THE MODERN-DAY MAKERS OF TOKYO

Tokyo is renowned for its artisan culture and strong independent retail, but there are a number of talented makers who are pushing the traditional styles and expectations in new directions.

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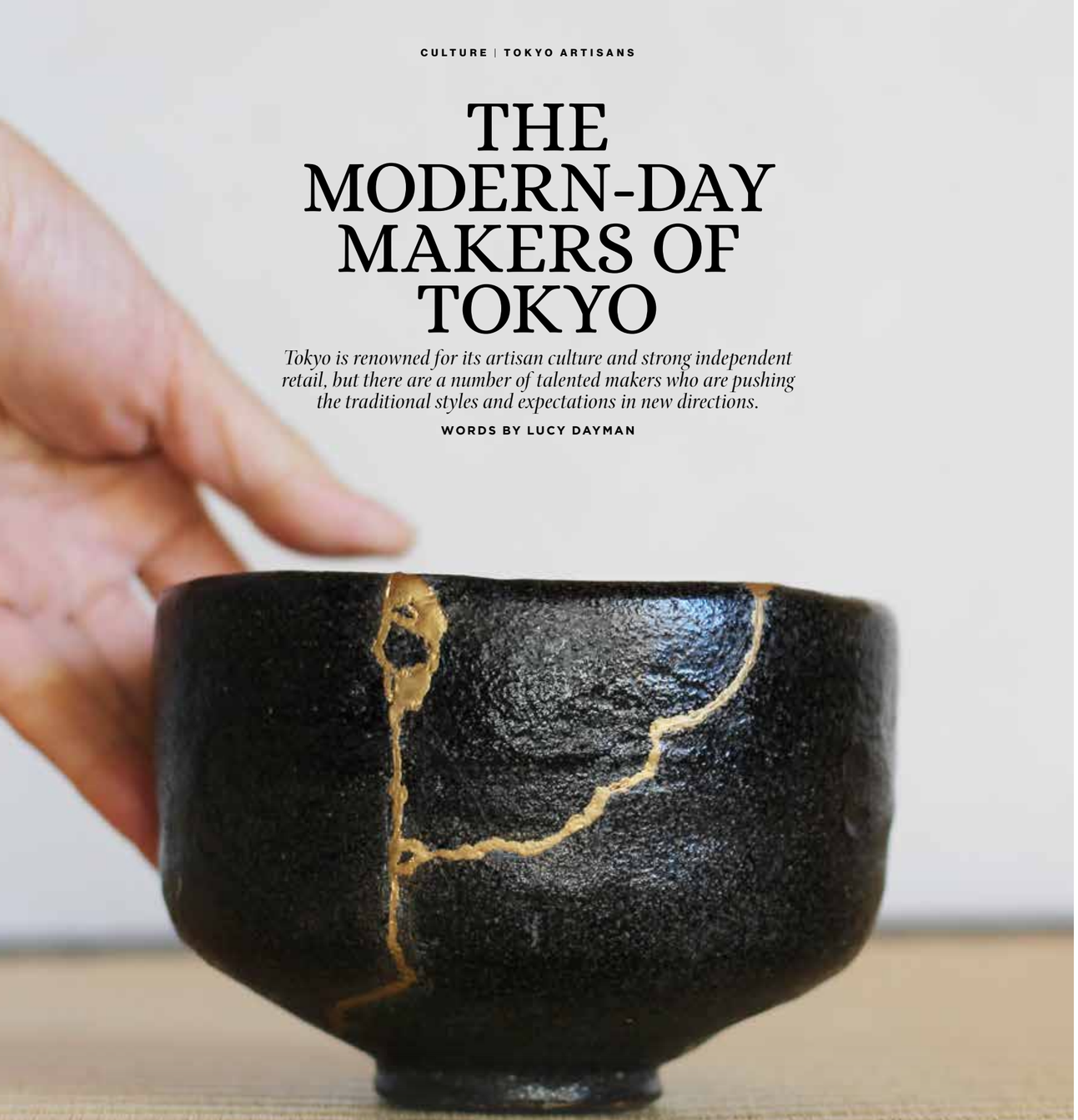

Compared with many of Japan's other cities, Tokyo is seen as the 'futuristic' hub, a destination where cloud-tickling skyscrapers and flashy neon signs advertising over-the-top robot shows line the streets. But that Tokyo is just a facade, a tourist's Tokyo, which is clearly doing enough to attract international guests in the millions. However, the true Tokyo is not just a city; it's an historic amalgamation of a hundred tiny cities, home to incredibly diverse local cultures and dedicated folk keeping such cultures alive. It's in the work and hearts of the city's makers and craftspeople that the real Tokyo lives. It is a city of great juxtaposition, modernity and tradition, and through today's traditional gatekeepers is the best way to access it.

