

BARLAHAM BENÍTEZ VARGAS:

He Makes Clock Watchers Out of All of Us

interview by Laura Rozenberg.

Photos by Barlaham Benítez Vargas (Mexico)

Barlaham Benítez Vargas is a lone folder who lives in Mexico. Very few people in the origami community worldwide knew about him until a couple of years ago when his rendering of Robert Lang's "Black Forest Cuckoo Clock"—one of the most difficult models of all times—appeared on Flickr and other social media websites. It was an outstanding representation, probably the best we've seen after Robert Lang's own design. Intrigued, Laura Rozenberg, the editor of *The Paper*, sent him elephant hide paper, which is difficult to find in Mexico, and he set to work again. After several months, the new model—his fourth interpretation—was complete. A true work of art! Even Robert Lang was surprised, when he saw it at the recent OrigamiUSA Annual Convention in New York. In this interview, Barlaham reflects on this work, the obstacles he found along the process, and his feelings along the way.



Barlaham, tell us something about your life. Where you were born and grew.

My name is Barlaham Benítez Vargas. I was born and raised in San Luis de la Paz, a small town in Guanajuato state, in the center of Mexico. It is a peaceful and hardly boisterous town. As unpleasant as it may seem for some people, for someone like me it is an excellent place because one can always find new things to do. I lived and grew here for 29 years, almost 30.



Do you remember the first model you folded? I was 8 years old when I folded my first one from a book at school. It was a traditional piggy.

When did you start folding paper? Did you have any instructor or just from books? Are there artists in your family?

I had my first experience with origami in elementary school, but only started practicing it more seriously about eight or nine years ago. With the arrival of the Internet, the information was just a click away and that was phenomenal for me. The way I grew up made me a relatively tranquil person. I am not the athletic type, I don't practice sports regularly, so I believe I was drawn to origami in part for that reason. I can say I am a self-taught origamist because when I started I only had books. I remember one in particular where I found the first model I learned to fold. Much to my surprise, even today relatively few people are aware of the art, so imagine twenty years ago when the access to information was not as it is today. I never belonged to an association or origami group, although I taught to small groups while I was studying Japanese in the university.

Although there are no formal artists in my family, I never stayed away from arts. My mum, she's very good at knitting and my dad has been an amateur photographer for most of his life. I would say I have art in my blood. Since I was a little child I grew up with classical music and what would be better than combining music with paperfolding!

What is your current profession and how much time are you able to dedicate to folding paper?

I graduated in graphic design (I'm still working towards the degree). For the moment, I am in charge of a family business. It's not that bad, from time to time I can work in design and what is more important to me is that I can work almost full time in paperfolding.

You are extraordinarily talented. Your rendering of the Cuckoo Clock by Robert Lang, and the Ryujin by Satoshi Kamiya leave people in awe. Recently you agreed to make a Lang's Cuckoo

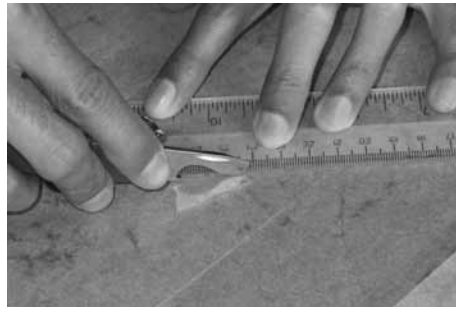


Taping the two pieces of paper. After cutting the paper very accurately, the next step was joining them. From the start, all has to be done very carefully. Any minimal mistake at the beginning, will bring disaster at the end.

for an upcoming exhibition of paper-folding in Uruguay, and I would very much thank you if you could possibly describe the process.

How long did it take, if you had done the experience before, and what did you feel doing it?

It took me a long, long time, and that is one of my secrets. Any project has its own pace, and I never force myself to reach a model finished. If at midway I find an obstacle or I lose patience, I put it aside for a couple of days so as to clear my mind, and then I continue with no pressure. Usually I don't put aside paperfolding but there are times when it is better to move away completely and try to find a bit of distraction. I play music and do long walks. If I'm not too annoyed with the project I simply look for a new model,



Using a tool to help precreasing (step 12 in the diagrams). Sometimes I find it helpful to use some tools to help me fold or crease the paper. It makes the pre-creasing easier, especially when working with large pieces of paper.

to do something different, and then I take on the old project.

Until now, I folded four Robert Lang's Cuckoo Clocks. The first three are relatively similar in technique and style (two of them can be found on my Flickr account), and the only difference is that one is larger than the other two. These first three were folded using double tissue paper bonded with spray adhesive. Dry folded and with some touches of glue and some pieces of wire to help them keep their shape (I don't mind purism). The fourth is the one I folded for the exhibition in Uruguay.

And how does it feel? It's a beautiful range of emotions. Starting with a doubt: how am I going to proceed with new material of which I know nothing about? The anxiety of the start. The horror and desperation

when things don't work as you thought. The relief when you take the right direction. And the deep satisfaction and awe when the project is complete.

What were the major challenges?

I wouldn't call them challenges. It was more like a learning experience.

To begin with, the plan: I knew it would not be "any" model, and that I could not take it lightly, as it was the first relatively complex model I would fold, and one of the most remarkable models of all times. Due to the limitations of resources I could not afford the luxury of wasting paper (I had to perfectly cut the original sheets into rectangles and glue them before I could start folding the model). I had to do it right from the start to minimize any error. I knew that I only would have some time available to fold during the day. (I don't like to work with artificial lights.) And the limited space disposable I have to work was a little issue that I had to think about.

