

# Foreign Interest Growing in Traditional Japanese Craftwork

By Japan Traditional Craft Center  
Association for Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries

The Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries operates the Japan Traditional Craft Center in a terminal building at the west entrance to Ikebukuro Station in Tokyo to introduce craftwork from all parts of Japan to visitors.

Callers to the center will encounter many foreign visitors who wish to know about Japan, feel more about the country and have knowledge of traditional Japanese craftwork. They include those from North American and European countries such as the United States, Britain, Germany, France, Spain, Italy and Russia as well as those from Asian countries and regions, including China, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore, and furthermore from South America and Africa. The number of countries confirmed has totaled about 40.

## “Traditional Craft” Represents “Cool Japan”

The Japanese public may rather take traditional craftwork as something antiquated and, in fact, many people in their late 40s or older may think so. However, a recent boom favoring things Japanese is winning the support of a wide range of relatively young people. Those who are in their 30s and younger seem to think Japanese culture completed before their parents' generation is a refreshing surprise rather than old. This is probably due to the effect of such common developments as Japanese people's travel and life abroad and growing opportunities for them to take a new look at their country from outside Japan.

As we turn our eyes toward other countries, we find that Japan is receiving attention with “cool Japan” as key words. Craftwork is no exception. Staff at the Ikebukuro center really feels it day by day.

## Number of Foreign Visitors Rising

The center opened in Ikebukuro in 2001. It made a fresh start last April after undergoing a face-lift. We have seen foreign visitors before but the number of non-Japanese visitors has steadily been increasing since it reopened. Depending on the time, one may think the facility an international center as it is taken up by foreigners except for some Japanese clerks. While sales are sluggish in the midst of the current economic slump and Japanese visitors keep a tight hold on their purse strings, traditional craftwork purchases by foreigners are faring well. Goods popular among foreigners include products embellished with very thin gold leaf, mosaic woodwork, woodblock prints, Japanese paper *washi*, and *kokeshi* wooden dolls. Some foreign customers purchased high-priced articles, including an American who bought Kyoto ceramics and *urushi* lacquerware for a total bill of 700,000 yen, a Chinese who paid about 300,000 yen for mainly ceramics and *Ukiyoe* woodblock prints, and a Russian who bought in bulk a variety of *urushi* ware produced in various parts of the country for more than 300,000 yen.

## More Foreign Visitors Eyed

We wish more foreigners to visit the center not only to see and buy traditional craftwork but also to feel the charms of craftwork by watching craftsmen display their skills in a demonstration of production and by getting a small slice of their technique and using it for hands-on experience in crafting products.

For that purpose and to help foreigners come to the center without missing their way through subway exits or underground passages, the center has produced leaflets printed in color with a detailed map incorporating photos and containing explanations in Japanese and English. The map is enjoying great popularity.

Also, the center has made sure to see that all signboards in the exhibition hall have English explanations as well. Furthermore, it has a display corner near the checkout counter exhibiting a selection of products popular among foreigners so that even those visiting the center for the first time can easily select their purchases. Those who do not have much time or who cannot decide what to buy to take home may choose some products in this corner. These efforts for a better response to foreign visitors resulted from a sweeping review of guide signs, signboard positioning, the number of signboards and other aspects, leading the center's staff to



Entrance to Japan Traditional Craft Center



Various traditional Japanese craftwork goods are on display for sale at Japan Traditional Craft Center.



raise their awareness of manners of dealing with foreigners.

The center has moved up the time of opening the exhibition hall by one hour to 10 a.m. since October. We believe the change will make it easier for those with a tight travel schedule to find time to stop by the center before proceeding to their next destination as well as those staying in hotels in the vicinity of Ikebukuro to come on the day of their departure for home for last-minute purchase of souvenirs or something to remember their visit to Japan. The closing time remains unchanged at 7 p.m., allowing visitors to enjoy shopping at leisure in the expanded time frame.

Additionally, we regularly interview foreign visitors to reflect their suggestions in the operation of the center. Quite a few of them have become fans of the center, saying they came to the center without fail whenever they visited Japan; they would come back the next day because they enjoyed spending time; the center is the best place to visit in Japan; and they would recommend their friends visit the center if they wanted to see genuine craftwork.

### Appeal to Foreigners outside Exhibition Hall

We have prepared an English version of our catalog listing leading examples of traditional craftwork from across the country so foreigners can take advantage of it. The catalog, consisting of more than 150 pages, is replete with color photos. We hope it will be of use for foreigners in choosing souvenirs.

Also, we put together a special supplement titled “*Foreigners in Kyoto and Traditional Craftwork*” in the July 2009 edition of “*Dento to Kurashi*” (Tradition & Livelihood), a quarterly magazine for members of the center. The article is based on questions posed to foreigners on sightseeing tours of Kyoto about traditional Japanese craftwork. We were surprised that people from so many countries indeed visited the ancient Japanese capital. We also took up the subject of “foreigners living in Kyoto after falling in love with its beautiful tradition.” In the course of interviewing foreigners and collecting information about them, it drove us home that there are many non-Japanese who are interested in traditional craftwork of this country.

### Conclusion

Foreign visitors have given varied answers to a question on what made them come to the center. They included the following replies: “I was introduced to the center by a nearby hotel,” “I was taken here by our tour conductor” and “My son who is a student at a university near this place recommended I come here.” Many visitors were highly pleased with the time they spent at the center before going home. What is really the best for foreign visitors is to buy pieces of traditional Japanese handicraft and use them in their country, but they can also have a delightful time watching those goods made by Japanese craftsmen. We recommend that you add a visit to the center to the schedule of your Japan trip.