

# “Japanese Carpets” Evolving through Tradition

By Shuichi OYA

Yamagata Prefecture is located some 300 km north of Tokyo. Yamanobe Town is close to the mountains about 8 km west of Yamagata City, the prefecture’s capital. In this small town, there is an outstanding company that supports Japan’s culture of making fine products. The company, Oriental Carpet Mills Ltd., produces high-quality carpets using a traditional hand-weaving technique that pursues a Japanese sense of beauty. The company’s carpets are held in high esteem not only in Japan but also in other countries. In recent years, newly designed company products, born through cooperation with industrial designer Ken Okuyama, are attracting attention. Okuyama, who is from the prefecture, is a globally known player in the world of design.

## Originating from Yamagata

The impact of the present unprecedented financial crisis and global economic deceleration is also being felt in Yamagata Prefecture. It is immeasurable as there are many small and medium-sized makers of automotive and semiconductor parts in the prefecture. Yamanobe is also known in Japan and abroad for its textile and woven products such as knitwear. However, the textile industry was in a dire situation even before the present worldwide recession. In this economic environment, Oriental Carpet has been working hard to make “Japanese carpets” in this town.

Oriental Carpet was founded in 1921. The founder and his partners started to make luxury hand-woven carpets by inviting seven Chinese carpet-making experts from Beijing. This led to the birth of a company making Japanese carpets in Yamagata. Carpet making was suspended due to the war, but it resumed in 1946 when a new company was established under the present name. Hiroaki Watanabe, the current president, is a fifth-generation leader from the founder.

According to a 2005 national census, Yamanobe’s population was about 15,000 that year. Oriental Carpet is in the central part of the

town, and when I asked for directions, townspeople invariably showed me the way with kindness. Watanabe’s earlier generations founded the company in this town to create jobs. At present, the company employs some 40 people, including part-time workers. Yamanobe is the starting point of the company’s manufacturing culture, and Watanabe is very much aware that his firm is a manufacturing company rooted in this community.

The workshop at the headquarters looks like a mountain cottage in North Europe rather than a factory. It would be more appropriate to call it a studio than a factory. Oriental Carpet’s tradition and expertise are packed here. The company’s real power is in producing high-quality carpets based on Japanese aesthetics. It has been producing carpets that can be used for generations as durables, rather than as consumables to be quickly thrown away. The beauty of carpets is never lost even after use for scores of years. The carpet in the reception room of the company’s head office is 70 years old but has not lost any of its beauty.

## Used in Japan & Abroad

The characteristic of Oriental Carpet products is that the more they are washed, the better they look. Basically, the raw material is high-quality sheep wool. The company’s strength is that it is the only maker in Japan to use a mercerization process. This process gives porcelain-like luster and smooth, luxurious texture to finished products. Another strength of the firm is that the whole manufacturing process is done within the workshop in a fully integrated manner ranging from spinning and dyeing to weaving and mercerizing. The company is also a construction firm, doing interior work. Its carpets are used in offices, hotels, halls and private homes. Its clients are varied. In Japan, its carpets are used in the new Imperial Palace, the Foreign Ministry’s Iikura Guesthouse, the Kyoto State Guesthouse, the Supreme Court, the Embassy of the United States and the Yamagata prefectural government office. Outside Japan, the firm’s products are in the Vatican Palace and other noted buildings.

The company’s product line includes hand-woven carpets made by traditional techniques, one-of-a-kind hand-embroidered carpets made with a tool called a hooking gun, tapestries, woven pictures,

Photo: Oriental Carpet Mills Ltd.



A craftsman puts finishing touches on a woven picture, “Yuki no ko-omote” (snow Nob mask, representing a pure girl).



Photo: Oriental Carpet Mills Ltd.

Employees work on a hand-woven carpet delivered to the State Guesthouse in Kyoto.

drop curtains, shaggy carpets and many types of machine-woven carpets. Of particular interest are the hand-woven carpets. For “Japanese carpets,” each knot is carefully woven, and, as such, even a highly skilled worker can weave only about 7 cm a day. Delivery periods depend on the size of a carpet. These are veritable works of art among floor coverings. Hand-embroidered carpets also use sheep wool as a raw material. Yarns are thrust into the base fabric by a hooking gun according to a design blueprint. Each craftsman operates the special tool to manually produce carpets piece by piece. Both categories of carpets are high value-added products.

The company makes woven pictures not just to meet demand but also to pass on hand-weaving techniques to later generations. Pictures are woven with woolen yarns and are framed or made into wall hangings. The charm of an original painting is accurately reproduced by weaving woolen yarns strand by strand. These are also works of art, in which subtle tones of color are reproduced by the highly skilled techniques of craftsmen. Woven pictures are attracting a great deal of attention at exhibitions. All these products depend on human resources. “Young generations are carrying on with hand-weaving techniques. I feel assured in this respect,” says Watanabe. The company is developing human resources from a medium to long-term perspective.

### “Yamagata Carrozzeria Project”

In recent years, Oriental Carpet has been actively working together with the noted designer mentioned before, which has opened the door to a new world. Industrial designer Okuyama is known globally as a designer of Ferrari cars at Pininfarina S.p.A. in Italy.

Like Oriental Carpet products, there are many traditional products made by local firms using outstanding techniques, including cast-metal products and woodwork. To link these traditional industries with new designs, the “Yamagata Carrozzeria Project” is now underway in the prefecture. (Carrozzeria is an Italian word meaning a “car design studio.”) The project was initiated with the idea of making goods from a new perspective. In 2006, several companies involved in the project launched a common brand name, “YAMAGATA KOUBOU” (Yamagata Studio), which includes Oriental Carpet prod-



A visitor examines Oriental Carpet’s “Inaho” (Ears of Rice) carpet exhibited at a YAMAGATA KOUBOU booth at the Maison & Objet Fair in Paris in January 2009

ucts. In January 2009, YAMGATA KOUBOU products involved in the Yamagata Carrozzeria Project were shown for the fourth consecutive year at *MAISON & OBJET*, an international interior goods fair in Paris. Oriental Carpet produced carpets in unhackneyed designs crafted by Okuyama such as *Momiji* (Japanese Maples), *Umi* (Sea), *Inaho* (Ears of Rice), *Sakura* (Cherry Blossoms) and *Nami* (Waves). While maintaining product quality, the company has worked to improve its manufacturing techniques to produce merchandise priced below the expensive conventional hand-woven carpets. Thanks to the participation in many international fairs, Watanabe’s interest in overseas sales has grown. He feels it essential to find local partners to sell overseas. Oriental Carpet has been able to open a new frontier thanks to collaboration with design guru Okuyama, but this is a result of the company’s solid manufacturing expertise cultivated over the years. The maintenance and further evolution of that expertise will be the engine for the firm’s future development. With sales estimated at ¥600 million for the business year ended in March 2009, Oriental Carpet is not large in terms of sales, but it gives priority to earning solid profit. Watanabe says, “My mission is to make sure that hand-weaving technology is passed on to future generations in Yamagata.” In this spirit, he is working to increase his company’s presence both in Japan and abroad.

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*Shuichi Oya is Chief, Yamagata Bureau, Nikkan Kogyo Shimbum Ltd. He joined the business daily in 1992 and once worked as a beat reporter at the Small & Medium Enterprise Agency, an arm of the Ministry of Economy, Trade & Industry.*