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Legman, Tikotin and Yoshizawa: A Trio That Transformed the Art of Paperfolding

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biography (/thefold/keywords/226) history (/thefold/keywords/236)

Editor's note: Endnotes appear after the photos at the bottom of this article. They also appear in a separate article, (/thefold/article /legman-tikotin-and-yoshizawa-endnotes) so the reader can refer to them by opening the notes in a second window.

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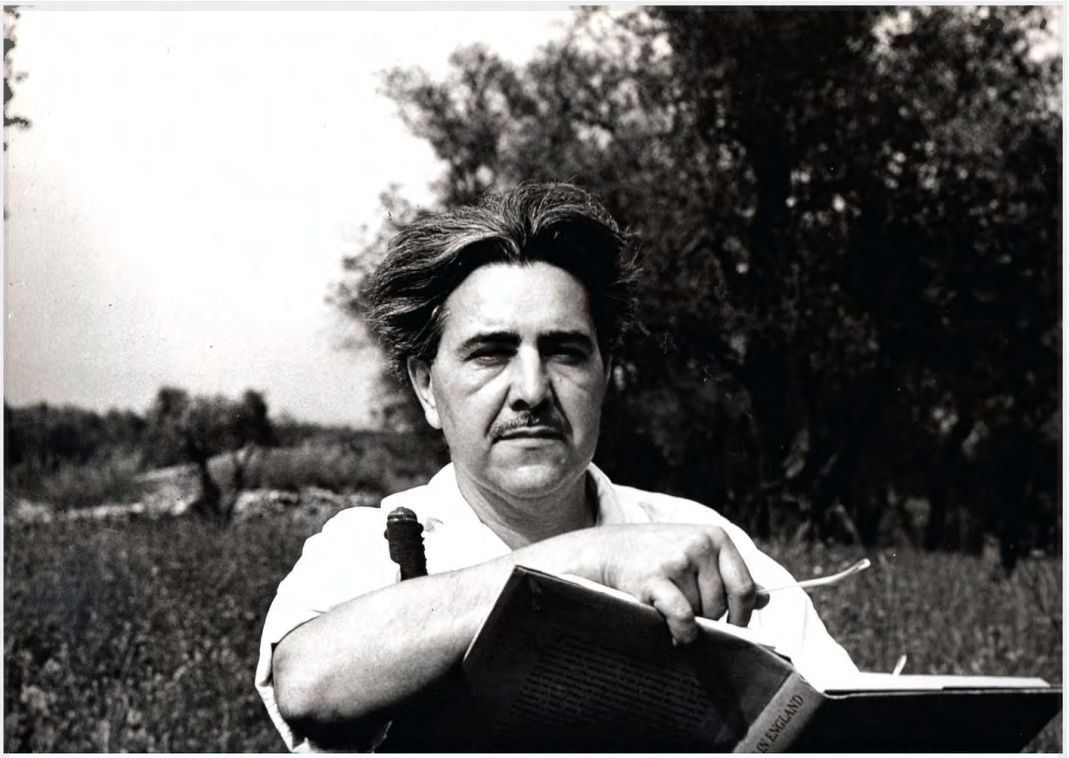
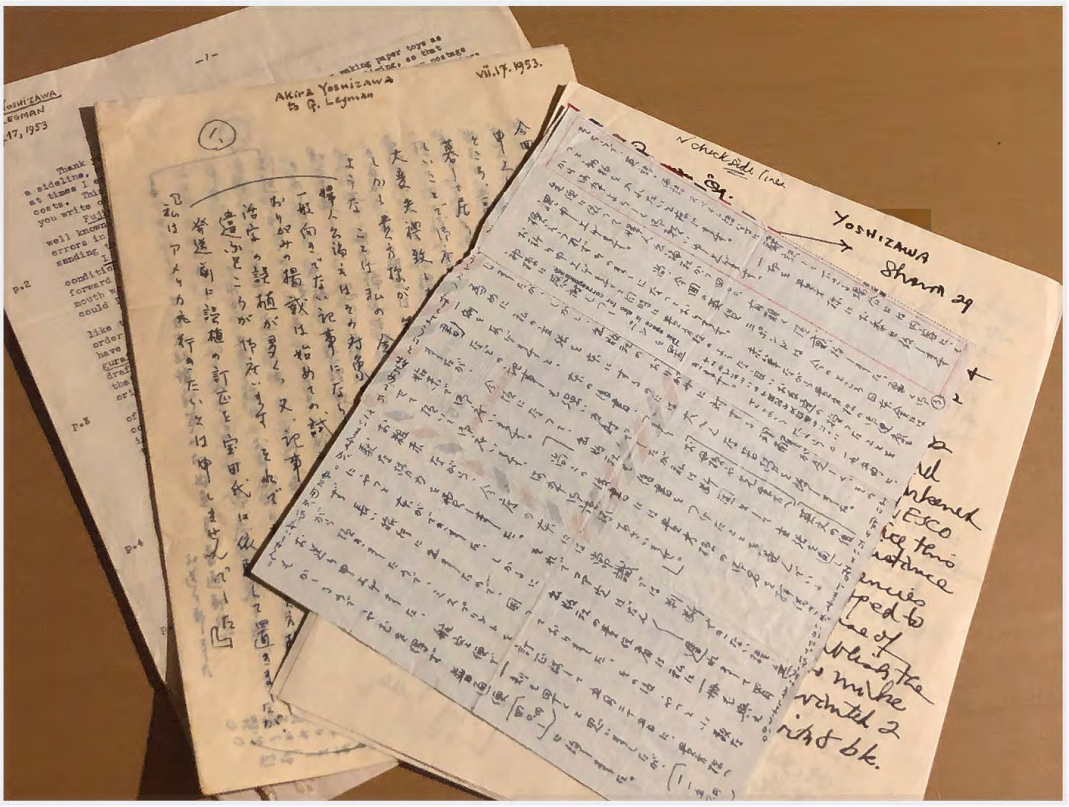
This research, which is briefly highlighted in the magazine The Paper (issue 139, 2022), sheds light on the events that resulted in the famous exhibition by Akira Yoshizawa at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1955. The account traces the steps of Gershon Legman, an anti-establishment figure who was at that time engaged in editing a monumental catalogue raisonné of erotic jokes as well as a book on limericks. Branded a proponent of obscene ideas, Legman chose to emigrate to France, where he continued his academic work but also labored assiduously to introduce the origami art of Akira Yoshizawa, a virtually unknown Japanese artist, to the West. This research is based on the correspondence between the two men; it reveals hitherto unknown details that further animate this history, which is key to understanding the origin of modern origami.



Gershon Legman in France. Photo by Wayland Hand

Gershon Legman was so devoted to assisting Akira Yoshizawa that he continued to dwell on him during the bustling activities of his exile. He had departed New York in August 1953 to take up residence in France, where he would remain for the rest of his life, and this expatriate experience would change his perspective in many ways.

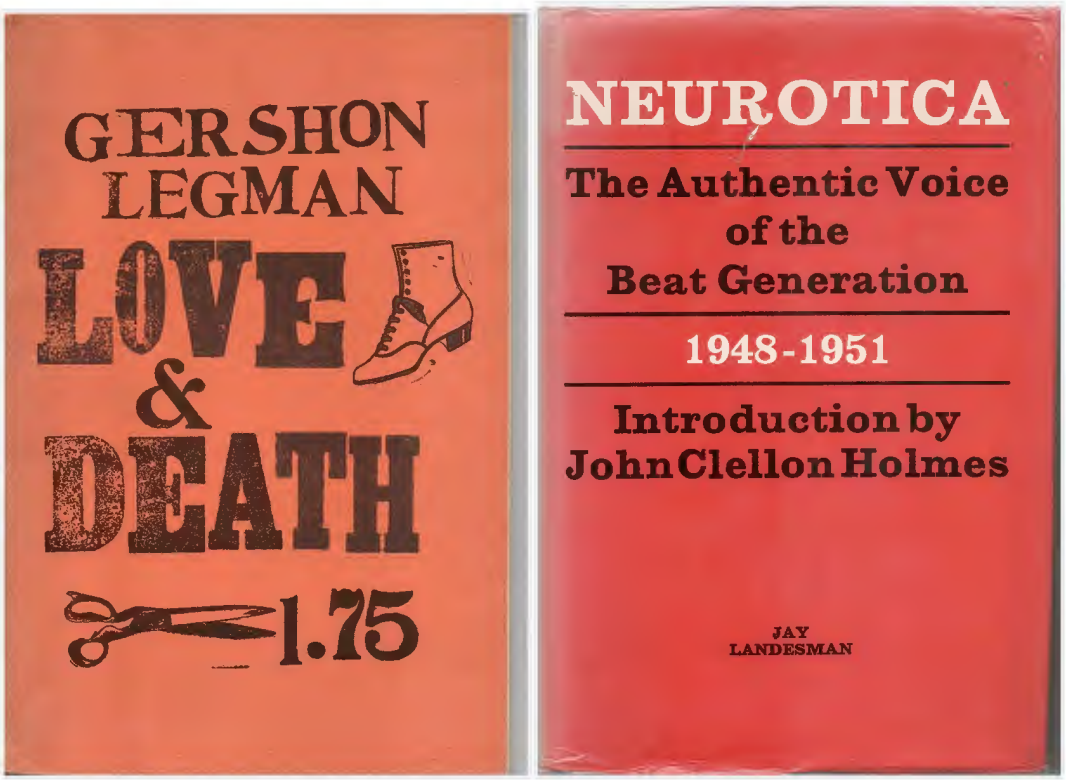
Having discovered Yoshizawa's talents during the months prior to his departure, Legman was convinced that he had found a genius. Such beginnings, forged by the heat of the pages that constantly flew in both directions between Tokyo and New York (later France), constituted the starting point for a new art movement that eventually came to be called modern origami.



Letters from Yoshizawa to Legman and their translation.

But all this was still far from becoming a reality on the morning of Aug. 18, 1953, when Legman, weary but undefeated at the age of

36, was sitting in the kitchen of his tiny house in the Bronx. He would sail the next day for the port of Le Havre aboard the steamship Flandre. This was not a pleasant voyage, and it was not clear to him when, or if ever, he would return. The experiences of recent years had been extremely hard on him, and he no longer felt comfortable in America, which was experiencing the harsh repression of McCarthyism. He had been advised on several occasions that his writings and academic interests were not seen in a good light by the so-called "protectors of morality and decency." His book "Love and Death: A Study on Censorship"[2] had been classified as obscene material, and the U.S. Postal Service suspended its distribution despite Legman's disclaimer to the accusatory tribunal that began to persecute him.[3]



Legman's problems with the McCarthyite censorship apparatus did not begin with "Love and Death" but had in fact started earlier, when he was a writer for the magazine Neurotica, where he also worked as an occasional editor. The relationship between Legman and the founder of Neurotica is deserving of mention since it helps explain Legman's multiple interests, although, strangely enough, these did not interfere with his passion for origami. It also demonstrates the peculiar characteristics of his personality: As editor for Neurotica, he discovered and nurtured certain emerging voices (and fought with others) who would play key roles in the rise of the Beat Generation.[4] The same pattern was repeated with his other facet, origami, where Legman's talent for discovering artists stood out.

Neurotica was a small quarterly periodical designed by Jay Landesman, a charismatic antiquarian who had decided to abandon the family business in St. Louis to try his luck in the publishing world. Launched in the spring of 1948, it sold out its first issue in the New York City bookstores that were the centers of the underground culture.

In his memoir, "Rebel Without Applause,"[5] Landesman recounted an episode that transformed his life, one in which Legman played a major role. Interestingly, the same story also appears in detail in the memoirs of John Clellon Holmes,[6] one of the earliest writers of the Beat Generation. Both recalled a hot Fourth of July weekend in 1948 when they met Gershon Legman at his home in the Bronx. Describing the evening in similar terms, Landesman and Holmes each highlighted how he realized that Legman would be the key to advancing the magazine's editorial stance. Legman grudgingly accepted their proposal, sensing that the magazine would be a good vehicle for him to attract interesting authors and could also serve as a radical space from which to publish essays challenging the prevailing censorship. His adventure as the editor of Neurotica, masterfully recounted with a dose of humor in Landesman's memoirs, served as the prelude that led Legman to become estranged with government authorities and to make the decision to go into exile in France.

From those tumultuous years, Legman would retain a single stabilizing factor — his passion for origami — that was less belligerent and that he refused to give up in the face of many difficulties. This led him to the discovery of artists like Yoshizawa, who, encouraged by Legman, succeeded in developing their potential and forming a network of enthusiasts who swapped letters, in this way forming the basis of modern origami.

