

PAPER ART IN JAPAN

If there is one country in the world where they really get what's great about paper, it must be Japan. Dutch journalist Caroline Buijs travelled to Tokyo to delve into the happy world of traditional paper and contemporary crafters.



When I finally reach my hotel room in Tokyo after a long flight, I have my first taste of the type of Japanese paper called *washi*. Set in front of my windows are traditional sliding panels made of wood and covered with *washi*. They are beautiful and stylish, intended to soften the light and keep the outside world out – which is pretty enticing when you've just arrived in a huge, unknown city and are still feeling a bit reluctant to go out. As soon as you enter Tokyo, you inevitably enter a different culture. That isn't so strange, especially in Japan where they look after their cultural heritage very well.

When you're strolling through the Japanese capital you experience the typical culture all day long: tasty sushi, the occasional lady in a kimono, neon signs in (to me) incomprehensible characters, but

also, little shops bursting at the seams with traditional paper, and bookshops chock-a-block full of modern Japanese craft books.

LOOKING, TOUCHING, SMELLING

Pretty soon I come across a couple of small family shops that have been selling paper for generations. The walls are lined with wooden cabinets crammed full of Japanese paper. Open one of the drawers and you automatically end up feeling the paper: is it thick or thin, coarse or fine? Does it slide smoothly between your fingers, does it make a pretty sound? Some sheets are handmade and hand printed – quite a time-consuming job if you're working with several colors because the sheets are printed per color. The old woman behind the counter teaches me the word for the ➡

Beautiful paper is everywhere in Japan: even the subway ticket you buy comes in a paper sleeve

beautifully printed paper, *chiyogami*, and with the help of her granddaughter, who speaks a little English, she manages to tell me that some of these prints are inspired by the kimono patterns of centuries ago. There are patterned sheets with abundant flowers and other sheets with more subdued, more graphic patterns – all in varying colors. Not only does the paper feel nice, the smell of fresh ink is a real sensation. And I suddenly realize that I must look like a junkie, by the way I am sniffing at the paper. Luckily the old woman behind the counter doesn't notice.

AT YOUR MOTHER'S KNEE

So then what? What are you supposed to do with all these beautiful sheets of paper? Personally I like to hang it on the wall, the patterned sheets are certainly pretty enough. I use it to cover my datebook and make envelopes. But in Japan they have far more refined ideas about what to do with paper than I do. For example, they have the age-old tradition of paper folding (*origami*) or making paper dolls (*anesama ningyo*). Veronika Schäpers from Germany has been living in Japan for over fourteen years. She is an art book maker and turns Japanese paper into the most glorious, beautiful handmade books. When I look her up in Tokyo she explains that paper is very much part of the fabric of everyday life in Japan, everybody pays attention to it. Veronika says, "If friends serve you cookies, then each cookie will be wrapped in a separate piece of paper. Do you own a kimono? Then you keep it wrapped in special paper. When you buy a ticket for the subway, it comes in a special paper sleeve. And when you walk into any stationer's, you'll find cabinets filled with printed paper in the back. Not handmade, but thanks to the prints they're still a feast for the eye." Veronika asks me whether I had seen children folding paper on the plane. I had actually. When I boarded the plane to Tokyo, I immediately noticed a Japanese girl, about five years old, with two sweet little pigtails. She was completely engrossed in the small stack of paper on her seatback table, folding little birds with amazing dexterity. Veronika says, "In Japan they teach you to love paper from as early as kindergarten. I notice it in my own kids, who are at school here in Tokyo. They have no problems at all with origami and once a year someone comes in to make paper things with them. Japan really gives lots of attention to crafts." They are also very good at wrapping presents in Japan. Walk into any department store and you'll see shop girls being trained in wrapping techniques. No customers? Then you can

watch them practicing furiously. Wrapping a present beautifully (*tsutsumi*) is important because in Japan the receiver doesn't open the present immediately. The giver explains what's inside, and afterwards you put it away in a special place. There's another reason why wrapping plays such an important part in Japan. According to the Shinto religion, the original religion in Japan, everything has its own spirit, its own soul. When you are wrapping something, you are also wrapping its soul, so that deserves a bit of care.

BOOKS FULL

I step into a bookstore in the Shibuya district – well known for its zebra crossing where the light changes to green for six lanes at the same time, leading to massive crowds. Surely there are crafters who use paper in more modern ways than just origami? Well, there must be, as here are stacks and stacks of books waiting for me. Leafing through them, obviously I understand none of the text, but that matters less than I expected. I have discovered that in Japan, looking is what counts and I realize how much I like not being distracted by the text. Ultimately it allows you to see more. I see books with the most incredible new wrapping techniques, simple how-to books on drawing, books filled with beautiful examples from art journals, books on making mini streamers, and I easily count eleven different books on using masking tape. One book I can't put down: *Modern Patterns of Japan: Sweet & Nostalgic* by Yonagadou, featuring the most stunningly beautiful paper and fabric patterns from the thirties, fifties, sixties and seventies. Japan wouldn't be Japan if some of these patterns weren't for sale on paper and masking tape. Leafing through Japanese craft books is heavenly, so much so that I lose track of time, forget my empty stomach and the budget I'd set for myself to spend on crafty books. When I have spent three and a half hours picking out my stack I realize that my budget is thoroughly blown. Hm. I put half of the books back and go to the checkout, where I get another surprise. In Tokyo they cover each of your books in a beautiful piece of paper. I end up coming back to this shop over and over again, doing sums in my head along the lines of 'If I buy my sushi in the supermarket, rather than in a little bar, then I could save enough yen to buy yet another craft book...'

