

Unwrapping the Riddle of Yoshizawa-Legman

This is the story of how two of the most important players of the “new” origami movement in the 20th century – Akira Yoshizawa and his proponent, Gershon Legman – met for the first time. The essay also seeks to debunk certain myths. The account serves to discredit earlier assertions of a barrage of letters written by Legman to Yoshizawa in an attempt to reach out to him. The Yoshizawa who emerges from the present analysis of these letters is young, powerful and proactive, in complete contrast to the image of an artist waiting to be discovered in an obscure Tokyo suburb. This new perspective, revealing a man who sets out in pursuit of his destiny without waiting to be summoned and who capitalizes on his opportunities, is consistent with the elements that defined Yoshizawa’s personality throughout his extensive and productive international career.

by Laura Rozenberg¹

In 1937, Akira Yoshizawa could not possibly imagine that he would someday be acknowledged throughout the world as the “father of modern origami”. He did not lack for desire to innovate this art that had been stagnating for centuries.

This ambition explains why he took the step to walk away from his fixed income as a draftsman to devote himself fulltime to origami. It would be fifteen years before he began to reap the results of his patient dedication.

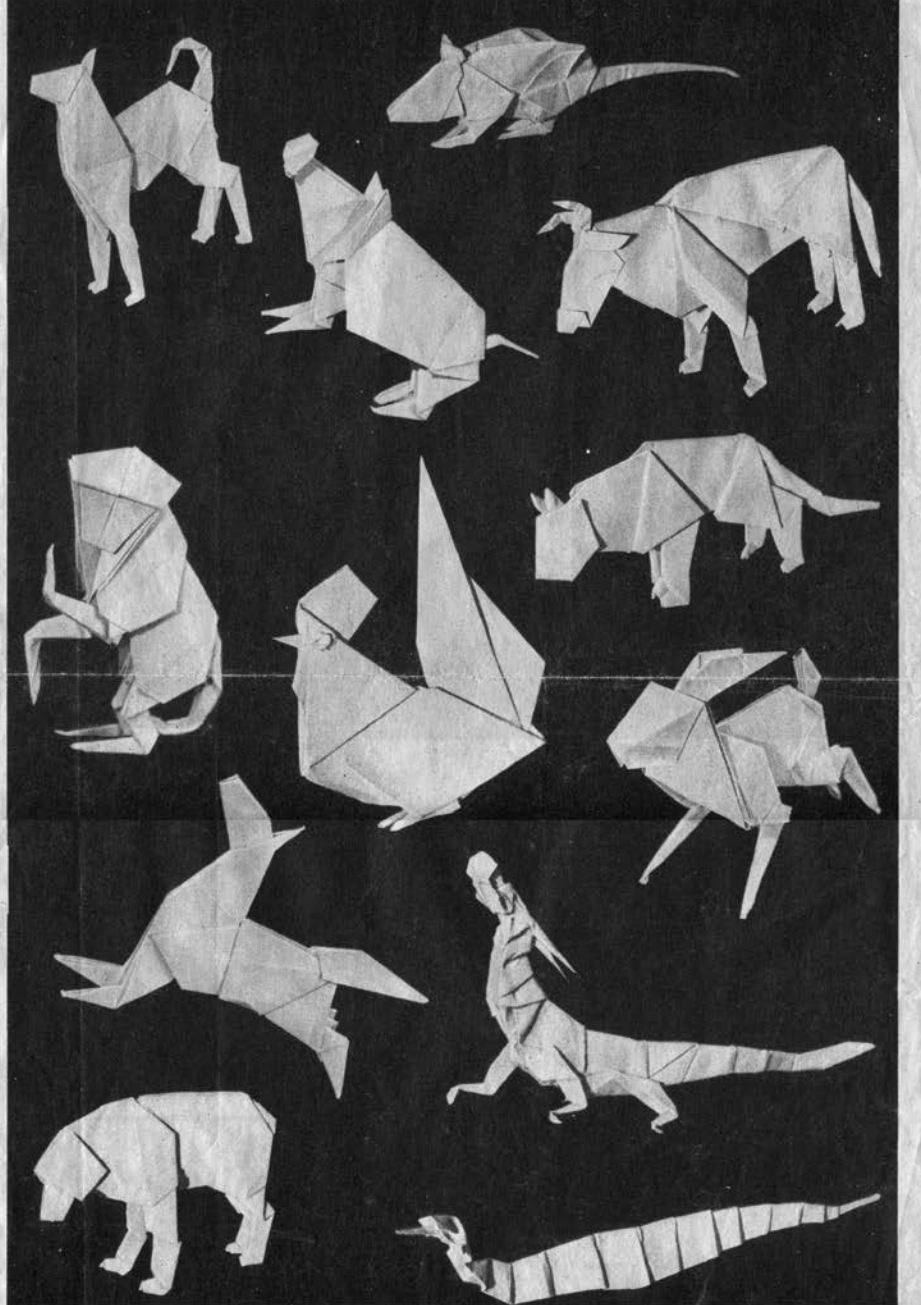
The Origami Zodiac by Akira Yoshizawa (1951)



These are the earliest known photographs of objects folded by Akira Yoshizawa.