KINTSUGI

Kunio Nakamura

Translated as 'golden joinery', kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery by mending the areas of breakages. Kunio Nakamura holds popular workshops to introduce the 'art of imperfection'.

Kintsugi artist Kunio Nakamura's workshop isn't what most would expect; it's a cosy café-bookshop-workshop hybrid nestled on the second floor of a strip of restaurants in the residential inner-city neighbourhood of Ogikubo. Although it's not so typical, it suits Nakamura, who isn't your 'typical' artisan either.

In a previous career, Nakamura was a TV director. The discovery of kintsugi – repairing and decorating broken crockery using gold, paint and lacquer – inspired a career change. "I was exhausted both physically and mentally, but I soon began to feel as though I was healing myself by fixing precious vessels," he wrote in an art blog. After falling in love with the art form, he retired from TV and opened Rokujigen, the café-workshop he now calls home.

"The act of kintsugi isn't as traditional as people think, everyone who does kintsugi does it a different way," he explains. "Every shokunin [craftsperson] has their own way of doing things." It's this lack of regimented rules that Nakamura attributes to part of the reason behind the form's recent renaissance. "I started practising kintsugi 15 years ago; at the time there were just two people doing workshops in Japan. That's why I thought I should put on workshops to keep the tradition alive."

Now, Nakamura estimates there are hundreds: "Many are people who started really recently." Kintsugi embodies a type of authentic honesty, which Nakamura believes is a large part of its appeal. "People are attracted to things that have imperfections; their landscape tells a story."

For Nakamura, kintsugi's act is just as valuable, if not more, than the finished product itself; it's a large reason why his technique of 'making' is by teaching, running workshops in his café. Following the devastating 2011 Tōhoku earthquake and tsunami, he received more sign-ups from those who brought in items that survived the devastation. It was a moment that helped Nakamura solidify his beliefs in the form.

Once completed, beautiful seams of gold glint in the conspicuous cracks of ceramic wares, giving a unique appearance to each 'repaired' piece.

Kintsugi emerged in Japan more than five centuries ago.

"PEOPLE ARE ATTRACTED TO THINGS THAT HAVE IMPERFECTIONS."

"The act of repairing something that's broken has healing properties," he says "I receive a lot of letters from people who joined my workshop saying that repairing their items helped them repair or come to terms with something in their own lives. There are people who bring dollar-store plates, really cheap ones. The cost of my workshop is nearly ten times the price of the item, but it's proof these items have more value than their cost."

AMEZAIKU

Takahiro Yoshihara

Amezaiku is an ancient Japanese tradition dating back to the Heian period, in which tiny edible masterpieces are made in a race against the clock.

Don't play with your food. It's a command most people hear growing up, but for makers of amezaiku, such as Takahiro Yoshihara, playing with food is the whole point. A traditional, but not necessarily well-known art form, amezaiku is the art of crafting intricate, miniature edible sculptures that may be most closely associated with lollipops, but are far more than just a sweet on a stick.

"What I love about amezaiku are the performative aspects of it," explains Yoshihara, the founder and owner of Amezaiku Yoshihara, the first store of its kind in Japan, a fact that's amazing considering that the earliest recorded history of amezaiku, goes all the way back to 1746. "As a child, I discovered amezaiku going to matsuri [traditional Japanese fairs] and watching the stallholders masterfully craft these sweets.

Artists use their hands, tweezers, and scissors to shape molten rice malt (mizuame) into incredibly realistic animal shapes and designs. They only have a few minutes to pull, nip, and bend a dollop of 90°C candy on a stick.

"I don't remember exactly what the first shape I saw was, but I remember its fun. I started making amezaiku professionally at the age of 26 and have been doing it for about 18 years now."

Amezaiku makers have just three minutes to create their little edible masterpieces before the warm and malleable, viscous starch syrup turns hard. This race against the clock is just another part of the show.

The show of it all makes sense when you learn the history of the craft, Yoshihara explains: "Amezaiku makers would travel place to place, setting up at matsuri outside temples and shrines.

"They'd travel wherever people wanted them. You don't see many old photos or much in terms of history on amezaiku because it was once considered an everyday thing, something fun for kids, not necessarily an art form."

By opening his Sendagi-situated store, though unintentional, Yoshihara has in a way elevated the practice of amezaiku to an art form. The best comparison would be like visiting a florist, a store that sells a product which – while its lifespan will be fleeting – the joy it offers the recipient is timeless.