IT MAKES YOUR LIFE HAPPY

Designer Kazumi Udagawa has written some of the very best craft books including one – also translated into English – on making your own stationery. ('Your self-made stationery is the one and





Participants in the workshop



Caroline Buijs

HOW IT ALL STARTED

Paper has played a big part in Japanese culture ever since the seventh century. Originally, the technique of making paper came from China, but Prince Shokotu of Japan was unimpressed by the Chinese quality and put a lot of effort into developing different types of paper. Paper was put to good use, especially in Shinto temples (Shinto is the original religion in Japan). People made wonderful folded articles – forerunners of origami – for feasts and worship.

Fun fact: the pronunciation of *kami* (paper) and *kami* (Shinto god) is the same, even though the words have different origins. That couldn't be by accident, people figured, since the properties of Japanese paper (purity, perfection, beauty) are also attributes of the Shinto gods. That is how paper became a symbolic aid to prayer and sacrifice.



During the workshop



Envelopes



only stationery in the world. It's easy to make, convenient to use, and it makes your life happy!). She's also written a book on art journals (my personal favorite) and a sequel to the self-made stationery book (Self-made Envelope Stationery). I meet Kazumi in a small bar in a Tokyo suburb. She gives me a little handmade gift, a streamer tucked inside a homemade envelope – with polka dots – measuring two by two centimeters. The little streamer has tiny masking tape flags that say 'Welcome' in Japanese. And the funny thing is that this tiny streamer actually makes me feel welcome. The fact that someone has taken the trouble to make this especially for me feels really good. As Kazumi doesn't have much English she is accompanied by another craft celebrity from Tokyo: Australian Ebony Bizys from the Hello Sandwich blog. I want to know whether they use traditional paper, like washi, in their crafts. "No" is the unanimous answer. They feel Japanese paper is old fashioned. "I much prefer the new crafts," Kazumi says, "At home I have a box where I save all kinds of left-over materials: pieces of wrapping paper, ticket stubs, clothing labels and small design such as stamps or matchboxes." Kazumi has just finished an exhibition where she showed all the wonderful things you can make from old envelopes. In the café she pulls out a shoebox filled with folded materials: a diverse collection of small purses, bags and folders – too cute! "I simply start folding and just see what happens as I'm working." Kazumi never lacks ideas. "My publisher sets me a theme per book and I start working with that." She likes that method because her head is so full, it helps her to focus on one thing.

SERIOUS BUSINESS

Ebony Bizys also makes craft books in Japan, often with a wrapping theme. She also gives workshops. Ebony says, "Tokyo inspires me far more than Australia. The quality is so much higher here. Anything in the way of crafts is beautiful: window displays, books, craft supplies, flyers, zines (homemade mini magazines). Japanese people aren't easily satisfied, they keep going until something is perfect. They consider every aspect very carefully and their use of colors, knack for composition and eye for detail is just great. It seems as if that sensitivity is genetic." Whether it truly is part of their genes remains to be seen, but that yearning for perfection certainly springs from a certain time in Japanese history, the Edo period. During that era, from 1603 until 1868, Japan voluntarily closed itself off from the rest of the world.



Crafting is serious business over here, no time for idle chat

Craftspeople (paper makers, woodworkers, etc.) became really creative, as in the absence of any foreign influence they could only perfect their own work. Aiming for mastery – perfect control of your craft – pushed many an artisan to great heights. Crafting is still a serious business in Japan, as I notice when towards the end of my stay I take a craft workshop and mix with real, honest-to-goodness Japanese crafters. I manage to get into a workshop at Hello Sandwich. Not with paper, unfortunately, as that one was booked solid, but a workshop on making 'tissue-holders'. Whereas in the Netherlands you'd hear lots of chatter in between bouts of crafting, in Japan you'd get no such thing. Some serious work is going on here. Even though I try to let go of perfectionism in my everyday life, I am secretly thrilled that they don't go for that in Japan. My stack of superb craft books (that I barely manage to lug onto the plane home) will keep me inspired for years! ●

SEE/READ MORE

- * The book *Modern Patterns of Japan: Sweet & Nostalgic* can be ordered via [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).
- * www.veronikaschaepers.net: have a look at Veronica Schäpers' beautiful, handcrafted books (from the article).
- * www.udagawa-file.com: designer Kazumi Udagawa's website (from the article).
- * hellosandwich.blogspot.com: blog by Ebony Bizys (from the article). Japan seen through Western eyes. Packed with inspiration.
- * You can find original Japanese paper on the Dutch website www.papierenzo.nl.