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# LIFEINSPIRED

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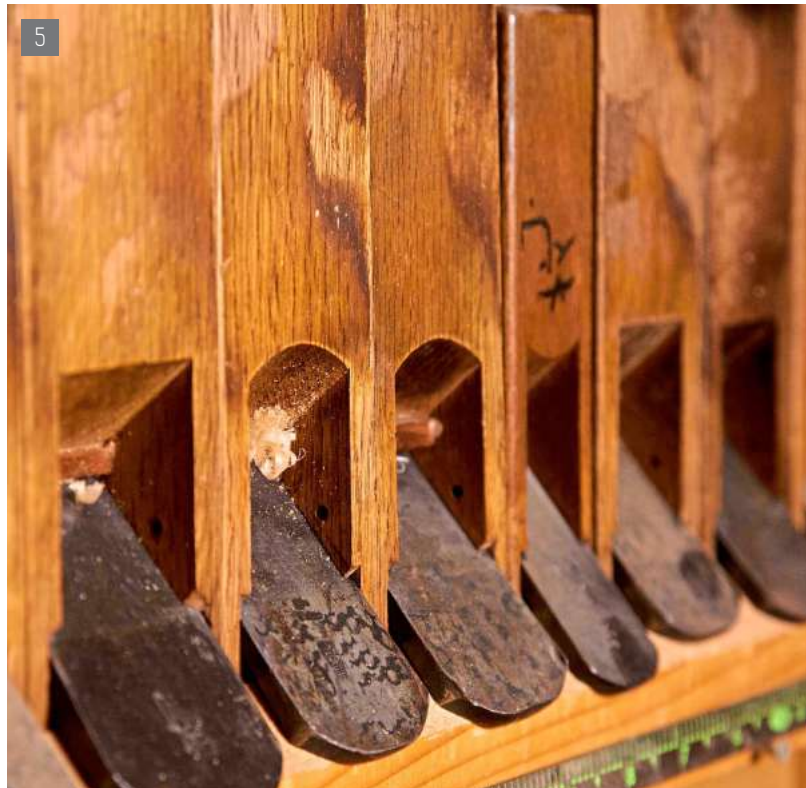


Kyoto-born Shuji Nakagawa is part of a new generation of craftsmen who try to adapt Japanese know-how from the past to fit contemporary lifestyles. Nakagawa and his Kyoto peers are part of an initiative called Japan Handmade. The group works with Danish design studio OeO to create new products using age-old craftsmanship, for the global market.

# Old meets new

To perpetuate traditions, a new generation of Kyoto craftsmen are injecting a contemporary twist into centuries-old techniques and plugging Japanese craft to a global audience

By LEONG SIOK HUI



1 The initial step to making a ki-oke or wooden bucket involves drying the wood to reduce the moisture content to prevent warping or cracking. A log would require a couple of years to dry while wooden chips take a few months. These are then cut into slats.

2 The wooden slat is scraped continuously using "sen", a blade with handles, to smooth its surface before the slats are joined with bamboo pegs to create a round or oval bucket.

3 The technique for handcrafting the ki-oke was developed 700 years ago during the Muromachi period (1337-1573). Nakagawa uses this technique to make his champagne coolers or wooden buckets. Here, he uses a plane to whittle the inside and outside of the bucket in a process called "kannagake."

4 A copper or nickel band holds the bucket in its shape. The hoop keeps the bucket intact.

5 Some of the tools used to craft the ki-oke were handed down from his late grandfather, Kameichi Nakagawa (1913-1998). Kameichi apprenticed with a Kyoto wooden bucket craftsman when he was just nine in 1922.

6 Award-winning Japanese design studio, Nendo, collaborated with Nakagawa to craft this wine cooler. It is made from Japanese cypress and Jindai cedar, a rare, dark wood which is treated with urethane.

