

An American in Paris

by Jan Polish

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Origami exhibitions tend to be small and insular, usually a group of tables pushed together in a room connected to an organization's convention. So nothing I've seen in the past prepared me for ParisOrigami, the recent exhibition mounted at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris. It ran for four days (March 26-29) and was open to the public, with an admittance fee of 40ff (about \$6.50). The artists were all specifically invited and included many of the finest paper artists from around the world.

The initial idea for ParisOrigami came from a contact in the southwest region of France between **Michel Charbonnier** of Origami France, a now-defunct commercial alliance that also included **Eric Joisel** and **Gerard Ty Sovann**, and **Jean-Marie Clerton**, head of communications of Groupe Gascogne, one of the largest paper manufacturers in France. "It was Clerton's idea to have an origami festival in Paris," said **Michel Ronsseray**, President of MFPP (Mouvement Français des Plieurs de Papier). "For Groupe Gascogne, it was an occasion to present kraft paper not just as packaging, but to show the public other qualities." They formed a new company, Animation Aquitaine (the region in France where the paper is produced), and began to seek additional sponsorship. They eventually included Eric Joisel as the artistic director and MFPP to help coordinate the folding activities.

The hall was huge, at least 60 x 90 yards. Guarding the entrance were lifesized wild beasts, including a paper tiger folded and realistically painted by Gerard Ty Sovann, and a more abstract but equally protective rhinoceros, by Joisel. Display cases were scattered through the room in a variety of styles, from beautifully lit four- or five-shelf standing cases to table top displays with domed lids. The sides of the hall were filled with booths; some with more exhibits, some with commercial contents. The organization (whether intentionally or not) presented the chronological history and the amazing diversity of the paper arts. The first displays at the front featured the work of **Akira Yoshizawa** and **Yoshihide Momotani**. These two pioneers of modern origami, now 87 and 70 respectively, are amazing artists when their work is shown in isolation. Presented in historical context, they also showed the seeds from which the rest of the participants grew. Further in were the more mainstream origami artists like **Robert Lang**, **Lionel Albertino**, **Michael**

LaFosse, John Montroll, and Alfredo Giunta, among others. Towards the back and into the sides were the relatively avant-garde paperfolders **JeanClaude Correia, Didier Boursin, Vincent Floderer, and Paul Jackson**.

In the center of the room was a stage area, divided in two by a wall that made it look like a squash court. There the 'stars' made their scheduled appearances. The students' chairs and tables, along with nearly all the furniture in the hall, were made of natural colored corrugated cardboard (yes, cardboard) provided from La Maison de Carton, one of the commercial exhibitors. Amazing stuff, and surprisingly sturdy, although by the fourth day of heavy usage it was starting to show some wear. There were also teaching stations in each of the corners, where hard-working members of MFPP taught simple models almost constantly. I don't remember seeing **Veronique Leveque** sitting at any time during the four days. Standing and teaching, yes. Running cartons, yes. Racing from one teaching station to another, yes. Collapsed on the floor in exhaustion, yes. But sitting ... no.

At several relatively calm spots in the hall were other teaching tools: small kiosks with enlarged diagrams of simple models. They were supplied with a constantly refurbished supply of paper, and a constantly recycled supply of people. This was a very successful concept that will also be used in Charlotte at the Southeastern Origami Festival, and in other origami gatherings open to the public.

As always this type of international gathering is also a family reunion, presenting opportunities to see friends and colleagues. During the first two days I wandered randomly, spending more time chatting and folding than doing a systematic examination of the exhibits. Every time I walked anywhere I spotted something new: some model I hadn't noticed or a particularly impressive use of paper. But I somehow couldn't do the thorough review, case by case, model by model, that the display warranted. I finally realized that I was overwhelmed by the quantity, quality, and intensity of the work presented. I was in sensory overload. I was glad that I had given myself the full four days at the exhibit. Friends had been amazed that I would plan to spend so much time there, and I had wondered if I would be bored. I'd planned lots of little 'escapes' into Paris. I took none of them. There wasn't enough time.

