

Ogura Sengei

Capturing the colorful beauty relying in craftsmen's life and imagination through hand-paint dye

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Using a more flexible approach for the global expansion of the world of richly colorful Tokyo hand-painted Tegaki Yuzen.

Tokyo *Tegaki* (or “handpainted”) Yuzen, one of the top three forms of Yuzen in Japan, symbolizes the history of the development carried out amidst the merchant culture in Edo, and is characterized by its serenely unconventional, openminded expression. In the over 80 years since the establishment of the studio of Ogura Sengei in Takadanobaba, it has experienced World War II and the collapse of Japan’s bubble economy. With the passing of time it has faithfully maintained all the processes of its traditional method while always exploring new forms of expression in Yuzen. The secret is the pure passion for beauty acquired through daily life and travel by Teiyu and Takashi Ogura, father and son who respectively represent the second and third generations of Ogura Sengei – passion that is honestly incorporated into their Yuzen designs. Their painted *kimono* designs include incorporation of elegant arabesque patterns that will make you momentarily forget they are western motifs evoking the colors and appearance of seeds and leaves of grape vineyards seen on their travels to Europe, and sketches of arabesque patterns they saw in places such as Christian churches. This modern, flexible approach that goes beyond being categorized as Japan and Tokyo is a driving force drawing people to the haute couture appeal of wearing *kimono* in modern Japan where it has become mainstream to rent *kimono*. At the same time, Ogura Sengei also cites the factor of capturing the hearts of many customers in foreign markets where they have not expanded yet. The Yuzen’s beauty is expressed through thorough, careful technicality and processes, including repeating the dyeing process so that the designed colors shine brightly under any light. The work of the studio creates a one-on-one relationship between the maker and the wearer because it is haute couture, and the studio’s opportunities to deliver its designs and quality to many customers are increasing through collaborations with fashion brands and others in recent years. Thus, it can be said that the studio’s work will probably acquire many more fans even outside Japan.



The possibilities of Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen, which embodies free and serene *iki* aesthetics

Yuzen is a method for dyeing designs on cloth, and is Japan's most representative dyeing technique. Unlike *Kata Yuzen* which uses stencils for dyeing, Tegaki Yuzen is a method involving drawing a design on plain fabric, applying resist paste called *itome*, then hand-painting colors in brushes all done by handcraft. In addition to *kimono* themselves, this method can also be applied for *kimono obi* and *fukusa* (accessory case used when wearing a *kimono*).

Generally the "top three Yuzen" in Japan are said to be Kyo Yuzen based in Kyoto, Kaga Yuzen developed in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, and Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen. Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen is said to have begun between the mid to late Edo period when the *daimyo*, or feudal lords brought a folding fan artist from Kyoto to Edo. The tasteful yet richly colorful patterns created by the artist were known as Yuzen *moyo* (patterns) and were characterized by their curved, simplified plants, animals, vessels, scenery, and traditional patterns. This is why Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen is known for having a high degree of freedom in comparison to other Yuzen.

In the early days, the dyeing studios were located in Nihonbashi and Ningyocho, and today the traces of this era can be found in the many venerable wholesale stores in the area. In the early 20th century, production of kimono began to increase along with new artisans, and dyeing studios increased in the area of Takadanobaba where the Myojoji River and the Kanda River met in order to carry out Yuzen-*nagashi* (or *mizumoto*, work involving washing away excess dye with water). This is the reason this area still has many dyeing artisans. Ogura Sengei is one of the studios created about 80 years ago in that era. Although it was established in a location right in front of the Kanda River, the studio was destroyed by a fire during World War II and was subsequently moved to its present location.

The founder of Ogura Sengei was born in Mie Prefecture, but his parents died while he was still an infant. His care was entrusted to a dyeing artisan in Tokyo, and he later established the business through inheriting his father's occupation. Currently, Takashi, who was born in 1976, represents the third generation and endeavors to create works daily with Teiyu, representing the second generation, and two apprentices in their twenties.



Japan has changed since the times when importance was placed on the value of handmade items and wearing *kimono* to important ceremonial occasions by families. In modern times, the rental *kimono*, mass-produced at much lower cost sometimes using inkjet printers, has been occupying an increasing share of the market. Items that are stipulated to be Yuzen due to their pattern are naturally entering the market, and the original definition of Yuzen is weakening. In addition, because customs for marriage ceremonies in particular and other events have become laxer, motivation for buying a one-of-a-kind *kimono* is generally lowering.