7 8 Nakagawa and Kyoto-based lifestyle brand, sfera, collaborated for this collection, launched at Maison & Objet Paris 2012 and Salone del Mobile in Milan in 2013. The vessels are crafted from umbrella pine and jinda-sugi cedar; the latter is believed to be 2000 years old and had remained buried due to volcanic eruptions. Iron from the mud and wood tannins yielded a gorgeous, deep grey-brown hue.





“Tradition is a continuous process of innovation”, a *wagasa* (traditional Japanese umbrella) maker once told me. Today, this mantra holds true more than ever as good ol’ crafts are relegated to souvenir shops or tourist bazaars. Even Kyoto, the ancient capital of Japan and the veritable hub of craftsmanship, is not spared. From *wagasa* and lacquerware to kimono textiles and pottery, these generations-old family businesses are grappling to stay relevant in modern times. In 2012, six like-minded peers from Kyoto banded together to breathe new life into age old crafts. Cooper artisan Shuji Nakagawa, the third generation in his family business, and potter Yusuke Matsubayashi, the 16th generation in his fam-

ily business, are part of an initiative called Japan Handmade. Together with four others: a tea caddy maker, a *kyokanaami* (metalknitting) craftsman, a textile and a bamboo manufacturer, they inject contemporary appeal into age-old crafts and work with Danish design studio OeO to create new products for the global market.

Nakagawa puts it succinctly: “Even if we don’t preserve its traditional form, I hope to hand down the technique, spirit and philosophy to the next generation.”

In January, we dropped in on Nakagawa and Matsubayashi’s studios in Shiga and Kyoto respectively to get a glimpse of how they work their magic. Here’s their story ...

Yusuke Matsubayashi kneads clay to prepare it for the potter’s wheel. Kneading helps even out the moisture and lets air penetrate the dough. Asahiyaki, a 400-year-old pottery studio, is the only one that uses this clay dug from the Uji region 150 years ago. It is known for its mottled pattern and warm pink tones. The Matsubayashi family stocks the clay and Yusuke says the stock should last a few more generations.



1 Yusuke is the 16th generation of the Matsubayashi family in the pottery business and he combines age-old techniques and materials with contemporary designs for his ceramic ware. It takes at least 13 years of experience to be a full-fledged potter – for the first three years, Yusuke mastered clay-kneading, and this was followed by 10 years at the potter’s wheel. As a child, he “played” with his grandfather at the potter’s wheel, and Yusuke instinctively knew he would one day join the family business.

2 Fashioning exquisite, delicate ceramic ware is a slow process that requires meticulous craftsmanship and artistic flair. “Beautiful pottery is not just about the potter’s hand but the combination of quality clay, glaze and firing techniques,” says Yusuke.

3 The finished bowl, ready for the kiln.

4 This “norigama” or step-climbing kiln has been used at Asahiyaki for nearly 40 years. Extremely difficult to control, this wood-fired kiln produces an average of 30 to 50 ‘good’ bowls out of 300, but it creates beautiful glazes and patterns that a modern electric-fired stove cannot achieve.

5 Daily Life Collection ceramic wares designed by Danish studio OeO in collaboration with Yusuke.

6 A ceramic bowl crafted by Asahiyaki.



# Hands of time

New generation Kyoto craftsmen are breathing new life into centuries-old techniques to bring Japanese craft to a global audience

By LEONG SIOK HUI  
Photos by SHIGEKI WATANABE



I hope even young people from my generation will be interested in traditional culture like the tea ceremony when they see and use my products



The sweetsmelling scent of *koyamaki* (umbrella pine) permeates the room as Shuji Nakagawa painstakingly smooths a wooden bucket with a hand plane.

Careworn planes of all sizes, some generations-old, line the walls as the evening sun casts a warm glow on the small workshop space. Outside, snowflakes drift gently onto piles of wood planks.

I was transported back to the Edo period (1603-1867) when samurais roamed the streets and a cooper artisan like Nakagawa fashioned wooden buckets or *kioko* for storing rice and miso and wooden bathtubs for different households. But this was January 2014 and Nakagawa, the third generation in a family business, was handcrafting a champagne bucket using an age-old technique that dates back 700 years.

