

# Remodeled 'Japan Traditional Craft Center' Opens

By Naohisa MARUYAMA

The Japan Traditional Craft Center, run by the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries as a permanent venue where makers and users of craftwork can come together, made a fresh start on April 2, 2009, after a face-lift. The center is designed to promote Japanese traditional craft industries, which can be said to be the roots of the nation's "monozukuri (manufacturing) industry."

By displaying scenes of daily life with traditional craftwork through settings full of the sense of the seasons and offering ideas for their use from many angles, the renewed center aims to become a facility where visitors can spend a very enjoyable time. The library and audiovisual sections, which were on the third floor and attracted few visitors, have been moved to the ground floor, enabling the facilities to actively convey information on traditional craftwork. Books, slides and films in English are also available.

To develop its operations from a new perspective, the association is now shifting its emphasis in the promotion of traditional craftwork from what tended to be support for producers to what will produce quick results through publicity to users. As a part of this effort, the center enlisted the cooperation of Tokyo Electric Power Co. (TEPCO) to stage an exhibition titled "From the Birthplaces of Electricity," the first special event to mark its renewed start. The exhibition introduced the traditional craftwork and culture of life in Fukushima and Niigata prefectures, where electricity is generated for supply to the Tokyo metropolitan area. It promoted traditional craft industries such as those which are friendly to the global environment and fit for a "recycling-oriented society." TEPCO has been cooperating with our association as a supporting member since last year because it believes that traditional craftwork is suitable for a recycling-oriented society, benign to and harmonious with the environment. We are also planning an exhibition in cooperation with Tokyo Gas Co. We are also proposing broad business partnerships with airline companies, which

are in a typical fossil fuel-guzzling industry, for various purposes, including their use of environment-friendly traditional craftwork, in a bid to help them create new corporate images.

The Japan Traditional Craft Center, located in Ikebukuro, Tokyo, will continue to offer the general public opportunities to come into contact with and also purchase traditional craftwork through permanent exhibits where products from all over Japan are on display, and through special exhibits held for specific periods of time. The center will also show government-recognized master craftsmen at work and sponsor lectures by experts. By offering many users (consumers) living in large cities as many opportunities as possible to see and touch traditional craftwork from across the country, we will work to spread the idea that these products are actually very close to our daily lives even today, and that we can use them for many, many years, an important feature in the recycling of resources. Although some tend to assume that traditional craft products are "used in a Japanese lifestyle," many products go beautifully with Western-style rooms. For example, we are now recommending the use of folding screens of *Edo karakami* (beautiful *washi* Japanese paper with patterns, originating in the Edo feudal period) in the offices of presidents at many firms. Their response has been extremely favorable.

## Foreign Visitors Growing Since Renewal

Since the remodeling of the center, the number of foreign visitors has increased sharply. This may be due to our active publicity efforts directed at people abroad even before the renewal. In some hours of the day we even get the feeling that we are in an international center. We talked with some 100 foreign visitors during the first two weeks of the new opening and found that by country of origin, the United States ranked top in the number of visitors but that by region, more than half were from Europe.

Photos: Japan Traditional Craft Center



Samples of products on display at Japan Traditional Craft Center



Wild cherry bark craftwork  
(all-leather tea leaf box)



Hakone mosaic woodwork  
(jewel case)



Nambu cast-iron product  
(iron teakettle)



Kanazawa gold leaf  
(ballpoint pen coated with fine gold leaf)

Note: The Japan Traditional Craft Center may not always have these products in stock for sale.

About 80% of the visitors came to Japan for sightseeing and also some 80% were in Japan for the first time. As many visitors pointed out that our explanations about the way to reach the center and its location were hard to understand, we are trying to improve our presentations. We have set up a special corner where visitors can find goods popular among foreign visitors and are improving the services of our staff.