The artists and visitors expressed surprise that origami seemed to be going in so many directions at once, and that there was innovation and excitement in each of these forks. Many of these directions were already familiar to me, so perhaps what surprised me the most was that I could still be surprised. Lionel Albertino, for example, a young French creator, was new to me. He folds in the realistic school, and his animals and people were amazingly sculptured. If other origami is 3D, his somehow finds a fourth dimension. He has been folding for 20 years, much of it alone with a book, and creating for 10. He amazed me by saying that these works were five years old, and that his new work was

going to be even more life-like, more like sculpture. "I want to translate the animal," he told me. "It doesn't have to be complicated. When a model is complicated the animal is invisible, and you just see the technique." His recent work has been much influenced by **Dave Brill**. "When Dave Brill folds it is a true fold-it is life. Not very difficult, but it is life." Other influences? Albrecht Durer, and le Caravage (a 17th century French painter), and Walt Disney. Walt Disney? "Yes, their animals are very interesting--they pick just one aspect of the animal but it's the essence of the animal. With the paper it's also possible but more difficult." Albertino is not well known outside of France, but that won't be true for long, I'm sure. When I took an informal poll of the other exhibitors asking whose work impressed them the most, his name came up often.

Others whose names were often mentioned by their peers were Eric Joisel and Vincent Floderer, two French artists who combine traditional paperfolding with amazing paper sculpting. Eric was the artistic organizer of the event, and had been so busy that he presented the same work that had been on exhibit at the BOS convention in September. But each new opportunity to see his work shows you facets you'd failed to notice before, or forgotten. **Joseph Wu**, in his article in the last issue of *The Paper*, described Eric's technique well, so I won't go into detail here. Eric's masks, busts, and recent animals use 'simple' boxpleating to create paper with a third dimension of thickness that can be modeled. He uses these sheets of paper like sheets of clay, pliant and responsive. Some of his designs, like his delightful rats and the rhinoceros at the entrance, don't use box-pleating, but show that his charm, wit, and artistry exist independent of medium.

Vincent Floderer is a charismatic, articulate, generous man, and his work reflects his personality and unique sense of humor. One piece I remember looked like a series of animation cells, as his gorillas moved, each slightly changed, through a framed grid. Another had intricately folded and tightly coiled columns, shaken out to become graceful curving strands of wheat or antelope horns. Two years ago, Paul Jackson taught us his technique for using crumpled, pliant paper to make objects. Vincent has extended those lessons into new areas. While he tirelessly taught everyone to make free-form mushrooms from the softened paper, his own displays proved the difference between art and craft. Yes, we can follow his instructions. Yes, we can make an acceptable mushroom. No, we cannot all combine mushroom models into a fascinating display, perfectly balanced in shape, color, and texture.

Vincent's background is in art. He started folding many years ago, from "very simple books with very bad explanations," and incorporated his origami into his formal studies. "It was always a way to do sculpture," he said. "I made my diploma after years of study in origami. There was a problem. The jury said, is it sculpture? Finally they decide, yes it is. It is a light way to do sculpture, light in all meanings of the word. It can solve some problems of sculpture. The

artist is a receptor, and the medium is also a receptor. The fold is not just a technique, it's also an energy. That's the different thing with other plastic techniques. The folding exists in the movement at the same time as in the paper. That's why it's incredibly difficult to explain." Vincent is also remarkably modest and free of conceit. He feels that the paperfolder doesn't create the fold, but discovers it. "I like the name paperfolder," he adds. "You don't have to say artist. Artists bring an artistic dimension. Scientists bring another dimension. Educators yet another. You have to forget ego. Cezanne said that works of art exist separate from the one who created it."

Jean-Claude Correia, one of the founders of MFPP 20 years ago, and Didier Boursin, a very early member, also have backgrounds in other arts. "I was a painter," Jean-Claude told me. "I made many exhibits, and I am from many generations of artists. I ask questions of myself about my work. I can use many tools, I can use pencil, oils, marble. There were so many tools I could use to make painting, I was frightened--too many choices. With a sheet of paper, it's simple. I can put my ideas directly into the material." Jean-Claude was one of the first paperfolders to move away from traditional origami into more abstract work. He displayed several large, intricate works, complex waves of box-pleated paper pulled into angry points. I asked whose work he most admired. "The methods, the techniques of Paul Jackson," he replied. "And the way that Vincent Floderer brings other things into his art, not only techniques. I am tired of 10,000 frogs, 100,000 elephants and insects. Technique is not sufficient to decide that something is art. Art is a connection between two people on this planet, when one person can give some emotion to another person, even something bad, but still emotion. Someone can write pages and pages and have nothing to say. You have to have ideas, have lived life. Then after years, you have something to say, and have the technique to give this message."