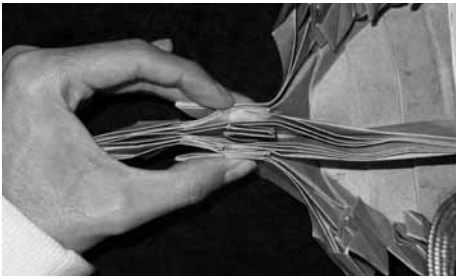
The paper: I always adapted to the paper available. I don't have too many options where I live, and bringing paper from other countries is a little expensive, especially if the model gets spoiled and I lose the investment. I had never worked with the type of paper I used for the last interpretation (elephant hide). My first impression was that the paper was not the right choice for the model because when I started folding I did a dry fold (without applying the wet-folding technique). I was horrified by the way the model looked at that early stage!

Then I applied the wet-folding technique after I unfolded the whole model and it was magic! It was the first time I used it and although it's been a while since I finished the project, I have no words to describe how I felt. Everything seemed so familiar, from start to finish. There were no tests, it was like I had always been using the technique, or as if instinctively knew what parts needed more humidity and which ones less. It's hard to describe the excitement of seeing the piece taking shape, at least at first try. I'm still in awe for my achievement.

A good part of the technique involves knowing the model and the process of folding because once you dampen the paper you have to work fast so the paper stays wet until the end of the folding.



Starting to fold the model. After the pre-creasing, everything is really easy. The diagrams are not difficult to follow and most of the needed marks are there. You only need patience and a little bit of practice. Do not rush! Take your time.



A nightmare. After folding the model dry and arrived to the head of the deer, I almost panicked when I saw the paper was too thick there. But I had to do the wet-folding.

As per this model, I have no particular secrets. The diagrams are enough to get you going and to achieve a good reproduction if you use the wet-folding technique.

Based on my experience, these are my three rules for a good interpretation:

- 1) Take your time. It doesn't matter if it will take you days or months. In the end, the result will be more satisfactory.
- 2) Test the model. Fold it over and over again (if you can). Find what you can improve and where you can put some of you.
- 3) The most important rule: your interpretation should be a reflection of your respect for the work of the creator. Don't take an interpretation lightly, give the best of your-



Wet folding. Although the paper should be wet since the beginning, I folded the model dry and unfolded completely to fold it again wet. The model didn't change its shape.

self, show your gratefulness and respect for the work of the others through your work and effort.

Is it like interpreting music?

Yes, definitely. You begin playing with the score and later you apply your style. Same with the diagrams, once you get to know the model you can change the order of some steps or some of the shaping and in the end there is something from yourself that stays in the model, be it in the way it's been folded or in the invisible factor called "interpretation" or personal "touch."

Each time is a little different?

It is always different, sometimes you learn something and sometimes you learn other

things. Very rarely I fold a model only once, that's another of my secrets. I think only the creator of the model knows its secrets in depth and this is something that can't be explained in a diagram. That's why I believe that only by folding a model over and over again it is possible to unveil the secrets kept in the model and with time and practice, somehow, the model takes life.

How do you feel when you finish one of these masterpieces?

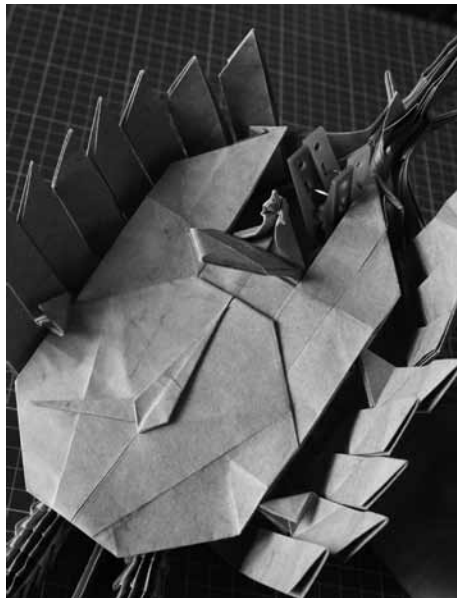
I'm always satisfied. On some occasions like this one, I was really surprised of the achievement. And not only when I finish a model so complex, it also happens with easier models that I gave as gifts to people close to me. Once, not so long ago, I was so happy when I finished a model that I was moved to tears.

What new pieces are you working on right now or what do you plan to do in the future?

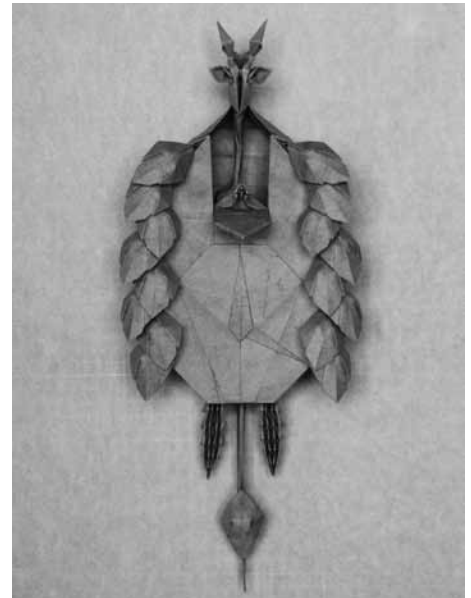
While I enjoy very much to interpret the work of creators, I would like to use some time in creating my own models. Strangely enough I don't own a personal collection, I only have small models, so this is one of my short-term projects: to start my own collection. 📄



Improvising. I don't have sophisticated tools. I like to improvise. Here using a wooden compass (very big, the type that is used in blackboards), to press the head of the deer while it gets dry.



Magic. It is like magic, or even more, when applying wet-folding. Seeing how little by little the model, with this type of paper, went alive—it is almost supernatural. It went from nightmare to wonder. I think I will never be able to explain my state of awe.



The finished model.