

Matsuzaki Doll

Wielding original head parts production techniques to craft contemporary dolls

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The Koikko brand of dolls built from head to toe adapts to the changing times

From its location in Tokyo's Adachi Ward, Matsuzaki Doll mostly produces dolls for the seasonal festivals of Japan under the Koikko brand of Edo *sekku* dolls (or *ishogi* dolls) and Edo *kimekomi* dolls, a traditional craft. Established in 1920, the company makes festive ornamental dolls to celebrate the healthy development of children during festivals such as Girl's Day and Children's Day. Unlike most enterprises in the industry, where the head and body are typically made by separate workshops, Matsuzaki Doll produces both. This arrangement is a major advantage because it allows the company to design original dolls more easily. Recognizing that Japanese consumers want different things from dolls as homes have become smaller and people adopt more Western lifestyles, Matsuzaki Doll complements its lineup of festival dolls with fun little items from its line of Wa-Works, which has created more business for the company. What makes Matsuzaki Doll stand out is that while traditional dollmaking techniques and products serve as the foundation, the company has been adaptable to produce items today's consumers want. Unlike other workshops where artisans are growing notably old, Matsuzaki Doll has many young artisans in their 20s and 30s and every year churns out about 5,000 dolls both large and small. As the times change, the company has overcome the challenge of adjusting its approach and work while keeping its dollmaking operation running steadily. The year 2020 will mark the company's 100th year in business.



A doll workshop with 100 years of history
producing dolls from head to toe

Matsuzaki Doll was founded in 1920 in the Tokyo neighborhood of Shitayatakicho. The area has changed much since then. The neighborhood no longer has this name and is now part of the western side of Koto Ward. Over that time, Matsuzaki Doll has grown into a venerable business producing Japanese dolls. The Japanese dolls that Matsuzaki Doll handles mostly fall into one of two categories of items made as traditional craftwork: *Ishogi* dolls and Edo *kimekomi* dolls.

"*Ishogi*" means "costumed". These dolls are dressed in pre-made clothing. Normally, separate workshops will produce the head and body, and the doll is completed when the head is attached. *Ishogi* dolls date back to 17th century Kyoto. Afterward, in the late 1600s, during the reign of Tokugawa Tsunayoshi, the fifth shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate, Kyoto dollmakers were invited to the capital, Edo (modern-day Tokyo). The dolls thus became a hit in Edo as well. Today's dolls with removable clothing supposedly follow the style of the *Kokinbina* dolls created by the famed dollmaker Hara Shugetsu in the 1800s.

Edo *kimekomi* dolls, meanwhile, are constructed differently. They have a wooden body made from *toso* clay, which is formed from kneaded and dried paulownia sawdust. Grooves are cut into this body, into which the ends of cloth forming the costume are tightly tucked. The work of tucking the cloth into the grooves is called "*kimekomi*", hence the name of these dolls. *Kimekomi* dolls originated at Kamigamo Shrine in Kyoto about 270 years ago. The dolls were made from the wood of the shrine's willow trees. Word of this craft spread to Edo, leading to the development of Edo *kimekomi* dolls that garnered widespread popularity in the capital.



After graduating from high school, Atsushi Matsuzaki withdrew from Tokyo University of Agriculture to pursue a career in drama. Upon building up experience at a training school and on the stage, he joined Matsuzaki Doll in 2011 for a job on the side while still acting. In doll production, he mostly designs ornamental daises and folding screens. Atsushi eventually became the third head of Matsuzaki Doll in place of his father, Mitsumasa. The company's founder, Yoshio, was born in Chiba Prefecture, just east of Tokyo. When he was in elementary and junior high school, he was sent to train under the tutelage of Minetama Tsuda in the Asakusa area of eastern Tokyo. Yoshio became Mr. Tsuda's top apprentice. It was during this time that Yoshio first began creating Matsuzaki dolls. Yoshio, whose family originally hailed from Osaka, a large city near Kyoto, was renowned for his ability to dress dolls in costumes. He started Matsuzaki Doll as a workshop for *ishogi* dolls, but by the end of World War II, a supply shortage prevented him from carrying out his work.

