

The Home Forum

ORIGAMI ARTIST MICHAEL LAFOSSE

Paper player

LITTLE-PIG MAN: Michael LaFosse used one sheet of 12-inch-square handmade paper – and no glue or scissors – to make this piece.



JOHN NORDELL – STAFF

WHAT Michael LaFosse can do with a single sheet of paper is magic, though it's not called that.

His specialty is origami. You may have tried this art form, which is a Japanese word meaning "paper folding," but until you see a master like Mr. LaFosse in action, the possibilities are hard to imagine.

In less than two minutes, using one sheet of paper, he can create all the illustrations for a "story-gami" about visiting a boy in the mountains of Japan. When he folds the paper one way, it's a snow-covered peak. When he folds it some more, it's an animal footprint or a bird's pointy beak. The story ends with the sighting of a large bird, a crane, that flaps its wings (the paper wings flap when he pulls the tail) and flies off. The story is a sure-fire way to calm a crying toddler on an airplane, LaFosse says.

LaFosse has been folding paper with a purpose for 40 years, ever since his Uncle Norman made him a paper airplane when LaFosse was 5. His creations range from designs so simple that children in early grades can do them to ones so advanced that engineers lose the trail.

The origami artist has invented more than 100 kinds of paper airplanes. He's also crafted hundreds of animals and plants and geometric objects just for fun.

Some origami modelers like their paper-airplane designs to resemble actual airplanes. But too much realism can mean planes that don't fly very well. He prefers function over form in this case, even if his airplanes look abstract or futuristic.

LaFosse has a collection of origami books that is worth thousands of dollars. He knows origami styles the way art lovers know painting styles.

He came up with his first unique paper-airplane design in college, where he studied marine biology. LaFosse still thinks his "Art Deco wing" is one of his best designs.

Standing at his eighth-floor dormitory window at the University of Tampa, Fla., he would simply let go of the wing and watch it float for blocks. Seeing it soar out of sight was a thrill, he says.

As a young boy, LaFosse thought of origami as a mechanical hobby. It was like doing a crossword puzzle. That view changed at age 12, when he read an article about Akira Yoshizawa, a Japanese origami master.

The story was illustrated with a photograph of Mr. Yoshizawa as well as a self-portrait he had crafted from folded paper. LaFosse's eyes were opened. Now he saw how origami could combine his interests in science as well as art. Origami, he realized, could provide his "path through life."

That explains the name of his Origamido

Studio in Haverhill, Mass., north of Boston. The name combines "origami" with "do" (pronounced "doh"), which means "the way" in Japanese.

LaFosse says that, to his knowledge, his is one of only two origami studios in the world that are regularly open to the public. Origamido is a combination studio and store. People can come in to admire the impressive origami artworks. They can also buy instructional books (some written by LaFosse) and handmade papers, a specialty.

On the day of the Monitor's visit, he was working with his young Japanese papermaking apprentice. Barely out of his teens, Satoshi Kamiya is already recognized as one of world's top origami designers. Now he is learning how to make custom papers sturdy enough to last for centuries.

Origami design and papermaking is a rare combination of skills. LaFosse, who began making his own paper as a teenager, is dedicated to imparting his knowledge. He conducts many workshops for young people.

If you enjoy handicrafts, are comfortable manipulating material, and have a good spatial sense, LaFosse says, you'd probably enjoy origami – regardless of your age.

The mistake many make, however, is assuming that origami is child's play. Origami can be learned with a little persistence, but it's important to begin with projects suited to one's skill level. He tells of an origami activity that McDonald's once put on a Happy Meal box. It prompted a flood of complaints from people who couldn't figure out how to do it.

