

When Origami Came to Harlem

by Laura Rozenberg(*)

Harlem is not a neighborhood that would be automatically associated with origami, and paper folding is not commonly practiced by its residents. Seventy years ago, it would have been even less likely for Harlem, with its majority Black population, to experience an almost unknown art form primarily linked to Japanese culture. At the start of 1952, however, a unique and unprecedented opportunity for Black children emerged in the heart of the heavily populated neighborhood, one that could be described as the first origami workshop to take place in New York City.

But this was no ordinary origami workshop conducted to entertain children. During several weeks (the precise dates are not known), the activities that took place at the Lafargue Mental Health Clinic had a specific purpose: to encourage young people to turn their attention to a manual exercise that would divert them from violent comic books. If origami could also help these children express their emotional problems to staff therapists, this would be an added benefit.

The experience was singular for that period due to the environment in which it was conducted since the city's Black were systematically denied access to the city's mental health facilities and the use of the creative arts was not yet a common feature in therapeutic sessions. This amounted to out-and-out innovation in the least likely location.

The idea of introducing origami at the clinic came from Gershon Legman, a young man with no medical training but

The facade of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, on whose property the Lafargue Clinic operated (photo by Laura Rozenberg, 2017)



HISTORY OF PAPERFOLDING

a wealth of contacts among the intellectual elites of New York's psychoanalytical community. In time, Legman would be remembered as the patron and first historian of paper folding. Surprisingly, however, his work at the Lafargue Clinic remained undocumented and would probably never have come to light but for the correspondence between Legman and those closest to him, with whom he regularly shared accounts of his activities at Lafargue. Today this body of correspondence is housed within the historical archive of the Origami Museum in Colonia del Sacramento, Uruguay, and the present article is the first occasion for a review of the letters to uncover traces of the past and understand how Legman came to his role as a participant in the clinic's therapeutic mission.

Up to that point, Legman had worked as a bibliographer, writer and investigator of *risqué* subjects such as pornography, routine and "banned" sexual habits and anything having to do with those aspects

of everyday life that were practiced behind closed doors and rarely discussed in public – and that even less frequently became a focus of academic research. Legman was a self-taught outsider with a brilliant mind capable of memorizing the Talmud, the central interpretative text of the Jewish religion. At the same time, he wrote essays on eroticism in popular culture, published anti-censorship pamphlets, lived under the threat of imprisonment and earned a living from occasional clients for whom he wrote bawdy novels, drawing on the hard-to-classify materials provided by the librarians who maintained custody of the "hell boxes".

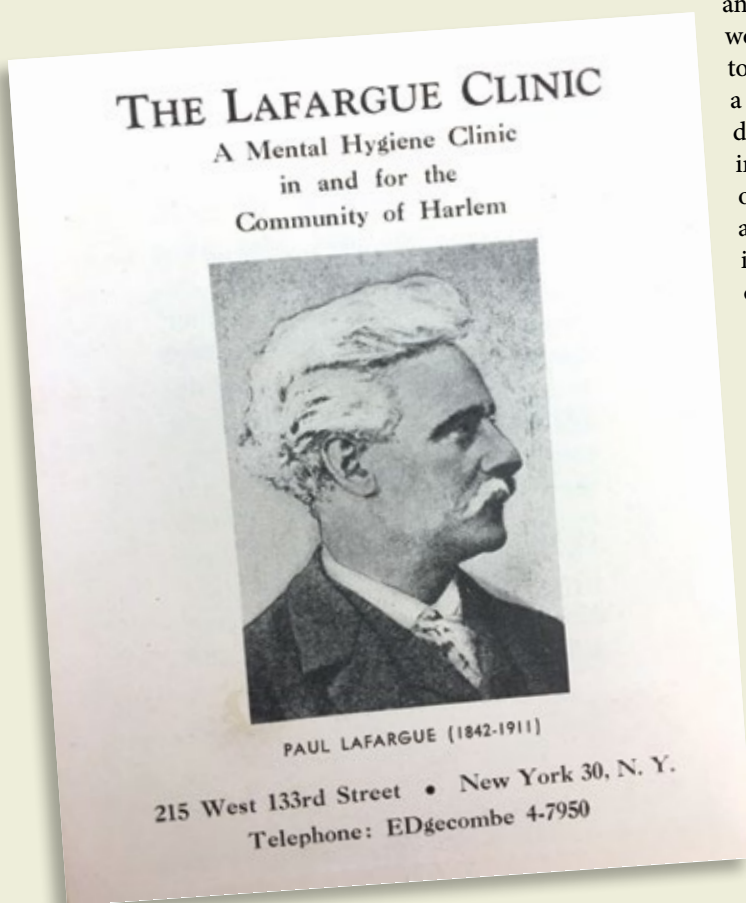
Legman was also devoted to origami. It intrigued him because he viewed it as an artistic medium with the potential to contribute knowledge through the use of the same tools he employed in his other studies. As a bibliographer, he was trained in the techniques of conducting searches for little-known books and documents in the manner of a detective, and he put these skills to work tracing the history of paper folding, a universal practice of diverse origins not only in Japanese culture but other parts of the world as well. He was also intrigued, however, by common-sense applications of paper folding,

initially seeking a way to turn a profit from it (quickly abandoning this notion) and subsequently attempting to present it as an alternative form of diversion for young people. These efforts were in line with a movement advocating the rejection of "blood-gushing" comic books out of a debatable fear that these would induce their readers to commit all manner of misdeeds and crimes like the ones that appeared on their pages.

