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The Art of Japanese Paper

A 1,500-year history and a passionate contemporary following

BY JACKIE COOPERMAN, PUBLISHED ON 03/30/2010

Sold for as much as several hundred dollars per sheet, labored over by entire villages, and prized as much for its beauty as its utility, Japanese handmade paper, or *washi*, has a 1,500-year history and a passionate contemporary following. Strong, elongated plant fibers make washi sheets both durable and featherweight, and the artisans who paint, dye, stencil, and form the paper use its suppleness to stunning effect. Its patterns and textures lend themselves to everything from wedding invitations and gift wrapping to interior design. Collectors frame it, book conservators mend rare manuscripts with it, and prominent architects confess awe in its presence.

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"If I had an alter ego, I'd run a stationery shop," says Sir Nicholas Grimshaw, the architect responsible for London's Waterloo Station. "I attended a papermaking workshop in Japan and found the style and quality absolutely intriguing. Japanese paper seems to match the beautiful interiors of the buildings. It is almost a form of architecture."

Even paper-industry veterans who are accustomed to handling sheets from every corner of the world turn lyrical when discussing washi.

"I sell it for printmaking, calligraphy, brush painting, origami, scrapbooks, and collage," says Joe Barreiro, the owner of Kate's Paperie in Manhattan. "I've seen it used for wall coverings, lighting fixtures and covers, place mats, window shades, and room dividers. Japanese paper can be used to create fantastic window displays. I've seen it in stage sets as well as in chic restaurants. I've even seen food served in Japanese paper cones."

But it's really in two Tokyo stores, Ito-ya and Kyukyodo, both in the chic Ginza district, that the connoisseur experiences complete immersion in washi.

The massive, modern Ito-ya stationery store (18 floors that are distributed between a main building and two annexes) carries more than 155,000 products. But sybarites should proceed directly to the fourth floor of Annex 3, where Ito-ya sells more than 3,000 kinds of traditional Japanese paper of such variety and delicacy that to call them just "paper" is highly reductive. Diaphanous sheets in shades of pearl, celadon, and garnet drape wooden racks, swaying as people pass. Sheer as veils, some incised with lacy patterns, the papers come in solid colors and tie-dyes. There are ruby-red sheets flecked with silvery fibers, white sheets with eyelets, and cream-colored ones with the slightly macabre—albeit inventive—addition of real butterfly wings pressed into the paper.

Bolts of heavier-weight sheets are painted or silkscreened, adorned with animal, flower, and landscape motifs based on ancient kimonos. On first inspection they appear to be cloth, not paper. Kazyuki Akasaka, director of the *wabungu* (stationery) department, opens a glass case to reveal indigo-dyed sheets called *aizome* and washi durable for 1,000 years made by Ichibei Iwano, an artisan who's been designated a national living treasure. A paper called *bingata*, made in Kyoto, hand-stenciled with bright magenta, yellow, and orange flowers and teal waves, is so strong that it can be used to make handbags and hats.

Kyukyodo, too, carries, paper treasures. A much more traditional space than Ito-ya, which was founded in 1904, Kyukyodo opened in 1663 as a store for Chinese medicine. It supplied incense to the Imperial Palace during the Edo period and moved from Kyoto to Toyko in 1880. Kyukyodo still sells its original incense—a blend of aloeswood, sandalwood, chinaberry, musk, clove, and star anise, wrapped in origami—and is still run by the founding Kumagai family, who count a samurai warrior among their ancestors.

The ground floor has as many as 100 rolls of washi ornamented with cranes, cherry blossoms, and geometric patterns, often used for gift wrapping. Gift cards, most made in Kyoto, vary by season, with spring patterns that include berries, lilies, and irises. Upstairs, Kyukyodo sells personalized stationery, to which customers usually add names but not always addresses. "Japanese are reserved and don't like to give all that information so casually," says Kuniaki Tanaka, one of the store's directors.

Calligraphy paper, dusted with gold powder in the form of clouds, costs \$125 per 14.5 by 20-inch sheet. For expert calligraphers, Tanaka suggests blocks of carbon, ingrained with golden flecks, at \$170. "They're almost too good to use," he says. Bamboo, ceramic, or wooden calligraphy brushes come with the hair of raccoon, weasel, horse, sheep, cat, and skunk. Clients can bring their own bristles—including, in accordance with Japanese tradition, the hair of a newborn baby—for made-to-order brushes. Such care and specificity, experts say, epitomize the Japanese approach to papermaking.

"The Japanese believe that papermaking is from the soul. It's not a job, it's an art," says Cindy Bowden, director of the Robert C. Williams American Museum of Papermaking in Atlanta.

Behind this high art, though, are rather humble ingredients: the durable fibers of the silk mulberry plant, or *kozo*, and a tuber called "sticky potato," or *tororo-aoi*, used to suspend the fibers in a liquid solution during the production process, creating stronger, more even sheets.

"The *kozo* plant is not pretty. It has long lanky branches and is really a scraggly bush," says Lauren Pearlman, president of Paper Connection International, a leading importer of Japanese paper and supplier to American stores like the Pearl Paint chain and Kate's Paperie.

Papermakers also use fibers from *gampi*—a particularly expensive plant, since it is wild and cannot be cultivated—and *mitsumata*, both varieties of the daphne tree. All three plants grow in many places in Japan, but in the greatest concentration on the island of Shikoku. After the harvest, workers spend a week preparing the fibers. The elaborate process includes steaming the branches, stripping their outer bark, and soaking the inner fibers to neutralize naturally occurring acid. Later, the fibers are boiled, separated into long strips, and soaked and beaten, turning them into pulp. The pulp is mixed with the *tororo-aoi*, boiled, and poured onto a mesh mold, which workers repeatedly dip in boiling water. Expert papermakers then "throw" the pulp, making figure eights with their wrists and letting the water drain away. "By some miracle," as Pearlman puts it, the pulp is formed into long, thin sheets. A professional can make about 400 sheets per day.

