

# Kakinuma Ningyo

Conveying traditions and creating new styles  
with Edo kimekomi dollmaking

## Information

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Kakinuma dolls, crafted with techniques  
dating back to the 18th century

*Kimekomi* dolls, fashioned by carving lines in a wood-based body and tucking kimono fabric tightly into the lines, originated in Kyoto in the late 1740s. Thereafter, as the Japanese capital of Edo developed, dollmakers who moved there from Kyoto began to spread knowledge of the technique. (Edo refers to modern-day Tokyo. The Tokugawa shogunate was based here from 1603 to 1867.) The word *kimekomi* literally means “to tuck into a groove”. It refers to how the dollmaker will carve fine grooves for placing the costume’s folds and seams. The technique was originally called *kiwamekomu* (meaning “extreme tucking”) because of how the artisan inserts the cloth so skillfully that the grooves on the body’s surface become unnoticeable. The doll’s head is made of crockery or plaster, while the body is formed from a particular type of clay called *toso*. The clothing placed on the body is made from pure silk, or from nylon materials such as rayon or polyester.

Kakinuma Ningyo was founded in Tokyo in 1950. Since then, the company has been producing dolls by further improving on the craft and thinking beyond convention. A particularly notable aspect of Kakinuma dolls is the beauty that comes from the elaborate and dynamic fashioning of the clay mold.

Today, Toko Kakinuma, the son of the founder (who was also named Toko) is the company’s chairman, while his eldest son, Tomonori, is the president, and his second son, Toshimitsu, works for the company as an artisan. These three men grew up in the constant presence of Kakinuma’s dolls, of which there are two types. One is *hina* (princess) dolls, which are dressed in traditional costumes for Girl’s Day, when the Japanese celebrate their young daughters. This holiday falls on March 3. The other type of dolls are the *samurai* dolls. These are for Boy’s Day, May 5, when the Japanese commemorate their young sons’ birth and pray that they will grow up healthy. The Kakinuma men carry on the sensibilities of their founding patriarch. Meanwhile, they have also been flexible, even modifying the dolls’ apparent size, to adapt to changes in Japanese homes, and also creating dolls with designs and colors stemming from Western influences.

Another of Kakinuma's original products is the lucky cats, a familiar sight among the Japanese, many of whom keep them as ornaments for good luck. A lucky cat has one paw uplifted to welcome people. They are often seen at stores as an auspicious charm to beckon customers and wealth for a prosperous business. Kakinuma's lucky cats have won popularity from customers in both Japan and abroad for their combination of the kimekomi technique and innovative materials. The company also proactively creates wholly original products by collaborating with other designers and producing the kimekomi trays for everyday household use.



Traditional Japanese dollmaking carried on  
over three generations in a family business

The original Toko Kakinuma and founder of the company worked as a carpenter. After his experience of World War II, he pursued dollmaking as creation meant to hold prayer for the healthy development of children and to soothe the heart. After training as an apprentice in his early twenties making Mataro dolls in Tokyo's Taito Ward, Toko founded Kakinuma Ningyo in nearby Arakawa Ward in 1950. What started out as a home manufacturing operation among a few workers is now a business that hires outside artisans to help produce the company's dolls.

His son, also named Toko, apprenticed under his father, the traditional craftsman, and pursued the art of producing Edo *kimekomi* dolls. The younger Toko, born in Tokyo's Arakawa Ward in 1948 in the family's home-cum-workshop, began studying under his father in his teens, in 1974. Since then, the company has concentrated on making Edo *kimekomi* dolls, and today continues to refine its unique techniques and work on new original styles with splendid coloring.

Like the younger Toko, Tomonori knew from a young age that he would enter the family business. After working in automobile sales, from 2000 he joined Kakinuma Ningyo. In 2017, he took over from the younger Toko to become the company's president. He says has been running the business with an even greater sense of fulfillment and value in this craft of bringing people happiness, even as the world of traditional crafts undergo a reassessment.





In the eyes of Toshimitsu, the younger Toko's second son, making a living from making dolls was a perfectly ordinary idea to him, even from a young age. Since the store used to have only one story, he was always around the dolls for sale there. When he became a high schooler, he would help out, such as by levelling surfaces with a file. After working as a civil servant, he made a smooth transition to the family business and he says he has been focused solely on this path ever since. When he first became involved, however, Toshimitsu did not immediately sense the full complexity of dollmaking. For example, since a single hina doll set is made from products originating in several different locations, simply possessing the skills for *kimekomi* is not enough to make the set. Due to Toshimitsu's heightened interest in Japanese crafts, he started going beyond the workshop to places around Japan in search of items he could use in dollmaking.