The appreciation of fleeting beauty is, as Yoshihara explains, the epitome of the traditional ideology of wabi-sabi. "Although it's a beautiful ornament, in the end, amezaiku is still just candy, so we want to ensure it tastes nice. From the Edo period up to now, the main point of this art is to create tasty candy. The idea being that while the candy I ate is no longer here, the memories I have of seeing it be made and enjoying it remain in my mind and heart. That connection, I believe, allows the art to stay alive long after it has been eaten."

TEA GROWER & MASTER

Ryo Iwamoto

Business owner and Japanese tea master Ryo Iwamoto has taken the ancient practice of Japanese tea preparation and transformed it into a business fit for modern times.

At just 23, most people would be beginning to figure out what they want to do with their lives, not becoming a major figure in one of the most traditional cultures in the country. But Ryo Iwamoto is not like most 23-year-olds. He's a tea master, the founder of tea manufacturing company TeaRoom, and a man who has dedicated 14 of his 23 years on this planet to appreciating, understanding, studying and promoting Japanese tea.

"I first became interested in tea after I saw a tea master on TV when I was nine. I was just amazed by the man, how he conducted himself, and his attitude to others and society; it's one of respect and deep consideration."

Chadō or sadō ('the way of tea', sometimes also called chanoyu, 'hot water for tea', or ocha, literally just 'tea') is the traditional ritual of preparing and serving green tea. It customarily takes place in a room, sparsely decorated with tatami mats and a hanging scroll or flower arrangement, with up to five guests kneeling on cushions.

For Iwamoto, tea is as much about action as it is about consumption. That, he believes, is its greatest appeal. "Every time you brew tea, you have to take time. Tea has a lot of deliberate actions entwined in its making.

"Tea has the potential to influence action. If you feel rushed, you can take time to understand yourself. It can become a force field against time, and encourage mindfulness, which is more important today than ever."

As a company, Tearoom sits somewhere between a start-up and an extension of Japanese traditional tea culture.

Tearoom cultivates and supplies tea to large companies both across Japan and the globe, and collaborates with other brands, like the hip artisanal San Francisco-based chocolate company Dandelion, as well as local gin makers Tatsumi Distillery, to reinvent the role of tea in modern society.

"I'd say, though, what we do at Tearoom is traditional," says Iwamoto. "We extract parts of tradition and infuse it with modern society."

Iwamoto is clearly business savvy but believes that you can't progress in the business of tea without knowing the culture, and it's this appreciation of culture he partly attributes to his success. "People in the industry really respect people of culture. I am young, but I have a tea licence, and I'm a professional within the culture. So, despite my age, the people in the industry respect me both as a person of culture, but also as a progressive young entrepreneur. I have a lot of connection and advantages in the industry."

Iwamoto's success is an excellent example of Tokyo's connection to both its history and the future. "Tokyo is a fashionable city, but also a cultural city," says Iwamoto. "All cultures gather because here people can understand and welcome new culture and traditional culture."

Knife maker Katsuyoshi Ishida is the director at 230-year-old store Kiya.

KNIVES

Katsuyoshi Ishida

In a world filled with cheap, disposable goods, Katsuyoshi Ishida creates traditional, high-quality knives.

Two centuries and three decades – that's how long Tokyo-born knife makers, Kiya, have been in business, and ever since their establishment in 1792, their reputation for producing some of the finest, most sought-after knives in the business hasn't waned.

In fact, in a time when cheaper alternatives are available at a portion of the price, Kiya's legacy and crossover appeal is stronger than ever. "The people who usually buy our knives are both home cooks and professional chefs," says Kiya representative, Katsuyoshi Ishida.

Today, quality over quantity keeps people flocking to their outpost in Tokyo's culinary capital, Nihonbashi. Ishida's theory of the reason for Japanese knives' high reputation has to do with the country's landscape: "Japanese knives are so popular because Japan is surrounded by the sea, so people used to catch and eat a lot of seafood. They realised that to cook, knives must be sharp, so they came up with single-edged knives that prioritise sharpness."

The tradition of the nation's knife crafting hasn't changed much, as Ishida explains, and he should know, given he's been working for Kiya for 51 years. "Even now, Japan is the only country in the world that uses single-edged kitchen knives."

With a 230-year history as a proudly Tokyo-based establishment, Ishida explains that part of the company's success is the city's ability to grow, support and nurture 'makers' of all creeds. "Tokyo is an excellent place for artisans, because it's the largest city in Japan, with a large population and the highest demand for various daily necessities. Therefore, the competition and demand for artisanal goods, especially kitchen items, is high."