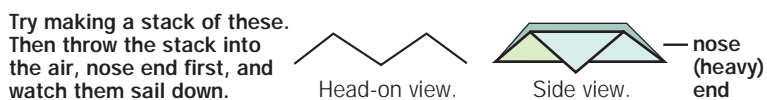
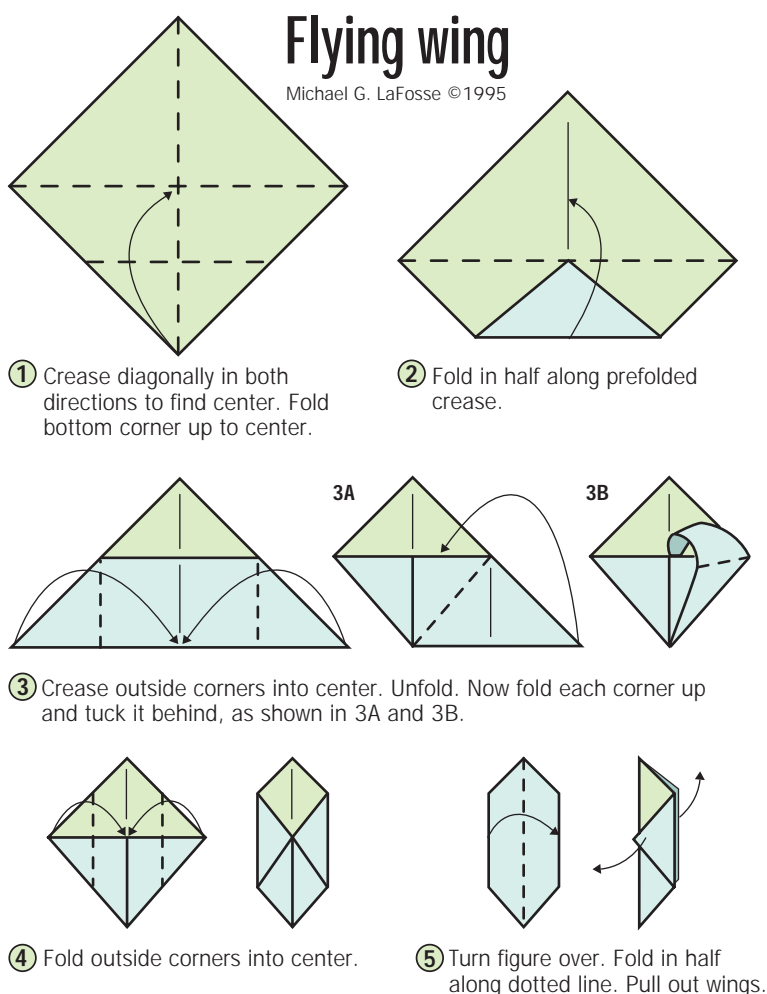
He cringes when he thinks of school classes folding paper cranes after reading "Sadako and the Thousand Paper Cranes" (by Eleanor Coerr, 1977). The cranes are too difficult for beginners, he says.

Looking around his studio, LaFosse points to a paper goldfish he refined in three hours of intense work. He spent 8-1/2 years perfecting a bat. Both are made using a fine-art technique called wet folding. By lightly wetting the paper, it's possible to make softer shapes. Dry-folded shapes (like those in the projects shown here) are more rigid and geometric.

This is a golden age for origami, LaFosse says. There is a tremendous amount and variety of paper available and lots opportunities for learning to fold it. About 25 new origami books are published each year. Videos are a good way to see the steps in making a project.

LaFosse is also enthusiastic about other applications for origami techniques. What about designing space-saving items or innovative highway maps? Yes, to an origami master, even the "mountain" and "valley" folds of a well-designed map are a thing of beauty.

