

# The Archives Speak

by Laura Rozenberg (NY)

As a follow-up to the opening of the origami exhibition *Surface to Structure: Folded Forms* on June 10, 2014 at Cooper Union, I thought that running an article in *The Paper* about the first exhibition at The Cooper Union in 1959 would be a nice complement to Uyen Nguyen's new show. The origami historian David Lister provided information in some of his essays (<http://www.britishorigami.info/academic/lister/>), and there were also details scattered in news clips from that time. What else could be said that hadn't already been mentioned?

One night over dinner, I shared my thoughts with my husband and to my surprise, a couple of days later he told me that while doing an online search he had stumbled upon the physical location of The Cooper Union's first origami exhibition archives! Apparently the documents had been kept safely in several folders, not in New York but in Washington, D.C., at the Smithsonian Institution Archives building (<http://siarchives.si.edu>). (There was a reason for that; in 1967 The Cooper Union Museum

for the Arts of Decoration's collection and library had been turned over to the Smithsonian Institution.)

I sent an email to the Archive's front desk requesting an appointment and received a positive response. Everything went smoothly, I was allowed to visit to conduct research, and the librarians gave me permission to scan hundreds of documents that I later studied at home. What a treasure trove!

There they were, in two archival boxes, all the correspondence between the curators and the artists whose works were part of the exhibition *Plane Geometry and Fancy Figures*, which opened on June 1, 1959 at Cooper Union. The archives also contained the complete correspondence with Lillian Oppenheimer, the inspiration for the exhibition, and with Gershon Legman, who sent many of Akira Yoshizawa's models that previously had been exhibited in Amsterdam in 1955. There were also drawings, sketches and memoranda with many interesting details on how they designed and coordinated the setting.

If that were not enough, there was a final report co-signed by Christian Rohlfind and Edward Kallop, curator and associate curator at the museum's Department of Exhibitions. In their words, the show gathered "*the largest total attendance for an exhibition on view during the summer months in recent years.*"

Strangely enough, there were no pictures in the archive. However, Gershon Legman's widow, Judith Legman, later sent me by mail (she lives in France) a set of 15 photographs from the exhibition. Perusing the documents, I learned that the exhibition was an idea conceived by Mr. Rohlfind after reading an article by Meyer Berger published in the *New York Times* (June 27, 1958), which featured Lillian Oppenheimer and her passion for paperfolding.

Also, the report indicated that students from The Cooper Union Architectural School Class in 3-D Design used paper folding as a class project, and the best results were included in the show.

I also learned about how they organized the layout. While some objects were suspended from the ceiling, there were others on peg-board walls, and many inside glass cases.

Twice a week, in the morning and in the afternoon, the program hosted demonstrations conducted by "qualified paper folders, many of them pupils in classes given by the Origami Society."

The museum printed a 12-page catalogue (available online at: <http://library.si.edu/digital-library/book/planegeometryfan00coop>), and sold it for 50 cents. Both the catalogue and Robert Harbin's book *Paper Magic* sold out before the show ended two months later, on August 31, 1959. Rohlfind's office continued receiving letters with inquires about books or classes on paperfolding for several months after the show closed. 📖



Phonebooks standing atop of a tessellated paper arch. Photo by Emerich Gross, 1959



Two foxes by Akira Yoshizawa. Photo by Emerich Gross, 1959