Not long after the end of World War II, Legman contacted various New York psychoanalysts, notably Fredric Wertham, to propose incorporating origami as a way "to teach [the children] a pleasant art and at the same time quiet their nerves."

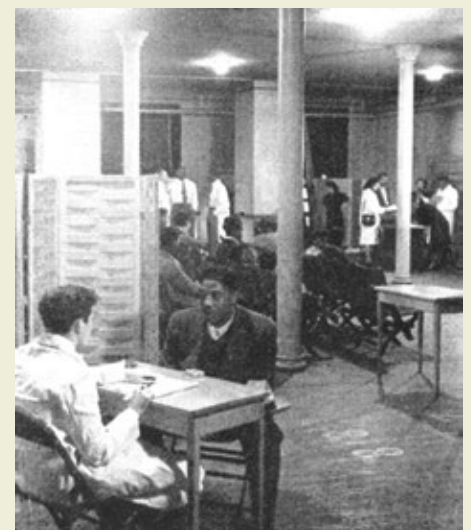
This concept transformed Legman into a pioneer in viewing origami as a therapeutic tool – and within an environment that seemed unthinkable during that era.

The Lafargue Clinic was the first facility to offer mental health services to Blacks, who were systematically denied access to this care throughout the boroughs of New York City. Lafargue was a beacon in the civil rights struggle: Its director, Wertham, played an important role in desegregating the Delaware state school system by serving as a consultant on the effects of segregation not only on students of color but on white students as well. Wertham and the Lafargue Clinic were part of an heroic action that sought



LEFT. Brochure for the Lafargue Clinic (Image courtesy of Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, 2017).

RIGHT. Doctors and patients engaged in therapy sessions at the Lafargue Clinic (no date).



RIGHT. Actual view of the St. Philip Church basement where the clinic operated in the '50s (photo by Laura Rozenberg, 2017)

BELOW. Gershon Legman in New York c.1950. (photo courtesy of Judith Legman)



to include the most deprived members of society in a public space devoted to play and healing. As we will see below, Legman was no stranger to such principles.

In the letters sent by Legman to his circle of acquaintances who shared his interest in origami, there are many references to the Lafargue Clinic. As I reviewed this correspondence, I asked myself whether other evidence of his presence at the clinic existed – perhaps in photos or texts. To explore this, I visited the Frederic Wertham archive at the U.S. Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. in March 2017. Among his papers, I discovered notes by Wertham of telephone conversations with Legman, and I was able to establish Legman's clear interest in developing Wertham's enthusiasm for origami.

With the same objective, I visited the rectory of St. Philip's Church in Harlem that same year and was invited to visit the basement space where the Lafargue Clinic operated in the 1950s, since converted into a large multipurpose area. Several blocks away, at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, a New York Public Library branch located on Malcolm X Boulevard in the heart of Harlem, I obtained photographs and documents kept in the Lafargue Clinic archive, but unfortunately none indicating Legman and the children engaged in the making

of folded paper objects. There were several images of Wertham, however, showing him together with the children: Some photos showed a sort of puppet theater; others depicted the children playing with blocks on the floor. These provided at least rudimentary evidence that techniques of artistic expression were used to address emotions.

Although my search for photos confirming Legman's presence at the Lafargue Clinic was fruitless, the notes from a phone call about this topic provided a clue. There were also several letters between Legman and his friends and acquaintances (among them origamists Akira Yoshizawa and Ligia Montoya, physician Ethan Allan Brown and publisher Frederic Melcher) making repeated references to his project at the Lafargue Clinic.

Based on all these elements, I attempted to reconstruct the circumstances that could have led Legman to collaborate with the Lafargue Clinic. The result is an article that, due to its length, is published in *The Fold*, the online magazine of OrigamiUSA.

Legman was a controversial figure: multifaceted, difficult to categorize, frequently explosive and contradictory. Many of his contemporaries were fascinated by his personality and brilliant mind, so much so that he appeared in various lights in books that portrayed that epoch, including *Rebel Without Applause* by Jay Landesman (The Permanent Press, 1987) and *Nothing More to Declare* by John

Clellon Holmes (Dutton, 1967). Landesman and Holmes were two of the mythic figures of the Beat Generation who recognized Legman's enormous influence on their budding careers as writers. Both Holmes and Landesman devoted extensive portions of the aforementioned books to accounts of the time they spent with Legman, his unpredictable personality, his thought processes, which were so far in advance of the times, and, finally, the impossibility of pigeonholing him into any standard definition or movement.

As will be seen in the article for *The Fold*, Legman was no stranger to these debates; his mission was to test the possibility of introducing young people to interests other than comics. As mentioned earlier, all this activity is traced in the voluminous correspondence that Legman in one line maintained with dozens of people dedicated to the world of origami. These documents, which can today be consulted at the Origami Museum in Colonia, represent an invitation to conduct further research into a chapter in the initial and fertile development of the origami movement in which Gershon Legman was one of the principal protagonists. 🏠

I invite you to read the article in *The Fold* that relates the story of how origami arrived in Harlem, brought by Gershon Legman. The link to access the article is: <https://origamiusa.org/thefold/article/when-origami-came-harlem>

(* Translated from Spanish by James Buscham. Edited by Jane Rosemarin.