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One Orinda Student's Passion for Paper

By Diane Claytor



Alex Meckes' origami sculptures fill up the family dining room table. Photos Diane Claytor

really like this art form, he was really good at it. His mom, Wendy Meckes, described her son as "always being very focused. He's like a builder and once he finds something that captures his interest, he sticks with it."

"I started out making very simple origami objects and then this happened," Meckes exclaimed as he pointed to a dining room table covered in a myriad of geometrical shapes in varying sizes and colors, or, as he called them, platonic solids. According to the precocious Meckes, "geometers have studied the mathematical beauty and symmetry of the platonic solids for thousands of years."

In addition to platonic solids, Meckes' makes tessellations (also called tilings) - shapes that are arranged side by side to produce a pattern with no gaps in between. An origami tessellation is made from one piece of paper that is folded over and over until it has a tessellated pattern. When Meckes begins folding his small sheet of paper, he typically has only a vague idea of what the finished pattern may look like. It can take him several days folding a small square - he starts with a grid and every fold must be lined up precisely. But the most amazing feature of these beautiful pieces can be seen when the finished tessellation is placed on a light board. Suddenly, hidden shapes and patterns appear that were not seen before; flip the paper over and a whole other array of shapes and patterns show up.

Repeatedly folding small squares of paper hour after hour may not sound like a good time for most pre-teens. But for 12-year-old Alex Meckes, it is a great way to spend an afternoon.

A recent Nielsen study reported that middle school boys spend an average of 6.3 hours per week playing video games. While that may, indeed, be the case, it is doubtful that Meckes spends anywhere near that amount of time. Although he admits to liking video games, the Orinda Intermediate School seventh-grader doesn't have that many hours to spend in front of the computer; he is way too busy practicing his origami skills. And considering that his second Orinda Library origami exhibit closed at the end of December, his skills are obviously excellent.

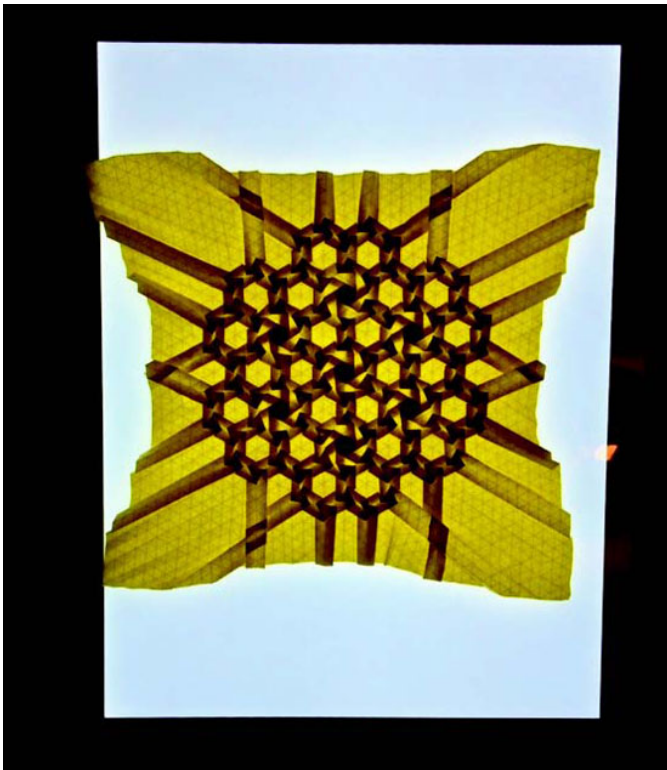
Always an avid reader, Meckes made regular trips to local libraries. He remembered as a second grader walking around the Wagner Ranch School Library. "I was getting bored with the books I'd been reading. I wanted something different. I saw a book on origami and thought, 'cool, I'm going to take this home and try it,'" he said.

Origami is the art of paper folding. Its goal is to transform a single flat sheet of paper into a finished sculpture using only folding and sculpting techniques. Meckes found that not only did he

Art and creativity fill Meckes. He loves both acting and singing and participated in the Lamorinda Idol competition for three years (winning the K-2 category in first grade). He is a drummer and last year taught himself the glockenspiel, which he now plays in the school band.

While it is likely that not many young boys are spending their time constructing origami objects, as Wendy Meckes explained, "once you start doing something a lot, you find a whole subculture of people doing the same thing." There's an organization that meets monthly in a San Francisco library - BARF (Bay Area Rapid Folders) - where people of all ages and all levels of expertise gather to quietly fold paper, learn something new and sometimes talk about what they're creating. Meckes, who said these meetings are fun, attends these gatherings when he can.

The Orinda Library's art gallery is organized and curated by the Lamorinda Arts Council; it is believed that Meckes is the youngest independent artist who has ever been an exhibitor. Experiencing his talent and dedication, it is likely that Meckes will have other exhibits in the Lamorinda area well into the future.



One of Alex Meckes' tessellations placed on a light board, showing all the different shapes and patterns that come from the art of origami.

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