During Japan's period of rapid postwar economic growth, it was a time when the more dolls Yoshio could make, the more he could sell. This lasted until 1972 or so. In 1952, Matsuzaki Doll had a direct outlet at the Mitsukoshi department store in Tokyo's Nihombashi district. The economy was booming and dolls were a thriving business as festival items occupied an entire floor at the department store. This expansion, however, would eventually backfire. Matsuzaki Doll's focus on selling through Mitsukoshi meant that no other sellers were able to handle the dollmaker's wares. The department store had them all. Later, as the department store began returning more unsold items, this caused a serious problem that pushed Matsuzaki Doll to the brink of bankruptcy.

When Yoshio's son Yukio took over the family business, he moved the workshop to its current location in Adachi Ward and reopened there. Yukio apprenticed under the famed sculptor Koun Takamura and was skilled at producing carved works. Matsuzaki Doll had only manufactured bodies under Yoshio, the founder, but his son Yukio applied his carving skills to constructing heads as well. Producing both the heads and bodies in one workshop was an exception to the norm, but because Matsuzaki Doll could now make original heads and bodies on its own, this provided a huge advantage.

It proved to be a good choice that brought success. The business recovered and grew to employ 50 or so people. Turning a difficulty into an opportunity helped Matsuzaki Doll identify a unique strength. The company became a workshop unlike any other in Japan because not only was it able to construct dolls in their entirety, from the head to the body, but also, Matsuzaki Doll was making festival dolls for both the March Girl's Day and May Children's Day holidays. Furthermore, the company does not sell directly to customers, only through its main buyers at department stores and boutiques.

The brand under which Matsuzaki Doll sells its products is Koikko. Mitsumasa created the new branding after his father Yukio, the second-generation owner, passed away. The name "Koikko" uses one character from the name of Yoshio (the founder) and Mitsumasa when written in Japanese.

About 10 years later, Atsushi joined the company after having already begun his career in theater. The company made a pronounced effort to hire young artisans in their 20s and 30s, a move that invigorated the workshop with new energy.



An industry leader as a maker of the final product

There are 16 artisans working at the workshop today. In a year, they will produce 5,000 or so dolls in varying sizes and types. At any given time, the workers are making dozens of different kinds of dolls.

Dollmaking is a complicated task. A single doll is the sum of many different traditional crafts. These assorted processes range from producing the arms and hair to making armor. As a result, the doll represents the work of many artisans. As numerous artisans are involved with each part, dollmaking is a monumental task that can vary according to the type of doll being made.

Making a *kimekomi* doll can be broadly separated into three processes. The work performed by craftsmen at Matsuzaki Doll mainly involves the latter stages.

- Step 1: Make a mold for the doll's head and body parts.
- Step 2: Use the mold for mass production,
then carve grooves in the copies for tucking cloth. (*kimekomi*)
- Step 3: Affix the head, tuck in cloth and finish.

Step 2 is usually contracted out to other artisans, using the mold made by Mitsumasa. After the cloth tucking is finished, the head part is carefully adjusted to the body.





Making an *ishogi* doll is a very lengthy process. Following a rough draft, an artist will carve the paulownia while adjusting the size, facial expression and so forth to produce a mold for the head. This is the beginning step. Next comes fabric production, making the *toso* clay, adding the eyes, connecting parts and more. In all there are just under 20 steps involved in creating the head and body. More work comes afterward, which depends on the type of doll being made and where it will be placed. These tasks include: selecting the fabric pattern and colors; wrapping the collar around the neck and applying an adhesive; dressing the doll in order from the undergarments to the *hakama* divided skirt and jacket; and stuffing the shoulders and adjusting the chest or other parts with cotton or wood wool according to the doll's shape, while dressing it in its costume. Then, while imagining what kind of face the doll will have, an artist will perforate along curved sections to attach the arms and legs at the correct angle to create the appearance of movement. This approach creates natural folds in the costume that help make the doll come to life. Lastly, the head is attached with the face in the intended direction, and the final adjustments to the clothing and hair are made. Now the *ishogi* doll is complete.

A serious problem facing companies that produce final products and their suppliers who make the parts and materials for the dolls is that with an industry-wide slump in demand and Japan's declining birthrate, some businesses have nobody to take over their operations after the current proprietor retires or passes away. Many makers of end-products depend on sales to general consumers to stay in business, but they can only continue operating so long as they can rely on the many artisans who construct the parts and materials they need. To confront this problem, Atsushi says, "I want us to be an industry leader as a maker of the end product."



