

# Interview with Paul Jackson

By Jan Polish

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*Paul Jackson is a professional artist and paperfolder who has incorporated origami and other paper arts into advertisements, displays, packaging, pop-ups, and cards. He is a prolific origami creator, and has published many books. In addition, he runs workshops on the techniques and application of paperfolding at art and design colleges throughout the United Kingdom. In December 1994, on a train between Kyoto and Tokyo after the Seian conference on origami in science and math, I spoke with him about his work.*

*Jan Polish: How did you get started in origami?*

Paul Jackson: I was an art student. I always knew I'd be an artist, even as a child. My mother used to clean a doctor's house, and on school holidays I went with her. It was a big house with a huge garden, and they had a big bathroom with a circular stained glass window. I used to stare through it, and look at the magical colored light shining through. They had individual sheets of toilet paper, and I used to play with them, fold them. I actually made a sailboat. It was such a magic moment for me. Also, my father knew how to make one kind of complicated paper airplane, and I learned how, and impressed my friends. I knew how and they didn't. At 11, I went to the library and took books out. I folded through my teens, and got an odd book here and there.

I went to art school, at a very good school, and got an M.A. I was doing all kinds of things, performance art, music, whatever, but not paper. I showed my origami to my teacher, and he dismissed it. I was deeply hurt. I thought, you so-and-so, I'm going to show you. To be fair, it was a simple sort of origami, like flapping birds.

After college, I decided to start working with paper, teaching paper techniques, and folding paper to make shapes. By 24 my creative origami reputation was made. I'd been a member of the British Origami Society (BOS) since I was 18, and was already known as a creator. I was an origami model maker, and moved gradually from model making to folding paper. I learned you don't need to make models, you just need to fold something that you can then apply to other contexts, and not necessarily in paper either. I did some workshops at Siemens in Germany for their senior designers. The teachers were graded, and all 30 people gave me a 5 in every category. This had apparently never happened before. I knew I was onto something. That was in 1984, three years after college.

*JP: How do you get your inspiration?*

PJ: For me, one area is "models," and the other is what I call "non-models." If we're talking about models, I find them by playing, not by trying to find something, but watching television, whatever, and finding interesting sequences or nice shapes. Nineteen times out of twenty nothing happens. But sometimes you see an action or face emerging, so you follow it through. It's a methodology I prefer to "how do I make a spider?" That way, you may find an efficient solution, but it's rather dull. I like to think that my models are surprising. When I create by playing, I find things that are simple and elegant, that you don't anticipate. It's very important that models are interesting to make, with an elegant folding sequence, and flowing. It's important that the whole thing, not just in detail but in overall effect, is interesting to look at, harmonious, and that the sequence and the final model fit well. You discover it, and liberate it from the paper. In complex models, you feel that it's been forced from the paper. All great design, whether a light bulb or whatever, it's like it's been there for a long time. It's discovered rather than invented.

But on the non-origami side--folding. When I say origami, I mean easily recognized subjects, while folding equals abstracts, like my one-crease things. Folding gives me more satisfaction than origami. It's more spontaneous. You can change things, you can alter things. Something nice about paper is that it's a temporary material, with very simple forms created at the moment, for the moment. When you're working like that, you're more aware of what's around you. It's mood-a more total experience than folding a model.

*JP: How did you discover folding?*

PJ: There wasn't one magic moment--several things connected. At a paper industry trade fair in Grenoble years ago, there was a huge exhibit by MFPP [Mouvement Français des Plieurs de Papier, the French origami group] that brought people from all over. I saw what others were doing. People were using origami in art and therapy, et cetera, not just in model making. Two or three weeks later, **Akira Yoshizawa** came to England. I spent time with him, and saw what he did.

Also, I started teaching in colleges, and asking myself, "what can I do with one crease?" As I began playing with that, very interesting things happened. I found these things very beautiful for me. I showed them to **John Smith**, and John was very excited, and it went on from there. He recognized that it was so in opposition to what others were doing that it kind of pulled people. It made them consider what they were doing. It considers the aesthetic rather than just the clever. It's deceptive, really.

It looks very simple, but it's actually technically very difficult. Complex realistic folding is very mechanical. Abstract folding respects the paper. You have to touch it with such care. As Yoshizawa said at Seian, you should touch

the paper as you would kiss your lover. You have to caress it, not bash it. It seemed to be the opposite of what everyone else was doing, but it was more intellectually satisfying, more spiritually satisfying, more aesthetically satisfying.

