

Capsule Toy Vending Machines: A Cultural Phenomenon in Japan

More than half a century on from when they first arrived on these shores,

capsule toys continue to capture the imagination of children and adults in Japan.

by **Matthew Hernon**

If you have ever walked past a mysterious and enticing capsule toy vending machine, you know how hard they are to resist. Scattered throughout Tokyo, these hugely popular machines dispense toys and trinkets in round plastic capsules, though you never know exactly what you are going to get.

It is the element of surprise that adds to the allure. At T-ARTS Company, Ltd., one of the most famous toy manufacturing companies in Japan, there is an extensive set of Gacha (a Japanese onomatopoeic word describing the sound made when the machine is used) toys to choose from including famous character figurines, original forms and some useful everyday goods. With each vending machine housing different series, it is then a case of potluck as to what comes out. It was Ryuzo Shigeta who first introduced the concept here back in 1965 after one of his American customers sent him a vending machine that spat out gumballs and toys. As the items were often mixed together, he decided to encase them individually and sell them outside his shop in Tokyo, Penny Shokai, which is now a subsidiary of T-ARTS.

T-ARTS soon started selling their own capsule toy products and, according to a spokesperson, they proved an immediate hit. “They were different to everything else out there because they were only 10 yen. Rather than waiting for a gift on a special occasion, children could spend their pocket money on these capsules. Initially, miniature toy weapons and insects were sold with the target being elementary school children. Eventually, the quality and price of the products rose.”

The capsule toy vending machines became a cultural phenomenon in Japan and by the 1990s an increasing number of adults were showing an interest in them, mainly due to the popularity of video games and anime. Even in today’s technologically advanced world, they are still going strong as many people like to upload pictures of the toys on social networking sites. For the creative team at the toy company the challenge is to keep coming up with innovative ideas to entice new and existing customers.

“We have meetings once a month,” says the spokesperson. “Proposals come via drawings on paper and we try to imagine what



they will look like as 3D objects. If 70–80 percent like the idea, or if someone is very passionate about what they have come up with, we will often go with it.”

ZooZooZoo (a collection of sleeping animals in comical human-like poses) is one of the best-selling Gacha series at T-ARTS. They are even the most popular items at places mostly frequented by tourists such as Haneda airport. The hope is that the latest releases, including a series related to dams, will be just as attractive.

One of the main goals of the company right now is to continue creating innovative products while also trying to control the amount of waste. Designing the plastic capsules as ornaments or jewelry boxes should encourage consumers to keep them, rather than immediately throwing them away.

The staff know how important it is to keep on evolving. Inventiveness is the key to their success and that is something you can feel as soon as you walk through the doors and see all the toys and posters of their products scattered around the head office in Aoto, Katsushika Ward in the downtown area of Tokyo. It is a district that was known for celluloid doll production during the Taisho era (1912–1926) and the early part of the Showa era (1926–1989), making a significant contribution to overall toy production in Japan. The same could be said about the area today, thanks to the influence of T-ARTS and its vast selection of toys, including those famous little ones packed inside capsules known as Gacha.



How about buying your last souvenir of Tokyo with the capsule toy machine at Haneda Airport?

You can try your luck at capsule toy machines. You might be fortunate enough to get one of the adorable ZooZooZoo series’ sleeping animals.