

[return to article](#)

Wisconsin Film Festival: Origami documentary better than it looks on paper

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March 31, 2009



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At first glance, a documentary about origami doesn't exactly sound like it should be added to a Wisconsin Film Fest moviegoer's "must-see" list. The topic calls to mind conventional images of kids folding paper cranes for an elementary school project.

But like the surprising, diverse artistic creations that can emerge from one piece of folded paper, "Between the Folds," is an unexpected and fascinating look at the art form, and the characters who are drawn to it. In addition to artists, the film profiles mathematicians and scientists whose paper folding has led to complex problem-solving and new ways of teaching, in addition to beautiful art.

Vanessa Gould, director and producer of the award-winning documentary, acknowledges that it has taken some creativity to market the film. She credits festival director Meg Hamel for being willing to program a film where moviegoers tend to think they already know the topic and might have "mildly underwhelmed notions about it."

"My strategy has been to present it very visually," Gould said. "The breadth of visuals is so beautiful and broad."

In addition, she has also attempted to show the film's "intellectual" appeal: "It's about the artistic possibility; the creative potential of anyone and everyone," Gould said. "The idea that so much can come from the same starting point."

The strategy seems to be working. The two screenings of the film are sold out, but some tickets should be available at the door. In addition, Gould and Wisconsin Public Radio's Ruthanne Bessman, a board member of OrigamiUSA, will host a free origami demonstration at 2 p.m. Sunday, April 5, at Steep & Brew, 544 State St.

Gould, who originally envisioned the film as a 7-minute short after meeting the scientists working with origami, soon found that there was plenty of content to tell a larger story, and built from there. She has been working on the documentary for the past 4-5 years, and this is her first film. It is a self-funded effort.

While she did not set out to become a filmmaker -- she studied astrophysics and architecture at Columbia in New York -- she was inspired by the career questions some of her subjects had faced.

"They, too, had experienced a similar conundrum in their lives," she said. "They were technically and mathematically inclined but at the same time they had these creative urges."

Interviews with the scientists led to meetings with origami paper-makers and a French paper folder, and she realized she had "hit on something."

"Between the Folds" seamlessly moves between the scientist profiles to origami artists who fold paper inspired by a range of artistic movements -- classicism, impressionism, abstract art and the avant garde, to name a few -- and all without scissors, tape or glue.

The idea that "the medium itself invites such a breadth of perspectives became the most important thing about making the film," Gould said. "It would have been a big mistake to only present one slice of it."

If you go

What: "Between the Folds"

When: Saturday, April 4 at 4:30 p.m.; Sunday, April 5 at 11 a.m.

Where: Chazen Museum of Art, 800 University Ave.