Although other cities may have a reputation for their traditional culture, Tokyo is and always will be the reigning leader. "Craftsmen from across the world came to Tokyo to make and gather goods and tools," Ishida says. That's how it started, and will always be.

CERAMICS

Kotaro Sakazume

Pottery and porcelain making is one of the oldest Japanese crafts, dating back to the Neolithic period, but Kotaro Sakazume is taking a non-formal approach.

Ceramics is an art form so ingrained in the evolution of Japan's culture that there seem to be as many different forms of ceramics as there are people who practise it. In Shinagawa's busy urban centre, Kotaro Sakazume, aka 'Panda Sensei', runs cosy, intimate ceramics workshops teaching guests his particular brand of clay crafting. "In 2014, I set up my production base in my current studio and started running pottery classes in 2017 as a way to make more money while working on my artworks," Sakazume explains.

An artist by training, and a teacher now by trade, Sakazume makes pieces for a range of purposes, both as an expression of art and for more utilitarian purposes like photo shoots, in-store displays and everyday use.

His pieces have an endearing quality about them; they emit a feeling of casual playfulness. "I studied ceramics at Musashino Art University's Department of Craft and Industrial Design, but have been self-taught since graduating from university without any apprenticeship," says Sakazume, offering some insight into his unique, non-formal style of such a historic craft.

A Tokyo native, Sakazume is on a mission to help the city cultivate a ceramic legacy. "Currently, there is no ceramic industry in Tokyo that can be called a traditional craft," he says. "So I would like to create something like that someday. Tokyo has an excellent traditional craft culture – art forms like Edo Sarasa [a type of silk printing] and Edo Kiriko are still being handed down today. However, as times change, values change. I believe that crafts and craft culture exist in order to be passed down from person to person." This passing on and communication of culture, Sakazume believes, is the most valuable aspect of the craft evolution and something he says "should not change". Essentially, what's important is the message, not the medium. Although being a ceramics teacher on the side may have at first been a means to survive as an artist, it's now a source of inspiration for his own creations. "I have a very good balance at the moment," Sakazume says.

Kotaro Sakazume believes that crafts and craft culture exist in order to be passed down from person to person.

TEA & YOGA

Machiko Hoshina

Challenging the idea of the tea ceremony as part of the 'traditional culture' of Japan, which is like something out of a history museum, Machiko Hoshina is taking the famous cultural experience into the modern era.

Tokyo-based tea master Machiko Soshin Hoshina says the idea to combine the traditional drink with the art form of yoga came after she experienced a friend's yoga session. A woman responsible for bringing the tea ceremony into the modern age, Hoshina's company, Tranquilitea, offers guests of all backgrounds an accessible and intimate way to appreciate this timeless art form, and a practice she believes has great importance in the modern day, not just as a connection to history but a way to deal with contemporary stresses.

In terms of heritage, there aren't many people in the world who seem to be as made for the role of tea master and gatekeeper of history as Hoshina. She is able to trace her family lineage to the founder and first shōgun of the Tokugawa shogunate. Hoshina, however, has spent a large portion of her life growing up abroad.

Tranquilitea provides a bilingual tea master to give a detailed explanation of the tea ceremony in English. It also provides an updated version of the ceremony or 'chanoyu' that is more casual, but still traditional and tranquil.

But rather than drive a wedge between herself and her culture, she believes her time overseas helped her become a better tea master and advocate for Japanese culture.

"The international setting influenced me to understand Japanese culture from many sides," she says. "When you try to explain or want to share anything that relates to you originally, sometimes it is rather difficult to do so because they are too 'normal' for you. I wanted a different point of view, so I intentionally moved out of my community and studied as an exchange student."

"YOU CAN OPEN YOUR FIVE SENSES, CONNECT YOUR BODY AND SOUL."

Back in Japan, Hoshina understands Tokyo's dichotomy of tradition and modernity, national authenticity and international influence, which is what makes her company, Tranquilitea such an ideal representative of the city.

"Traditional culture often appeals in front of you as 'heritage' like something from a history museum, but this is not for the tea ceremony," she says. It's in part this reason she launched an experience that combines yoga and tea. "After experiencing my friend Noriko's yoga class, I felt so relaxed, like how I feel in my tea room with a bowl of matcha. We found many good connections between the two cultures. We decided to create our original yoga and tea experience where you can open your five senses, connect your body and soul, feel oneness between all the surroundings of yours to gain the confidence to live in this hectic modern time."

EDO KIRIKO

Sarazo Kawai

Edo Kiriko, or cut glass, is a manufacturing method in which clear colours and delicate patterns are cut into glass. At his store, Sarazo Kawai is learning and trying to evolve the traditional techniques.