Topping the list of craftwork selling well among foreign visitors are woodwork products such as wild cherry bark craftwork and Hakone mosaic woodwork. The former category of woodwork, made in Akita Prefecture in the Tohoku (northeastern) region of Japan, is said to be "bark artwork unrivalled in the world." Wild cherry trees are barked first and then the barks are shaved thin to be pasted on the surface of wood or laminated in many layers to be carved. These products have unique beauty. They are strong and highly moisture-proof. Their luster increases with use. Small personal items, trays and lighting equipment made with this technique are among the popular items.

The latter group is made in Hakone, a resort near Mt. Fuji and not very far from Tokyo. Hakone is part of Fuji-Hakone-Izu National Park and has been popular as a hot spa resort among visitors from Japan and abroad for many years. Today, it is one of Japan's leading tourist spots with abundant nature, art museums and other tourist attractions, and many good hotels and *ryokan* (Japanese-style inns). What characterizes Hakone mosaic woodwork is its designs and patterns. At first glance, they may look like prints, but if you look at them closely, they are stunningly beautiful. As there are a great variety of trees in this region, wood pieces of different natural colors and grain patterns are put together to produce exquisite geometric patterns, thus making "*tane-ita*" (seed board) of certain thickness. The board is shaved into paper-thin sheets with a special plane. These sheets are used to decorate the surfaces of boxes and other wood products. The most popular Hakone mosaic woodwork is "secret boxes." These look like ordinary colorful oblong boxes, but they cannot be opened unless you slide open the side pieces of a box in a certain order. The greater the number of times you need to slide open the pieces, the greater the difficulty of opening the box. The number ranges from dozens of times to more than 100 times.

Metal products are also popular. *Nambu* cast-iron teakettles are made in Iwate and other prefectures in the Tohoku region. This craft not only comes in an attractive Japanese-style design but also offers a health benefit. Blood carries oxygen everywhere in our body, but this is done by iron in our red blood cells. The deficiency of iron content lowers bodily functions, causes constipation and excessive sensitivity to cold, and could eventu-

ally trigger the onset of diseases. Iron in vegetables, grains, eggs and milk is known as trivalent iron, which cannot be absorbed into our body easily. Therefore, it is believed difficult to take in the required amount of iron through our modern eating habits. On the other hand, iron that dissolves into water from the iron teakettle is bivalent iron, which can be easily absorbed into our body, thus prompting iron teakettles to attract wide attention as a source of iron supply. The advantage of the iron teakettle is that we can habitually get our daily iron from coffee, black tea or any other favorite drink without changing our lifestyles. Hence, it is safe to call it an optimum means for us to get the required iron supply in our modern way of life. Also, boiling tap water in an iron teakettle removes the smell of chlorine and renders it mild and pleasant to taste.

Products adorned with Kanazawa gold leaf, an extremely thin gold leaf made in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, are also popular among foreign visitors. This gold leaf is made of an alloy of pure gold and minute quantities of silver and copper. The gold alloy is beaten to stretch it to the thickness of between one-10,000th and two-10,000ths of a millimeter. Although the gold leaf is so thin that you can practically see through it, it never loses the glitter of gold. It may be difficult to imagine how thin the figures are. But if you are told it is as if a gold alloy the size of a coin is stretched to the size of a bed sheet, you will see how thin they are. Most of the gold leaf of this type is made in Kanazawa City, which is on the Japan Sea coast in central Japan.

Other popular items are *Koshu inden*, deer hide products decorated with designs in Japanese lacquer made in Yamanashi Prefecture at the foot of Mt. Fuji, and *Ukiyoe* woodblock prints made in the style of the Edo period (1603-1867), which are an important art form of Japan. In the future, we plan to open a special sales corner catering to foreign visitors so they will find it easier to shop.

Traditional craft industries, born out of the climate of various regions of Japan using local raw materials, have been developed by local craftsmen. They have been nurtured amid local lifestyles and handed down from generation to generation. The Japan Traditional Craft Center aims to bring the sense of richness and warmth in our daily lives by offering the public an opportunity to personally feel the charms of Japanese traditional craftwork, which the nation can take pride in, and the depth of the tradition the Japanese people have passed on from generation to generation without interruption. Everybody, come visit us. **JS**

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