In 1952, Legman continued to be plagued by the censorship imposed on him by the authorities. In this stifling atmosphere, his only escape was to go abroad. The opportunity came when a bookseller friend, like Legman a devotee of underground literature, paid his passage to France, and even offered Legman small stipend in exchange for the promise that, once settled in Paris, he would

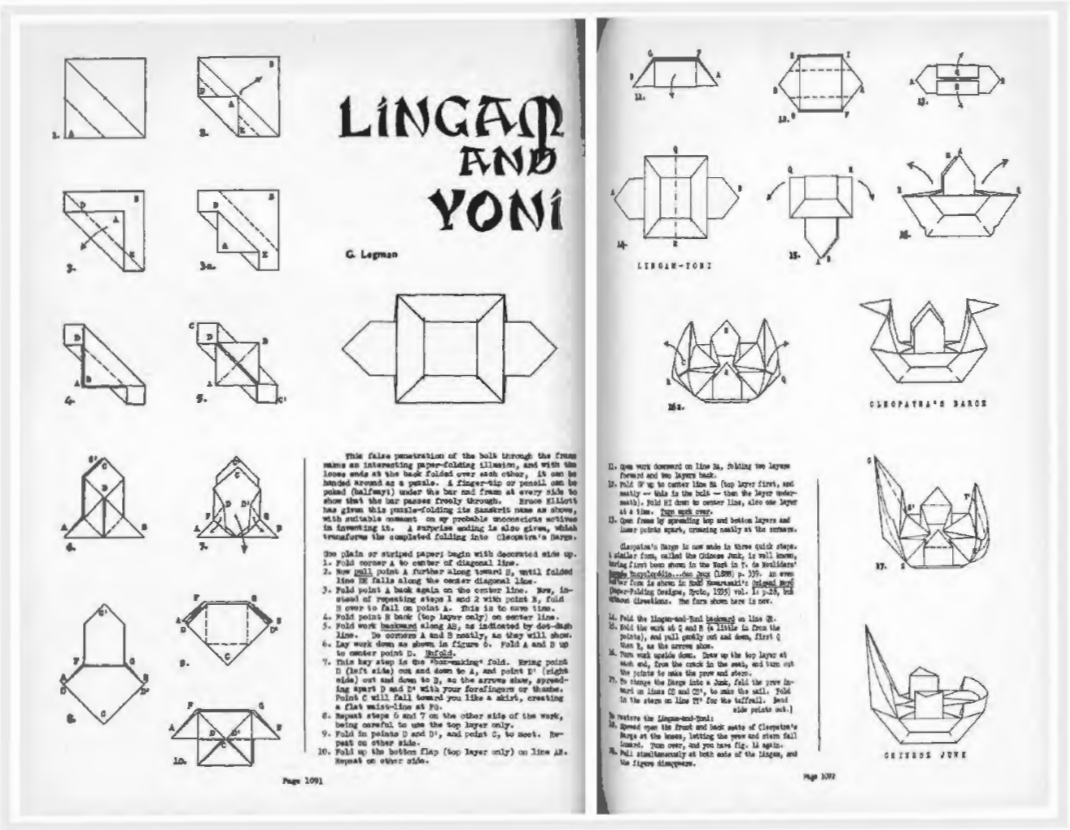
oversee the English-language printing of several books that had been prohibited in America.[7]

That assignment was liberating. Legman needed a break before taking on the Herculean task of collecting and analyzing in Freudian terms the infinite varieties of the erotic joke, a project that would result in publication several years later.[8] He saw Paris as a city filled with social and intellectual opportunities that he did not wish to pass up.

An American in Paris

The ocean voyage that culminated with his arrival in Le Havre at the end of August 1953 provided Legman with an opportunity to finish his outline of the concepts that would anchor his research in the years that followed. His profile as a critic of censorship in the United States became a launching pad allowing him to develop lines of research that even today remain the subject of social science debate.[9]

He also intended to continue with his investigations of paperfolding, an art that was as fascinating to him as his more erudite studies.



Diagrams for Lingam and Yoni and Cleopatra's Barge by Gershon Legman.

Origami combined all the ingredients to make it an object of serious study. He was interested in its historical perspective and its connection to children's play, and he felt comfortable in researching both areas. Moreover, origami included an element of exoticism and mystery. At an earlier point, he had created a simple origami design titled Lingam and Yoni, which was published in Phoenix, a magic magazine. According to Legman, the name had been chosen by the editor, Bruce Elliott, in a complicit allusion to Legman's "unconscious motives" since the original Sanskrit term referred to sexual endowment.[10] With a few more movements, the model could be transformed in a boat that he named Cleopatra's Barge.[11]

Sometime later, as Legman prepared for his European voyage, events transpired that would form the start of his relationship with Akira Yoshizawa.[12]

Legman's early involvement with origami had not been motivated by science. It was his skill as a bibliographer that gave him a qualitative edge in researching its historical roots. For him, this activity provided a respite that helped him step back from his academic interests — a kind of intellectual recreation.

Shortly before the end of World War II, he imagined that he might derive some income from the subject. His idea in starting to collect different designs was to publish a children's book, though this plan never came to fruition. He regularly visited libraries, purchased old books, set up an index of file cards and began to contact individuals around the world.

His relationship with Akira Yoshizawa emerged from these searches and letter exchanges.[13] The artist sent him diagrams that he

regularly published in Japanese magazines, and Legman sensed that a collection of these designs and Yoshizawa's more advanced models would meet with success. All the books he knew on origami were written for children, as his own book project would have been had he not abandoned it. By contrast, Yoshizawa was taking origami to heights never imagined. This led Legman to change his view. He was now convinced that the educated public he expected to find in Paris would show interest in a book that would also function as an objet d'art in a manner similar to the volumes of ukiyo-e prints[14] so sought after by collectors. His hope was to find someone to help him make this project a reality. And he made Yoshizawa aware of this.

The morning before his departure, Legman wrote him a letter while sipping coffee as the cats clambered over piles of books in his kitchen. "I am leaving tomorrow for France. … I wish I could help in promoting this publication, and I am turning my mind to ways of doing so. I will not make promises just at this moment, but I have a number of ideas which are not without hope."[15]

Arriving in Paris in August 1953, Legman searched for housing in the Quartier Latin. There he found a room in the Hotel Dinard, where, years before, the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke had lived with his friend, the painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. The Dinard's location at 29, rue Cassette was across from a convent, and the street view from the hotel's cramped rooms looked out at the ancient trees in the nunnery courtyard. For Legman, the experience of treading the floors where the poet had once walked and living in the petite chambre where Modersohn-Becker had painted her famous nude self-portraits almost a half-century earlier was a good omen.[16]

Diagrams for two Yoshizawa designs and the traditional Crane in Fujin Koron magazine (1952).

While Legman put his new life in order in Paris, Yoshizawa continued his progression of publications in Japan. Since his article in Asahi Graph magazine, which had pictures of his 12 masterfully folded zodiac symbols as well as photographs of the artist in the process of folding,[17] various media outlets had contacted him with proposals for collaboration. Beginning in March 1952, his diagrams were published in Fujin Koron, a nationally circulating magazine that featured a variety of advice columns and crafts targeting a female readership.[18] He had also begun to develop pieces for a possible exhibition in Tokyo and had embarked on the publication of his first book.

One sunny morning in May 1954, the manager of the pension near the church of Saint-Germain-des-Près, to which Legman had recently moved, handed him a package that had arrived from Japan. Legman's heart skipped a beat when he opened it to find a small book in landscape format emblazoned with the familiar peacock image that Akira Yoshizawa had sent in his first letter the year before. The book was a gift from Masamishi Takarada, editor of Fujin Koron, the magazine in which Yoshizawa was now a collaborator.

Yoshizawa's first book, "Atarashii Origami Geijutsu." In the collection of the Origami Museum, Colonia, Uruguay.

With the assistance of a translator friend, Philip Yampolsky,[19] Legman learned that the title of the first book by Yoshizawa was "Atarashii Origami Geijutsu" (The New Art of Origami).[20] This was the book Legman had been waiting for. He no longer needed to create something "from scratch." It was only necessary to translate the "Atarashii" and find a publisher who would agree to distribute it in Western countries.

He began to shop the book to publishers in the hope of finding one interested in financing its translation into English, French or Spanish "… or the three languages in a single book."[21] Despite his efforts, it appeared that no publishing house was sufficiently impressed or disposed to invest in such a project. Refusing to accept failure, Legman relayed the news to Yoshizawa and kept him informed of his efforts.

The other possibility – that of staging an exhibition in Paris – seemed even more remote, but Legman was someone who knew how to seize opportunities. Although he could not have known it at that time, he was about to meet the person who would help him gain entry into the world of the art galleries.

To a significant extent, this would involve Legman being in the right place at the right time. While he lacked funding, his meanderings through the narrow byways of the Latin Quarter served him as a source of both delight and inspiration.

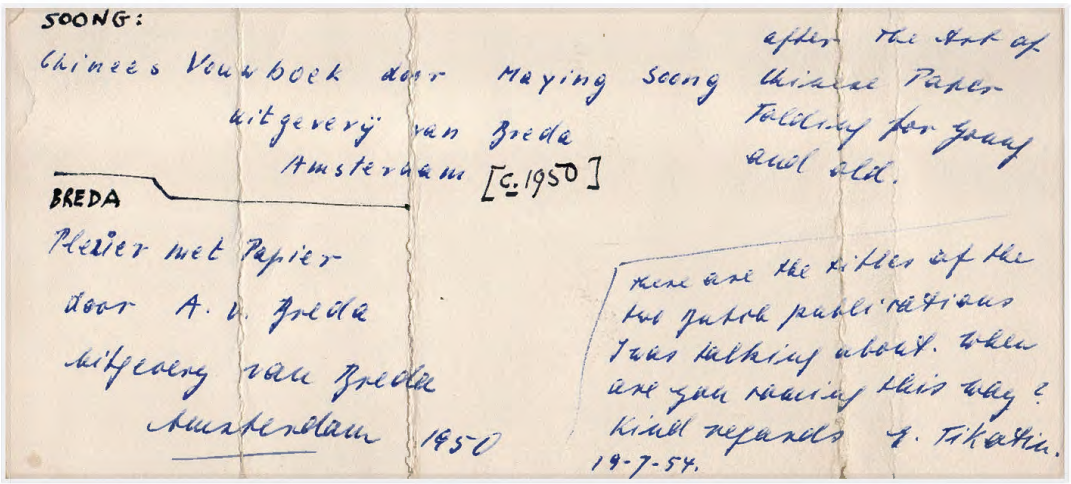
One of his favorite places was the legendary Librairie Mistral,[22] located at 37, rue Bûcherie. This was where Legman held conversations in English with the bookstore's owner, George Whitman, who requested on more than a few occasions that he mind the store while he left for a break or to run errands. Having a clientele that included writers and painters, it also featured an upper floor where, for a few francs, it was possible to spend the night. It was said that guests included Henry Miller, William Burroughs and the bohemians of the Beat Generation, notably Allen Ginsberg, the poet whose racy poem had been rejected by Legman for publication in Neurotica magazine.[23]

First Meeting With Felix Tikotin

In mid-July 1954, a letter was delivered to Legman's pension. It was a cardboard note handwritten by Felix Tikotin, an art dealer he had met several days earlier at the inauguration of an exhibition of Asian masks at the galerie Place des Vosges, located in the heart of the elegant Quartier du Marais.

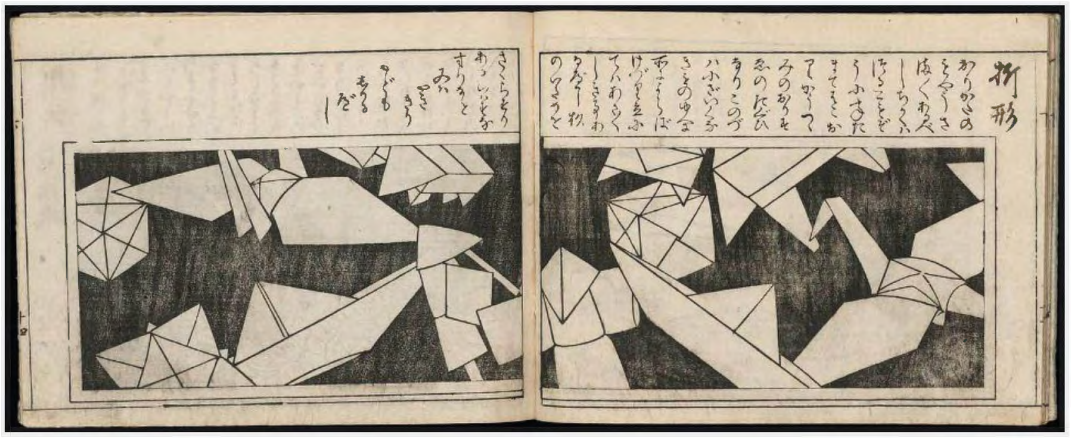
Tikotin, who possessed a considerable fortune and owned some of the masks and netsukes being exhibited there, had chatted briefly with Legman and had been surprised by his knowledge of Asian art, especially the ukiyo-e prints, some of which portrayed erotic scenes. Tikotin took note of the burly young man with his bushy black hair and penetrating gaze. Legman's passion immediately attracted him, and he made a mental note of his interests. Legman related his attempt to locate the "Kanomado," an apparently lost Japanese manuscript revealing secrets of how samurai and geishas folded paper to delight their invited guests. Although Tikotin was not up to date on this subject, he recalled having seen a couple of books on this "minor" art form, and he promised Legman that he would share the titles once he had returned to his residence in Wassenaar, a suburb of The Hague. It did

not go unnoticed by Legman that the man lived in one of the most expensive and elegant neighborhoods in the Netherlands, one sought after by princes and aristocrats.