Toshimitsu also took lessons from a dollmaker to learn how to perform the woodcarving work that makes a *kimekomi* doll complete. As the processes involved in *kimekomi* work are normally performed by separate artisans, it takes more than one person to finish a piece. But Toshimitsu gained confidence as an artisan when he created a complete doll, carrying out all the process himself from the beginning to the end.

The younger Toko passed on his approach of seeking out contact with fine items outside his business and making new discoveries, from which he would gain inspiration to add to his own works. His son Toshimitsu enjoyed pursuing his trade while broadening his horizons as he pondered every day about what new elements he could incorporate into dollmaking. This thinking led him to travel overseas to purchase fabrics and visit exhibitions and gift shows to hunt for fresh materials and ideas. Apparently, the younger Toko is presently working on a piece that links what he happened to see in Paris with his own ideas.

In addition to works completed in-house, Toshimitsu has high hopes for collaborations with other designers. He said, "If I contemplate by myself, I'll get stuck, but by partnering with other designers, we can produce novel ideas and perform work that fosters a nice mutual relationship". Toshimitsu expects that this cooperation with outside creators will lead to *kimekomi* items like nothing before.





### Hand-crafted dolls made from traditional materials and processes

In the 1970s, the growing work and sales caused by Japan's second baby boom led Kakinuma Ningyo to open up a second workshop/warehouse in Koshigaya, a city in Saitama Prefecture, which abuts Tokyo. Today, nearly all of the company's work is still performed at the Koshigaya location.



The process of creating a *kimekomi* doll begins with fashioning a mold of the doll from clay. This original copy is produced from both clay and gypsum. The younger Toko will shape the clay, then Toshimitsu will take it to a molding shop to have it filled with a compound called *toso* that is made from paulownia sawdust. When removed from the mold, the piece is set to dry.

Next, the item extracted from the mold is carefully carved with a file to remove unwanted protrusion and uneven surfaces. These variations will be visible, even after the doll is clothed, so the costume must fit the body perfectly. In addition, since the foundation shrinks unevenly and cracks when drying, Toshimitsu will fix up the piece with the same sawdust used to produce the torso or by filing the surface. Depending on his purpose, he employs a wide range of files, from those with rough surfaces to finely textured implements. As the mending and drying are steps which may have to be performed more than once, it takes at least one to two weeks before the torso is ready for placing clothes.



The following step is the application of a white chalk powder made from clam and oyster shells. The chalk is mixed with *nikawa* (an adhesive composed mostly of gelatin made with animal bone, hide and other ingredients) to produce a liquid that is applied to the surface of the flattened foundation. While coating and pulling the foundation tight, it also prevents the foundation from showing through faintly colored parts of the costume that are inserted into the grooves on the solid body.

Then, the doll is finally dressed in its clothing. Kakinuma currently handles over 5,000 types of fabrics. While some are in standard use, Toshimitsu will travel to Kyoto every year to purchase fabrics that lead to the production of entirely new pieces. There are myriad possible combinations of costume patterns and fabrics, according to the type of doll. Toko is largely responsible for deciding which combination of patterns and color to use. He says he decides the colors based on his instincts and inspiration from what he has seen before.

To put it all together, outlines are carved into the torso, and the grooves are then filled with starch. A tiny gimlet, a traditional craftworking tool, is then used to tuck the costume's fabric into place. When this precision process is difficult to perform by hand, a spatula may be used for convenience. Just like real clothing, the doll is dressed beginning with the inner layer, from the undergarments to the outer clothing, followed by the *hakama* divided skirt, the belt and so on, all with the *kimekomi* technique.



For each doll, the *kimekomi* process takes approximately three hours. As the work requires concentration, an artisan can perform it on only two or so dolls per day. Kakinuma Ningyo now has 13 employees, along with about 30 other artisans who carry out the *kimekomi* work at their homes.

After the *kimekomi* work to finish up the torso, the head and arms are attached. The doll is now complete. Kakinuma Ningyo contracts outside specialists for the head, and others for the arms. Yet another expert artisan affixes the silk hair.

The same chalk as before is again applied to the head as a foundation. The artist uses a fine-point brush to draw the doll's eyebrows, lips, eyes and so on. A slender brush is used to paint the lower parts of the hairs, one by one. A doll's face can have a variety of expressions and sizes. In fact, there are more than 50 types of faces alone.

Sometimes Kakinuma Ningyo will prepare several face designs for the facial artist, while at others the artist will make a face especially for the company. In addition, since the surface texture is of such importance for producing the face, only the best *nikawa* adhesive is used. Likewise, the chalk employed is a top specialty type for fine application and high quality.