The 46-year-old is part of the new generation of craftsmen who try to adapt Japanese know-how from the past to fit contemporary lifestyles and the global context. Along with his like-minded peers from Kyoto: a potter, a tea caddy maker, a *kyokanaami* (metal weaving technique) craftsman, a textile and a bamboo manufacturer, Nakagawa is part of an initiative called Japan Handmade.

Under the government-sponsored initiative, the group works with Danish design studio OeO, helmed by Thomas Lykke and AnneMarie Buemann, to create new products, using age-old craftsmanship, for the global market.

So instead of traditionally round *kioko* buckets, Nakagawa crafts *kioko* stools using similar materials like *kisosawara* (Japanese cypress) or the rare *jindaisugi* cedar, believed to be 2000 years old, which had been buried underground due to natural phenomenon like volcano eruption. The combination of iron from the mud and woodtannin yielded a gorgeous deep graybrown hue. Acid-resistant and highly absorbent, *kisosawara* has a subtle aroma and is traditionally used for making sushi rice tubs.

Before Japan Handmade, Nakagawa was commissioned by vintage champagne brand Dom Pérignon to make champagne cooler in 2010.

"It took me more than 20 prototypes and two years to create the oval shape using *kioko* techniques," says Nakagawa during our interview at his workshop in Shiga city, a 25 minute train ride from Kyoto. It takes six months to prime the wood and nearly two days to make one cooler or bucket.

In 2011, Nakagawa teamed up with Kyoto-based lifestyle brand sfera to create a collection of sleek vessels using *kioko* techniques and a combination of *jindaisugi* and umbrella pine. The launch of the collection at international trade shows like Maison & Objet Paris in 2012 and 2013, and Salone del Mobile in Milan in 2013, garnered rave reviews.

It is easy to see why. Meticulously crafted and intrinsically beautiful, the smooth, rounded vessels are made of assembled wooden pieces joined by fine bamboo pegs and nickel silver (a combo of copper, zinc, nickel alloy) bands.



The lines between the slats are so fine that you would think the vessel is carved out of a whole trunk. Not surprisingly, the champagne coolers are Nakagawa's bestsellers but the waiting list is at least six months.

In 2013, Oki Sato of Nendo, a prolific Japanese design studio, spotted Nakagawa's work at Maison & Objet Paris. Stoked by the ingenious, age-old craft technique, Nendo teamed up with Nakagawa to come up with the oke collection of cups, carafe and wine cooler.

"Working with Oki Sato to create new forms challenged me and helped improve my techniques," says Nakagawa who was awed by the talented industrial designer's seemingly simple but complex designs.

But the fate of the kioko tradition wasn't so rosy just 10 years ago. When Nakagawa's grandfather, Kameichi Nakagawa (1913-1998), started the family business Nakagawa Mokkougei in 1961, there were about 200 studios in Kyoto that specialised in the trade. Kameichi had 10 craftsmen working in his workshop. Shuji's father, Kiyotsugu Nakagawa, inherited the business in 1978, and he was designated Japan's Living National Treasure in 2001.

The Japanese government recognises individuals or collective groups who have "attained high mastery of an art or craft" and provides annual grants to the recipients to preserve these "intangible cultural properties."

During his father's time, the demand for kioko dropped drastically and Kiyotsugu, 72, ran the studio alone. During the postwar period, plastic containers became the cheaper and more accessible alternative.

"I was afraid in 50 years the tradition will vanish forever," says Nakagawa who joined his father's studio in 1992 after graduating with a contemporary art degree from Kyoto Seika University. As an artist, Nakagawa has held solo exhibitions for his metal sculptures and nabbed awards for his artworks. In 2003, he set up his own studio in Shiga Prefecture.

"Today, there are only three kioko studios in Kyoto and sales come mostly from traditional Japanese *ryokan* (inns use these wooden bath tubs and water buckets to recreate the old atmosphere)."

