



Tanaka is very comfortable and welcoming in his cozy workspace in the downtown area of Tokyo.

Crafting the Future

Edo Kumiko Tatematsu stays true to traditional *kumiko* while putting a modern spin on the craft.

by Anne Lucas

Tanaka Takahiro, the second-generation owner of company Edo Kumiko Tatematsu, runs his fingers across one of his current woodwork projects. It is one piece of an exquisite screen featuring intricate *kumiko* patterns. It becomes even more exquisite to the eye when realizing that each tiny individual piece of wood has been meticulously handcrafted and assembled without the use of nails.

Herein lies the awe-inspiring technique of traditional *kumiko*, a style of woodworking that was invented in the eighth to the twelfth centuries but developed more fully in the Edo period (1603–1868). It is used to make fittings of Japanese houses such as *shoji* screens and sliding doors. To create a fitting, the artisan begins with a base frame and then gradually assembles the

smaller parts to an accuracy of 0.1 mm, using only wood glue to help hold the pieces together. One of the advantages of *kumiko* is that through using smaller pieces of wood, the end product is lighter yet stronger, and does not warp. There are more than 200 *kumiko* patterns that have been handed down, each representing flowers, leaves, and other forms of nature. For the screen he is currently working on, Tanaka is featuring patterns to beautifully express the four seasons, such as cherry blossoms, hemp leaves, bellflowers, and snowflakes.

In a world where many companies can rely on machinery to make their work easier and quicker, Edo Kumiko Tatematsu is rare in that they are committed to handcrafting the work. In this way, they are staying true to the original technique. At the same time, they have found ways to keep the tradition moving forward, ensuring that *kumiko* has a place in the future. Tanaka has a willingness and drive to collaborate with young designers and artists to come up with new products



This light fixture exemplifies traditional techniques put to contemporary uses.

such as light furnishings and picture frames. Although he insists he is not an artist, merely a craftsman, it takes a creative mind to imagine that such a historic craft might find a place in more contemporary settings.

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government (TMG) has selected Edo Kumiko Tatematsu to be part of the Edo Tokyo Kirari Project in 2021. Twenty-eight companies have been chosen so far. The TMG supports their overseas expansion such as publicity and exhibitions at international trade fairs. The project was launched in 2016 to introduce representative Tokyo brands, based on the concept of “old meets new.” The project features long-established companies with over 100 years of history and companies that have inherited traditions that represent the spirit of Tokyo itself. Each selected business displays not only a passion for time-honored techniques but also a drive to reinvent and sustain these

methods through more modern applications.

When asked which part of the process he likes the best, Tanaka says it is the communication with the customer. “It is an enjoyable part of the work, but moreover, it is the most important part of the job,” he stresses. It is imperative that he understands exactly what the person is looking for so that he can come up with ideas on how to deliver the perfect end product. He explains, “Sometimes I get quite unexpected orders, like computer cases, for example.”

And what does the future hold for Edo Kumiko Tatematsu? Since the company was founded by his father in 1982, Tanaka hopes the business will stay in this family and that his child will follow in his footsteps one day. But until then, he will continue looking for new opportunities to spread the unique craft of *kumiko* throughout Tokyo and to the world.

The items produced by Edo Kumiko Tatematsu display extreme accuracy and precision, beautifully.

