

Mori Ginki

Spreading the appeal of silver,
in which beauty deepens as time passes

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A general silverware manufacturer with over 90 years of history,
handling everything from production to diverse sales

Mori Ginki Seisakusho is a general silverware manufacturer engaged in a traditional Japanese craft called Tokyo Silverware, and the company handles everything from the dissolution of silver to the production and sale of silver products. The elegant appearance produced by harmonizing the unique radiance of silver with traditional patterns created from superb craftsmanship is the distinguishing characteristic of Tokyo Silverware. As evidenced by the company's catchphrase of "*From silver toothpicks to gold baths*", they produce and sell a wide lineup of silver products at prices great and small. Since silver is often regarded as a luxury item, sales are subject to economic conditions, and the company has already experienced many fluctuations in prices such as from the oil shock and the Lehman Shock. However, given that silver products actually last for a long time when properly cared for, Mori Ginki Seisakusho's intention is to make products that will be used regularly for many years. With the company idea of "providing customers with style and pleasure", they first ask themselves what they could make to fulfill customers' needs, and how they could convey the beauty of silver. This question has given rise to silver products in a variety of forms that express beauty and convey appeal after being used for a long period. The company boasts an extensive array of mainstay products, from silver items for Japan's Imperial Household Agency, to gold and silver Japanese and Western tableware, *netsuke* (a clip used for hanging a small container from *kimono* belts known as *obi*), baby birth items, small accessories, earpicks, toothpicks and medals, while their wide range of customers includes government agencies and general enterprises. Moreover, taking advantage of their strength of being completely integrated from manufacturing to sales thanks to having a retail store and a regional silver manufacturer as group companies, they are continuing to offer silver products that are suitable for the times.



Producing gold and silver by unchanging techniques passed down over 90 years

Mori Ginki Seisakusho is a long-established company that produces Tokyo Silverware, one of the traditional crafts representing Japan. The characteristics of Tokyo Silverware lie in the elegant appearance produced by harmonizing the unique radiance of silver with traditional patterns created by superb craftsmanship. Japan has a long history of using silverware, dating back to the Heian period. During the middle of the Edo period (from the mid-17th century to the mid-18th century), Edo (present-day Tokyo) became the world's most populous city, and silverworking craftsmen as well as producers of new metallic ornaments known as *kinkoshi* emerged. The wide range of articles that these metalworkers produced marked the beginning of Tokyo Silverware. Tokyo Silverware was exhibited at the Exposition Universelle (International Exposition), the second world fair held in Paris in 1867, which soon gave it a global reputation.

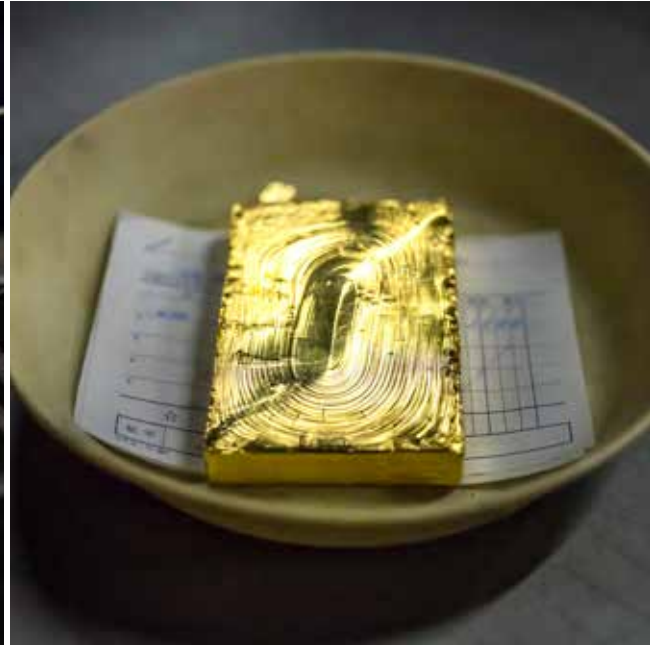
The history of Mori Ginki Seisakusho began with the current president, third generation Masaru Mori's father, Zennosuke Mori. Zennosuke studied as an apprentice under Katsunosuke Tajima, who was known as a master artisan in Ginza, before branching out on his own in 1927 as a tankinshi, an artisan who hammers silver with a mallet to raise it into vessels. The company was handed down as a family business, and now Masaru's nephew, Kiyoshi, is next in line. Kiyoshi has grown up in an environment of craftsmanship, surrounded by silver products well before he could remember. He studied architecture during his school days, and after becoming passionate about snowboarding he spent much time in his twenties practicing this hobby in Niigata and Nagano, and also lived abroad. While staying in Canada from 2005 to 2006, he encountered indigenous art, and was impressed that Canadians were able to accept the transformation of tradition and culture into art. After returning to Japan, he worked for an advertising agency, yet the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011 prompted him to take a deeper look at his life. Kiyoshi decided to join Mori Ginki Seisakusho Co., Ltd. to connect with his roots and produce something tangible with his own hands. Tomohisa Kimura is another young craftsman working at Mori Ginki Seisakusho. Born and raised in Honjo City, Saitama Prefecture, Kimura was fascinated by Indian jewelry from the time he was in high school, which led him to become interested in the manufacturing process of precious metals. After graduating from high school, he entered Yamawaki Design Art School and began studying jewelry. He became absorbed in traditional techniques and joined Mori Ginki Seisakusho with an intent to pursue traditional crafts.