The article in Asahi Graph was never circulated to the international origami community, and there is little likelihood that any of its members would have seen it following its publication in 1952. While this article was not responsible for boosting Yoshizawa’s recognition in the West, it nevertheless features the earliest photos of his folded paper objects, and it is a highly important source for studying the evolution of his artistry. The article, titled “*The new world of origami*,” was published January 9, 1952. The images reproduced here were taken from a copy of the issue that once belonged to Gershon Legman and is now maintained in the collection of the Origami Museum in Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay. All efforts to contact Asahi Graph to obtain its permission to publish these photos have so far proved unsuccessful. Due to the importance of this document, we elected to include the photos without having yet received a response from the magazine’s editors.

by L.R. (translated from Spanish by James Buschman)



The Origami Zodiac created by Akira Yoshizawa in 1951. Published in the *Asahi Graph Magazine* (January 9, 1952)

In 1952, the magazine *Asahi Graph* published an item featuring some of his figures, the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac, which astonished and delighted the Japanese public. These folds did not resemble traditional children's figures but were instead created with a surprising mastery and attention to detail. As Yoshizawa's fame grew, he began to appear in other publications, also staging his first exhibition in Tokyo. In a mere three years, his work transcended borders and continents, being displayed for the first time in the West at the Stedelijk Museum, which was then the most important modern art museum in Amsterdam.

Yoshizawa's career reached a crucial point in 1953. His hope of becoming recognized in the West had become a reality thanks not only to his perseverance but also to the connection he established at this time with Gershon Legman, an American intellectual whose many interests included paper folding. The origami historian David Lister referred to this interaction in the following way:

Undoubtedly the remote and unlikely chance that Gershon Legman got to know about Yoshizawa so soon after his appearance in "Asahi Graph" was a tremendous help in promoting Yoshizawa's career.²

This interpretation, reiterated in several of his writings, helped to cement the belief that the meeting between Yoshizawa and Gershon Legman, the person who promoted his artistry, had fundamentally occurred by happenstance. Our examination of how the encounter took place demonstrates clearly, however, that chance played only a minor role and that both Legman and Yoshizawa had already been actively exploring how they might get together.

As will be discussed in greater detail in the online continuation of this essay, Legman was the first of the two to write although his letter failed to reach Yoshizawa. Subsequently, in the manner of a blind date, Yoshizawa wrote to Legman, unaware that Legman had been trying to make contact with him.

But what occurred in the time between Legman's lost letter and the later one written by Yoshizawa? How was Legman's existence even known to Yoshizawa? And above all, is it a fact, as has been repeatedly alleged, that Legman persisted by writing over two hundred letters before finally eliciting a response by Yoshizawa?³

This historical account consists of a chronological review of the actual events occurring between 1951 and 1953 based on written correspondence involving Akira Yoshizawa, Gershon Legman and other figures of the period.

It is the first time this material has been subjected to a careful reading. The letters give us a glimpse of the protagonists, the interests involved in their exchange and the power relationship that was established between them. The correspondence of Akira Yoshizawa, Gershon Legman and others opens a unique window through which to understand the forces at play during the infancy of the modern origami movement. 📄

If you liked the story that was broadly outlined here, we invite you to read an extension, with fascinating details, in the online magazine *The Fold*:

<https://origamiusa.org/thefold/article/unwrapping-riddle-yoshizawa-legman>

1. Translated from the Spanish by James Buschman
Contributing editor: Michel Grand

2. <https://www.britishorigami.org/cp-lister-list/akira-yoshizawa/>

3. "Some reports say that Legman wrote as many as two hundred or more letters without a reply," wrote David Lister in his essay, which can be accessed at: <https://www.britishorigami.org/cp-lister-list/the-1955-exhibition-by-akira-yoshizawa/>
Besides this essay, the complete writings of David Lister, the leading origami historian of the 20th century, can be accessed at the British Origami Society's website.