Ross Atkin

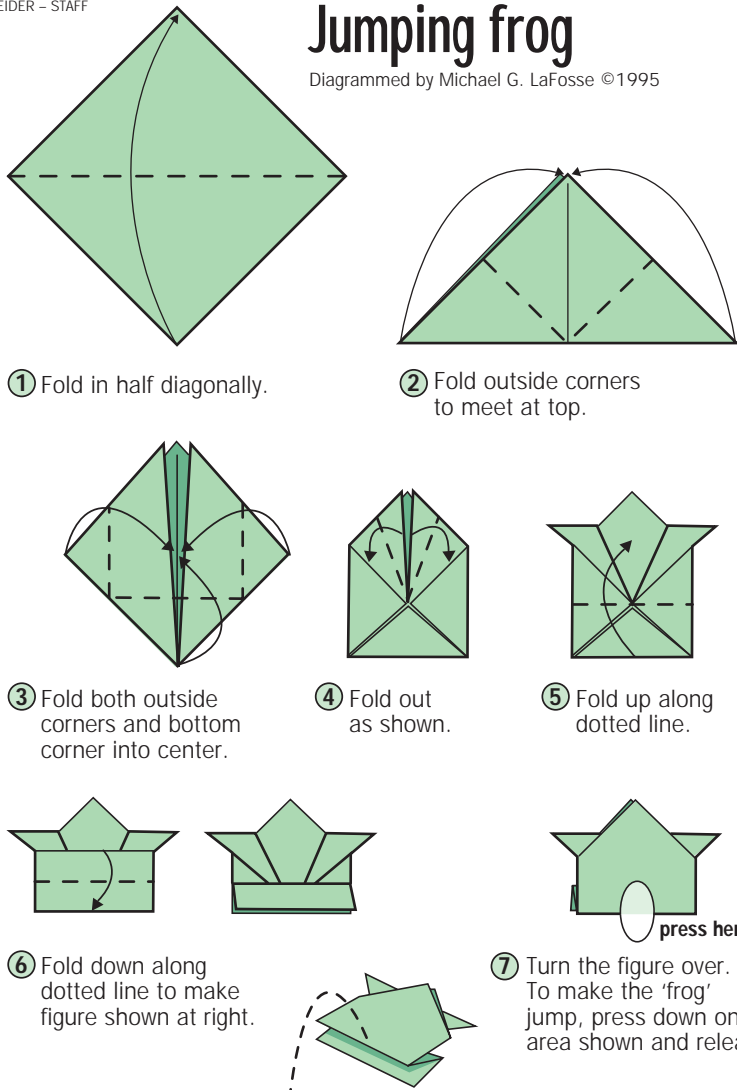


AT AGE 12, LAFOSSE SAW HOW ORIGAMI COULD COMBINE HIS INTERESTS IN SCIENCE AND ART.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
KAREN SCHNEIDER - STAFF

Jumping frog

Diagrammed by Michael G. LaFosse ©1995



How the history of this art unfolded

PAPER-FOLDING has been practiced for centuries, but its history is shrouded in mystery. The reason, says origami master Michael LaFosse, is that for much of its existence the tradition was passed along by one person showing another. Not much was written down.

Paper was invented in China about 2,000 years ago. The Asian art of paper-folding probably began soon afterward. From China it caught on in Korea and then Japan. A few of the ancient origami designs have survived. They are simple pieces that don't require complex written instructions.

The paper arts still enjoy a special place in Asian cultures.

Paper-folding spread to Europe around AD 700. Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519), the famous Italian painter, scientist, architect, and engineer, is sometimes credited with making the first paper airplane. If that's true, it probably was an example of pure folding, with no cutting or gluing. That would make it consistent with today's origami, in which no scissors, glue, or tape is used. (Multiple sheets of paper are OK, though.)

Origami's popularity with children grew with the kindergarten movement, begun by 19th-century German educator Friedrich Froebel. The idea of using instructional booklets and standardized pieces of paper (15 centimeters, or about 5-3/4 in., square), for paper-folding was especially well received in Japan. There, modern paper-folding fused with traditional Japanese origami. Mr. Froebel reportedly was unfamiliar with the word "origami."

During the 20th century, Akira Yoshizawa of Japan helped establish origami as a serious art form. He has created more than 50,000 origami works. With American Sam Randlett, he is also credited with developing the lines-and-arrows notation used in origami instruction.

R.A.

Tips from a master folder

- Start simply. Choose origami books with simpler designs and fewer folds until you get familiar with how to follow the diagrams.

- Don't use expensive origami paper at first. Sheets of newspaper and pages from magazines work fine, as do old catalogs and computer printer paper. Gift wrap has vivid colors and designs. (It also has a 'front' and a 'back,' making it easier to follow directions.) Construction paper is too thick and won't fold cleanly.