The industry surrounding Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen is also changing, spurring these movements. In the first half of the 1990s until the burst of the economic bubble, work by dyeing artisans was created through wholesale store business. But after the bubble burst, it could take several years before receiving work by way of a wholesale store. Although Ogura Sengei had trouble with management aspects, it persevered through the periods for the works that were ordered and continued its independent works, and exerted efforts such as holding a solo exhibition in Ginza. The exhibition was a success, which led Ogura Sengei to create direct connections with individuals and department store customers. Even today, at a time when we have fewer and fewer opportunities to see genuine Tegaki Yuzen, Ogura Sengei is still selective about its high-quality hand-made creations, and is playing a part in the future development of the industry.

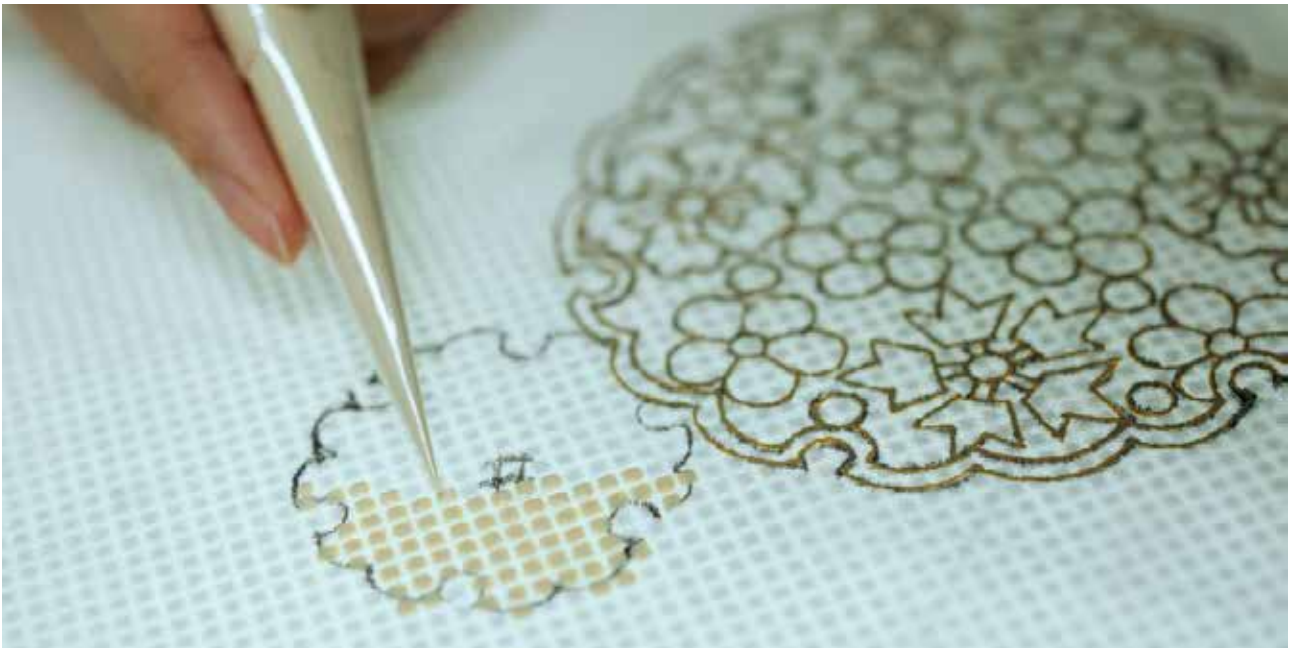
Takashi originally did not intend to continue his father's occupation, and was in charge of designing sportswear and gear for a maker of snowboarding-related products. However, his experiences abroad enflamed his mind, and they made him what he is today.

