

60 years ago 1953—A YEAR OF WONDERS

by Laura Rozenberg (NY)

Lillian Oppenheimer did not start her career in paperfolding until she was well into her 50's. Learning how to fold the flapping bird was a revelation to her. It happened in 1953, a year that brought other luminaries into paperfolding as well.

(Photo courtesy by the Archives of OrigamiUSA. Photo by M. Edelstein, undated. Origami outlines and montage: Masao, 2012)



Masao Edelstein

The OrigamiUSA Board Meeting was well under way on June 25 this year when someone dropped, almost absent-mindedly, an intriguing question: “Do we have any origami anniversaries this year?” “Well,” I replied. “As a matter of fact, we do. And more than one,” I beamed.

I guess no one was expecting to hear something so conclusive. “What?,” Wendy Zeichner said holding back a smile.

“True! Just 60 years ago, the year of 1953 was a remarkable year. David Lister, the British origami historian who recently passed away, made the interesting observation.” All the eyes were fixed on me. I had caught their attention.

Unfortunately we didn’t have much time to go into the details, so I made a mental note to write about these facts later. Lister was right—the year of 1953 had been an *Annus Mirabilis* (Year of Wonders) for the history of paper folding and the reasons why are worth telling.

1. Lillian Oppenheimer: the awakening of a passion

In 1953, Lillian was 55 years old and already a grandmother. Not that she had in mind to start a new career in her life! She had had a taste of paperfolding some twenty years before while she was raising her children, especially when one of her daughters, Molly, was sick with meningitis. Lillian had purchased a book to entertain her while she stayed in the hospital. The book had an explanation on how to fold a flapping bird; but the diagrams seemed too complicated, and the legend goes that at that time she never finished the model (another version of the story goes that Lil-

lian didn’t realize there was a flapping bird in that book, so she actually didn’t fold it because she didn’t see it!)

It would take Lillian almost 20 years to get back to that bird! One evening, during a family party, Lillian glanced a man—Laura Kruskal’s stepfather—who was at the back of the room folding a flapping bird. Intrigued, she approached, but the man mumbled something about not knowing how to teach the folding, so Lillian left sad and empty-handed. Then, in 1953, Emily Rosenthal, a teacher at the New School of Social Research in New York, finally taught Lillian how to do it right.* It definitely was a turning point in Lillian’s life. It was such a great feeling of accomplishment and it was so much fun that she promised herself she would try to teach it to as many people as possible, whenever she could and wherever she went. And that’s what she did. She dedicated the rest of her long life to the art of paperfolding.

popular culture and also a bibliographer, so he decided to apply his knowledge to an area ingeniously creative and surprisingly underestimated by those who considered it a mere children’s pastime. He began to compile a list of books on the subject from around the world in order to learn as much as possible about its origins and techniques. Although the information was scattered and often inaccurate, he started drafting a history of paperfolding employing the myriad of data that even today is hard to believe he was able to gather.

For his more simple, straightforward project of a bibliographical list, Legman sent literally hundreds of letters to libraries, scholars, booksellers and trading companies requesting information on vintage and new books on origami. By 1952, he self-published the first and most comprehensive bibliography on paperfolding with more than 300 entries. He sold the 8-page leaflet right from his home-based mail business at 8 cents a piece.

2. Gershon Legman “discovers” Akira Yoshizawa

Not far from Lillian’s home, in the Bronx to be more exact, a man named Gershon Legman was also discovering origami and finding that it was a fascinating, but hardly explored field. He was a scholar of

But Legman was dangerously approaching a crossroads in his life, too. Having studied topics that were considered immoral at that time (his interests ranged from bawdy words to dirty jokes to criticism on what he called a “replacement” of sexual content with violence in the media), and because he was openly against censorship, he



Gershon Legman teaching how to fold a flapping bird to children attending a workshop during the first exhibition of Akira Yoshizawa at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (1953). (Photo courtesy of Judith Legman.)

