

Interview with John Montroll

By Jan Polish

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John Montroll is a prolific creator and author. I spoke with him recently about his work.

Jan Polish: How did you first discover origami?

John Montroll: A friend recommended origami to my family. We got a book- **Honda's *How to Make Origami***, which had models pasted in. At the time, I was in the first grade, and could barely read, but it looked neat. I went through the book--the cup, the box, et cetera. Then I got to the "basic form," which was the bird base, and I didn't quite understand. I finally figured it out--that squash fold just opened up my whole world. That was just so neat. You put your hand inside and you squashed the paper! The book continued with the crane and two-piece bird base models. The animals were very appealing to me--at the time, two pieces was okay. We just collected as many origami books as we could.

JP: When did you start creating:

JM: Even when I was six I created--I made other animals. Even then I was able to make things. But I didn't realize that it was creating. It was just like when you want to draw something--you just draw it. I didn't realize it was anything special. I already had the idea that the models in the book weren't right--that you should fold from one square with no cutting--and I wasn't sure why the books wouldn't do that. So again it was just like drawing. I just took the paper and made new animals.

Then I wrote to **Lillian Oppenheimer** and she invited me to the conventions. At the conventions I'd bring bags of my things and expected to see bags of other people's models, because I assumed that to do origami was to make whatever you wanted to make. So I was rather disappointed that they had very little to show me.

JP: When did you realize that this was a gift? That it was something special?

JM: I don't pick up on those things. I didn't have an idea that I was doing something new. Nothing I did was so amazing. I couldn't understand, since anything else I could do, anyone else could do it better.

JP: Can you teach or verbalize this gift of creativity?

JM: No, you can't teach it. It comes from within. Everyone who tells me how they create is either lying because they don't really create with the method they're explaining, or they're not very creative because they've just explained one method of coming up with a set of models--there's nothing new to what they're doing. You can analyze someone else's work, but that has nothing to do with creativity. For me, to be creative means to develop a new style, a new technique, something new rather than just using the same old stuff over and over again. When I was young I noticed that everything around was made with the bird base--either they used one bird base and cut, or they used two bird bases, or a rectangle that they made two bird bases from. They were not doing anything really new.

JP: How do you feel about those who are using computers to create?

JM: They may have made a few models with the computer, but they're not really using the computer to create. I have no objection to using the computer to come up with a model, but just understand its limitations--it's only as good as your programs.

JP: Do you see a certain pattern in the type of person who is able to create? What makes you different from people like me, who can't create anything?

JM: I think it's several things. First, I have a passion for folding paper ... for wanting to fold animals ... and for not being satisfied with the things I see. In fact, if people ask me if they can create, I ask them to pick a model they like. I ask them if they're satisfied with the model. If they say they're satisfied with the model, they won't create. Second, my family tells me the story of when I was eight, and took an IQ test. One part involved spatial relationships, and I was off their scale. I can see in 3-D. I can see models folded in my mind.

JP: We've had many members tell us that their first book was one of yours. We don't hear that about many other complex books. Why do you think your models, and your books, are more accessible than those of other complex creators?

JM: One of the things I worked on in high school was geometric shapes. From one sheet, of course, but I did two genres. One was very complex cubic arrangements, and the others were stars--6, 12, 24, up to 96 points--all with one piece of paper. The more difficult of these would take me four hours to fold. And by the time I was in college, I realized that there was no future in this, because I couldn't diagram them. The easiest of the star patterns are in my *Animal Enthusiast* book. But even the easiest cubic arrangement was beyond my ability to diagram. It was then that I realized that good origami should be duplicated. My work has been getting easier and easier to fold. In each new book, it's getting easier, especially in *North American Animals and Mythological Creatures*. I'm very aware of what your fingers can do and what

the paper can do, and how the layers of the paper work, and what's an easy fold and a hard fold--what's a natural fold and a clumsy fold. People test my diagrams, and I take their suggestions, but I'm already tuned in. When people tell me that my work is too hard, they're looking at my old work, or they've just started and have a long way to go.

JP: What in your work are you proudest of?

JM: I guess my newest book, for several reasons. I have been able to simplify things--many of the animals are under 40 steps, some under 30. There's a certain understanding I have with the paper when I create. I have a feeling for good proportions for animals and the concept of structures of folding patterns, such as the dog base and its variations. Often in my designs I think in terms of wood carving. The models should have the look of a wood carving, in the way that they stand, the way the lines look good together, the texture.

JP: There is some controversy between the "technical" folders and the "artists." What is your opinion?

JM: I have to admit that perhaps I don't know what you mean by "technical" folding. I know they're referring to complex things, but being complex doesn't mean being mechanical. I think of Bach's music as being technical and complex. I think of Chopin's as being romantic and complex. People refer to technical folders because they may use more math in their art, but they're still producing art. To me, technical folding is like doing scales on a piano. If you want to fold beyond the crane, you need to have such techniques as rabbit ear, crimp folds, et cetera and they should hopefully be natural to you. If you want to be a piano player, you need to have certain techniques, and they all can be used for a more interesting art form. To have such artistry demands good technique.

If you want to stick to mountain and valley folds only ... that makes me think of going to a concert where they're going to perform a symphony with only middle C. I'm sure that's fine for some people, but a lot of people would like to see more, or hear more.

JP: Where do you think origami is going?

JM: In many good directions. We now know that there are many different ways people can contribute to origami. For example I'm a composer. We have other composers and many performers. We have composers, we have performers, we have teachers, we have people who like to put on exhibitions, people who like to tell stories. And everyone is influencing everyone else to make a more developed art.