Didier Boursin first studied architecture, "making paper structures to test resistance of the material with folding, and looking at the nature of how things grow; how plants fold and resist. I tried to translate that into architectural structures." He met Jean-Claude Correia just at the beginning of MFPP. "We came up with many new ideas. At first I wanted to make something with kinetic movement, something funny. I started to try new things, new ways. I learned origami bases, models, but very quickly wanted to make new things." Didier works in several directions. He seems to alternate simple creations for children with sophisticated works displayed in art galleries. Is that a contradiction? No, he said. "I try different approaches: simple for children, sometimes very hard because I use curving folds. When you write a letter with a pen, you make a curve. If you write with a pen without ink you can make a curve, and fold the paper into a 3D form. There is a difference between my exhibit and others--most of the time people take long paper, and fold, fold, fold to make a model. I like to keep the paper at the border and fold in the middle, and I cut also--I have no rules. I like to have proportion between the

number of folds and the aesthetic: it is sometimes better to have less folds and some cuts--a better aesthetic for me."

Tomoko Fuse observed that in France there was less division between origami and sculpture using paper. "Japanese people make a fence," she said. "This is origami, this is not origami. Here many are using paper like clay. There is a power to use paper making something new." She has just returned to origami after a long illness where she didn't fold for over a year. In her exhibit were lamps she had designed for a commercial manufacturer in Japan, using folds to create wonderful shadow patterns in the shades. She will design more, but she said that this exhibit had influenced her. "Maybe my way is more toward paperfolding and not toward origami." In addition to the lamps, she exhibited boxes and quilts. The quilts especially impressed me, since I've folded many myself. But she showed what an artist can add to the patterns that she has given to everyone else to reproduce. You look at the paper she chose and think, 'they don't go together.' She takes unlikely combinations that shouldn't work but do, and that bring your eye and brain around in her desired direction. Your eye movements become involuntary, as her work takes control.

The variety in Fuse's work surprised Paul Jackson. "Her work has moved on more than I thought it would have, especially the lamps." His own work has also changed recently, as he has developed his amazing pottery-like bowls made with shaped and decorated box-pleated grids. I'd seen some before, so I thought I was prepared. But he had over 30 new examples, and they proved again that the choice of medium is less important than the artist's eye, and his control of that chosen medium. The clean lines, graceful shapes, compelling use of color—all would be powerful whether in porcelain or in paper.

Paul is in the midst of a two year college packaging course to add a new skill to his others. He'd never intended to leave paperfolding, but to develop a hedge against the vagaries of an artist's life and to acquire the technical skills to realize his packaging ideas. It's ironic that as soon as the course began and his time became limited, his paperfolding work took off: more books, more advertising contracts, more gallery shows, even a grant to work with a choreographer in Charlotte to develop the 'paper music' he'd displayed at the last Festival. I asked Paul if this exhibit would change his work. "Yeah," he said, "but work changes anyway, and you don't really know where the influence came from. It's more a feeling of confidence--seeing your work properly displayed, not just one by one in a studio. Part of the function of an exhibit is seeing your work on display. But if you can't be inspired by this," he said, waving his hand around the hall, "what can you be inspired by?"

Both Tomoko and Paul singled out Gerard Ty Sovann, a young Frenchman originally from Cambodia, for his imposing and crowd-pleasing models. Tomoko was especially surprised to hear that Gerard earns his living from

origami; his large painted models are used in window dressing and office decoration. A stationery store in the shopping mall outside the exhibit hall had several of his models in the window, and they were delightful. Some people questioned whether they work perfectly well as origami, but their power and charm are extremely impressive. And Gerard himself is a charming man and excellent teacher. There was a stage at the back of the hall where he periodically folded life-sized and larger-than-life models. A fine example of origami as spectator sport, and his audience was fascinated.

The best spectator origami, as always, was presented by **Marieke de Hoop**, who was there with her Origami Theatre. She sits, dressed in black, with a large box on her lap. The music begins, and a small crowd starts to gather, drawn as much by her open smile as by the sound. Slowly the front of the box opens, forming a stage. Marieke's hands enter through the curtain at the back, even more slowly. Her long, elegant hands hold a piece of paper. With dancing grace and complete control she begins to fold. The deliberate and disciplined movement are hypnotizing; there is no way you can shift your eyes away. Wristwatch time disappears. Only paper time exists. The sheet moves back and forth, peacefully and smoothly, in her fingers. Finally, a simple duck is born. He glides across the stage and out, into the waiting hands of a wide-eyed child. There is always a moment's hesitation before applause begins, as if the audience jerks itself out of a trance. And the enchantment happens to paperfolders, too. She makes us look at our own hands in a different way, as she proves that there can be amazing beauty in the previously pedestrian act of folding a sheet of paper.

