

# Interview with Michael LaFosse

By Jan Polish

Originally published in *The Paper*, February 2000

*Michael LaFosse, folder, teacher and proprietor of the Origamido Studio, talks about how his craft has evolved personally, and how origami as an art form has grown.*

*Jan Polish: Is origami an art or a craft?*

Michael LaFosse: The art or the craft potential for origami is the result of each individual's vision and attempt at communicating or being creative with it. People could extend their artistic potential through music, or painting, or acting, but even if it's through the medium of folded paper this still has to be a piece-by-piece, person-by-person question to answer.

*JP: In your Origamido studio, you present origami as both a craft and an art. Do you think that origami is accepted as an art form?*

MLF: If you're talking about the general public, they're not used to seeing what the origami community sees every day and they are caught a little off-guard. I think that as more venues present origami within an art context, it will allow the general public to recognize some origami as art. It's not their fault if they think that it's merely a piece of folded paper. That's a symptom of ignorance, not a bad word; it's a state of a person's experience. I am fond of saying, "It isn't a work of art just because it's an oil painting, and an origami model cannot be disqualified as being art based on the one point that it is just a piece of folded paper."

Some of us were hoping that origami-as-art would be an instant success, but it can't be that. Many of the traditional arts that people are more familiar with, that museums are prepared to exhibit, took hundreds of years to become part of the culture. It's a longtime process.

*JP: When you started, you started with origami as a craft. When did you consider yourself an artist?*

MLF: I first recognized the artistic potential at age 10 when I read the article in Reader's Digest magazine about Akira Yoshizawa, and saw the photo of his self-portrait. I recognized the potential and I aspired to do that, but I didn't

think I could; gradually over time, I worked towards it. It was like somebody learning to act, but not expecting to be on stage. As a person develops facility, a freedom for expression is born. When that happened to me, about 10 years later, I showed myself I could do it and I realized I'd found a vehicle of artistic expression for myself. In fact, I was so sure of myself that I left my college career of marine biology to pursue this as my way of life.

*JP: What is your creative process? How do you get your inspiration?*

MLF: I've learned that the best thing to do is to go out and be connected to life. For some people, that means New York cafes. For me, it's walking out and looking at the living creatures and plants, and spending time watching them, taking it all in until it becomes part of me. Sounds a bit spiritualistic, but it's a very human process. I don't know from day to day what experience, which animal or plant, will strike me. When you find yourself on an interesting little road, with something that calls to your heart, you become driven. You start asking questions. You want to learn more and more, and then you want to make a tangible expression of what you have learned: write a technical paper, a poem, or create a sculpture....

My intent with my work is simply to relate my personal experiences, from the natural world, through my chosen medium of folded paper. To help me connect to these things, I will do watercolor and pencil sketches, gesture sketches of these animals in motion. What that does for me is internalize the shape and motion, activity and structure, of the characteristics of these creatures, so that when I go to shape the paper with my fingers, it's there. I don't have to guess at it. I don't have to make it up. That process is no great secret. Artists for hundreds of years have done that before they actually made their art. As I pursue the same subject year after year I add more to my personal experience, and the new renditions show I know more. It's a lifetime thing. Especially the last 10 years, because of that, I've been happy to stay with a relatively small number of subjects, to stay with them for the rest of my life. I guess that's why I look to use the word Origamido, which implies that it is a way of life, a path to something.

For too long and for whatever reason, origami has not been considered as an artistically expressive medium that takes time to develop. There's no doubt that someone who studies to be a musician is going to work very hard, for many years, before they can even perform up to standard. Add that kind of dedication and effort to origami and we will really start to get somewhere.

Origami seems to promise, by its very nature of "this-goes-here and that-goes-there," that if you do each step you'll get the desired result. Certainly music seems to promise that, too: if I just play all of the notes I will have a great performance--not likely. The fact is there's no difference between sheet music and origami diagrams in this regard, and there are styles in

origami too, as in music. If you're trained in classical music and suddenly want to play jazz ... you need to grow into it first. When creating origami in this way, like jazz, you take a structured system and get to a certain place, and then add your individuality and artistic touch. I think that's why you don't see many people folding Yoshizawa's work, because his models require that extra element every step of the way. It's not arbitrary; there's technique as well as art.

*JP: Many people, even in origami, don't understand that.*

MLF: You would have to question each individual to see where that misconception ultimately comes from. And each person's use or need for origami is very personal and fundamentally based on their expectations. For instance, a mother visits our studio and asks "Do you teach classes? I think this would be good for my daughter, who's four." We say "We limit our classes to age eight and up, so why don't you take the class and teach your daughter at home?" Then she'll say, "Oh, I could never do origami!" Here's an adult saying she herself couldn't do it, but expects her four-year-old can! From the origami community a common sentiment expressed is, "I am not capable of making art. The reason I like origami is that I'm not creative." Just like that mother, that person has told himself a remarkable falsehood.