Notes to Gershon Legman written by Felix Tikotin. Legman's additions are in black ink.

The note Legman now held in his hands, hurriedly written by Tikotin on a business card from the Galerie Place des Vosges, contained mention of the promised book titles[24] but also a scribbled invitation: "When are you coming this way?"[25] It was signed and dated July 19, 1954.



Legman purchased a copy of the "Ranma Zushiki" from Tikotin in 1954.

In fact, there was no need for Legman to make the trip to the Netherlands. Tikotin traveled frequently to Paris, and there proved to be no difficulty in meeting up with him at art galleries. On one such encounter, the wealthy businessman agreed to sell him an exceedingly rare book: the "Ranma Zushiki" by Oka Shumboku, published in 1734. In a letter to Akira Yoshizawa, Legman informed him of the purchase in the following terms: "This year I bought from Mr. Tikotin, for a price that was madness to pay, but seemed worth it at the time, a copy of Oka Shumboku's work, 'Ranma Zushiki' (1734, Kyoho era, year 19), in which, in volume 3, pages 13 and 14, a number of foldings are shown, just ornamentally, but very exactly: the Tsuru, boxes, a doll-man, and so forth."[26]

Over the months he spent in Paris, Legman stayed up to date with gallery trends, the names of artists and the interests of collectors. It was his good fortune to find places such as the Galerie Place des Vosges where he could view images created by the best Japanese painters, artists such as Katsushika Hokusai and Utagawa Hiroshige. These gallery visits led Legman to consider how he could organize an exhibition that combined Yoshizawa's origami works with other forms of Japanese art, such as ukiyo-e woodblock prints and kimonos. If he found a gallery for that project, he would also be able to sell at the exhibition the Yoshizawa book that he was planning to publish.

In a letter Legman sent to Yoshizawa in August, he let him know about the Japanese art galleries in Paris: "Many of the loveliest prints of (Torii) Kiyonaga show the tsuru as a design in the ladies' garments, and there is also a 19th century print (I believe it is by Utagawa Kunisada in his best period) which shows a girl writing a letter and dreaming, and the pages are all floating into the air and turning into many exact examples of the well-known inflatable frog."[27]

Legman had not stopped thinking about Tikotin either: The proof of this is found in his virtually telepathic letter to Percival D. Perkins recounting his meeting with Tikotin, written on the same day that Tikotin had sent him – in an envelope with no return address[28] – that trifold cardboard sheet.

Perkins was an old friend, the owner of bookstores bearing his name in Pasadena and Tokyo. Besides being a bookseller, he was an importer who regularly acquired Asian publications on art and literature. In his characteristic style of tying up loose ends to allow his story to unroll, Legman told him of his recent encounter with Tikotin. “Things Japanese are very much in the air in Paris now. Two new galleries solely devoted to this have opened, Mme. Huguette Bérès, on the Quai Voltaire, Paris 6, and the galerie Place des Vosges, 26 Place des Vosges, Paris 3. The latter opened just a few weeks ago with a truly splendid display of materials on ghosts and demons in Japan with some remarkable prints and sculptures, partly loaned by the Dutch dealer, Mr. Tikotin (of Wassenaar, Holland) who, with Mme. Bérès, sweeps everything before him at the auction galleries here whenever there is anything Japanese for sale.”[29]

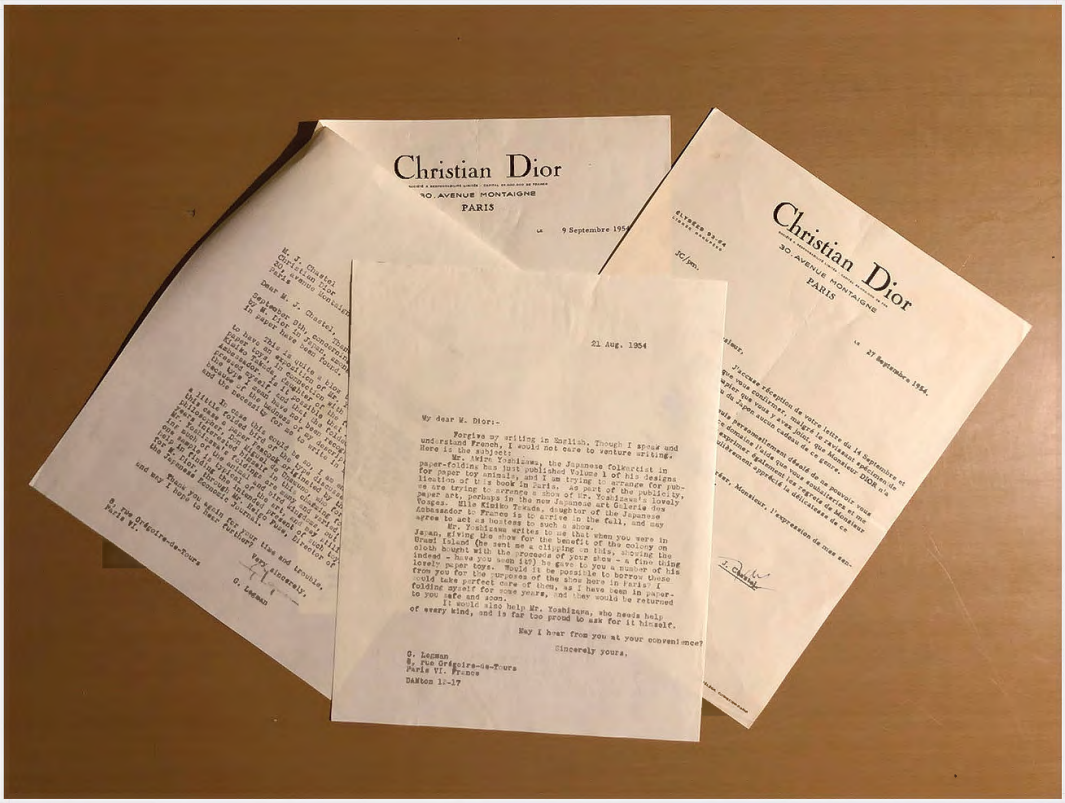
Gallery Place des Vosges

Legman spent the rest of the year enmeshed in economic difficulties; even in the midst of these, he continued to send small amounts of money to Yoshizawa to help him progress with the international book project. “You must not even consider any question of ‘thanks’ in connection with money sent. This is strictly to be thought of as an advance on royalties on your book.”[30]

Incessantly, almost obsessively, writing from flophouse hotels and cheap pensions, Legman recounted instances of progress and urged him to continue his admirable creative work while thanking him for the gifts the master was including in each reply letter to him. “Your enclosures in the letter, as always, a treasure trove of delight. The two butterflies are so delicate! And the Octopus and the other animals with the scorpion-tail, such fine examples of your method.”[31]

But the book was not finding success, and Legman was experiencing difficulty in locating someone who would accept it. Origami was not popular, and no publisher was willing to take such a risk. Discussing various ideas with friends and acquaintances, Legman began to envision the possibility of organizing an exhibition to publicize Yoshizawa’s oeuvre. Living in Paris, he felt he could not pass up such an opportunity, and he believed that the conditions and required contacts were in place to make it a reality.

At this initial stage, Legman saw the exhibition not as an end in itself but rather as a way to support the book project, which “would give just the needed ‘push’ to the publication of your book in France,”[32] he wrote to Yoshizawa. It would become a venue for selling the book, and there would be publicity. One medium would assist the other. The public would view the actual works and purchase a copy of the book, and word of mouth would do the rest. As always, Legman’s criterion was the craft. But he was unable to overcome the lack of gallery interest. Curators were not impressed by the tiny foldings that Yoshizawa had sent him by mail. Something grander would be needed to win them over. “I have not been able to make proper headway on this because I lack your foldings to demonstrate,”[33] he lamented.


Christian Dior
30, AVENUE MONTAIGNE
PARIS
21 Aug. 1954
My dear M. Dior:-
Christian Dior
30, AVENUE MONTAIGNE
PARIS

Letters detailing a broken connection between Dior and Yoshizawa.

In his search for these unique pieces, he was directed by Yoshizawa to Yoshiko Takada, the daughter of the former Japanese ambassador to France, who had traveled to France carrying several Yoshizawa models. Legman also wrote to the fashion icon

Christian Dior. Yoshizawa had made him a gift of several works during a visit by Dior to Japan. The response sent to Legman by the House of Dior was disturbing: “I wish to state to you precisely that Monsieur Dior has never received from his Japanese friends any toys made of paper. During the voyage which he made, about a year ago, there were transmitted to him a certain number of presents, each of them more agreeable and interesting than the others, but none of them were in any way similar to the objects which you describe.”[34] The letter was signed by J. Chastel, spokesman of the House of Dior in Paris.

Legman wrote again to Yoshizawa, explaining why it would be necessary to send several samples, since all his attempts to locate larger-scale pieces had been in vain. An exhibition required foldings of greater size, not the tiny models Yoshizawa had been enclosing in his letters – very lovely, to be sure, but lacking the required impact. Legman bemoaned that “all I got from the young lady, Ms. Takada, whom you suggested I get in touch with, was a folding of a Sea-horse, which I must return; and the box of foldings with Designer Dior seems to have gone astray.”[35]

The passage of time did its part, however, and things had begun to look up when Legman wrote to Yoshizawa in November of that year that he was investigating the prospect of staging an exposition “in one of the Japanese art galleries here in Paris during this winter season,”[36] and, while he still had not the slightest idea whether this might be feasible, he assured the artist that he hoped to finalize the arrangement by the winter. He had apparently succeeded in identifying the contacts he would need, but he needed assurance that Yoshizawa would in fact be willing and would not leave him hanging. “I need to have that one absolutely vital element of help from you that I can be sure you will supply the necessary beautiful foldings for the exposition, after I get it arranged for,”[37] he declared fervently.

Legman’s doubts needed to be assuaged: It was a fact that Yoshizawa did not know him. Would he be capable of sending his creations to a stranger in a far-off land? He feared that Yoshizawa would not wish to take a chance that his works might be damaged in transport or at the exposition. Legman imagined that Yoshizawa would worry about such risks, and he was reluctant to commit to a gallery only to have the project come to nothing in the end.

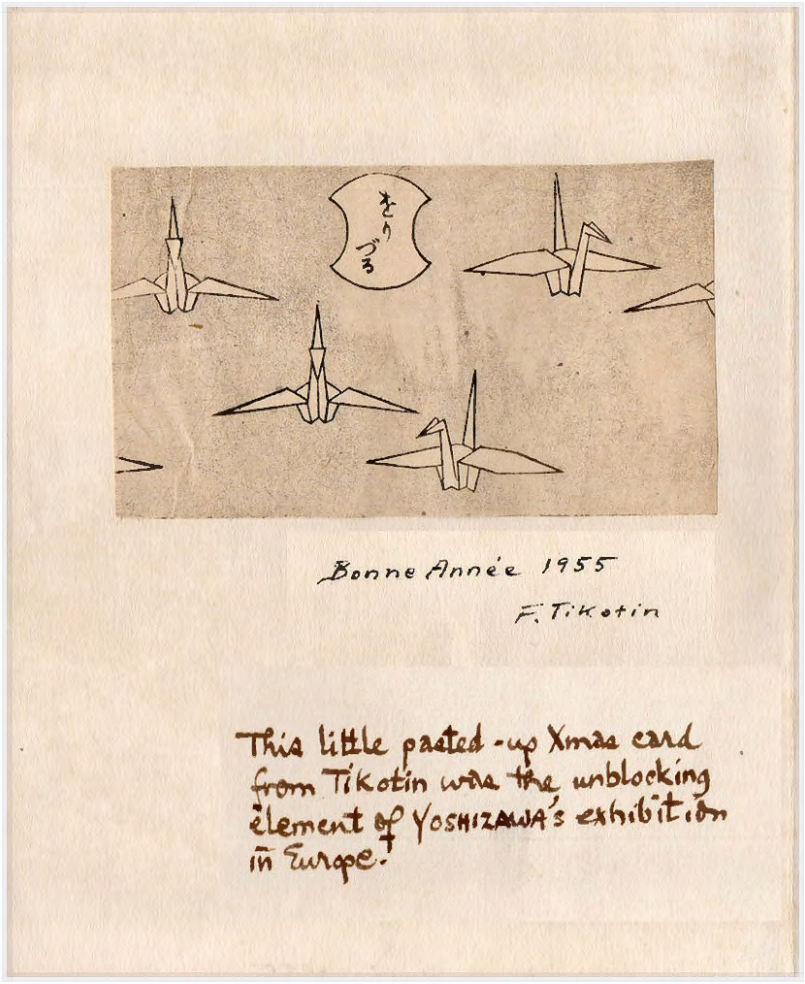
Yoshizawa thought that the idea was a good one, although he raised several points of concern. In the first place, he wanted Legman to work out the logistics with Ms. Takada. Who would pay the costs of mounting the exposition? How many pieces would be needed? He was also concerned about the possibility of plagiarism; he had already run into trouble of this kind, and he feared that such issues could multiply once the works had left the country. “You must pay attention to the protection (copyright) of my creative pieces,”[38] he insisted to Legman.

