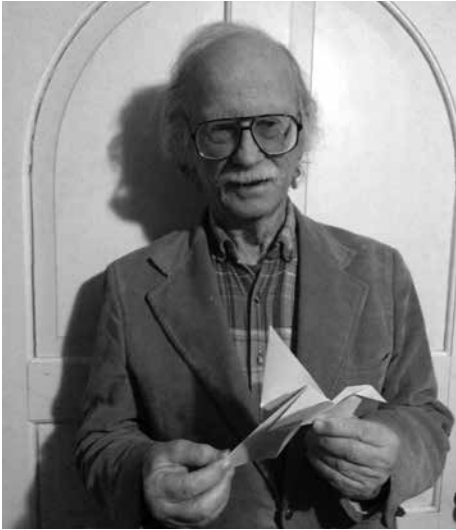
That was George Rhoads' opinion. He was a sculptor. I only said what he said: that Yoshizawa would end up with paper maché, because you can get spectacular results quickly. I was never particularly interested in the final artistic presentation. It takes half a dozen years to learn how to fold the simple swan with curved edges and so forth. I can see Yoshizawa's point. If you want to hold all the curves just right, it's going to take a long time with wet folding.

Were you limited by the four points of the square? Did you want to create more points?

This had already been accomplished by George Rhoads during the years the years he was in Legman's company.



Sam Randlett corresponded and exchanged creations with paperfolders from around the world. In this picture, his "Witch," "Dachshund" and "Bat." (Gershon Legman's archive)



Sam Randlett holding his famous flapping bird. (This model is different from the traditional Japanese flapping bird.) Photo by Larry Moore.

You mean because Legman invented the blintz base?

Yeah. Exactly. With such techniques you can create as many points as you want. As

Lillian Oppenheimer said, “With George Rhoads and his blintz bird, now you are not limited to four points. You can have more if you want.” Legman said I had to go to hell because I asked George what blintzes are (*laughs*).

George Rhoads was living in Spain at that moment and Legman in the South of France. They were quite close to each other.

I did ask George how he started, and he said Legman had some models by Yoshizawa. George went to see Legman and looked at those models, he got ideas and went on to work on the paper.

You corresponded with a number of enthusiasts, among them Lillian Oppenheimer, George Rhoads, Gershon Legman, Ligia Montoya, Neil Elias, Bob Neale, and Robert Harbin. Did you have certain topics of conversation? How did the letter system work among you?

It’s a difficult question to answer. We were trading models and along the way we chatted. So you sent a model that you had meshed together and discussed what was its state, did it have any weakness, and so on and so forth. Things were not political back then. We were just friends having fun. It happens with any organization. It used to be a lot more fun. At a certain point it becomes too organized, and the spontaneity is lost.

Did you get away from origami at one point?

No. I always continued.

What kind of origami you practice?

I do origami dollar bill tips for waitresses.

And the waitress smiles at you?

Yes. I was the other day at a Greek restaurant, and the waitress was delighted. 🍷

REMEMBERING FRIENDS

ROBERT HARBIN

A good friend. England’s foremost magician. I never met him. He was in USA briefly. I couldn’t take a couple of days off, but we were good friends. Harbin’s models are not always the best because his wife hated origami. He said, “I had to do it on the sly!”

LILLIAN OPPENHEIMER

Without her there would not have been any American origami because socially she was very good. She put people in touch with each other and she was as helpful as she could be.

LIGIA MONTOYA

She was a source of inspiration. A mighty force in origami. She saw things other people didn’t see. We corresponded but, unfortunately, we never met. Very lovely person. Lillian Oppenheimer gave me her address. She also thought Ligia was a very refined, delicate woman. Essentially, she outlined, it was as if she wanted to draw and she did it unusually well. She worked for Vicente Solórzano, illustrating his books. But she wasn’t like him. Take the mouse, for instance. Solórzano’s model of a mouse is worthless, it looks almost like a chimney. Instead, Ligia’s mouse is a treasure of the 20th century origami... the toes and the tail.

NEAL ELIAS

My blood brother. Here is another one just like me. Both interested in card magic and origami. And several similar views about things. Lillian Oppenheimer put us in touch. He wasn’t creating origami, and I had origami coming every day (in the mail). I said, we can trade. Anything good that came my way, I would copy and then send it to Neal, who would diagram it for personal use. And then he would thrash the model. He could reproduce it any time. One day he invented some beginner squirrel or something, nothing to boast about, but he continued. Then he produced several masterpieces in 3D. He said that he had hardly scratched the surface. There was no longer a barrier to him. All of a sudden he started to produce all this magnificent stuff which he continued for the rest of his life. And in the notebooks he had principles we exchanged. We cooperated in any way possible and we got together from time to time.

Do you still have his models?

Yes. I see the origami Jesus Christ every day in my bookshelf.