Edo Kiriko is a proudly Tokyo-born craft, which those familiar with Japanese may have noticed from the name. In Japan's history, the nation's capital was once known as Edo.

Creations born here – that the city was proud of – would be given the 'Edo' prefix, like Edomae sushi, which is just sushi as we know it today, but which was born in Tokyo and featured seafood caught in the sea near Edo.

"Tokyo is a place where tradition and newness are woven together, where Edo culture is rich in history, and Tokyo is at the forefront of Japanese culture," says Sarazo Kawai, a craftsman at Edo Kiriko Studio Shop, located in the traditional downtown area of Sumida. Edo Kiriko is a form of delicate glass cutting and a technique that leaves glassware with almost gemstone-like angles that catch and glitter in the light like a colourful, well-cut crystal or diamond.

Edo Kiriko was founded in 1834 by Kagaya Kyubei, who operated a glassware store in the Odenmacho area of Edo, now better known as Tokyo.

The earliest reports of the craft were in around 1834 when a Tokyo-based glassware seller, Kagaya Kyubei etched designs on the glass' surface using emery sand. Fast forward 170 years and Edo Kiriko Studio Shop, entered the scene. "We opened our store as an official store of Sumida-ku, in 2004," says Kawai.

"We are trying to learn and evolve the traditional techniques, which have been cultivated over a long period while evolving production techniques that match the modern times, because we believe it's integral to ensuring the form will continue for the next generation."

There's something so sophisticated, metropolitan and urban about this form. Unlike rustic regional ceramics, Edo Kiriko's existence is more about showcasing a delicate, carefully crafted beauty than it is about being useful. It feels like a craft that can only be born in a city that gives so much value and to such thoughtful, considered beauty.

However, with typically Japanese humility, Kawai talks down his talents and dedication to the form. "After graduating from a vocational school, I have been involved in the Edo Kiriko business for 30 years," he says. "But rather than creating my own works, I am involved in the production of products for my company. My role is to master and pass on the traditional techniques. I am proud of my work as a craftsman, not as an artist."

"TOKYO IS A PLACE WHERE TRADITION AND NEWNESS ARE WOVEN TOGETHER."

KIMONO

Hiroko Takahashi

A contemporary textile artist based in Sumida, Hiroko Takahashi works to innovate the Japanese kimono tradition with patterns consisting of the basic elements that make up the universe – circles and straight lines.

Tokyo-based avant-garde kimono designer Hiroko Takahashi doesn't see herself as a traditional kimono craftswoman. "I'm firstly an artist and designer." Takahashi is one of the city's most fascinating cultural figures, not only due to her iconic, attention-commanding kimono designs, but in large part, to the ideologies she represents as a contemporary Tokyo-ite and a modern, progressive woman working within a world so entwined with tradition. In Sumida, a traditional downtown corner of the city is where you'll find Takahashi's modern, glass-panelled atelier, a redesigned 50-year-old factory.

From top: Takahashi's collection at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London; The geometric patterns created by Hiroko Takahashi are composed of just two simple shapes.

Inside, she crafts her pieces, predominantly kimonos, which feature bold lines and patterns that traverse the world of retro-pop art and modern simplicity. All of her designs are composed of only circles and straight lines, as she pursues what she calls the "infinite possibilities that arise from constraints", a perfect metaphor for her mission as an artist channelling her vision within a silhouette so locked within the confines of history.

Takahashi's interest in the kimono came from her time at art school, where she discovered just how much the garment shaped the nation's textile history and evolution. "To represent myself as a Japanese artist, I felt it was necessary to study the kimono.

"The simplicity of the kimono creates a unique result for whoever wears it; it triggers my artistic sense," she says. "You can't recreate a style perfectly; the kimono comes out different every time. I want to change how kimono is perceived in the modern world by combining the modern style with traditionalist ideas. Tokyo is a great place to do that because it's a trigger point for the rest of the nation. At the moment, the world is looking at Tokyo as the representation of Japan, and we want to showcase what we can do."

It's clear Takahashi is on a mission to redefine Japanese culture and the perspective with which many people view it. For her, the kimono is an item to be respected, but one not so sacred it's exempt from innovation and reinvention.

While classic kimono studios may be closed off to outsiders, Takahashi's studio is open to the public and those interested in meeting with her or learning more about her work.

Takahashi's work and ethos are so representative of Tokyo's progressive attitude that she has received plenty of attention both locally and across the world – including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, where her kimonos are featured within the permanent collection.

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Called 'Sakura', this splendid season of growth and blooming has grown to be extremely popular, with people flocking to the city to snap photos and to take it all in.

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