But he closed the letter on a positive note: “Let us be idealistic and develop the beauty of Origami not for our selfish interests or honor but for this treasure of the world.”[39]

Yoshizawa was granting his stamp of approval. He had confidence in his American friend.

Legman plunged euphorically into the task of finding a site and securing funding to stage the exhibition. One afternoon, arriving back at his rooming house at 9, rue Victor Letalle, he found in his mailbox a new letter from the mysterious Tikotin. He took off his gloves and tiredly climbed the stairs of the dark, clammy building, feeling the ill effects of a cold. He would never give up! In that working-class and immigrant neighborhood, he was the “américain.” Sometimes the Veron family residing in the building across the street would treat him to a freshly baked baguette from the boulangerie on the corner of Letalle and Panoyaux. On other occasions, Legman descended to the street to watch the passers-by or stopped to chat with the owner of the laundry or the coal seller.

The 20th arrondissement was alive with the buzz of Algerian cafés as their patrons waged the “café wars” between the partisans of the National Liberation Front and the Algerian National Movement, the group led by Messali Hadj. He enjoyed this colorful world, so different from the oppressive environment he had fled just a few months earlier. He felt ashamed to admit to the lack of freedom of expression in the United States and his own experience with that situation, which was the reason for his presence in Paris. Although he tried to avoid political discussions, he could empathize with others he met who were going through similar situations back in their homeland. He kept his views to himself, preferring to remain inconspicuous. He was too troubled by his own affairs to go looking for problems.

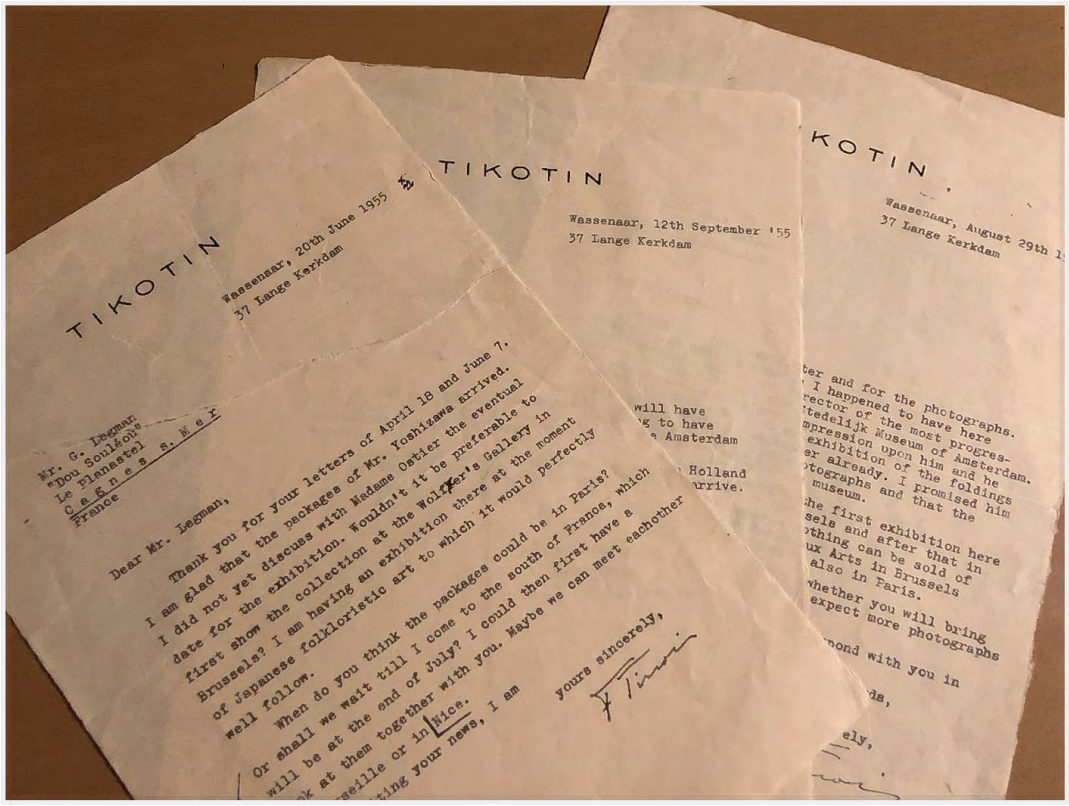


A Christmas greeting from Tikotin. Legman's additions are in black ink.

He closed the door to his room and blew on his hands to warm them up. Though the bustle of the street could not be heard there, the dampness of his quarters was upsetting to him. Sitting on the side of his bed, he carefully opened the envelope. He always used a letter opener and saved the envelopes, sometimes removing the stamps, which he kept in a separate collection.

This time there was no letter inside, however, but instead a handmade card with a tiny Chinese ink drawing of a group of cranes for peace, rendered in origami. This was a warm New Year's greeting that could have been created by an immigrant with the soul of an artist. Legman was deeply moved. He had been certain that Tikotin had not forgotten him and that, deep down, the two of them were kindred souls. For a millionaire to have the thoughtfulness to make such a small gesture: no words were needed in such a communication. These brief, playful messages had a more profound significance, especially coming from such a busy and distinguished Dutch merchant. He needed to pin his hopes on this man with the majestic bearing and intelligent gaze who seemed to be everywhere and nowhere at the same time. He wanted to help: Legman sensed this very clearly. (Years later he would write on ink on the bottom of the card: "This little pasted-up Xmas card from Tikotin was the unblocking element of Yoshizawa's exhibition in Europe.")

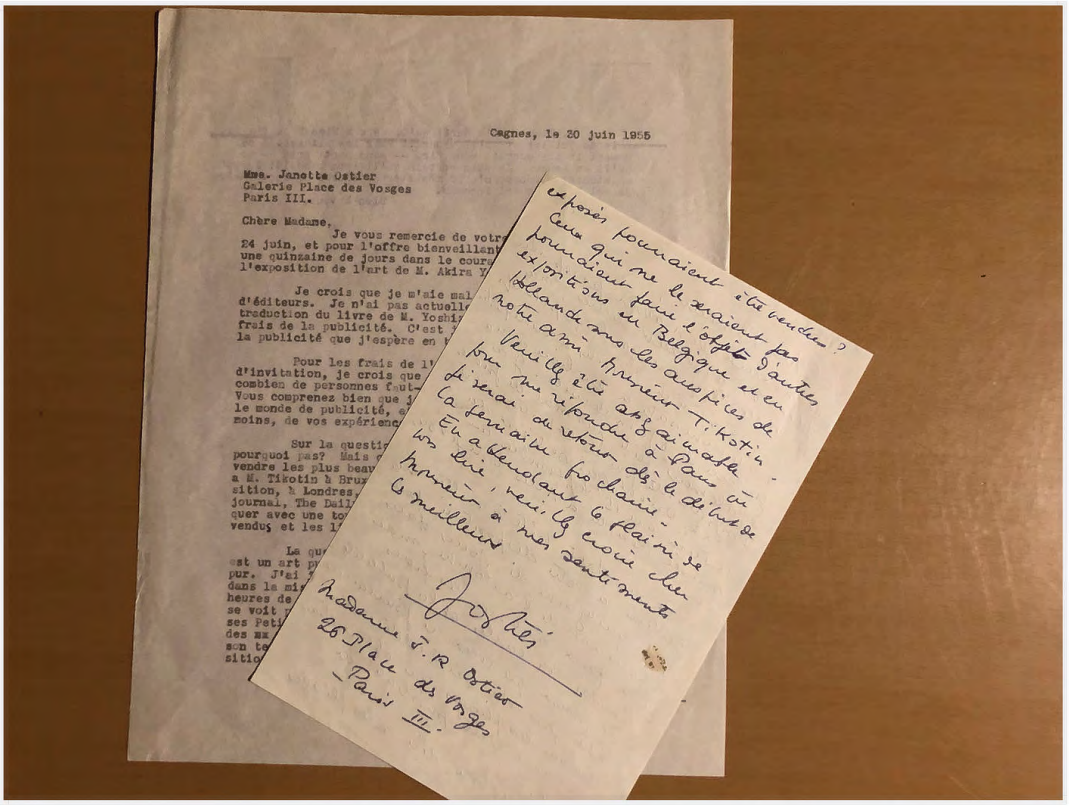
He was sure that, if asked, Tikotin would find a way to overcome the reticence of Janette Ostier, owner of a gallery at 26 Place des Vosges in Paris. He had not forgotten that note written on a trifold card from the gallery. It had been a sort of coded message, a nod from Tikotin. They were of the same opinion: The small and distinguished Gallery Place des Vosges was an ideal location. Ostier had exquisite taste, and if she agreed to show a Yoshizawa, it would be because she recognized something unique and worthy of exhibition. It took little effort for Legman to learn that this was a new gallery, open for only a short time, and that Ostier was a lover of Japanese art. Her first idea had been to open a gallery of contemporary art, leading her to contact Tikotin, who convinced her that she could achieve competitive advantage by focusing on Japanese art. Origami could be une petite folie, a brief but tasteful summer interlude.



News about the planning of a show in Paris in letters from Tikotin.

Determined not to miss the opportunity for more frequent contact, he wrote enthusiastically to Tikotin to describe his project and to urge him to come on board with it. If the plan were to take shape, Tikotin's support was needed. "I have written to Mr. Yoshizawa to ask how he feels about trying to have an exhibit of his sensational paperfolded origami animals in Paris, as a very good preliminary to the publication of his book in French. He has answered me in a positive sense,"[40] he related. "Do you imagine Mme. Janette Ostier would be interested in giving place to such an exhibit of Japanese 'pliages' in the galerie Place des Vosges? I am sure it would fit perfectly in the tiny and gem-like intimacy of that lovely gallery. Mr. Yoshizawa is very sick often and lives under extremely difficult conditions. The opportunity to make an exhibit of his marvelous folk-art, if it is not taken now, may never come again."[41] Legman's tone must have brought a smile to Tikotin's face since he needed no convincing: As a collector of Asian art, he found the proposal amusing, and he was predisposed to embark on a little adventure that did not present serious risks – even if it meant he had to deal with such an irascible fellow as Gershon Legman.

Tikotin confirmed his support and – what is more – told him that he had already written to Ostier, who would surely concur. Regarding the date, he agreed with Legman: "The summer with the many foreign visitors seem a good moment for the show."[42]



Cagnes, le 20 juin 1955

Mme. Janette Ostier
Galerie Place des Vosges
Paris III.

Chère Madame,

Madame J. R. Ostier
26 Place des Vosges
Paris III.

A letter from Janette Ostier and a reply by Gershon Legman.

Despite his hardships suffered at the hands of wintry conditions and bad food, Legman was exultant. An influenza attack worsened his condition, and he was gripped by high fever for a week. He nevertheless made arrangements to visit the galerie Place des Vosges to have a discussion with Ostier. As soon as he recovered, he wrote to Yoshizawa to tell him the good news. “This is just to let you know the definite good news that your Paris Exposition has been arranged for the galerie Place des Vosges, 26 Place des Vosges, Paris (3). The director is Madame Janette Ostier, a very fine lady, who asks me to assure you that she will feel honored to exhibit your lovely art foldings. Her gallery is solely devoted to Japanese art (and is believed to be the only such gallery in Europe). The appropriate time will be early summer, when all the visitors from all over the world will be here who can appreciate your work. I will occupy myself with the translations of your book and the taking of photographs and Mme. Ostier will create the necessary publicity. Please do not forget that we will need some photographs of you.”[43]

Legman picked up the pace and worked to complete most of the preparations since his immediate but still unconfirmed plans were to move to the south of France – possibly to Cannes or some less expensive part of the Côte d’Azur. Rental costs were lower in the winter, and he wanted to escape the Parisian climate that, with its excessive cold and dampness, was threatening his fragile health. In addition, his wife Beverly had arrived from New York, spending her time in the confinement of the rented room, where she complained incessantly about everything.

