



Cherishing Edo Expertise

A recent initiative has chosen a select number of traditional companies to enhance Tokyo's brand with their long history of innovation and cultural connections.

by Rico Komanoya

Japan's traditions run deep. And nothing better illustrates this than the more than 3,000 Tokyo-based companies that have been doing business in this city for over a century—and, in some cases, far longer.

This impressive history was one of the factors that led Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike to spotlight traditional craftsmanship in the “Edo Tokyo Kirari Project,” launched in November 2016. Like the Comité Colbert, founded in 1954 to preserve and promote French fine crafts and culture, the concept was to choose traditional companies that could help in globally branding metropolitan Tokyo as an attractive and inviting city.

Five firms made it through the strict selection process, including Hanashyo, which makes Edo *kiriko* (cut glass), and Ryukobo, which produces Edo *kumihimo* (braided cord). The others included Hirose Dyeworks, a maker of the fine patterns known as Edo *komon*, the knife maker Ubukeya and the NPO Japan Culinary Academy Tokyo Operations Committee.

Edo *kiriko* is a strikingly beautiful glassware craft first developed by Kyubei Kagaya at the end of the Edo period (1603–1868), and is even said to have attracted the eye of U.S. Commodore Perry at the time of his 1853 attempt to open the country to trade. The Edo *kiriko* production process involves laying colored glass over transparent glass, and then engraving traditional patterns into the surface. It concludes with polishing the surfaces until their transparency is crystal-clear. The main colors are red, dark blue, violet, green and blue.

Hanashyo began in 1946 as a supplier to a larger Edo *kiriko* enterprise. But Ryuichi Kumakura, the son of the founder, wanted to lead the company in a more artistic direction and in the 1980s, opened an outlet in Kameido named Edo Kiriko Hanashyo Co., Ltd. Another outlet in Nihombashi, where many traditional firms are located, was opened in 2016. He is now the company's chairman and head craftsman with 13 staff.



Ryukobo craftsmen use *kumidai* to braid the *kumihimo* (left). Bracelets and *obijime* cords (below) are braided in the same manner. The heroine wears a *kumihimo* in her hair in the hit animation film, *Kimi no NA ha*, “your name.”



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According to Chisato Kumakura, Ryuichi's daughter and director of public relations, “Hanashyo controls all the production processes from engraving and polishing to merchandising under one roof, and doesn't sell wholesale. We don't only use traditional design patterns in our engraving, but create original designs as well.” Another appeal is that all their products are polished by hand.

Nine traditional design patterns were selected from hundreds of traditional motifs for Hanashyo's products, including *Yarai* (arrow-shapes), *Kagome* (basket weave), and *Nanako* (fish scales). Their original design patterns include *Tama-Ichimatsu* (dots in checks), *Itokikutsunagi* (chrysanthemum petals), *Asa-no-hatsunagi* (flax leaves) and *Kometsunagi* (rice grains), which have gained international recognition since *kometsunagi* wine glasses were chosen as gifts to the state guests at the G8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit in 2008.

Another Nihombashi-located firm selected for the Edo Tokyo Kirari Project is Ryukobo, which has a creative his-

tory of almost 120 years. Since the company establishment in 1963 by Mannosuke Fukuda, Ryukobo has been the leading producer of the braided cord known as Edo *kumihimo*. The company controls all aspects of production, from growing mulberry trees to raising silkworms, designing the patterns, dyeing and distribution.

Far more complex than the *kumihimo* popular with hobbyists around the world today, the intricately braided cords were once used by the ancient aristocracy to fasten their clothes, to bind religious scrolls and to lace samurai armor. They later began to be used as *obijime*, cords to tie on *obi* kimono sashes. “Edo people tended to be reserved in their outer appearance, using modest colors and patterns on their kimono,” says Takashi Fukuda, Ryukobo's owner and a qualified craftsman. “But they would hide more flamboyant colors on the inside of the sleeves, or show them on the *kumihimo*.”

Fukuda helps researchers who are looking into the murky area of past production processes, but also is passionate about taking the craft into the future. “I tend to pour my energy into things that others say are impossible,” he says. His innovative craftsmanship has led to such *kumihimo* products as ball-point pens, bracelets and camera straps. There is a scene in which the heroine ties her ponytail with a red *kumihimo* in the box office-record-breaking film *Kimi no NA ha*, “your name.” “Mitsuha's *kumihimo*” became an international sensation among anime fans, the result being a frenzy of orders for Ryukobo.

While both Hanashyo and Ryukobo are family-owned firms, they are international pioneers in a real sense, keeping history alive with energy, passion and the perfect combination of modern business acumen with incredible craftsmanship.

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Hanashyo's products feature traditional patterns as well as original designs (below), cut by craftsmen tracing roughly drafted lines on the glass (opposite).