I gave a workshop in 1985 at the Chester BOS convention with 15 people, which was the first time I gave a workshop on it. I thought that everyone would loathe it, but the reaction was extraordinary. People were in tears: "Oh, my God, I'll never fold a model the same again." There was an incredible emotional response. I do these workshops with origami people, or with design students. Other people don't really respond. Another technique, crumpling, also gets tremendous response. It's difficult to do well. Some origami people can't take it; it's not for them. You can't diagram it, can't repeat it, cannot document it. My one-fold workshops are intellectual, while crumpling is more sensual. But one flows into the other--from form to texture.

It's great for students who are more interested in texture, especially my fashion and textile students. They've done incredible things. I don't teach in just one college. I travel around, teaching all over the UK. With my students, I try to give them a vocabulary to use. Even if they only use it in a minor way, I'm quite happy. That's what I'm there for. Some have gone on to do some exciting things, won packaging prizes. It's so exciting to see design people go on from it.

*JP: What do you think about technical folding?*

PJ: It's awesome stuff, some of it, but it's not for me. It's so uncreative--you take a base or principle and milk it to death. It's folding by numbers. It's model making, not paperfolding, and it's rather banal. It's very clever, but if you accept it as a substitute for something beautiful, I find that unacceptable, but some of the folders have indeed created beautiful things. But it's like being a snapper--you take 500 shots of this trip, and I can guarantee you that 10 will be superb.

There's something irritating about the self justification of it all to make it seem quite miraculous. It's kind of showing off. It appeals to people because it's possible to achieve something quite complicated by following diagrams. But things like one-crease folding are the responsibility of the folder to make it work, not the teacher. Some people come to origami because it's quite comfortable to work inside its rules. There's a kind of power and social entry for shy, insecure people. Some have technical brains with Yoshizawa's artistry, but not many. **Dave Brill** is almost unique. There is a difference between model making and sculpture, and Dave's is a form of paper sculpture. You need to study for many years. You can't hold down a job in a bank, and be Yoshizawa in the evening. **Marc Kirschenbaum** now - I like some of his work. It looks folded, not stuck together, and rather eccentric. He's

becoming better and better.

*JP: Which other paperfolders impress you?*

PJ: There's one or two people. Yoshizawa and **Jean-Claude Correia**. Other people do very important work but they're the only two people who have actually taken origami into new areas that no one's thought of before. Jean-Claude has introduced origami into the abstract, and into art galleries. Most origami looks very passive - Yoshizawa and Correia look very energetic. It says, "someone's made that." Then there are 10 to 15 folders on a rung below those two.

*JP: Toshi Aoyagi said to us recently that origami will never be accepted as an art form until it opens itself to independent critical review. What do you think about that?*

PJ: If you want something to improve and become more, you have to criticize, sometimes very destructively. If all we say is "wow, how nice," we're never going to improve. Of course, in most cases, origami is just a hobby, and we don't want to be rigorous. My background is art, where one or two times a week we talked about people's work. By talking about it honestly, you grow. Otherwise, your ego gets stroked, but you don't really get something back. We need to set up a safe environment for discussion, where we can talk about the work in a free way. In small groups, not large, and not defensive, but talk in an open and honest way.

*JP: Where do you think origami is going?*

PJ: Complex origami will dominate for quite a long time, but origami will become increasingly fractured into different areas, like complex, mathematical, computers, geometric, simple things to teach the kids.

In Europe, some radical things are happening. Like folding just for the pleasure of it, with no model at the end. You end up back at the square. There's some movement here and there toward abstraction, not geometric. Myself, **Thoki Yenn**, **Paulo Mulithano**, **Michael Anderson**. Just satisfactory shapes, not animals, not boxes, just forms. That might be the next movement.

I've had exhibitions of abstract forms, and they've gone quite well. But what I do is not really saleable. I'm quite jealous of people who can sell their work, but this also fits with my attitude that paper is ephemeral, so in a sense, I've shot myself in the foot. I have to do it for the moment, not just make a model that you keep on the shelf.

*JP: Where do you see your work going?*

PJ: I don't know. I've got no idea at all.