Mori Ginki Seisakusho's workshop was established in Tokyo's Taito Ward, and is currently home to 25 employees. Equipment necessary for silver production such as the machine for *nobe* (the work of extending the plate-shaped silver with a roll) and the caldron that dissolves silver have been carefully maintained for many years and are still being used even now.

As evidenced by the company's catchphrase of "*from silver toothpicks to gold baths*", Mori Ginki Seisakusho produces and sells a wide lineup of silver products at an equally wide spectrum of prices. The company's mainstay products range from silver products for Japan's Imperial Household Agency, to gold and silver Japanese and Western tableware, *netsuke* (a clip used for hanging a small container from *kimono* belts known as *obi*), baby birth items, small accessories, earpicks, toothpicks and medals, while their broad base of customers includes the Imperial Household Agency, public institutions, shrines, temples and private companies, and continues to expand further. The company develops silver products in a variety of forms that convey beauty after being used over many years.





The beauty of silverware expressed through unique products derived from qualified techniques and aftercare

Silver products are often regarded as luxury items, and sales are significantly affected by economic conditions. Describing the financial crises Mori Ginki Seisakusho has already experienced over its history, Kiyoshi had the following to say. "The company has already faced numerous financial crises such as the soaring cost of silver as a raw material, as well as the oil shock and the Lehman Shock. When the economy was good we could sell whatever we produced, but now in the present which is overflowing with material goods, this is not the case."

Given that silver is not a daily necessity, it tends to only be purchased by the few who can afford it. In actuality, however, silver products are quality items that last long when properly cared for, and Mori hopes that customers will use their products regularly for many years. That is why the company seeks to "provide customers with style and pleasure," and continues to create products after asking what they can make that their customers will want to use, and how they can convey the warmth of silver.

One of the properties of silver is that it becomes softer as its purity rises, so depending on the application, products are produced using different amounts of silver. For example, this can range from a purity of 92.5% for silver used in objects such as chopsticks and earpicks that require durability, to products with 99.9% purity for use in utensils such as teapots and kettles.

Since the company has opportunities to meet customers directly such as at department store events, they actively seek feedback about trends and the kind of products that customers want. By increasing this sort of contact with customers, Mori Ginki Seisakusho is continuing to make silver products that are the most suitable for present-day lifestyles.

Mori Ginki Seisakusho's style is to offer silver products in which a deep character develops after being used for a long time, and they have a very interesting concept regarding the aging of silver. Just as with leather goods, a type of silver known as oxidized silver is characterized by a change in the silver color that comes with the passage of time. Regular metals oxidize due to a chemical reaction with sulfur contained in oxygen. By making use of this, the naturally darkening surface of silver could become even more intriguing if you take care of the product regularly, which makes it valuable as time goes by.





There are eight steps in the silver production process, which are listed as follows.

1. The silver nugget or ingot is melted in a furnace and made into a plate shape.
2. The plate of silver is stretched out and made thinner with a roll until it reaches the required thickness, in a process called *nobe*.
3. In a process known as *jigane-tori*, the corners are cut with metal-cutting scissors and the rolled-up silver is made into a round shape.
4. The silver is drawn by hitting with a hammer. Doing this makes it become hard (work hardening).
5. A process known as annealing is used to soften the silver by heating it with a gas burner or similar heat source.
6. (The shape is made by repeating step 4 and 5.)
7. The interior is ground to a finish with a grindstone and paulownia charcoal.
8. A buffing machine consisting of a rotating round bundle of cloth is used to polish the inner and outer sides until they shine.
9. The process is complete.