And "non-creative" origami hobbyists should not apologize for not creating new origami. We need performers as well as composers. We need great performers who will fold creators' works after they're gone; fold it in their own way. For instance, I'd love to see an exhibition, at the convention, by origami artists who have decided to focus on one specific model, year after year, bringing that same subject back, better and better, displaying growth in skill, artistry, and paper choice. I think many would learn a great deal from this.

*JP: Can everyone truly do this?*

MLF: Yes. I believe every person is capable of creating art somehow. The reason is because everyone has life experience they need to convey to one another, and that's the essence of art, of the artistic drive.

*JP: Do you agree that it takes a certain amount of spatial ability to be able to create origami models?*

MLF: I suspect that's true, because I know of my own difficulties in other areas that prevent me from grasping concepts and being prolific. Take math. I can attend math classes and get good grades, but I am not very creative at it; I am not interested enough.

*JP: What about competition and criticism?*

MLF: I don't think the origami community is ready for it just yet. We don't need to put blue ribbons on origami. We don't need some judge to say this is great and that isn't. If I believed in that kind of criticism I would have stopped using origami as a legitimate medium for art. The work will speak for itself. People will know; people will learn. Participants will bring in their work and will learn from comparison.

*JP: But if you talk to Paul Jackson or Dave Brill, who have art school backgrounds, they'll tell you that the criticism they received in school was a big part of their education as artists. Wouldn't that apply to origami, too?*

MLF: I don't think that's 100 percent applicable here. That is a method that the art community uses for an entirely different reason. Yes, a career artist needs to be taken out of himself sometimes. You're going to make a living and have to be up to standards pretty quickly; other professionals will be relying on you too. There is a need and motivation for, say, musicians who are going to be in an orchestra, to have experts kicking them in the rear, saying this is what is required here. But I don't think that we have any "great authorities" outside of the origami community, in the art world, interested or educated (about origami) enough to fairly evaluate a Yoshizawa, a **Vincent Floderer** or an **Eric Joisel** at this time, and we don't have the equivalent of an academic community, touting set standards; we are lucky like that. The art critics of Van Gogh's time trashed his work. Later those opinions changed. Useful, valid, criticism is not going to be borne from a single look. It's a long, personal, process. The origami community is not a big art professional thing yet, but when there is a population inversion, with many people making origami a career, their life's focus, there will be no shortage of critics, I am sure.

An artist has to be prepared to throw down conventions and reinvent. I criticize myself, and I'm prepared to take criticism when it's valuable, and disregard it when it springs from obvious ignorance. We have to get used to criticizing ourselves within the origami community first. I do that with my students in my advanced classes. You could also find a mentor and develop under that person, and day-to-day, year-to-year, their opinion would move you along. I'm all for that kind of criticism in our art right now. If I see a spark of excitement in folders, and if I feel I could help them, I will approach them and give them my opinion of their work, and I ask them to give their opinions of my work too. I strongly favor the type of criticism that encourages specific areas of improvement. Sometimes it's enough to point out the features which are particularly successful.

*JP: But when someone puts their work into an exhibit, aren't they saying they're ready for criticism?*

MLF: Not really, not so much in today's origami community. Most such displays are in the spirit of sharing, being a part of the community, and educating the public about our pastime. Right now, a lot of the great stuff coming out of the

origami community is by artists who've been inspired by other artists and want to move beyond them. It's a golden age for that.

*JP: Part of your life is teaching people to fold, and part is creating artworks ... which gives you greater satisfaction?*

MLF: I like to be able to do both, because you need a contrast and a balance. If I just holed-up someplace and tried to do nothing but art, I would probably grow to hate it because I'd be disconnected from people. Teaching is a totally different activity, and it's plugged into the origami, plus I learn so much when I teach. But if I were only teaching and not making art I would grow to resent that. So it's important to do both, and then I can enjoy both.

*JP: How is your art changing?*

MLF: It's changing in that, originally being inspired by Akira Yoshizawa, I thought I had to do the Noah's Ark thing--create every animal. And really, over the last 15 years, I've abandoned that, and felt that I'd like to do more and more about less and less. Now I deal with less than two dozen creatures that I fold over and over.

*JP: What trends do you see in origami?*

MLF: I feel that there are a greater number of people who seem to be interested in elevating the quality and style of their own work; they're really being more finished model quality conscious. I believe that the group exhibits at conventions are in part responsible for this.

*JP: Who do you most admire?*

MLF: Akira Yoshizawa, of course. I think that he's magnificent, and generally misunderstood. I still believe that he is the greatest origami artist to have ever lived. His best work is so far above what ever else I have seen. It will be a long time before anyone else comes close.

*JP: Where do you place your own work?*

If you were to examine my technology, I've got some unique and clever things that I know people will appreciate, but they don't compare with the sheer level of technological innovations that someone like **John Montroll** has contributed. I think that people will compare me favorably with Akira Yoshizawa's style, and they'll see his influence. But because I'm so end-product focused in my work, I think people will probably know much less about how I do my origami, and so they'll have little or no opinion about that. I think they'll remember me for a handful of exceptional pieces that I hope embody the standards that I have for the art of paperfolding.