Yoshizawa’s Rising Career in Japan

Yoshizawa was beginning to taste success with his presentations in Tokyo. He staged an exhibition in a stylish café that “was meant for ten days but since it was successful, it was prolonged for nine more days.”[44] Following this show, a second one was held in the elegant Ginza district that he described as “not so bad.” The problem was his lack of funds to buy special papers, forcing him to include various pieces that had already been displayed in the previous exposition. At any rate, it was well received by the public as well as the media. The Asahi Shimbum Sha newspaper published an article, and he made an appearance on television (Nippon Tele News).[45]

Based on these public showings, where he was able to see how his art was at risk of being damaged, he shared his concerns with Legman over sending his works to France. “In painting, to express your individuality, you can make many corrections until you are satisfied with your work. Origami, on the other hand, is a very subjective thing, and I am afraid that when I send my work to Paris, such corrections might have to be made but would be impossible.”[46]

On March 26, 1955, he wrote excitedly to Legman: “Because of your warm friendship, Origami has just begun to bloom,” and he thanked him for the funds he had sent periodically, which were allowing him to pay some of his debts. “Thank you very much for the 20 dollars. I wish you would take it out of the royalties (of the book).”[47]

At that time, Yoshizawa believed that it would be best for him to attend the debut exhibition in person, and he advised Legman to

deduct the travel costs from the royalties earned by the sale of the book. Unfortunately, the publication existed only in the form of an expression of intent and the funding advanced by Legman himself, who had barely enough to eat and pay his rent. Yoshizawa understood the situation, but the proposed trip put Legman in an uncomfortable position: He had no option other than to rule out the trip, running the risk of jeopardizing the project. “It is indeed sad that there is no way, at the present, of finding the necessary steamship fee for you to be in Paris for this exposition. It would be so lovely to meet you here. It is too bad but somehow these expenses cannot be arranged for. That will be the main thing lacking: yourself.”[48] Legman’s intent was only to be realistic, not difficult. But as he sealed the envelope, he questioned whether or not he was placing a stumbling block on the entire effort. How would he feel if he were in a similar situation, if he had been told that he could not travel to exhibit his own creative work? His probable response would be to tell the informant to go to hell. And yet he was proposing exactly this to Yoshizawa. It was only the circumstances that directed his response. The project was at such a low point that he even counseled Yoshizawa not to send the artworks by air even though this would reduce the risk to the objects by shortening the travel time. “There is plenty of time for the package to arrive by shipmail.”[49] Legman was wagering on his own skill in being able to set right any damage occurring in shipment.

In April, production of the book suffered another setback when the translator Legman had hired suddenly left the country “for political reasons,” as Legman was informed when trying to contact the linguist. Legman told Yoshizawa that the only way around this development was to find a translator in Japan. He also thought this would be an excellent idea, since Yoshizawa would be there to oversee the translation. “The publication of the work in French, in English, and even in Spanish, depends on your supplying me with a literal English translation of your book, complete, and of the articles in Fujin Koron, showing your two-piece animals,”[50] he wrote Yoshizawa brusquely. Legman also included in his letter a request to include the material that had appeared in a book by Isao Honda[51] in which several Yoshizawa works had appeared for the first time. Only this approach, to display “Books, Articles, and material from Mr. Honda’s book, would be what I feel would make your great introduction of art paper-folding to the West.”[52]

Legman felt overcome by the difficulties, since he was well aware of Yoshizawa’s situation yet in no position to bear the costs of a book, let alone its translation. He clearly recalled the artist’s recent letter in which he admitted to not being able to buy paper for lack of money and having to mount the Ginza display using old and abraded artworks.

Still, his renown was beginning to spread rapidly in Japan. An important agency, Maimichi Shimbun Sha, requested permission to film the Ginza exposition. He had also been included in the annual Asahi Shimbun Sha anthology. Yoshizawa dreamed that a documentary film on his oeuvre might someday be shown at the world-famous Cannes Film Festival.

As March 1955 became April, Yoshizawa ceased lamenting his condition and shifted into a higher gear. Legman was pleased to read that he had decided to create 50 completely innovative models and that his mentor Tadasu Iizawa would cover the cost of their air freight, which came to 12,000 yen. He estimated that he would be able to send the package, weighing less than five kilograms, by April 5. He also assured Legman that he would, of course, send him the ones he had not shown at the Ginza exhibit.[53] This was the initial plan. Legman could not imagine how it would later change, substantially reducing the number of pieces to be shipped.

Still, Yoshizawa had other worries in his life at this time, and in this letter, he decided to open his heart to Gershon Legman. He had observed, for example, that imitators of his foldings were appearing with greater frequency. “The number of people who try to imitate me increase: in short, it is good to know that origami is becoming popular. But I think these people do it either for money or for honor. However, I will dedicate my life for origami in the name of God.”[54]

Yoshizawa was experiencing a transcendental moment in his life. He was spending long hours analyzing forms of nature and drawing plants and animals, and he was fascinated to learn about their biology. He discovered the world of planaria (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Planarian) (a type of worm) and sent Legman complicated charts linking the human senses to emotions and to his philosophy of life and death. It was possible to sum it all up using a sheet of paper, and it was this expressiveness that animated his work. He related to Legman that he was going through a mystic phase and that he wished to dedicate his life to origami and to the Divine Will. On his 44th birthday, March 14, 1955, he spent the evening with a young disciple, the disciple’s mother and an 83-year-old man. It was a profoundly symbolic experience. “I am to be baptized for the first time,” he confessed, “because Christ has never existed in me before. I am so overwhelmed that I cannot write this letter very well.”[55] To Legman’s bewilderment, he went on to say that the experience led him to an awareness of aspects of his life that he had not known up to that point.

Legman was shocked that Yoshizawa would reveal such intimate feelings to him. He himself was an agnostic, and it had been a long time since he had pondered transcendental concepts. Religion was a thing of the past. In boyhood, he had been pressured by his father into beginning rabbinical studies, but he had long since abandoned religion.

He did not mince words in responding to Yoshizawa: “What you tell me about your conversion to Christianity gives me very solemn feelings. I do not know what to say. I am not Christian myself, and I believe that all ways are ways of truth – Christianity, Shintoism, Judaism, and all others, so long as a person lives nobly and does no harm, and even good!, to others. I am glad you are able to find strength and meaning in religion, as I know that your life is hard and unhappy, and that you need this strength. May it give you great happiness!”[56]

Legman’s day typically began at four in the morning. Stimulated by strong coffee, he would write at his desk to further the progress

of his monumental opuses on erotic humor and limericks. As he worked, he enjoyed listening to classical music, especially Mozart and Beethoven. Before breaking for lunch, he nearly always devoted time to correspondence. He customarily received 10 or 20 letters daily, among which it can be said that he had a soft spot for those coming from Yoshizawa. The letters in Japanese script, which he sent immediately to his translator, contained secrets that he would never fully comprehend. These were the ambiguities that could not be deciphered by the translator, perhaps out of lack of familiarity with the subject or else because Yoshizawa expressed himself somewhat mystically, especially when referring to the sacred use of paper.

The difficulty in understanding these concepts and his fear that the project could fail if Yoshizawa were to have misgivings left Legman in an exceedingly anxious state of mind. He counted down the days as he awaited Yoshizawa's confirmation that the pieces had been sent for exhibition in Ostier's gallery. April turned to May with no news, although Legman had alerted him that the exposition was to take place in June.

To reassure him, Yoshizawa advised him that he would send the package by air. He then changed his mind, however, electing to use sea freight since he now calculated that the shipment would weigh 10 kilos, not five. As he had accumulated more pieces, the weight and volume of the boxes had increased. Legman was extremely worried. He needed to confirm exactly when and how the packages would arrive, and he again reminded Yoshizawa that the English-language version of his book was stalled and would not appear without his aid in arranging for a good English translation in Japan. Legman pointed out to him that the artwork was fundamental for the exposition. Any financial revenues would come from selling the book, not the pieces themselves. And if things went well, Yoshizawa would end up with funds to bring him through his difficult economic situation.

Legman kept up the pressure like a parent confronting a child's neglected homework. "The book should appear with, or even before, the exposition, as this gives the greatest possible publicity value, but I must tell you that this depends on YOUR cooperation on the translation,"[57] he admonished Yoshizawa, knowing that he was not dealing with the matter. He was beginning to believe that the project – both the book as well as the exposition – could ultimately come to nothing at any moment.

By March, he had ceased residing in Paris, and his contacts with Ostier became more sporadic. He had decided to retreat into the Maritime Alps, taking advantage of "an invitation to go South for a short time to escape the terrible weather of this Paris winter, the floods, and the political horizons, and to seek the sun for a short time."[58] In principle, this would not develop into a permanent stay. His idea was to remain there pending positive news from Yoshizawa; once informed of the arrival of the shipment, he would return to Paris to mount the exposition.

From his Côte d'Azur refuge in Cagnes-sur-Mer, Legman wrote again to Tikotin to bring him up to date regarding his discussions with Ostier and to consult him concerning expenses. He let Tikotin know that he had been assisting Yoshizawa by sending small amounts of money and that he would continue to do so. Despite the worsening of his own financial problems, he wanted to appear confident in his planning: "I certainly feel I must continue to do this and that in the end, the history of folk-art will be all the richer for it."[59]

Yet the days were passing and Yoshizawa's artworks had still not been sent. He suggested to Ostier that, in view of the time that had elapsed, it would be better to postpone the exposition until the fall rather than try to mount it in June. He sought to offer a convincing argument in favor of this strategy: "Instead of tourists, we will have the more cultivated public these foldings deserve, consisting of French intellectuals and artists returning to Paris from their vacations."[60] He supposed that the book would be launched in the meantime and would serve as a promotional vehicle for the exposition, although it was somewhat ingenuous at this point for him to make such an assumption: Legman, an experienced editor, should have known clearly that these things cannot happen from one day to the next, especially since the book had still not been translated.

But on June 5, 1954, without prior notice, Legman received a communication from the Customs Office at Nice Airport directing him to appear at the Air France hangar to claim a shipment of samples (echantillons) from Japan, 153 pieces in all, having "no commercial value," sent by Akira Yoshizawa.[61] Legman hastened to the airport, paid the customs duty (165 francs), claimed the boxes and began that evening to unpack the carefully packaged and cataloged envelopes.

He wrote to Tikotin and Ostier the following day: "The two enormous packages have at last arrived from Japan containing Mr. Yoshizawa's origami foldings. These 153 foldings overwhelmed even the blasé customs officials here at Nice: 'Incredible ... stupefying ... unheard of ...!!' From the Sea-horse nearly 1 meter long, to the Elephant of 1.5 centimeters (the big, little; and the little, big) they are all of them masterpieces of folkloric and fine art, of a diabolic dexterity and an absolutely inexpressible beauty. You must see them. With these foldings, the exposition will be a thundering success."[62]

Legman was exultant although he could not understand why Yoshizawa had not advised him of the shipment. Luckily, he was not far from Nice and able to go there without delay. But what would have happened if he had been in Paris? He learned the reason for the unexpected silence several days later, when he received a belated letter from Yoshizawa[63] not only notifying him of the shipment but containing other details that had Legman gnashing his teeth in rage.

He had to read the translated letter several times and even obtain a second translation to ensure that he had not misinterpreted it. The origami master specifically confessed that he had decided not to send his best pieces, fearing that these would be damaged, and had not even constructed other foldings that he had intended for the exposition due to lack of funds to buy paper. From a list of 350 pieces, only 153 – less than half – had been sent, including works that had originally been exhibited in Tokyo and no longer

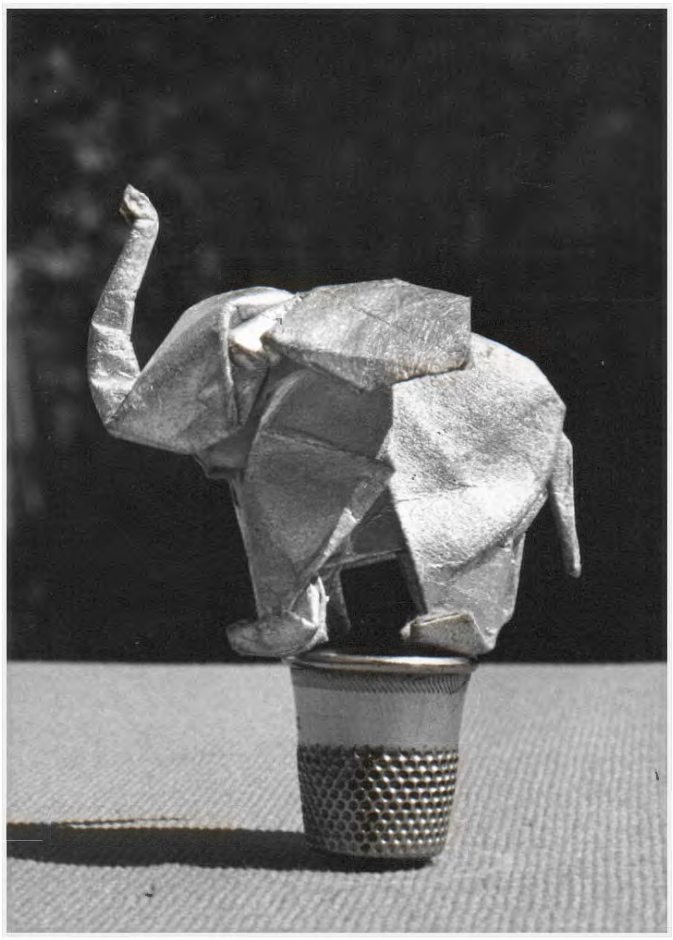
retained the crispness they had possessed when new.[64]

Yoshizawa offered details concerning the pieces that remained in Japan, including groups of insects, large animals, a dozen masks, human figures, kusudamas, boxes and decorative objects, abstract models and the metal stands required to hold up all these figures. “This is the list of everything I could NOT send,”[65] summarized Yoshizawa, as Legman contemplated how he would tell all this to Tikotin and Ostier – and whether it was necessary to provide such information or might simply be better to say nothing about the matter.