The Chinese invented papermaking in the second century, but Japanese paper, says Pearlman, is unique in its combination of supple strength and beauty and is unlike

European varieties.

"Italian paper is gorgeous but cotton-based, so it feels stiffer than Asian paper," Pearlman says. "The difference between kozo and cotton is that when it's beaten, kozo fiber becomes seven times longer, so it makes a stronger paper."

Other Asian papers, Pearlman says, lack washi's refined quality and meticulous production methods. Nepalese paper, for example, "is really rough, with traces of footprints and rock particles. It dries in a field, and whatever flies by could end up in the paper. Indian paper is essentially cotton from recycled clothing: T-shirts, jeans. A paper conservationist would never use it, but it's fun, rough, it has things in it like corn and garlic. Japanese paper fibers are almost valued like an expensive drug—they're sold by the gram. And the labor in Japan is much more exhaustive."

But the labor pool is dwindling.

"The number of papermakers has fallen precipitously," says Chuck Izui, owner of Aiko's Art Materials in Chicago. "In 1900, there were approximately 100,000 papermakers; in 1980 there were about 400. Nobody wants to slosh around in the cold, the water, and the muck for a pat on the back. It's a tough way to make a living."

This increased scarcity is one of the reasons Tim Barrett, who studied papermaking in Japan on a Fulbright grant in 1975 and now directs the University of Iowa's Center for the Book, has been growing his own kozo fibers and tororo-aoi since 1986.

Barrett's staff and students make 1,500-2,000 sheets annually, growing the fibers in a plot near the university's Oakdale campus. They sell their paper, at \$5 to \$12 per sheet, to some of the nation's leading rare-book and art conservators.

"If a work of art, archival document, or book has a tear, even if the material is in Western paper, we mend it with a Japanese paper because the fibers are very long," says Thea Burns, the Helen H. Glaser conservator at Harvard University Library's Weissman Preservation Center. "Japanese paper tends to be very strong, even if it is much thinner than a Western paper. If you use a thicker paper you'll add to the bulk of the book and warp the structure. For a discreet mend, you have a lot more success with Japanese paper."

Professionals like Barrett and Burns use washi in highly technical ways, but most people are happy just to admire its many hues and textures. Seasoned collectors like Pearlman remain under its spell. Even after nearly two decades in the business, she's still entranced by Japanese paper. "I fell in love with washi very fast," she admits. "I became addicted."

In Tokyo, washi is available at Ito-ya (2-7-15 Ginza, Chuo-ku; 81-3-3561-8311; www.ito-ya.co.jp) and Kyukyodo (5-7-4 Ginza; 81-3-3571-4429; www.kyukyodo.co.jp).

Where to find it in America

IN NEW YORK New York Central Art Supply Run by the Steinberg family since 1905, this is a serious shop catering to artists and designers and stocking everything from conservation-quality white papers to "washi sheets in incredibly shimmery colors," says manager Kathy Hyde. "The best Japanese paper is expensive, but when we see it, even at forty dollars a sheet, we have to have it. We're thrilled to meet individuals who are willing to pay the price because they know it will improve their work." 62 Third Avenue; 212-473-7705; www.nycentralart.com.

Kate's Paperie Owner Joe Barreiro encourages clients to touch the sheets, so look for them hanging, like a rainbow, on long wooden rods. Kate's has two downtown stores and one on the Upper East Side (main branch: 561 Broadway; 212-941-9816; www.katespaperie.com). Kate's will open another Manhattan store this winter (140 West 57th St.) as well as one in Greenwich, Connecticut (125 Greenwich Avenue).

IN CHICAGO Aiko's Art Materials Aiko Nakane, 94, founded this store in 1953. Considered the grande dame of Japanese paper in the United States, Nakane still comes in a few times a week. Current owner Chuck Izui will ship orders anywhere in the world. In addition to washi, the store carries Japanese ceramics and a wide range of black-ink sticks and paintbrushes for traditional Japanese calligraphy. 3347 North Clark; 773-404-5600; www.aikosart.com.

IN BOSTON Paper Source One of nine Paper Source stores nationwide, the Cambridge branch offers Japanese papermaking workshops several times a year. 1810 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge; 617-497-1077; www.paper-source.com.

IN CALIFORNIA Hiromi Paper International Hiromi Katayama, an importer of Japanese paper made by nationally recognized artisans, stocks more than 500 kinds

of washi and will also custom-order paper for clients. Send her a swatch, or describe what you want, and she will find the best Japanese producer to make it and ship it to you. Katayama also offers papermaking workshops. 2525 Michigan Avenue, Bldg. G9, Bergamot Station Art Center, Santa Monica; 310-998-0098; www.hiromipaper.com.

Paper Tree Owned and operated by the Mihara family for nearly 40 years, this paper shop in San Francisco's Japantown carries more than 400 kinds of washi, including a large section of origami folding papers. Vicky Mihara, the owners' daughter, teaches origami and gift-wrapping classes for the holidays. A bestseller: the photo albums, covered in Japanese brocade that replicates patterns from traditional kimonos. 1743 Buchanan Mall, San Francisco; 415-921-7100; fax 415-921-2023; info@paper-tree.com.

Flax Art & Design Manager Kim Menzel says Flax sells more than 2,000 types of Japanese paper. 1699 Market Street, San Francisco; 415-552-2355; www.flaxart.com.

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