

Toda Toshio: Maestro of Edo *Sashimono*

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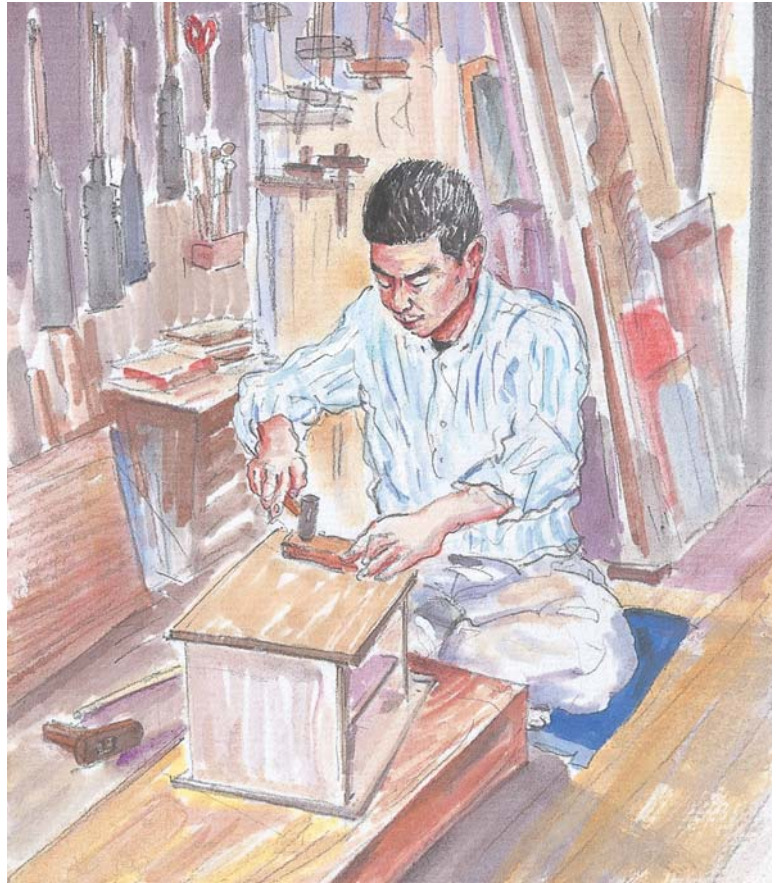
SEVERAL years ago I was disturbed by the number of disposable chopsticks I was using. As they are doled out by restaurants, at drinking establishments, hotels, even on airline flights and packed into those ubiquitous *bento* lunch boxes, it is difficult to avoid going through three or four sets a day. Not wanting to waste a resource, I asked an Edo *Sashimono* artisan, a special kind of traditional joiner, to custom-make me a pair that I could carry in my pocketbook.

Japan still offers the rare luxury of ordering personalized, top-grade products. Artisans of any sort, of course, are in short supply – the unfortunate flip side of modernization. As elsewhere, in Japan the aesthetic of buying something elegant, taking care of it and passing it on to children and grandchildren has all but died out. And few Japanese today know the once mundane protocol of discussing with a craftsman the materials and design of a chest of drawers, a mirror set or the like because cheaper, ready-made products are everywhere available. As in my case of ordering collapsible, compact chopsticks, the procedure takes time and costs quite a bit of money. A surprise pleasure in the process of discussing my order and having it fine-tuned, however, was that I came to know Toda Toshio and learn about his centuries-old craft.

TODA'S workshop in the front room of his home in Negishi, an old section of Tokyo, is packed with slabs of wood – mulberry Japanese cedar, paulownia and zelkova – in the process of drying. Some require years before they can be used. If not dried perfectly before being crafted into, say, a *tansu* (chest of drawers) the wood will expand, retract, crack or twist, making the drawers difficult or impossible to slide open. As Toda gently fingered a slab of wood, he reminded me of a sommelier tasting wine: noting its texture and other innate qualities. With merely a light caress, Toda knows the quality of his wood and how far along it is in the drying stage. The wood's grains – like a vineyard's grapes – determine its ultimate use.

"I came to the world of sashimono quite by chance," Toda says. "My high school teacher introduced me to Shimazaki Kuniharu, the most prominent Edo sashimono craftsman some 35 years ago and suggested that I work with him. In those days teachers commanded respect and it would have been unthinkable for me to ignore his plan."

Yet, even before this Toda was off in the right direction.



One of five children living in the country, he spent his time outdoors fishing, playing baseball and fooling around with his siblings and neighbors. "We didn't have manufactured toys to play with, so we made our own," Toda reminisced. "And we created games, such as collecting 'fighting spiders' in matchboxes and staging competitions. The carpenter next door kept a stack of wood pieces from which he let us make things. I crafted some cages for birds." Today, two similar wooden slatted cages house warblers at the door of his workshop.