He reread the letter incredulously. He had made Yoshizawa promise that he would comply with the deadlines and quality expected of an international exposition … everything was going well. Why was he not told of these problems? The letter alluded to a last-minute change of mind. He was very confused. Even the Japanese government had granted permission to export 350 pieces, but he had decided on his own to ship a smaller number.

As disturbing as all this was, the letter’s closing sentence left him in desperation. “I thought about it up to the last moment before sending the pieces. The French artists worry me – what they will think of me, whether they will turn their backs on me when they see the artworks.” Legman would have told him that things were not as hopeless as all that. The reaction up to that point had been excellent as indicated by the favorable comments he had received at the Customs Office and while returning home. But if Yoshizawa had doubts concerning the probable impact of the models being sent, he should have expressed his fears beforehand. At a minimum, the decision to send a reduced number of artworks, pieces of inferior quality, would have to be approved by Ostier and Tikotin. This was a huge responsibility, and a part of Legman felt that he had been betrayed by Yoshizawa.

Beads of sweat formed on Legman’s face, and on that hot summer day, he found himself wishing that all this had been a bad dream. Tenderly handling each piece as he removed it from its box, he recalled the sense of wonder he had felt when they arrived. These were delicate artworks – for example, number 103, a hare. Anyone would have said it was made of ordinary paper, but Legman had noted something special in its feel. “The paper used in number 103 is used in Japanese painting, and the process for manufacturing it appears to be unknown outside the country,”[66] explained Yoshizawa in the same letter. If it needed only a display base, Legman thought, there were many beautiful creations to encircle it. There was a precious elephant, so delicate that it seemed natural. He brought out his camera, which luckily was loaded with black-and-white film. He went out into the courtyard and positioned several pieces against a tree trunk. Click!



A miniature elephant from the Yoshizawa collection that arrived in France. Photographed by Gershon Legman (1955).

A group of pigeon chicks in a nest, their mother depositing food into a gaping beak. A miniature elephant above a dressmaker's thimble. Click! Numbers 10 and 78, an owl and a ram, boasted a special recommendation: "These have been rendered using paper regarded at the Universal Exposition as the best in the world."[67]

Feeling the full weight of the burden on his shoulders, Legman asked himself whether the description might be something of an exaggeration. But things remained that still puzzled him. If Tadasu Iizawa had in fact agreed to cover part of the transport cost through Asahi Shimbum, why would he not have been able to send the other pieces? Was there a more compelling reason that Yoshizawa was unable to reveal? Did he not realize how callously he was behaving toward him, Gershon Legman, the person who was unselfishly and wholeheartedly assisting him from abroad? It could be that he had no confidence in the manner in which the pieces were to be exhibited or perhaps in the care that would be taken to conserve them. There was undoubtedly a little of each of these concerns in the artist's reasoning. The more he gazed at these "creatures," the more he believed that Yoshizawa was right. But he was developing a fondness for them. Was it possible to love folded paper? What he felt at that moment was pure love, a boundless love for all of it that moved him to tears. He put the letter away in a box, resolved never again to mention the correspondence he had just received, that dagger to his heart, and it crossed his mind that perhaps one day he would avenge this act.

Coincidentally, Ostier and Tikotin had planned to travel to the Côte d'Azur on Saturday, June 11 to attend the opening of an Asian art exhibition at the Réattu gallery in Arles, located approximately three hours west of the house where Legman was staying. Tikotin informed Legman that he would pay him a visit in Cagnes-sur-Mer if he could free up the time, but in the end, the quick trip failed to materialize. Another plan to meet Legman there on July 29 also had to be called off.

Years later, Legman would relate to David Lister that the first exposition of Yoshizawa's figures took place in his courtyard in Cagnes-sur-Mer, where he displayed the pieces on tabletops and at the bases of trees. He may have been referring to the preparations he made to receive Felix Tikotin and Janette Ostier on that sunny June 11 day: Although the two of them were ultimately unable to be present, perhaps others had been invited.[68] At any rate, it would not have been a large-scale event. If it had, Legman would almost certainly have retained some evidence of it in the form of photographs, announcements or some other passing reference, but nothing of this sort was found in his archive.

Upon learning of the arrival of the artworks, Tikotin queried Legman regarding the possibility of staging an exposition in Brussels. He was in close contact with the Wolfers brothers, descendants of a famous dynasty of jewelers and craftsmen. Besides their atelier, they also managed a gallery that was at that time holding an exhibition of popular Japanese art from Tikotin's own collection. He suggested that the Yoshizawa pieces could be shown immediately thereafter. What appears certain is that no one had made firm plans: Tikotin had still not confirmed the Paris dates with Ostier, and her attention was elsewhere, notably with the recently launched exposition of 19th-century Japanese prints that would run throughout the summer. "I can make the gallery available to you for a fortnight during the fall, but I cannot cover transport and publicity costs," she advised Legman in a letter dated June 24.

Both she and Tikotin incorrectly assumed that Yoshizawa's book was on track for publication, and Ostier believed that Legman had already found a publishing house. She consequently assumed that the publisher could sponsor the exposition: In principle, this was the general arrangement on which they had already come to terms.

But just as Yoshizawa had not shared with Legman the difficulties he was encountering, neither had Legman been entirely open with Ostier regarding his vicissitudes in the publishing world. It may be that he believed that the dilemma would eventually resolve itself, and he was not a man inclined to reveal his anxieties to others. His decision to keep the matter to himself created further confusion in the long run.

By the end of June 1955, the book project was at a complete halt and the translation had become conspicuous by its absence. Legman had no alternative but to come clean with Ostier, who was unaware of the situation: "I currently have no publisher for the translation of Mr. Yoshizawa's book who is willing to cover the publicity costs. It is precisely through the exposition and the publicity for it that I hope to find one."[69] This admission turned on its head the plan they had been discussing up to that point.

Ostier had in fact already proposed a different solution, one to which Legman now began to give serious consideration. As a gallery owner, Ostier saw no reason why the Yoshizawa works could not be sold to cover these expenses. This represented an innovation: Never before had anyone sold a piece of origami artwork.[70]

Legman agreed. "In principle, why not?" he responded. But he questioned whether it was a good idea to sell "the most beautiful pieces in Paris," leaving the others to be taken to Brussels and maybe thence to London, where conversations were underway to feature them on a television program sponsored by The Daily Express. Or perhaps the sold works could be included in the tour and delivered to their buyers at its conclusion.[71]

Price was no small matter. He wrapped up his letter to Ostier: "Origami is a pure art, and Mr. Yoshizawa is an extremely pure man. I never ventured to discuss price with him. He lives in absolute poverty. … He has devoted incalculable hours to the creation of his swallow and the chicks in the nest, for example. What is a fair price for his time? A difficult problem."[72] Legman nevertheless imagined that an exposition at a venue like Place des Vosges might constitute an excellent opportunity to reach a market that never ceased to surprise him. Origami was an exotic art that would attract a sophisticated public. Moreover, it was a known fact that refined collectors prefer to make their purchases before prices begin to rise. For these buyers, Yoshizawa's works could represent

an investment that would attain a much higher value in future years.

Legman concluded the letter by reminding her that Tikotin was planning to visit him at home in Cagnes-sur-Mer, where he would show him the Yoshizawa works. “I am certain that he will be thrilled. Up to now, no one has been able to resist the extraordinary charm of this previously unknown Eighth Art,” he assured her.[73]

Determined to roll the dice, Legman described the proposed solution in a letter to Yoshizawa and awaited his answer, although he was not overly hopeful that the artist would agree to let go of his “children.” It thus came as a surprise when Yoshizawa responded favorably. He agreed to sell the works if doing so could defray the costs.

As usual, his letter was tinged with mysticism and melancholy. The experience of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings was still fresh among the Japanese people, and Yoshizawa was seeking a way to pay tribute to the victims while simultaneously establishing a legacy for the future. “Japan is the only nation that has received the ‘baptism of the atom bomb’ and more than any other nation does she long for the happiness and peace of mankind. Of course, it's an American mistake, but we must correct it peacefully. May God help us.” With regard to the book, he indicated that a percentage of the royalties should go toward promoting “the welfare of the children of the world.”[74]

The months of July and August came and went without a concrete proposal, and Yoshizawa’s boxes languished in Cagnes-sur-Mer. On July 29, Tikotin planned to meet Legman in Nice[75] but ultimately could not find the time. In a subsequent letter, he apologized: “I have only been in the Midi for a very short while and I am really sorry that I did not meet you. … I do hope that I may see the foldings one day in Paris. … I would be very glad to have the photographs you made from these foldings to show them to the director [of the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, where Tikotin was organizing an exhibition of Japanese art].”

With the arrival of the fall, Legman received a letter from Tikotin that marked the start of a new direction and the definitive path toward nailing down the long-awaited Yoshizawa exposition in Europe.

In the letter, Tikotin announced that he had spoken with Willem Sandberg, director of Amsterdam’s Stedelijk museum of modern art, and that he had shown enthusiasm for the idea of an exclusive exposition by the Japanese artist. He also proposed that this be followed by a showing at the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels rather than the Wolfers gallery.

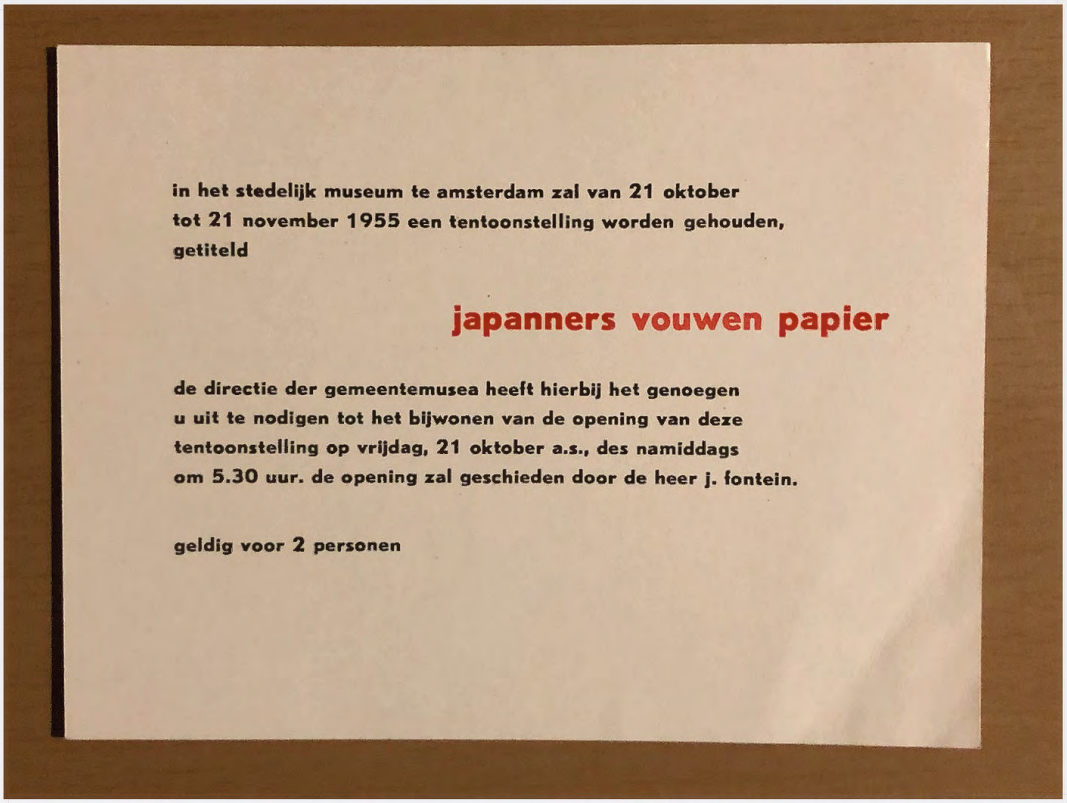
Tikotin’s suggestion was therefore to start the tour in the Netherlands, proceeding in succession to Brussels and Paris, where the pieces could be sold. “In the Amsterdam museum nothing can be sold of course, but in the Palais des Beaux Arts in Brussels, selling is possible and naturally also in Paris,” Tikotin wrote.[76]

Yoshizawa’s Show Opens in Amsterdam

In early September, Sandberg extended the formal invitation to Legman, assuring him that the museum would handle everything related to the press, although he asked Legman to assume the task of transporting the pieces. The exposition was tentatively scheduled to run from mid-October through December, with precise dates still to be agreed upon.