But more than just plugging for an age-old craft, Nakagawa wants to perpetuate the maintenance culture, inherent in Japanese tradition.

"If we use wood, we have to take care of it but it will last a very long time. I have repaired a 200-year-old wooden tub," says Nakagawa. "Even if we don't preserve its traditional form, I hope to hand down kioko's technique, spirit and philosophy to the next generation."

## The clay artisan

Like Nakagawa, potter Yusuke Matsubayashi feels it's important to inherit the spirit and the mindset of potters from the past – the desire to create something 'new' and foster traditions.

The 16th generation in his family business, Asahiyaki, 34-year-old Yusuke comes from a lineage of illustrious potters who crafted tea bowls for preparing whipped tea for nobility, warrior rulers and tea masters. Based in Japan's oldest tea region, Uji in Kyoto Prefecture, Asahiyaki was under the patronage of tea master Kobori Enshu (1579-1647) who was also a *daimyo* or feudal lord. During the Edo period, the daimyos' support for traditional crafts like pottery and lacquerware resulted in a thriving craft culture.

"Kobori Enshu taught our family about tea bowls and tea philosophy. My ancestors created works based on Enshu's philosophy of *kirei sabi* (loosely translated as graceful or elegant simplicity)," says Matsubayashi who studied pottery under his father, Hosai, and a Kyoto-based pottery school. *Kirei sabi* meshes the subdued *wabi sabi* ideals of tea master Sen no Rikyu (1522-1591) to the motley tastes of the Edo era.

Hosai's granduncle, Tsuronosuke Matsubayashi (1895-1938) was invited by British potter Bernard Leach, dubbed the "father of British studio pottery" to rebuild the Japanese-style

woodfired climbing kiln, *norigama*, at Leach Pottery in St Ives in 1922. Tsuronosuke stayed for two years and became an important influence on the potters there. His works are displayed at London's Victoria & Albert Museum and the British Museum or can be found in auction houses like Sotheby's.

"My granduncle's works are so rare and inaccessible even for us," says Hosai, 65, chuckling, when we met at his pottery studio.

Today, Hosai helms Asahiyaki, with a team of six potters including Yusuke, crafting pottery and porcelain tea wares and tableware for tea ceremony and contemporary homes. Asahi pottery uses clay dug from the Uji region that produces a glaze with soft, mottled patterns and subtle pink tones, emanating warmth.

As a child playing with his grandfather at the potter's wheel, Yusuke instinctively knew he would one day be a potter, even at the age of 10. But his father never pressured him to join the family business. He worked at a trading company for a year after studying politics in university. But eventually he decided to become a potter. His two younger brothers chose different professions – one is a glass artist and another a computer programmer.

Yusuke brings a youthful edge to Asahi wares.

"I hope even young people from my generation will be interested in traditional culture like tea ceremony when they see and use my products," says Yusuke. "I feel this is my role as a potter."

Being part of Japan Handmade is an exciting and great learning experience: "Thomas (Lykke of OeO) came to our workshop, observed how we work and learned about our techniques and philosophy," says Yusuke. "Then he came up with the forms and colours that showcase Asahi wares' unique qualities."

"Under Japan Handmade, we are making pottery wares that cater not only to the international market but also the younger generation in Japan because our lifestyles are similar to our peers abroad," he adds.

"It's important not to limit ourselves to Japanese tea culture but also to broaden our horizons, adapt and learn about other tea cultures."



1 Masataka Hosoo is also a member of Japan Handmade, an initiative by six Kyoto craftsmen.

2 More from the Precious Wood collection.

3 A closer look at an item from the Precious Wood collection.

4 The Kanaami-Tsuji range.

5 A beautifully-crafted wine/champagne cooler.

6 Ki-oke stools from Japan Handmade collaborations.



For more information on Japan Handmade, check out [Japanhandmade.com](http://Japanhandmade.com)