Multi-sized planes, saws and tools line the workroom's walls, many of which he made himself, a process that he learned during his 13-year apprenticeship. Toda is the last Edo sashimono artisan to have been trained in the strict, traditional "live in" way and the last to have become fully independent. He lived with his master for six years and continued his training for seven years after he moved out. He

started his apprenticeship cleaning the workshop, polishing objects that Shimazaki made and arranging visitors' shoes at the foyer while keeping an eagle eye on Shimazaki as he worked. Like all traditional joiners before him, he learned indirectly by "stealing" techniques from his teacher. He was not told or shown how to do anything. He had to watch what was going on around him and master techniques through observation. The first object he made was, ironically for me, a pair of chopsticks.

Some 30 years later, and a year after my order, Toda placed a small exquisitely grained mulberry box in my hands. The ornamental butter-brown box was so finely crafted that without his teaching me the "trick," I couldn't open it. The box contains four pieces of mulberry that can be assembled into a pair of full-length chopsticks. Toda created a special joinery method to achieve them. The set is so elegant that it belongs in a museum. It was well worth the wait and the \$500 that it cost.

EDO sashimono, the art of joinery specific to Edo (Tokyo between 1603-1868), has a grand history back to the eighth-century joinery used to fashion double-door containers housing Buddhist images for the Heian Court. Saw-toothed connections of all shapes and descriptions are the bones and cartilage of joinery work. The distinguishing mark of Edo sashimono, Edo joinery, is its simple elegance and refinement. This contrasted with the Kansai and other regional joinery of the time, which was influenced by the elaborate, showy woodworking preferred by the Imperial Court.

In Edo, perhaps resulting from sumptuary laws set in force by the Tokugawa government to restrict consumption and inflation, a kind of reverse snob appeal came into fashion. Silk *kimono* were woven to look like ordinary cloth or a plain looking kimono might have an inner lining of gold embroidery visible only occasionally on a windy day. Rather than being shown off blatantly, a veneer of simplicity hid wealth and elegance from all but the practiced eye. In much the same way, Edo sashimono, popular among all classes, came to be crafted so that only a true.

TODA is worried about the future of his craft. There are only about 27 Edo sashimono artisans today, seven of whom are still in training. It is questionable if any of the trainees will be able to become financially independent and build their own workshops. Thirty years from now there may be no Edo sashimono makers at all. The youth of today is attracted by part-time jobs and work that requires less intensive training and dexterity. Toda took on one trainee who gave up after several years. He dreams of taking on another in the future.

To address the problem of dwindling craftsmen, especially

those of the Edo crafts, Toda is involved in organizing a program to promote recognition of today's Edo craft worldwide, with the hope that more demand for their work will attract youth to their vocation. Roughly translated, the program's name is "Craftsmen Supporting the Branches of Edo Culture." The masterpieces of 10 selected artisans specializing in Edo style, including *tabi* footwear, textiles, ivory carving, silverware, calligraphy brushes, cut glass, knives and his joinery, are featured. Unlike frequent department store exhibits this is not a sales-oriented show. It will include their finest work and proceed on to Germany and other countries as a display of top Japanese craftsmanship. The show mirrors the aspect of the Japanese character that most impressed me when I first came to Japan – the drive for perfection and attention to detail that even the average Japanese still seeks.

TALKING about his past, Toda reminisces about his father, "He was never very strict about my studies, but my dad dedicated himself to teaching us how to live, how to spend our free time constructively. He spent lots of time with us kids, teaching us things like how to select and harvest wild mushrooms and how to fish. It's partly his influence, I guess, that my hobby is fishing for *fugu* (blowfish)."

Like some mushrooms, the blowfish – a Japanese delicacy – can be deadly poisonous. The liver of this fish imparts a type of intoxication said to be irresistible, and for this reason its preparation requires a great deal of knowledge, not to mention skill with a knife. Blowfish have a somewhat romantic and dangerous image due to an incident that took place in 1975 when Bando Mitsugoro the Eighth, a popular *kabuki* actor, died after feasting on this fish. Expensive and delicate tasting, *fugu* ranks among Japan's leading gourmet cuisine.

Since he crafted my chopsticks, once every winter Toda arrives at my doorstep by bicycle, carrying a large plate wrapped in a *furoshiki* cloth. On it are transparent thin slivers of blowfish that he has caught himself and artistically arranged into the shape of a giant rose. To me, this gesture reflects the character of the man, which is very much wound up in the Japanese tradition of expressing respect and care tangibly using perfectionist skills he has honed. As my husband and I sit down to taste the delicacy we note that Toda's father really did teach him how to live life well. **JS**

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