- Start with squares. Cut paper into squares that are 6 inches or 10 inches on a side. More important than the size is the squareness. Misshapen paper can lead to folding problems.

- Practice a piece by using one sheet of paper. Don't worry about multiple trial creases, but replace the paper when it's worn out. Once you've practiced, use a fresh sheet for the final folding.

- Make a series of 'step folds' to help you remember a complex project. Fold a sheet of paper up to Step 3, for example. Label it and make any helpful notes on it. Take another sheet and fold it to Step 6, and so on. File the 'steps' together in a resealable plastic bag and refer to them for review. Origami artist Michael LaFosse keeps crates of these tutorials.

R.A.

TODAY'S ARTICLE ON CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

An article of special interest to young people

My son, the half ironman

A FEW WEEKS AGO, May 19 to be exact, my son, Guy, competed in his first half-ironman triathlon - an athletic event in which the competitors swim, bike, and run.

An ironman triathlon - considered the ultimate endurance test for any athlete - is one where you swim 2.4 miles (usually in the ocean), then hop on your bike and ride 112 miles, and then run a complete marathon, 26.2 miles. You do this all on the same day, as fast as you can. A half-ironman triathlon is the same thing, only the distances are half. A 1.2 mile swim, a 56 mile bike ride, and a 13.1 mile run. In other words, even the "half" is incredibly tough to complete.

Guy is 14, and was by far the youngest entrant. Ordinarily, the California Half Ironman won't allow anyone under 18. We didn't know this when he registered online, giving his real age, and apparently it was a registration

oversight on their part that allowed him in. The 2,000 plus competitors included some of the finest pro athletes in the world. They were the ones hoping to win the big prize money. Most of the others, like Guy, were just hoping to finish.

He spent months in training - swimming, biking, or running every day after school. On the weekends he did lots more training. But he tells me he was still kind of concerned he might not be able to finish. It would be pretty embarrassing to tell that to his friends at school.

We talked about that a bit. And we talked about how we could pray. There's a line in a hymn that can stand on its own as a prayer. It says, "Take my feet, and let them be/ Swift and beautiful for Thee" ("Christian Science Hymnal," No. 324). Actually, the hymn doesn't just talk about feet; it also talks about hands, about every part of you, really, being consecrated to God.

In other words, you could think of swimming and biking and running as ways to glorify God, to express God. That way, you could compete without having a really big ego about the whole thing. Being swift for God, who is the creator, the Life of all, became a main point in our prayers. We also figured that Life, as a name for God, was the

source of stamina and endurance - spiritual qualities anyone could use more of - and qualities anyone in a triathlon would definitely need. This didn't mean he could skip the training. But the prayer became kind of a spiritual underpinning to it, and to the triathlon itself.

Race day started out scary. Just minutes before he was supposed to dive into the ocean, race officials called him over to the headquarters - a huge tent set up in the parking lot - and said he was too young and was being kicked out. They said we'd been dishonest in registering him with a false age. But we hadn't. He pointed out his true age. They'd had it on their forms all along, and on their website, but evidently they hadn't noticed. Just then, the person in charge came into the tent and overruled the decision. He could compete. Guy was really relieved.

Thousands of spectators lined the racecourse. Bang! The race began. I noticed a seal in the water not far from all the racers. He seemed to look surprised at all the swimmers splashing along. Then he must

have decided it was party time, because he joined in, outracing them all. Maybe even the seal was expressing divine Life in his own way.

Six hours and 25 minutes later, after swimming and biking and running, Guy entered the outdoor amphitheater where the finish line was. An announcer on a loudspeaker had been calling out the competitors' names as they finished. He announced Guy's name and age, and said he was the youngest athlete of the day. The crowd roared. A local TV reporter, and then a newspaper reporter, interviewed him. He was tired. He was happy. He had finished.

The Bible says, "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isa. 40:31). Guy definitely was weary. But he also definitely felt he'd had divine support the whole way through. The prayer had made a real difference.

Being swift for God,
who is the creator,
the Life of all, became
a main point in our prayers.

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