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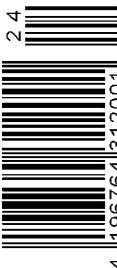
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Concrete and Roses

Crafting Memories of Japan

Design as Superman. Anytime, anywhere, can it save the day? In Japan, one of the cries for help it is responding to is the collective memories of the country's culture. In the land of the perpetual rise of the new, traditional crafts' contemporary guises provide a kind of design solace.



text & images VIRGINIO BRIATORE

It's a modern travel experience as familiar as the flush of anticipation that beckons one to far-off destinations, to find the reality in the hard daylight to be something else, falling short of the expectations, ugly even. Europe, for example, turns out not to be one big Versailles. And Japan surely has a towering reputation for transcendent beauty that draws visitors to seek it out. But where to find it? One place to look would be in the hands of the surviving traditional artisans.

It is an ancient land, yet already it is living in the future. The Shinkansen bullet train has been in service since 1964. On the Tokyo-Osaka line one leaves every three minutes. By the end of 2008 it had transported 6 billion people without a single fatal accident. This is the beehive society, where everything works to perfection and every bee has its honey. It has a lot in common with Old Europe: ancient cultures and traditions, highly refined cuisine and aesthetics, a passion for fashion and design, one of the highest life expectancies, a low birth rate and an aging population. There are also advanced industries and craft workers of great skill and ethical responsibility, now being undermined by globalisation, pirated goods and economies where the workers are treated like slaves.

Efficient & Ghostly

True, in Europe, too, particularly Italy and the Mediterranean coasts of France and Spain, in the last 50 years we have seen the landscape blighted by endless pseudo industrial or tourist metastases, but in Japan it seems they've succeeded in creating a particular disaster of their own. Wherever you turn there's a flood of soulless concrete and to people used to strolling in downtown Rome, Lisbon, Salamanca, Avignon, Prague, Brussels, Marseille or Amsterdam, all these streets of glass and metal, concrete and shops, look like one big ugly avenue.

What really struck me were the thousands of offices on rainy days and early evenings of autumn downtown, viewed on the outskirts and everywhere else, from the subway, the skytrain, the bus, the taxi and on foot. All the offices I saw were lit up in the same inane way: rectangular light sources recessed in the ceilings, emitting a whitish light, efficient and ghostly. Is it possible that no one ever gets the urge to install a floor lamp, a fabric lampshade, a glass sconce. In short, to work under a warm, human light, with a dimmer switch to personalise it

One of the local artisans perforates and carves the special paper employed in the precise beauty of the katagami technique



There's no shortage of outstanding contemporary architecture. Take the Issey Miyake Foundation's Gallery 21_21 Design Sight, designed by Tadao Ando in the elegant new Tokyo Midtown shopping mall, where it's almost impossible to find anything Japanese. Yet Japan is still a land of profound craft traditions and wonderful small manufacturers who appreciate the preciousness of time, the value of care, the allure of the inimitable detail. At the end of tiny Zen gardens, surrounded by abnormal apartment buildings and warehouses, gentle hands still succeed in growing a red rose! Amid the craze for novelty that seems to seduce so many Asian societies, something is moving and a handful of semi-heroic figures are struggling against the early obsolescence of cars and plasma TVs, seeking to ferry the wonders of the past into the future.

Quality Product

In the city of Imabari the presence of the port and a hinterland rich in water and thermal traditions favoured the birth of the textile industry in the 19th century. It specialised in the production of towels. They are bath towels, noted for their softness and superior absorption, thanks to the use of the finest long-fibre cotton, often organically cultivated. In order to position themselves on markets capable of appreciating and paying for a quality product, the 20 leading manufacturers in the zone (notably Shikoku, Murakami, Con-tex and Maruei), together representing a turnover of some €400m, have come together under the Imabari

Towel brand, designed and coordinated by the graphic designer and art director Kashiwa Sato. After encouraging results at Helsinki's Habitare fair in 2009, they are now ready to disembark in Europe.

Meanwhile, on the seacoast at Tsu and Suzuka, near the famous temple of Ise Jingu, the most important Shinto shrine in Japan, for 600 years the hands of great craftsmen have perforated and carved a special kind of paper with the katagami technique. Once this perforated paper was used to make paper stencils for printing kimono fabrics. Now that the kimono has disappeared into the attic, they are proposing using it for making lamps and printing bags or jackets. So for the first time a courageous young collector, Masaaki Okoshi, who loves design but has a keen sense of history, presented a reproducible series of the finest katagami stencils at the 2010 edition of Maison&Object.

With the aid of design, some brave entrepreneurs are seeking to find new outlets for the fruits of ancient knowledge. Meanwhile, the craft workers are all elderly, but authorities have an outmoded vision of progress and are unable to fund the small budget of a school for young craft workers. Still, few experiences surpass the pleasure of emerging from a hot bath, in which the Japanese are masters, to sip tea wrapped in a soft towel and contemplate the beautiful light that filters through the perforations in a katagami stencil.

- 1. Downtown Imabari
- 2. Furniture corner in Imabari
- 3. Yatsuzuka Mitsuhide, photographer

(facing page)

- 1. Inside the Orim factory, Imabari
- 2. The new Imabari Towels Collection, design & art direction by Kashiwa Sato
- 3. Wordy kitchen towels & apron-wearing pleasures, both produced in Imabari by Maruei Towel
- 4. Electronic waste gathers dust in Imabari
- 5. Maruei Towel's art director Kashiwa Sato
- 6. Purification pool at Ise Jingu temple
- 7. Walking outside the Yatsuzuka Mitsuhide studio & shop in Mirabari
- 8. Dress code for the Isetan department store in Tokyo
- 9. A single rose struggles in the concrete jungle
- 10. Fishing boats in Imabari