

Silver Cutlery and My Life

By Ueda Kozo

SILVERWARE has a surprisingly long history in Japan and its use can be traced as far back as 916. Various kinds of silverware were found among the treasure in such temples as Horyuji and tributes to the authorities.

In the middle of the Edo period (around 1670), Edo (the present Tokyo) became the world's most populous city. This was a time of silver forging and chasing techniques were established with huge demand emerged for all manner of silver goods from the feudal lords and samurai families. Silversmiths called the *Shiroganeshi* or "Silver Masters" manufactured sword guards, broaches for *obi* (sash), Japanese hairpins and other accessories.

Edo at the time was extremely prosperous, attracting highly skilled craftsmen from all over Japan. Craftsmen have been drawn to the city until the present day, and Tokyo is now recognized as one of the most important silverware production areas. This is the origin of the *Tokyo Ginki* (Tokyo Silversmithery).

These methods and techniques have been passed down through successive generations from the Edo period through the Meiji, Taisho and Showa periods to the present day. Although these traditions may appear feudalistic in some respects, the passing down of craftsmanship is felt to be invaluable and its lineage is still being preserved.

Japanese silverware differs from that of European countries – it is characterized by toned-down luster and tinted, subdued colors. This elegant, austere taste is known as *ibushigin* (oxidized silver).

My acquaintance with Tokyo Ginki began early. I was born as the son of a silversmith in 1939 in Asakusa, one of the downtown areas in Tokyo. My father was very strict

and he began teaching me when I was in my teens.

The silverware business started booming at the end of World War II due to high demand from the central purchasing office of the US occupation forces. Western-style cutlery in particular was in high demand, so all of the silversmiths at the time were working day and night to produce it; this tided them over during the post-war economic depression. When the occupation forces withdrew, the 10 years of demand suddenly came to an end, and many smiths went back to producing traditional Japanese silverware. However, I held a firm belief that the westernization of lifestyles would boost the demand for Western-style cutlery in Japan, so I made a decision to devote myself exclusively to cutlery production.

The skills at that time could only be learned by watching other's examples. In terms of making the ware, we were able to add fine details, but unfortunately we must admit that our product lacked the functionality or practicality required of the finest cutlery. Seeking mentorship for my work in European cutlery, which is the epitome of a long tradition of Western tableware, I traveled to Britain as well as Italy, France and Germany to meet and learn from the local craftsmen. This study of methods and techniques was invaluable.

At Ueda Ginki-kogei, we devote ourselves to the development of high-quality cutlery that is superior in design, functionality and elegance, applying Japanese traditional methods and skills for the fine details that have been passed down from generation to generation since the Edo period.

Using cutlery-making techniques, we manufacture all manner of silverware, and we are particularly honored to have received orders for silverware from the Imperial Household. In order to meet the Japanese people's penchant for innovative goods, we have over 5000 dies. Die production in Japan is reliant on outsourcing, but we have introduced computerized machines to make metal dies; this enables us to create new designs and products.

It is my belief that we should undertake every part of the process ourselves from the dies to the final polish to produce better quality cutlery. Although I bear the title of master traditional craftsman, and of course the traditional techniques underpin my work, I am also flexible and keen to introduce modern, innovative techniques.

In Japan, where the tradition of using chopsticks is very strong, it is difficult to increase demand for cutlery. However, ever since my youth I have followed my dream, and am determined to continue making Western-style silver cutlery.

At the same time as pushing my own company forward, I

Photo: Ueda Ginki-kogei Co., Ltd.



A set of silver tableware



Anniversary memorials (upper left), dinner cutlery "plum-fretwork" (lower left) and dinner cutlery "plain"



Photos: Ueda Ginki-kogei Co., Ltd.

also work for the industry as the director of the Tokyo Gold and Silverware Industrial Cooperative Association. I am trying to devote myself to the service of the industry by working as a facilitator for around 120 silverware manufacturing establishments. Being aware of my own duties and obligations as a traditional craftsman, I am also working as a commissioner for various programs of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, aiming to develop the traditional craft industry across the country.

Japanese gold and silverware are regrettably undervalued; trying to reassess this, I have organized the "All Japan Crafts Exhibition." This exhibition has been held eight times, and entries come from craftsmen and students nationwide. We

invite craftsmen to submit high-quality gold and silver products made using skilled techniques and traditional methods, and these are then displayed in an exhibition hall in Ginza, Tokyo.

The exhibition is run concurrently with a competition to improve silverware production in Japan. The first category competes with traditional techniques, and the second category is judged by marketability, design and function.

In Japan at the moment, consumers favor foreign brands, not only for silverware but in all sectors. I hope our efforts at Ueda Ginki-kogei will be given more credit and Japanese silverware will win greater esteem in Japan and the rest of the world.

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