Currently, 25 craftsmen ranging in ages from their twenties to sixties work at Mori Ginki, and one of the craftsmen in charge of the *nobe* process remarked about the difficulty of making silverware. "I am currently in charge of work called *nobe*, where silver in plate form is stretched with a roll until it becomes the necessary thickness. At a glance it might seem like rather dull work, but bringing out the desired thickness requires both a degree of intuition as well as experience. There's much more than meets the eye and it's a time-consuming process to master."

The fact that the average age of the craftsmen is rising coupled with a shortage of workers to carry on in the next era are indeed issues for Mori Ginki, but this is a problem the entire industry of traditional crafts is facing, not just manufacturers who produce final products. Many companies who struggle with this problem are forced to go out of business. It's often the case with Tokyo Silverware that each process is handled by a different workshop, so one workshop that collapses could bring an end to silver production. That is why Kimura says, "I want us to do our best as a company that makes final products." Also, division of labor means that peers in the industry can also become customers, and the degree of quality and perfection in a product will soon be discovered, so Mori Ginki cannot afford to cut corners when making their products. This is also precisely what makes the work feel extremely rewarding when craftsmen produce items that meets their own high standards of quality.





Complete integration from manufacturing to sales together with group companies

One of the strengths of Mori Ginki Seisakusho is its complete integration from manufacturing to sales, thanks to counting a retail store and a regional silver manufacturer as group companies. Kiyoshi, who decided to join the Mori Ginki Seisakusho family business after the Tohoku earthquake in 2011, said that “I sensed a gap in that the silverware and traditional handicrafts with which I had known about since my childhood were actually quite unfamiliar to typical consumers. Rather than only making products under subcontract work, I would like us to take pride as a producer and transform into a comprehensive manufacturer of silver products that improve people's lives.

Kiyoshi reflects on his experience of working at an advertising agency and notes that “The agency business for this industry will be tougher in the future.” The silverware’s pricing changes since it is directly affected by market fluctuations in the price of the material. The connection between retailer and consumer also became much closer since Internet has widely spread.

However, since Mori Ginki Seisakusho is affiliated with a local silver manufacturer called Mori Gin which purchases gold, silver and other metals, Mori Ginki Seisakusho can stably source its materials from this partner. In addition, it also has its own retail shop in Asakuska, a neighboring location that sells their products. This makes it possible for family-owned companies to be completely integrated in the process from purchasing to sales without having to go through a distributor, and by selling directly they can maintain their direct relationships with their customers. That in turn provides the company with a solid foundation to withstand price fluctuations. This is a significant advantage that Mori Ginki Seisakusho has cultivated over its history.

One of the company’s representative works is a sterling silver large *sake* cup, a product that is handmade by a craftsman using *tankin* (a technique of shaping metal with a hammer) with a single silver sheet. Thanks to the properties of silver, one can enjoy the delicious taste of the *sake* without losing any of its flavor, and when not in use the cup serves as a beautiful interior ornament with a brilliant shine.



Mori Ginki Seisakusho's brilliant future, with expanding exports to Asia

The majority of Mori Ginki Seisakusho's business involves products for work undertaken with government agencies and general companies, but these days it is also working on products for overseas customers and ambitiously collaborating with outside designers and artists.

The number of Chinese customers has recently been increasing along with the rise in tourists visiting Japan. These customers have shown a strong interest in sterling silver teapots, owing to Chinese culture and customs. There has been a custom in China since long ago of serving tea to guests that visit one's home. Such social occasions offer the host a chance to take pride in displaying their wealth, which makes Mori Ginki Silverware's original silver teapot the perfect item for such an occasion. In this way, the company is creating products suited to the cultures of different countries, and is also actively engaged in producing original goods through collaboration with the artists and designers.

To provide a recent example, the company collaborated with product designer Hidefumi Yamaguchi to produce "Gyokuhai Nagare", a *guinomi* (sake cup). When *sake* is put inside the *guinomi*, the edges of the cup are reflected on the bottom due to the refraction of light, making it seem as though a three-dimensional precious stone is floating inside. Gyokuhai Nagare is distinguished by a striped hammered pattern and a tall stand (a circular ring into which the bottom of the vessel rests), and is a piece thoroughly designed with drinking sake in mind.

Silverware and traditional handicraft items are no longer familiar to most people today. Mori Ginki Seisakusho Co., Ltd., which once primarily handled subcontract work, is taking pride in its ability to be a creator and is transforming into a manufacturer that makes excellent products. As Mori Ginki Seisakusho accelerates efforts to expand overseas and develop new silver works, there are high expectations for its future prospects.