One challenge for the artisan is what can be used to give the doll exactly the intended appearance. Even Toshimitsu, who has a lengthy career behind him, only recently noticed this. The work naturally requires patience as well, as dollmakers only produce a piece after bringing together the results of disparate, tedious tasks.

A beautiful doll is properly crafted to strike a balance between the body and face. One may see the life force of the doll in its expression. When you look closely at a doll whose head and arms have been attached to the torso, you get an electric sensation from the clever craftsmanship passed down among dollmakers and the patiently fashioned details.



**Kakinuma dolls are distinguished by their representation of subtle movement**

A doll's beauty is affected by the crafting of the mold that serves as the original copy. Toshimitsu, who has recently become somewhat involved in mold production, still seeks advice from his father about the finer details of a mold, even when Toshimitsu has been left to the task. In this passing down of Edo *kimekomi* dolls all the way back from the 18th century, it would seem there is still much learning happening, even as the artisan's hands move at work.

One crucial idea passed down at Kakinuma Ningyo is that the *kimekomi* technique represents movement in the dolls thanks to the clay molding. For example, a hina doll does not simply face straight ahead. It is designed so that it appears to be in the midst of a subtle motion or swinging to a dance. The same is true of the five court musicians (a quintet comprising the chanter, the flute player, the shoulder drummer, the knee drummer and the large drum percussionist). The body may be made so that a musician is lifting a foot or playing an instrument. This is a distinguishing aspect of Kakinuma dolls. In addition, they may represent a slight movement through understated undulations in the body's surface.

This is how Kakinuma Ningyo passes on masterful techniques to diligently produce each doll. The company's driving force is a desire to live up to the ideas and bonds of those who give these dolls as they pray for their children to grow up healthy on seasonal festivals that are traditional Japanese occasions. There is nothing more pleasing for the dollmakers than when a customer keeps putting out the dolls each year over the decades. The same feeling extends to the lucky cats that are auspicious symbols.

However, Japan's falling birthrate and aging society are reducing the number of buyers. Meanwhile, the going prices for hina dolls and samurai dolls as celebratory gifts, according to the national average, stands at around 100,000 yen. That average price range has not budged much over the years, while the share of customers purchasing high-end items remains unchanged.

This high pricing also poses an issue when marketing the dolls to customers outside Japan. Tomonori reasons that even if they admire the dolls themselves, that does not necessarily mean they will make a purchase, and it is difficult anyway because people in other countries do not have the same cultural tradition of seasonal festivals with hina dolls as ornamentation. And because the dolls may become damaged at some time, if Kakinuma Ningyo is going to sell products overseas, the company would have to work out a system for after-sales service and maintenance in the customer's locale.

One advantage of owning a lucky cat is that it will not lose its shape and you can leave it out for a long time. Kakinuma Ningyo hopes to make more creations that find acceptance across cultural barriers, such as lucky cats and *kimekomi* trays.





### Product development to spread awareness about kimekomi among youth

Given the circumstances, how can dollmakers show customers in Japan the value of *kimekomi* artwork? Tomonori says "Of course we want to grow our main business of *hina* dolls and *samurai* dolls, but at heart we're a *kimekomi* workshop, so I think we should show people things like lucky cats, and then tell them about the *kimekomi* dolls. That way, when the customer is considering a purchase of a doll, they still have the option of a different *kimekomi* item." Among the five individual Edo *kimekomi* businesses in Tokyo, the sensibilities of each creator is what distinguishes each work. For example, Kakinuma dolls have completely different facial expressions, shapes, clothing colors and color schemes from other types. This personality is an important component, and it makes them stand out.

Along with ornamental items in the form of dolls and lucky cats, Kakinuma Ningyo is also taking care to fabricate products for everyday use such as *kimekomi* trays. As to the company's approach to *kimekomi* in the future, Toko spoke of his aspirations. "We'll get people to wear *kimekomi* as fashion and accessories. It depends on what we make, but I feel that we can come up with some interesting things. We can use cloth with *kimekomi* to produce a variety of colors, so I want us to try our hand at general interior items and more artistic works."

Three generations of artisans at Kakinuma Ningyo have been fashioning elaborate dolls in a time-consuming artform by utilizing traditional materials and processes that go back to the 18th century. In addition to passing on that history, they will likely build upon the legacy, explore outside the conventional framework and present people in Japan and beyond with the next generation of *kimekomi* works. We can look forward to the traditional yet noble *kimekomi* dolls and products that will arise from such inventive artistry and the Kakinuma brothers' ideas.