

New Craftsmen Bringing New Life to Tradition

A talk with Mr. Kotaro Nishibori, 5th generation head of Hiyoshiya

Japanese umbrellas have long been an essential tool for traditional Japanese cultural life, especially in the tea ceremony. Today, sadly, old-style Japanese umbrellas have almost vanished from daily life. Until the early Meiji period, all umbrellas used in Japan were made from bamboo and washi Japanese paper. In those days, there were about 200 umbrella shops in Kyoto. Today, there is only one left: Hiyoshiya. This month, KVG spoke with Mr. Koichiro Nishibori, the 5th generation president of Hiyoshiya.



Hiyoshiya Japanese umbrella specialist

The first generation president of Hiyoshiya opened the shop in the late Edo period (1600-1868). Then, the second generation family head moved the shop across from Hoko-ji Temple. Hiyoshiya has been making umbrellas here for over 100 years. Since inexpensive western style umbrellas and cheap and casual umbrellas came on the scene, traditional Japanese umbrella shops all over the country closed or started to sell cheaper, easier-to-make umbrellas. Hiyoshiya also tried to sell western umbrella, but they weren't very successful. In the end, the 4th-generation president felt he had no choice but to close down the business.

Reviving Hiyoshiya Becoming a craftsman

Mr. Nishibori's is originally from Wakayama Prefecture. His early life had nothing to do with Kyoto or traditional crafts. "When I finished high school, I lived in Canada for 2 years. I went to a language school and met many students from all over the world. They often proudly told to me about their country and how wonderful their culture was. However, I felt that I knew so little about Japan. When someone asked me about Kabuki, I couldn't say anything. From this experience, I

started to become conscious of and quite interested in Japanese culture, and, at a certain point, I started to dream of working in the traditional Japanese culture field."

When he came back from Canada, he worked as a government worker in Wakayama prefecture. However, one day he visited his girlfriend's father's business: Hiyoshiya. "I still remember how impressed I was when I first saw a traditional hand-made Japanese umbrella up close. It was so cool." Later, after marrying his girlfriend, he learned that Hiyoshiya was about to close. That was when he decided to become the company's 5th generation president and see if he could save the company.

"When Queen Elizabeth visited Japan first time, as a head of a state, in 1973, the Urasenke tea ceremony master held a tea ceremony to welcome her in the exquisite gardens of Katsura Imperial Villa. The umbrella used in the tea ceremony was made by Hiyoshiya. In addition, a tea ceremony was held in Nijo Castle when Princess Diana visited Kyoto, and of course, Hiyoshiya's umbrella



was there again. I was very impressed that our umbrellas played an important place in these special occasions as a way of introducing the best of Japanese culture to the elite of the world. I felt strongly, at a certain point, that I had to do what I ever I could, as the head of Hiyoshiya and personally, to keep a small part of our great culture alive."

"Today there are a few traditional Japanese umbrella shops left in Japan. However, Hiyoshiya has an exclusivity that no other umbrella shop can match. Our Nodate-gasa or umbrellas for outdoor tea ceremony are exclusively made for the tea masters of both the Omote Senke and Urasenke tea schools. Nodate is a tea ceremony style during which people enjoy maccha whipped tea, a sweet, and the host's hospitality outside while observing the beauty of the season. The beauty of Nodate is not complete without a big, bright red Hiyoshiya umbrella."

Creating New Traditions Products for the 21st Century

Several years have passed since Nishibori took over Hiyoshiya. "I knew I couldn't revitalize Hiyoshiya if I did the same kind of business as previous presidents. I knew that we needed to modernize our reputation and our business. First, I tried to make a website. By chance, my brother specialized in computers. This was the first step."

Nishibori's attitude is different from general craftsman. It is of course important as a craftsman to master and produce the best quality work. However, even if the work is very beautiful, they often can't survive the circumstances of modern times. In that



sense, Nishibori is a new-age craftsman who decided to change to survive, and, in that sense, he is an inspiration to others in his situation and a small hero for Japanese culture in general.

Based on his beliefs, Nishibori has produced a new product: a brand of lighting products called Kotori. The opening and closing structure on traditional Japanese umbrellas and their geometric bamboo patterns, and Japanese washi paper were used to create a completely new form of stylish lighting. Kotori received an award in Japan's most prestigious design competition this year. This is a great example of what Nishibori wants to create: a functional, beautiful combination of traditional techniques and materials and modern design.

"To respect and preserve tradition is more necessary today than ever before. And to create new things which fit with modern life styles is equally important. Bringing old traditions and materials into the lives of the next generation is what we can do and that is the challenge that inspires me and other of my generation."

(Interview and text by Aya Okubo, KVG editor/translator)

海外でのお茶会に欠かせない、大きくて真っ赤な和傘はまさに日本の伝統美。宝鏡寺の向かいに店を構える日吉屋は、現在京都で唯一の和傘の専門店です。5代目店主 西郷勝太郎氏の、伝統を現代に活かすための様々な試みに迫ります。



Hiyoshiya is located on the south side of Teranouchi, east of Horikawa (just in front of Hoko-ji Temple; map B, e-2, pg 12); Tel: 441-6644; info@wagasa.com; www.wagasa.com

Experiences

Umbrella studio visit: Mr. Nishibori provides detailed instructions on the history of Japanese umbrellas and how to make them. **Mini umbrella making experience:** During their visit, people can learn how to attach washi paper to the bamboo "bones" used in old umbrellas. Please enquire for details. Reservation are required for both experiences.

