



A simple sheet of paper is the only material necessary to be able to profit from all the rewards of origami. People with poor strength can use a spatula to help fold the paper.

Paper Magic

The absolutely simple practice of origami can produce an extraordinary range of outcomes.

by Ian Martin

Maybe one of the things that comes to mind when people think about Japan would be origami; the iconic folded paper crane is almost a symbol of Japan to many people. While the roots of paper art in Japan lie deep in these islands' long history, in its current form it is just as much a product of the modern era, and the Ochanomizu Origami Kaikan, situated slightly north-east of the Imperial Palace in Tokyo, is a fascinating part of that story.

The Origami Kaikan was a key starting point for the creation of origami as it is known today. Incorporating a paper-dyeing studio and classes that require reserva-

tions, there is also a gallery that is open to the public, as well as a gift shop carrying crafts, kits, books, and beautiful paper with different colors and patterns.

The director of the Origami Kaikan, Kobayashi Kazuo, explains that it began in 1858 as a paper-dyeing business. Changes were afoot in all walks of life in Japan, though, around the late nineteenth century. The newly established Ministry of Education was fascinated by the use of paper folding for children's education developed by German educator Friedrich Fröbel. So, at the government's request, this small paper-dyeing firm began manufacturing the first dyed paper for

origami in Japan. The manufacturing of origami paper by the Origami Kaikan helped with the spreading of origami at kindergartens and elementary schools, eventually reaching kids all over Japan.

Usually plain on the back and patterned on the front, Kobayashi explains that Japanese origami paper also tends to be thinner and easier to fold than most other paper, although he insists that any paper can be used. To illustrate his point, Kobayashi pulls an ordinary paper napkin from his desk and with extraordinary dexterity folds and twists it into a ballet dancer.

In more recent years, origami has attracted a lot of attention for its therapeutic benefits, particularly its physical benefits. As Kobayashi explains, "Just as walking is good for the heart, it is said that origami is good for the brain because it's so tactile."

Many of the books Kobayashi has written about origami have been translated into foreign languages. Over the years, the Origami Kaikan has been happy to welcome many visitors from overseas hoping to learn more about this Japanese art form—including an internship program in paper-dyeing and folding techniques in collaboration with France's prestigious École Polytechnique. Furthermore, Kobayashi has been invited to many countries including Germany, France, India, and China, to visit schools and hospitals and spread the wonders of origami.

"I do not speak English, but I speak through origami," says Kobayashi as we sit down to follow him in crafting a samurai helmet out of a single small sheet of paper, "With origami, language does not matter—I put

myself in their position and show by doing."

There is something of the stage magician to Kobayashi, keeping your attention fixed on him with his energy and passion as he talks about the history and applications of origami, while his hands are always moving, illustrating his points creatively with whatever paper comes to hand. A small child walks by, and within seconds he has crafted an origami frog for him as a ca-

sual gift. It is clear that this is more than just showmanship: he passionately believes origami should be fun and for everyone.

"That is the beauty of origami," he agrees. "It is not an art that can only be made by artists. Without tools, and using materials found everywhere, it is something that anyone, from anywhere, regardless of age, can enjoy."

One of the many impressive origami examples on display at the Origami Kaikan gallery.