*There is another version brought up by Gay Merrill Gross that dates 1952 the year when Lillian Oppenheimer learned how to fold the flapping bird.

ended up being the target of regulatory entities to the extent that the FBI went after him (or so he thought). These were the years of McCarthyism in America, so the threats he received were not a joke. When it became evident that he could end up in jail, he decided it would be in his best interest to move to France, where he stayed for the rest of his life.

“These strands were initially separate but it was their eventual coming together that brought about the revolution in paperfolding, not only in Europe, but in much of the world.” -David Lister

The stress during the months before his self-exile didn't stop Legman from working as hard as usual. He continued doing research on his main topics of interest as well as on paperfolding. He was not associated with any formal institution, so technically it was the work of an amateur, but one of an extremely talented mind. After years of research, he pinpointed the major centers for paperfolding creativity (Japan, Spain and Argentina). He was eagerly looking for more clues from Japan and was trying

to find an elusive part of an encyclopedia called *Kan-no-mado*. His efforts led him to a startling finding that would change forever the way paperfolding was regarded in the West.

And what he found was a man.

In 1953, he learned for the first time about the existence of an extraordinarily talented paperfolder. The master was living in Japan and his name was Akira Yoshizawa. It took Legman several months before they started a fruitful correspondence, which led, a few years later, to the opening of the first exhibition of Mr. Yoshizawa's work in the Western world. The exhibition took place in Amsterdam in 1955, at the Museum of Modern Art (the Stedelijk Museum). How Legman and Yoshizawa got to know each other is a long and fascinating story worth another article, so right now I won't go further than stressing the importance of that year, 1953, when a man in Europe reached out for an obscure and poor master in Japan.

3. A British magician and a reclusive woman join the club

1953 was also a wonder year for Robert Harbin, the British magician, whose books on origami were used by generations of

paperfolders all over the world. According to David Lister, Harbin became acquainted with Gershon Legman due to a most fortuitous event. An American film producer living in England, Cy Enfield, was looking for a magician to play a part in a movie. The role was finally given to Harbin, and it is said that when Enfield saw Harbin folding paper during a break, his mind clicked and he remembered his old classmate in New Jersey—no other than Gershon Legman. So in 1953 thanks to Enfield and his good memory, Harbin became connected with Legman, and years of fruitful correspondence followed.

That's not enough for 1953 to be the year where it all started. Gershon Legman also contacted Ligia Montoya in that year, a reclusive paperfolder living in Argentina with whom he kept corresponding until her untimely death in 1967.

And David Lister himself said that his own interest in paperfolding took off in 1953, when he learned to fold the Chinese Junk.

One could argue why that happened. “Coincidence seemed to have taken charge,” said Lister. But also the field was becoming ripe for a change. 📄

1853-1953 ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN JAPAN AND THE WESTERN WORLD

by L.R. — Gershon Legman knew how to write seductive letters. But on January 20, 1953, when he sat to write a letter to the editor of *Asahi Shinbun*, the most prominent newspaper of Japan, he just wanted to please him. And he pitched on a perfect excuse. He realized that 1953 was a year of enormous significance for both Japan and the West. It represented the 100th anniversary of the opening of commerce between Japan and the West! So he set to write: “My interest stems from an international study of Japanese and Hispanic paper-folding (origami) which I have been attempting to compile over the last few years for publication in the British Journal of Occasional Bibliography, to commemorate—in a small and folkloristic way—the centenary of the opening of your country to intercourse with the West in 1853.”

Was that his real purpose? Probably not. But he got what he wanted: an orientation on Japanese origami books, and, if not enough, a hint that would lead him shortly to the “discovery” of the man who changed origami forever: Akira Yoshizawa.

My interest stems from an international study of Japanese and Hispanic paper-folding (origami) which I have been attempting to compile over the last few years for publication in the British Journal of Occasional Bibliography, to commemorate - in a small and folkloristic way - the centenary of the opening of your country to intercourse with the west in 1853.

Excerpt of the letter that G. Legman sent to the *Asahi Shinbun* on Jan 20, 1953. (Letter courtesy of L.R. collection of archival documents).