

Interview with Dave Brill

By Jan Polish

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David Brill is a renowned and prolific creator who has recently published his first book, Brilliant Origami. He lives in Poynton, England, and is presently Chairman of the British Origami Society (BOS). I recently spoke to him during the Paris convention of the Mouvement Français des Plieurs de Papier.

Jan Polish: How did you get started in origami?

Dave Brill: When I was about six in England, my brother and sister had *Rupert Annuals*, with Rupert Bear and Alfred Bestall drawings. The *Annual* is a book full of four or five different stories, and Bestall used to do landscapes on the front covers. People get very nostalgic about them--it conjures up an image of the perfect England. They had a lot of competition in the post-war years from other similar books, and Bestall wanted to think of ways to make his different, so he introduced simple origami diagrams. The first thing I folded was a flapping bird--I may have been helped by my brother and sister. It was a great joy.

Then I can remember at school with friends making paper airplanes, a design from Rupert with a waterbomb base. Subsequently, the thing which switched me on was one of Harbin's books--the first paperback, I think. I was in my late teens or twenties, and bought them all and started to buy other books.

I loved the **Yoshizawa Pigeon**, and wrote to him. He responded with a personal letter and a folded butterfly. I was very excited. I also wrote to **Nakano**, who had an origami correspondence course at that time.

Then I saw **Randlett's Best of Origami**. I thought that was a sensational book, particularly because of **George Rhoads' Elephant**. I couldn't believe it--I was in complete, absolute awe. Then I received a reply from Nakano. He didn't send the correspondence course, which cost a fortune, but he sent a little publication called *Origami Companion*. In it was a serial by **Gershon Legman** called "Secrets of the Blintz." It was fascinating. This research of the blintz tied in with my fascination for Rhoads' Elephant, which is based on the blintz. That was the way to go, I thought.

This was 1972 or 1973, before I was involved in the BOS. I soon found out that there were people on my doorstep. I wrote to **Mick Guy**, who wrote back. He thought I was a gift from heaven because he'd recently received a request for a demo for a harvest festival supper at a local church. I thought, "I'm good at

this," so I thought I could teach, and said yes. I went to the festival. Well, there were 90 people and of course I chose entirely wrong things to teach. I struggled like hell, but I had fun. Shortly after, I went to my first BOS convention, in the spring of '75 in London. There were about 40 people there, including **Robert Harbin** and **Eric Kenneway**--I met **Mick Guy**, **Max Hulme**, **Martin Wall**.

I was in awe. I started to dabble in ideas. I had relied on the blintz in everything--it was doubling the possibilities by bringing the corners to the center. There I saw that maybe the blintz wasn't quite everything. Max was at his peak then--ideas were gushing forth. He had a wonderful way of being given a challenge, and he had the facility to calculate how to fold it in his mind. More often than not he could convert it into a practical idea. I admired his ability to simplify the problem and work it out in his mind. I went back very inspired, and realizing that the creative process was an analytic one rather than a chance one, or at least one approach was analytic. My first experiences at creating were chance, a technique I positively reject now. The doodling approach is not the way.

JP: What do you think about the differences between highly technical origami and the more artistic "one-crease" approach?

DB: I want to move ever towards simplicity. It's what I strive for. The technical doesn't interest me now. It did then, but it's now boring to me. I'm more interested in the suggestive rather than the descriptive, like **Herman Van Goubergen's** new cat.

JP: Do you think that is your personal evolution, or typical of the evolution of the entire population of paperfolders?

DB: It's my personal evolution. Is it a trend? Well, it's certainly true of men. For a woman, the trend seems to be that they're not as interested in the technical, they're more interested in the decorative. But a man goes through phases--he gets gobsmacked by the complexity of technical folding and wants to do it. That was true for me. But one of the most difficult things is to create a good simple model--effective, direct, and reduced to an acceptable minimum. It gives great satisfaction ... look at **John Smith** and **Paul Jackson**. Thank heavens we ail evolve.

JP: Where do you think your work is evolving?

DB: I don't know where I'm going. I follow my nose. It's something I can't control and don't know that I want to control. I'm open to influences, to what I see around me. I need a stimulus--someone or something needs to stimulate me. An individual makes the rules, and decides what's acceptable. The rules had always been preordained--a square, no cuts, a single sheet--but we need

to move the rules. John Smith has written on origami profiles. At the center is purity, and there are arms moving off the center. For example, to decorate, or to glue, or to cut. And then there are points off the arms representing degrees. You take each arm and make marks, then connect them to make your origami profile, your personal viewpoint. You can make one for everyone. The point he was trying to make is that you make the rules, but they change. There might be one set for today and another for tomorrow. And I don't want to know what tomorrow's rules will be.

People say, "It's a pity you don't do animals anymore," but maybe I've worked that subject to death. I hope that I can go back to animals, but it would have to be with a completely new approach. I don't want to tread a path others have trod. I'm tired of people who looked at another origami version of animals to create theirs. That is sad. They should go back to the raw material of the animal, else there's no creativity at all. They need to search for a new image, a new way of looking at the subject.

JP: What do you consider your best model?

DB: As Paul used to say, "the next one," but of the past, it would be the Horse. Everybody loves it and I do, too, but I don't really have great enjoyment folding things from my past. I'm more interested in the most immediate last one or the next one.

JP: Whose work do you admire?

DB: Max Hulme wasn't a great folder ... by that I mean the finished article wasn't beautiful. But the concept is very simple and very direct. This is what I admire the most. Err towards the simplicity of the idea. I adore **Tomoko Fuse's** Articulated Lizard ... I adore it because of what a wonderful idea it is. I'd die happy if I'd invented that. It smacks you in the face--it's so simple, why didn't I think of that? Another thing I love of hers is a modular cube with a great concept--the random fold. Nothing more. It's a variation of the classic Sonobe unit. A random element is folded up from the bottom to your choice of location, then top down. You start with a 2 x 1, but every time you make a unit it's going to be different. When you make the cube with colored paper, you end up with stripes. It reminds me of a painting by Mondrian. Superb concept. We're so used to saying that this edge goes to this diagonal--this seems to be such a step into the unknown. That's what I admire when I see something, and say "why didn't I think of that?"

JP: Do you think the super-technical creators are creating art?

DB: I'm not sure what it is. I think it's more engineering, really, but artists can be engineers, too. A whole lot of origami animals are flat, in silhouette, and utterly lacking in life. It's fine to make all the bits and pieces, but if the thing

lacks spirit, it's dead. My painting teacher taught me first to decide on the composition. Decide what's going to be on it, then from the very outset compare what you're painting and what's outside. Compare the whole lot to the whole lot. Never, never, never concentrate on the detail. If you do, it lacks integrity. It's a lesson a whole lot of origami people could learn from. When I started painting it was very difficult to do. The human brain is taught to look at detail. You have to unlearn that, which is a bloody difficult thing to do.

And I can't really accept the computer as a creative tool. Apart from all else, it's a tool, and origami doesn't need tools. What attracted me from the beginning is that it was just me and the paper, and tools just don't fit.

JP: Do you think you can teach creativity?

DB: I'm not sure you can. You have to let people follow their own noses. If they're going to create, they're going to. You can lay the foundation for it, you can encourage it, but generally I would have to say no.

JP: Where is origami going?

DB: I don't know where, and we shouldn't inquire too deeply. We can't predict the future. I would be saddened if we become too technical, but we may. The important thing is that it should be something people are interested in.