Legman was pleased to accept the invitation to exhibit Yoshizawa’s work at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam. His Sept. 14 letter to Sandberg accepted responsibility for delivering the artworks, personally mounting the exposition and remaining there for a period of time, possibly for the entire run of the event. “I will arrive in Amsterdam a month from today, bringing Mr. Yoshizawa’s two big boxes of foldings with me as accompanied baggage,”[77] he advised Sandberg. To assist in the initial publicity, he drafted a press release and a sketch on the history of origami. He also promised to provide a lengthier essay that would be ready before the debut. “On the aesthetic side, I can only say that paperfolding art is a true, and unknown, Eighth Art, particularly in the superb examples made by Mr. Yoshizawa, and I do not believe any person, young or old, can resist its charm,”[78] he wrote in his letter to the museum.

Legman was pushing the envelope of his possibilities to fulfill these tasks. He was a visionary who understood the keys to this event as they presented themselves, and he acted intelligently and astutely, taking advantage of strokes of luck such as his encounter with Tikotin. His objective was not commercial success; in fact, the project was placing him in serious financial difficulty. Even his good judgment seemed to falter when he made the decision to try his luck in the Monte Carlo Casino. He was not in the habit of doing this, but … who knows? “I went to the Casino at Monte Carlo to gamble, hoping to win a ‘starting sum’ which I could share with you. … I did win at the roulette, but very little, and things are not changing. But I have deep faith in your foldings,” he confided.[79] He simply believed with his heart and soul in Yoshizawa’s creations and in having discovered the undiscovered Eighth Art mentioned in his letter, an art form that in his judgment would soon extend around the world much as cinema had done. That was possibly Legman’s ultimate objective, the one for which he was prepared to devote countless hours of work for what was clearly a non-existent economic return.



A ticket of admission to Yoshizawa's exhibition in Amsterdam.

The exhibition debuted on Oct. 11 and ran for a little over one month, closing on Nov. 21. It featured all 153 works sent by Yoshizawa, and, while it was regarded in every way as an one-man exposition, Legman may have included a single small decorative detail contributed by a second artist. In a letter written to Ligia Montoya, an Argentine paperfolder, Legman said that at the base of the vitrine displaying the butterflies he had placed a "bed" of flowers created by her.[80] The flowers had been included in a package she had sent to Legman earlier in the year in response to his invitation to share the Paris gallery's exhibit space with Yoshizawa. On May 31, Montoya had sent a box containing 30 flowers and other figures (angels, birds, a winged horse, a swan, an antlered deer, a "too perfect" fly, a bird of paradise and a Mexican bandolero!)[81] It cannot be confirmed whether this floral arrangement actually appeared in the Yoshizawa exhibition or whether it was simply a "white lie" told so that Ligia Montoya would not feel cheated. This suspicion is rooted in the fact that when Montoya asked to see the photos, Legman responded that the glass plates used to make the negatives had been reused, making it impossible to produce new copies.

Gershon Legman teaching the flapping bird to children during the exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum.

Sandberg arranged lodging for Legman at the home of friends in Amsterdam, in this way facilitating his daily attendance at the exposition to meet the public and offer workshops.

The event was an enormous success judging from the various articles that appeared in the Dutch press and elsewhere in Europe. The museum scheduled field trips by student groups that attracted over 8,000 children and their adult leaders according to its visitorship records. Legman became Yoshizawa's alter ego, working daily at the exhibition for no fee. Traditional origami figures such as the flapping bird and the master's models, including the butterfly, were among those most frequently requested by the students who stayed to participate in the workshops.

Articles about the show appeared in the Netherlands and elsewhere.

News media echoed the exhibition's success. There were stories in Dutch newspapers and magazines, and reports of the show were seen outside the Netherlands.

The exposition wrapped up on schedule on Nov. 21. Five days later, Legman directed Export Transport Ltd to ship the boxes back to France. Yoshizawa's works would remain in storage for some time at the Ledouz-Woodbridge warehouse in St. Ouen, awaiting the details of the next exposition.

The shipment from the Netherlands was tied up in French customs.

At that point, things began to deviate from the plan: French customs confiscated the shipment, demanding the papers supporting its export to the Netherlands. According to the customs documentation, “Lacking these, they could be regarded as having been shipped from Japan and subject to duties and taxes amounting to 125% of their value.”[82] Legman sent an urgent message to Sandberg to request submission of the paperwork held by the museum, ultimately resulting in the release of the boxes by the French customs agents, who recorded that the freight consisted of “educational objects … on paper … for children … folded to form figures, silhouettes, etc.”[83]

Despite his exhaustion, Legman brainstormed the possibility of scheduling a kind of tour through various European countries. There is no indication, however, that he was able to make much progress with any of the proposals he considered. He instead continued his search for a way to publish a book by Yoshizawa in Europe. There had been many requests for such a volume in Amsterdam. Though he had urged Yoshizawa to find a translator in Japan, he revived the idea of translating it into French after meeting a young man named Kaneko, “a student of comparative philology who is also much interested in paper art.”[84] Kaneko began to work on the translation, and Legman hoped to have the book ready for the exposition in Paris that he still expected to stage.

As he began to lay out the book, Legman asked Yoshizawa to provide the original diagrams – that is, the step-by-step instructions for the models that would make up the publication. “Do you have the original drawings for your book, or could you make drawings? The publishers, both here and in Holland, want the completed figure in every case to be a drawing, not a photograph, which costs so much more to print,”[85] he explained to Yoshizawa, hoping that he would understand the situation and send the drawings promptly.

In the same letter, Legman referred to the successful exposition in the Netherlands. “More than 8,000 children came, and thousands of adults. I taught your butterfly, the flapping bird, and other figures. Many people asked me for your name and address to write for your book. I hope to have it ready in French in time for the French exposition. Otherwise we lose the possibility of selling hundreds of books on which you could receive author’s royalties.”[86]

The End of a Book Project

On Feb. 15, 1956, Tikotin resumed his correspondence with Legman, surprised at not having received the information that would set in motion the Brussels exposition. He also proposed the Museum of Modern Art in Paris since, as he observed, “normal galleries are too small for your ‘crowds’”[87] He recalled the large groups of children and adults who had visited the Amsterdam museum daily.

Legman received no response at all from Yoshizawa regarding the drawings he needed for the book. This exasperated him somewhat, since it appeared he was making a personal request when in reality he was working unselfishly on Yoshizawa’s behalf. Instead, he received in March a copy of the second book in Japanese, “Origami Dokuhon,” a low-cost volume with a wide distribution.

Yoshizawa explained to him that the book “was only possible thanks to the editor’s superhuman efforts. My sole aim is to spread the message throughout the entire world.” The first page featured a photo of Legman teaching origami to a group of young visitors to the exposition in Amsterdam. Legman thanked him and reminded him of the importance of producing a more advanced book.

As if Legman did not have enough problems already, Yoshizawa was again pursuing the idea of traveling to the Paris exposition. “If an exhibition should be held in France, I believe that by all means I should also be present with my works,” he stated. “Paperfoldings are at their best when they are freshly done, and I fear that an exhibition presenting works over a year after they have been folded (and exhibited twice: Tokyo, and once further in Holland), would disappoint those who saw it, since the foldings would lack their original freshness and would have lost shape.” As much the idealist as ever, he proposed to display what he had excised from the body of work that was exhibited in Amsterdam. “If it should work out that I can come to France, I should like to bring with me my collection of paper folding, as well as books on the subject. In this way, I believe that you and I working together could make a genuine contribution to the world.”[88]

Lastly, Yoshizawa was emphatic with respect to the ongoing project to publish his book. He flatly prohibited Legman from going ahead with the idea. “As to the publishing of a translation of the book on paper folding, since I am now working on a new manuscript, will you please suspend the translation of ‘The New Art of Paper Folding, Collection 1’ (Ataharshii Origami Geijutsu)?”[89]

Legman was beside himself. At the foot of Yoshizawa’s letter, he scribbled out a summary of his response: “Very direct and long answer sent, telling just what is what: philosophical principle: relations must grow or diminish; cannot stay the same.”[90] He felt angry and betrayed. By this point, Yoshizawa was like a son to him. He had helped him financially, dedicated countless days … only to learn that he had no confidence in him? He was fed up with all of it, and when Legman lost his patience, it was better to keep one’s distance.

He did not completely cut off relations, however. He wrote to Yoshizawa in May to tell him that he was still working on arranging an exposition in Paris. “There is no progress yet to report – the galleries all want to be paid, they are horribly venal!” he complained.[91] He knew that it was not easy to move a shipment like this around Europe. Although Tikotin was willing to assist him in Brussels and other proposals were coming from England and even Finland, the task of handling the logistics would ultimately fall entirely to him, and he would not be paid for it. Each of these opportunities involved expenses.

Unfortunately, Legman often gave in to ill temper, which led to confusion. In one of his letters, Yoshizawa referred to sending a thank-you gift to Felix Tikotin in appreciation for arranging for the exposition in Amsterdam: an exquisite volume of 600 handmade sheets of Japanese paper. He had sent Legman something different: some papers and a calendar.[92] In his misinterpretation, Legman believed that the present for Tikotin had been intended for him, and he wrote Tikotin to claim it. Tikotin could only explain that he had no idea what Legman was referring to, since the gift had arrived with a note of thanks personally inscribed to Tikotin himself and that he had already distributed some of the sheets to friends. Tikotin concluded that Legman had decided for some unexplainable reason to put distance between the two of them. He broke off his discussions surrounding the possible Brussels exposition and the one in Paris as well. The two of them never again spoke of the matter, and Tikotin ceased corresponding with Legman.

In the end, the book on Yoshizawa's complex works that Legman hoped to publish in English and other languages was never released. Several years would pass before Yoshizawa's books would appear outside Japan. Nor did the traveling exhibition across Europe ever become a reality. Yoshizawa's subsequent exhibition in the West took place in New York City at the Cooper Union Museum in 1958. But that story will be the subject of our next article.

Acknowlegements

The author wants to thank Jane Rosemarin for her thoughtful work in editing this long article and to Michel Grand for comments on an earlier version.

Her gratitude goes also to Judith Legman, with whom years ago, the Museo del Origami in Colonia closed a deal to have the Gershon Legman origami-related archives transferred to Uruguay. These documents constitute the basis of the present research.

All images saved, but for the first, are from documents and pictures from the Gershon Legman Archives at the Museo del Origami in Colonia, Uruguay. The first photo, "Legman, by Wayland Hand," was loaned by Judith Legman.

Addendum

Pictures taken by Gershon Legman of some of Akira Yoshizawa's foldings at the time they arrived in France. They were later exhibited in the Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam in 1955. The concluding photos are from a workshop led by Legman during the show. (Credit: Gershon Legman Archives, Museo del Origami, Uruguay).

Endnotes

1. Translated from the Spanish by James Buschman.

2 Gershon Legman. *Love and Death, a Study in Censorship.* (New York: Breaking Point. 1949).

3. The United States Postal Service had wide-ranging powers of censorship that it exercised arbitrarily and with little objectivity, and this had a devastating effect on businesses like Legman's in which he shipped his sold copies by mail. For more on this subject, refer to: S.G. Davis, "Eros Meets Civilization: Gershon Legman Confronts the Post Office," in *Serpents in the Garden: Liaisons with Culture and Sex,* ed. Alexander Cockburn and Jeffrey St. Clair (Edinburgh: CounterPunch and AK Press, 2004), 260-269.

4. The magazine *Neurotica* (1948-1951) had a brief but tumultuous existence. Born at the height of the debates over media and psychoanalysis, in which Legman was particularly absorbed, it paved the way for new writers such as Marshall McLuhan, John

Clellon Holmes, Allen Ginsberg, Jack Kerouac and Carl Solomon. Pervaded by controversy, the magazine was censored, coming close to dissolution on several occasions. Gershon Legman's first editorial experience came from his leading this publication where he could present his critical vision regarding such topics as sexual repression and violence in the media (two sides of the same coin in his view). The magazine found itself drawing closer to the budding Beat Generation and its anti-establishment perspectives, although Legman was uncomfortable with the movement's adherents, whom he regarded as eccentric at best. This was the case with Allen Ginsberg, whose erotic poem *Fie my Fum i* was rejected by Legman as "ridiculous." The magazine's owner, Jay Landesman, who held the last word on the matter, ultimately published the poem in issue 6 of *Neurotica* in 1950. It was Ginsberg's first poem published in a "small" but nationally circulating magazine.

