

THE HISTORY OF JAPANESE ORIGAMI

The act of folding paper into shaped figures and ornaments is a rather straightforward definition of origami, in fact, origami literally means folded paper. This is a fairly recent term which began in the Showa period (1926). Prior to that origami was called *orisue* or *oritaka* according to Edo period texts. The act of folding and cutting paper has at its roots a more profound meaning in Japanese culture. Along with kirigami (paper cutting) and kumigami (paper assembly), origami is one of several types of paper manipulation which creates new forms. Origami can range from very simple forms to very complex works of art. In the recent past, origami was considered to be a child's form of entertainment, but within the complex folds there is much more to be learned in this folding art for all ages.



It is almost certain that paper folding was not just an Asian craft, since there is documented proof that folded paper forms were in existence in the late 1400's in Europe. If we were to take the typical Euro-centric view of the world then it would be easy to say that paper folding developed independently East and West. But the fact is that there is not a lot of early documentation on the development or migration of origami in either region. Some folded forms which were thought to be Asian in origin were brought to Spain by the Moors in the 8th century. There is some evidence that the Japanese origami form of a dog was used in European countries for other animals forms. However, most early European models are not structured like Japanese models so it may be safe to assume they developed independently. What can be said is that now the majority of origami is greatly influenced by the models developed in Japan during the Edo and Meiji periods. But origami is not a static craft because new models are always being created and variations of standard forms are continually being developed through the creativity of individual folders. Today the popularity of origami is quite evident in the many associations, clubs and individuals enthusiasts around the world. There are origami clubs and associations in over forty countries including the United States, England, Russia, Korea, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Chile, Columbia and of course, Japan.

There are some who would argue that the origin of origami has no religious connection. This writer does not believe that to be the case. Paper has been associated with the sacred since papermaking was introduced to Japan from China via Korea in the fifth century. Even before that introduction, the raw materials of paper-hemp and mulberry fiber- were ritual offerings. It only follows that paper would also be considered sacred. Cut paper was carried by travellers to ward off any evil spirits on their journeys. Cut paper forms with special writing were also carried to ward off evil spirits. It is not surprising that the first use of cut and folded paper was in religious rituals. Even to this day, cut and folded paper is used to create *gohei* or *shide*, the folded paper which hangs from *shimenawa*. Shimenawa are straw ropes which are woven in reverse from right to left, which imbues the rope with sacred properties. Shimenawa are used to delineate the sacred from the profane and the paper is used to attract good spirits to the site. Both



household and local shrines use shimenawa to define their area as sacred places. They are seen in profusion during the New Year festivities. Gohei is also the name for the wand of folded paper that Shinto priests or miko - female shrine attendants- use in purification rituals. The photo on the left shows a Shinto priest blessing a shimenawa with a gohei.



Origami's original use was most likely as *katashiro* which were cut from special shrine paper and used in purification rituals which came from China. Katashiro were considered dieties. Also called *hitogata* (photo), these originally were made out of wood or metal, however, paper forms began to appear during the Kamakura period. Some of these forms were six feet tall. Hitogata were used to transfer evil spirits i.e. sickness from humans. Typically these purification rituals were held on the third day of the third month. Folded paper standing hina dolls (photo below) evolved from katashiro. These dolls were constructed with wooden heads and intricately folded and decorated paper which represented court clothing. These dolls were displayed on same day as the purification rituals, the third day of the third month. This display eventually evolved into the Hina Doll Festival. So, in a sense, origami and dolls are historically linked with a common ancestry. With paper being a scarce and valuable commodity, origami as a form

of entertainment did not exist before the Heian period. The Heian period was a time of expanded paper production which was available to the court for their various pursuits.

Origami, as just a folded form, began during the Muromachi period. The Muromachi period was one of increased trade with China and many crafts and arts in Japan were impacted by this new wave of influence. It is not coincidental that new origami forms were developed at the same time as *mizuhiki*, which is the form of paper string wrapping used in gift giving for certain ceremonial functions. Another aspect of folded forms in gift giving, are *noshi*, which are folded paper with a strip of dried abalone inside. The noshi is glued to the upper right hand corner of the heavy white paper which wraps the gift. Today, yellow paper substitutes for the abalone. Also, *noshibukuro* are folded paper envelops in which small cash gifts are given to children on New Years. So the nature of



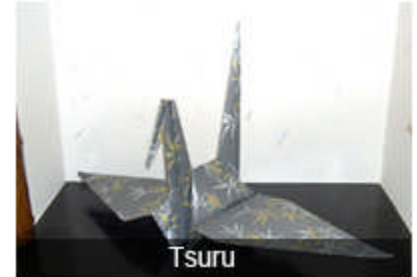
origami was very important in the formal etiquette of gift giving. The photo below is a *miki-no-uchi*. It is a ceremonial sake cask stopper made from heavy folded paper, mizuhiki and pine. Origami became part of the manners of the samurai, which were incorporated into schools of conduct such as the Houses of Ogasawara, Ise, and Imagawa.



During the Edo period, papermaking became more mass produced and less costly, which helped to expand origami as a recreational pursuit. Other folding,

cutting and dyeing paper forms were developed at that time. The oldest documentation of origami is from the late 17th century, and refers to orisue models of male and female butterflies (ocho mecho). These models are still used to wrap bottles of sake for wedding ceremonies. It is evident from woodblock prints that origami was prevalent to the point that origami models were incorporated into textile designs. Based on origami books of the 18th century, there did not seem to be a distinction between ceremonial and recreational models of origami.

During the Meiji and the Taisho periods, origami was used as a teaching device in kindergarten and primary schools. In a merging of east and west, Japan adopted the school system model from Germany. Friedrich Wilhelm August Frobel, who developed the concept of kindergarten, had already incorporated origami into the teaching process of his classes. When that system was imported to Japan, Japanese models became the predominate forms. At that time that about 150 models had been documented, and origami paper was produced in Japan for the specific use in the



schools. At beginning of the Showa period (1926), origami was not emphasized in the school system because it was felt that the standardized forms were not conducive to developing creativity. However, origami became popular again when it was realized that the planes in origami form three dimension shapes which were important in teaching geometry. Origami can be used to appreciate how planes can be transformed into solids, which is important today in the computer graphics industry. Origami has been found to be therapeutic for patients with mental and physical disorders since it engages the mind and the body. Origami continues to increase in popularity throughout