Acceptance of festival cultures that change over time to make dolls for modern needs

For a skilled artisan, it is vitally important to balance the doll's center of gravity throughout the many processes involved in its creation. Inside the doll is a metal core and the torso is filled with straw. These must be arranged in a balanced way so that the position and angle at which the arms curve are right. Throughout the production process, it is crucial that the dollmaker have a clear idea of what the finished doll will look like. Atsushi says, "To keep up the techniques I've cultivated through my experience, I have to collaborate with all the artisans from my generation, not just work by myself."

The products Matsuzaki Doll handles can be largely categorized into two groups: *hina* (princess) dolls and *samurai* dolls. The *hina* dolls are decorative pieces used on Girl's Day, a seasonal festival on March 3 to celebrate the healthy growth of young girls, as well as to pray that no disasters befall the girls and that their lives are marked by good fortune. The *samurai* dolls are for Children's Day on May 5, a festival for celebrating the birth of a boy. The dolls are placed to pray that children grow up healthy and develop into smart and strong adults.

There are two types of *hina* dolls: *ishogi* and *kimekomi*. *Samurai* dolls can also be largely categorized into two kinds. One is a major product type called *musha* Doll, or warrior dolls wearing helmets and armors. The other, called "*wakikazari*" is a showier type with dolls dressed in armor.

Customs surrounding Girl's Day and Children's Day are still undergoing change. The Japanese calendar used to have fewer events, so these seasonal festivals were very big occasions. There was a time that when a child was born, the family would receive dozens of dolls as gifts. This custom fueled Matsuzaki Doll's business. However, as Western holidays such as Halloween and Christmas have entered Japan, they have developed into uniquely Japanese traditions with widespread recognition as celebratory events. The growth of these Western holidays in Japan has reduced meaning and significance of the original Japanese festivals of Girl's Day and Children's Day.

Changes in lifestyles are also having an obvious effect. Until recently, it was customary to place festival dolls in a space such as a *tokonoma* alcove in a Japanese-style room with *tatami* mat flooring. However, there are now more households without these rooms due to how homes are laid out and more Westernized lifestyles, leaving them without a space for setting out a full set of dolls on a tiered stage.

In response to how customer needs and the times have changed, there has been a shift to making dolls in smaller sizes. Lately, Matsuzaki Doll's leading products have been a pair of dolls depicting an imperial prince and princess that are designed smaller (width 60 cm, depth 40-50 cm) for placing on a piece of furniture. Matsuzaki Doll also makes a compact version that is even more compact at only 5 cm tall.



Handmade with spirit that 3D printer fabrication could not realize

The people who buy dolls today are different from in the past. It used to be common for grandparents to purchase dolls for a grandchild. But times have been changing. Nowadays, grandparents may only provide money which the parents (especially the mother) will use to buy the dolls for the child.

This is also why different doll faces have become popular. Instead of the traditional faces with narrow eyes that were common until recently, faces with clear eyes and noses have become more prevalent. The reason is that because the mother selects the dolls, she will often buy one that resembles her child's face. Since many parents peruse the 100 or so types of faces to find the doll whose face is similar to their child's, Mitsumasa often produces dolls heads by getting inspiration from the faces of children he has recently come upon when selling his company's products at department stores.

However, some things about dollmaking can never change. To make a fine doll, the hands crafting it must be emotionally invested. Even in an era when we can make anything with a 3D printer, making dolls by hand means the artisan must work meticulously and imbue the doll with a spirit, and that will not change. As they create works, it is very important for artisans working by hand to work with the doll's future owner in mind, imagining life with the doll. With changing customs and culture, each household does not necessarily have a seasonal festival doll these days. To develop products that will find acceptance among overseas customers who have no customs involving these festivals, Matsuzaki Doll began expanding its lineup with the Wa-Works line of little dolls that fit in your hand.

Matsuzaki Doll's products have found acceptance among people by presenting seasonal festivals and dolls in line with the times, rather than sticking to traditional customs. In addition, to expand business into new areas and develop new products, the company has been ambitiously developing goods that tie in to new ideas about seasonal festivals and dolls, while also aiming to be an enterprise that generates culture. It will be interesting to see what Matsuzaki Doll does next.