Michael LaFosse, **Herman van Goubergen**, and Alfredo Giunta didn't present much new work, but what they did present was wonderful, and mostly well displayed. Michael especially seemed to have taken great care in arranging the lighting in his exhibit, so that the highlights and shadows fell in perfect contrast. Most of the new work he's done for the past year was on a special commission for the Arizona-Sonora Museum, in Tucson AZ, and wasn't available for display. A great pity, since the one new piece from that project, a lion's face, was superb. It was definitely a portrait of a specific lion, and had the personality and 'breath of life' that I expect to see in Michael's work. His hand-made paper, always constructed for a particular model, adds to the total effect. Herman's new model introduction, a face mask, also uses subtle and rounded folds to create an image that is both abstract and specific at the same time. It seems to have grown from the part of his brain that created his amazing cat, rather than the part that created the startling skull. Alfredo's work shares a liveliness with Michael's, which is perhaps surprising since he uses foil extensively. He told me that "you don't need to write a big book to express poetry, so maybe in origami it's the same; you don't need to put in so many folds to express life." He also said that he's become much more interested in paper lately. I can't wait to see what he accomplishes with that aspect added.

Comparing Michael's and Herman's displays with Alfredo's, though, helped me to distinguish the excellence of the models from the excellence of the exhibition of those models. Didier Boursin told me that he was a bit disappointed in the way models were displayed. "Most of the time I am very critical--for myself, too. I think the presentation is not great--the plastic balls are not a good way to make presentation. I didn't want to be in a glass box. If people want to touch, that's ok. The models are very very nice, but the presentation is not great. I like making with sand, with stone. It's nice to make a presentation, not only with model but an environment. The model looks better sometimes."

Didier's comments made me look more closely at the displays themselves, and how they worked to color the observer's impression of the work. Some of the displays, such as Vincent's, Tomoko's and Didier's, were unique and personal, and used few conventional display cases. In other displays, such as Michael's and Herman's, the artist brought relatively few models, which allowed for a more elegant and leisurely presentation. The eye of the viewer could examine each model with minimal distraction, and without being overwhelmed. But Alfredo's area had more models, and the somewhat congested whole took away from the appreciation of the individual pieces. Akira Yoshizawa and Yoshihide Momotani also brought many, many models, and it was difficult to concentrate on each item, incredible as they were. I was shocked to finally notice that my favorite model from Sensei Yoshizawa, his sea urchin, was there, but I almost missed it.

Robert Lang, John Montroll and **Stephen Weiss** suffered from rather haphazard displays. The models themselves were impressive: Stephen's money folds have a liveliness rarely found when currency is the folding medium, and John has been doing more wetfolding with good quality paper, to better present his new style creations (closed back animals with greater sculpting). While the display cases weren't as cluttered as with Yoshizawa or Momotani, the placement and lighting seemed almost careless. It certainly didn't flatter, and in most cases damaged, the impression given to the public of their work.

Robert's work has been exhibited many times before, to much better effect. Several years ago **Toshi Aoyagi** mounted an exhibit of Robert's work in a Toronto gallery, and they invited local artists to help create settings for the origami. One insect sat on a straw hat, I remember, and another was almost hidden in a forest of leaves; you could see and admire the precision and beauty of the individual models. Robert's recent work has continued to grow, both in science and in art, but at ParisOrigami he was given some of the domed tables, with no spot lighting available. It made the models seem flat, and few benefited from being seen mostly from above. A pity, because Robert's amazing combination of technical detail and personal artistry should have been given more prominence.

But these were small imperfections. The quality of the work was extremely high, and the magnitude of the accomplishment amazing. The people who were already paperfolders were well aware that they were present at an historic occasion, and the casual public seemed absolutely delighted. In a recent interview with **Gwyneth Radcliffe** in the *British Origami Society Magazine*, Eric Joisel mentioned that origami was not especially popular in France. I wonder whether this exhibition will change things; the people I spoke to seemed genuinely moved, and appreciative of what they were seeing.

Will there be another? The exhibit was extremely expensive, and sponsorship did not nearly pay for the costs, especially with late withdrawals by some critical backers. Michel Ronsseray told me that they knew from early in the planning that ParisOrigami would not break even without extensive sponsorship. "It was an investment in publicity," he said. Michel was very pleased with the artistic and public success of the exhibition, and hopes that there will be another, perhaps in 2000. The successes of ParisOrigami also gave overseas visitors ideas about having their own versions. I asked Michael LaFosse if we could do it in the United States. "Yes," he replied, "especially with this as a springboard, and picking up the successful points--the publicity, photos, etc. If it can't be sold in the United States, then the salesman is inept."

Marieke de Hoop said that ParisOrigami proved that we all use the same words, but we use them in different ways. Jonathan Baxter called it the Disneyland of origami. Michael LaFosse felt that it was the most significant origami event of our time. But perhaps **Florence Temko** said it best. "Fabulous, fabulous, fabulous," she said, looking around the hall. That certainly summed it up.