5. Jay Landesman, *Rebel Without Applause.* (Permanent Press Pub. Co., 1987). In this memoir, Landesman recounted his meeting with Legman and the behind-the-scenes activity of *Neurotica.* On the conflicts with censorship that led Legman to make the decision to go into exile in France, it is worth reading Susan David's *Serpents in the Garden,* cited above.

6. John Clellon Holmes, *Go, a modern novel for the search of experience and for love,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952).

7. Judith Legman. Email to author, June 14, 2014.

8. Gershon Legman, *Rationale of the Dirty Joke. An analysis of sexual humor. First Series* (Grove Press, 1968).
No Laughing Matter. Rationale of the Dirty Joke. Second Series (Breaking Point, 1975).

9. "Gershon Legman … was a collector of the erotic, the obscene, and the banned. The secret things everyone did or thought about doing, the desires people were afraid to acknowledge. … Folklorists claim Legman and many of his works, but he saw himself more broadly as a social critic, a leader in the battle to destroy American sexual censorship." S. Davis, *Dirty Jokes and Bawdy Songs: The Uncensored Life of Gershon Legman* (Urbana, Chicago; Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 1-10. doi:10.5406/j.ctvqc6hph.5.

10. In his text introducing the diagram, Legman explained: "Bruce Elliott has given this puzzle-folding its Sanskrit name as above, with suitable comment on my probable unconscious motives in inventing it." Gershon Legman "Lingam and Yoni," *Phoenix* no. 273 (January 23, 1953): 1091.

11. This model is very close to the Chinese Junk, a traditional folding. (Legman, "Lingam and Yoni," 1091-92.

12. Laura Rozenberg's research on the genesis of the relationship between Legman and Yoshizawa was published in two articles titled Unwrapping the Riddle of Yoshizawa-Legman. The first part was published in *The Paper,* 2021, no. 137, and the second in *The Fold,* 2022, no. 68.

13. Idem.

14. Ukiyo-e (pictures of the floating world) is a Japanese woodblock engraving technique. It achieved popularity during the Edo period. From the end of the 19th century onward, ukiyo-e prints were exported to Europe, where they were in great demand among collectors.

15. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa. Aug. 18, 1953.

16. The former site of the Hotel Dinard is now a residential building. The former convent across from 29, rue Cassette has been converted into a hotel, although the mature trees in the courtyard remain.

17. *Asahi Graph Magazine,* January 9, 1952, 7-9.

18. In their inspiration and layout, all these homemaker-focused magazines resembled those published in the United States, the victor of World War II.

19. Legman was unable to read Japanese, but early on, he contrived to find good translators who, as a favor, would translate Yoshizawa's letters. The first of these was Philip Boaz Yampolsky, grandson of the famous anthropologist who had founded Columbia University's department of anthropology. In the Navy, Yampolsky had trained to become a Japanese translator and had fought in the Battle of Iwo Jima in World War II. Legman was familiar with him from his days as editor of the magazine *Neurotica,* which had attracted Yampolsky due to his interest in the Beat Generation. Years later, in addition to teaching Japanese and directing the Columbia University East Asian Library, he dedicated himself to increasing the popularity of Zen, translating books such as *Zen Dust* and *The Records of Lin-Chi*.

20. Akira Yoshizawa, *Atarashii Origami Geijutsu)* (New Origami Art) (Origami Geijutsusha: 1954).

21. "... an English, French and Spanish edition of your work simultaneously ..." Gershon Legman, Letter to Akira Yoshizawa. August 18, 1954. These languages had not been selected at random. According to Legman's bibliographic research, the primary creators of origami were to be found in Japan, Spain and Argentina. In the Biography of Paperfolding, he also included books in English (from the UK and United States) and in German.

22. Librairie Mistral was renamed Shakespeare & Company in 1964, after the early-20th-century bookstore owned by Sylvia Beach.

23. Sometimes Legman made use of the time by writing letters on Librairie Mistral letterhead, as can be evidenced by some of his correspondence preserved in the collection of the Origami Museum in Colonia.

24. These were the Dutch version of a children's book by Maying Soon, published as *Chinees Vouwboek, and Plezier met Papier* by A. van Breda.

25. Felix Tikotin, Handwritten note to Legman on trifold cardboard. Printed on the back is "Galerie Place des Vosges, July 19, 1954." Collection of the Origami Museum in Colonia, Uruguay.

26. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, August 20, 1954.

27. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, August 2, 1954.

28. Legman wrote on the back of the cardboard sheet: "No return address. Letter from Wassenar sic., Netherlands."

29. Gershon Legman, letter to Percival D. Perkins, July 19, 1954.

30. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, August 20, 1954.

31. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa. August 20, 1954.

32. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, September 15, 1954.

33. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, September 14, 1954.

34. J. Chastel, House of Dior letter to Gershon Legman, September 9, 1954.

35. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, November 29, 1954.

36. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, November 29, 1954.

37. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, November 29, 1954.

38. AkiraYoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, December 23, 1954.

39. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, December 23, 1954. In the present essay, the English translations of Yoshizawa's letters are those Legman arranged after receiving the original letters in Japanese from Yoshizawa. The Origami Museum's Legman archive contains the Yoshizawa originals in Japanese as well as the translations.

40. Gershon Legman, letter to Felix Tikotin, January 20, 1955.

41. Gershon Legman, letter to Felix Tikotin, January 20, 1955.

42. Felix Tikotin, letter to Gershon Legman, January 2, 1955.

43. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, January 31, 1955.

44. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, March 6, 1955.

45. Ibid.

46. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, March 6, 1955.

47. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, March 26, 1955.

48. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, March 28, 1955.

49. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, March 28, 1955.

50. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, April 25, 1955.

51. Legman had first learned of the existence of Origami Shuko and the Yoshizawa works contained in this book from Yoshizawa himself in a letter of August 1, 1954 discussing the use of non-rectangular paper to form origami figures. Such non-traditional sheets (ranging from triangular to star-shaped) are "methods well exemplified in a book entitled "Origami Shuko" by Honda, published in 1944," Yoshizawa wrote.

52. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, April 25, 1955.

53. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, April 2, 1955.

54. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, April 2, 1955.

55. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, April 2, 1955.

56. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, April 25, 1955.

57. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, April 25, 1955.

58. Gershon Legman, letter to Felix Tikotin, February 7, 1955.

59. Gershon Legman, letter to Felix Tikotin, February 7, 1955.

60. “au lieu de touristes, le public évolué et averti d’intellectuels et d’artistes français, que méritent ces pliages, sera de retour à Paris.”

61. The Air France delivery notification (Note de Livraison) number 1213027 dated June 5, 1955 is preserved in the collection of Gershon Legman documents at the Origami Museum, Colonia, Uruguay.

62. Gershon Legman, letter to Felix Tikotin, June 7, 1955.

63. Yoshizawa had in fact mailed the letter on June 5, the same day on which Gershon Legman was claiming the shipment at Nice Airport.

64. “I had wanted to send 350 pieces but could not send more than 153. I did not have enough money to send everything.” But it was clear that this was not the main reason for sending his most outstanding pieces: “Origami is a paper work and I did not want to ruin my best works.” (translation of the Yoshizawa letter rendered into English by an initial translator). Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, June 5, 1955.

65. “Voici la liste de ce que je n’ai pas pu vous envoyer.” (translation of the same letter into French, containing further details). Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, June 5, 1955.

66. “Le papier du No. 103 est employé pour la peinture japonaise et le procédé de sa fabrication semble être inconnu à l’étranger.” Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, June 5, 1955.

67. “... sont faites avec du papier admiré comme le meilleur du monde lors de l’exposition universelle.” Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, June 5, 1955.

68. The reference to a supposed exposition in Cagnes-sur-Mer also appears in a letter from Mick Guy to Legman following the death of Robert Harbin, one of the pioneers of origami in Great Britain and for several years the director of the British Origami Society. In this undated correspondence, Guy informed Legman that Harbin’s files contained “a couple of photographs of you demonstrating to a small gathering.” It is entirely possible that Guy was referring to the photos of Legman taken during the workshops offered in conjunction with Yoshizawa’s exposition in Amsterdam since Legman had sent copies of those photos to several of his contacts abroad; however, Legman added his own handwritten note to the caption of the photos: “i.e. at Cagnes-sur-Mer, 1st European exhibition, 1955.” He apparently believed that the photos could have been taken during an exhibition that occurred in Cagnes-sur-Mer. This would amount to a further indication by Legman himself that this event actually took place. An opportunity to peruse Robert Harbin’s archive in an effort to locate the photographs has not yet emerged.

However, shortly before this article was published, Judith Legman confirmed that a showing in Cagnes-sur-Mer had indeed taken place, as she heard her husband say years later (since she had not yet met him in 1955). “But it was just in the garden, for friends, and only one evening, if I'm not mistaken — nothing really public.” (email to Laura Rozenberg, December 18, 2022). If that were the case, the “mystery” of the show is solved, although a photograph of the meeting would add substance to our research.

69. “Je n’ai pas actuellement un éditeur pour la traduction du livre de Mr. Yoshizawa, qui peut s’engager aux frais de la publicité. C’est justement avec l’exposition et la publicité que j’espère en trouver un.” Gershon Legman, letter to Janette Ostier, June 30, 1955.

70. Janette Ostier, handwritten letter to Gershon Legman, June 24, 1955.

71. “Sur la question de la vente des pliages: En principe, pourquoi pas?” Gershon Legman, letter to Janette Ostier, June 30, 1955.

72. “L’Origami est un art pur, et Mr. Yoshizawa, lui aussi, c’est un homme très pur.” … “ Je n’ai jamais osé parler prix avec lui. D’ailleurs il vit dans la misère absolue” “L’Hirondelle des Prés et ses Petits Oiseaux dans leur Nid, par exemple, lui a couté bien des nuits a faire. Combien est-ce qu’il faut demander pour son temps? Problème difficile.” Gershon Legman, letter to Janette Ostier, June 30, 1955.

73. “Je suis certain qu’il sera emballé. Jusqu’à maintenant personne n’a pu résister au charme extraordinaire de cet Huitième Art inconnu.” Gershon Legman, letter to Janette Ostier, June 30, 1955.

74. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, August 3, 1955.

75. The reference to the date of a possible meeting appears on a postcard he sent to Legman on July 27: “Only a word to say you that I will arrive at Nice by plane Friday (29-7) and will be at Nice 7 Avenue Gustave V 11:30. Is it possible to meet you there? I have to leave Nice in the afternoon for Marseille.” Also contained in the Felix Tikotin notebook preserved by his grandson, Jaron

Borensztein is the time of 11:30 a.m. reserved for the meeting with Legman.

76. Felix Tikotin, letter to Gershon Legman, August 29, 1955.

77. Gershon Legman, letter to Willem Sandberg, September 14, 1955.

78. Gershon Legman, letter to Willem Sandberg, September 14, 1955.

79. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, September 10, 1955.

80. Gershon Legman, letter to Ligia Montoya, May 20, 1956.

81. At the start of 1955, when nothing about the Paris exposition had yet been confirmed, Legman rather precipitately proposed to Montoya that she take part in it, electing not to discuss the matter first with Tikotin or Madame Ostier. “Would you like to exhibit some of your works at the same time, whether flowers or animals?” Unaware of the vagaries of the preparations, Montoya accepted, sending the enormous quantity of flowers. All that remains of this story is the correspondence between the two (letter from Legman to Ligia Montoya, January 31, 1955 and response from Montoya to Legman, February 13, 1955) since the photos of the Amsterdam exhibition do not include the vitrine with the Yoshizawa butterflies and the flowers attributed to Montoya. In later correspondence, Legman always assured Montoya that her models had been part of the exhibition.

82. Document issued by the freight company Express Transport Ltd., November 30, 1955.

83. Handwritten note containing the seal of R. Roger authorizing the works’ entry into France. December 8, 1955.

84. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, December 5, 1955.

85. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, December 7, 1955.

86. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, December 7, 1955.

87. Felix Tikotin, letter to Gershon Legman, February 15, 1956.

88. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, January 21, 1956.

89. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, January 21, 1956.

90. Legman left these words as a record. Though his actual letter to Yoshizawa is not among the papers in his archive, it may be assumed that this text represents the essence of his response.

91. Gershon Legman, letter to Akira Yoshizawa, May 20, 1956.

92. Akira Yoshizawa, letter to Gershon Legman, January 21, 1956.