"The foreign people I met overseas told me about many of the charms of their own country, but I could not say anything. I will always remember when my host family told me, 'Have confidence in yourself because your family makes *kimono* that are unique to Japan.' At the time, my father was making *kimono* with silver arabesque designs and highly regarded the classic techniques and designs of Kyo Yuzen and Kaga Yuzen. I was moved by the modern designs and was surprised that such designs were good. I think Kyo Yuzen embodies the idea of *miyabi*, or elegant aesthetic of Japanese aristocratic culture, while Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen embodies the chic *iki* aesthetic developed by merchant culture." (Takashi)

Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen has few restrictions compared to other forms of Yuzen and is characterized by its freedom of expression. The reason this approach was created was because many artisans begin Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen after learning other forms of Yuzen with many restraints. Takashi began working on this starting with the designs of Teiyu. After quitting his job at the snowboarding products maker, he became an apprentice at age 28. It is now his 13th year as an artisan, and while he is rather young in the industry, he always clinches high results in dyeing skill competitions, and in 2018 he was certified as a traditional artisan of Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

When questioned by European people involved in production about the necessity of hand-painted designs, Takashi answers that it is about awareness of how to inherit a culture that will surely decline in future. Supporting this answer is the collaboration project with the brands participating in the Tokyo Collection. Because existing yuzen designs for *obis* for *kimono* have been digitized and used as textile designs, they can be compared with *kimono* and the price range has become much more wallet-friendly. Takashi has taken this as an opportunity and feels the possibilities of "selling designs and making designs other than for *kimono*." Ogura Sengei is breathing new life into designs in media besides *kimono*, the spread of its products is causing differentiation, and the future of its Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen is expanding.





Pursuing highly qualified beauty of design and colors

When apprenticing, the first year involves earnestly and repeatedly conducting itome work: drawing resist paste (*itome-nori*) on the design, squeezing out thin lined paste from funnel-shaped paper cylinder. It is necessary to spend a long time training to be able to freely draw so that the seams are not discernable and with an even slenderness. This work continues for many months, which enables mastery of completely different nuances of the created patterns through the subtle lines of the finished work.

The next process is *yuzen-sashi*, the work of adding colors. The dyes are always restrained at about 80 colors, which create unique colors for each product. Then the steaming process is conducted to fix color to silk fabric. Because there are some color changes according to the season and weather, *yuzen-sashi* is the most vital process. After this, *fuse-nori-oki* and *hikizome* (coloring the areas besides the pattern) are conducted, and then *mushi* and *mizumoto* (the processes of steaming with water and washing away excess dye) are performed through an order placed with a neighboring studio. Then the finishing touches are done at Ogura Sengei.

There are no processes that stand out among all. If the sketch is crudely drawn, the *itome* will be off and the dyes will not hold well, creating a domino effect. However, if giving one example of how they pursue their art of color, when dyeing dark colors during *hikizome* process, the work is repeated several times so the Yuzen dye fully permeates inside the fabric. There are many buildings lit with LED lights in modern times which makes fabric look very bright, so dyeing only once would make them look faded. Materials that are dyed thoroughly have only very small differences in the colors on the inside and outside, and this subtle difference determines the quality of the product.





Relationship between craftsmen and customers / master and apprentice through sharing beauty

When the *mushi* and *mizumoto* processes are conducted for Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen, the results can be divided into when the colors appear as expected, or not. The result is caused either way due to small weather changes or simply by the artisan's experience. The moment when colors appear exactly as expected is when artisans feel the worth of their work.

Takashi says that another major aspect that makes artisans feel the worth of what they are doing is the closer relationships with customers due to changes to business conditions since the bubble economy.

"Compared to the time when retail was entrusted to wholesale stores, being able to see our customers face to face holds a great meaning to us. Now we can clearly see what kinds of *kimono* we should make that would fit various customers. Also, although originally we were in the position to say, 'Thank you for buying our products,' conversely we had few opportunities to receive gifts from distant customers showing their thankfulness toward our products. I feel grateful to be involved into this business when there is a heartfelt event like this happening beyond the 'seller-customer' relationship, receiving their reaction directly. I also feel the responsibility for carefully crafting each item and offering them to our customers." (Takashi)

It is possible to say that handmade items have the power to strengthen relationships between people. Although Ogura Sengei has no experience developing products for foreign customers, they come to tour the Ogura studio via an introduction from hotels. It goes without saying that many people are surprised at the detail of Ogura's work of color and drawing carefully delivered. This is not just limited to foreign tourists. Takashi also talks he wants to continue studio visit opportunities to many people as possible so they could understand why their products are valuable.

The relationship with the Oguras and their apprentices hold a hint to their craftwork. Although the lack of successors is a topic that should be solved for the industry due to economic recession, the two apprentices at Ogura Sengei are both young people with about three years of experience. One of them was accepted to the studio because of her similar sensibility for color usage as Takashi and Teiyu.

"For example, even if we just use purple as a single color, we deal with subtle nuance difference like 'red purple' or 'blue purple'. It is important to share color sensibilities and balance with our coworkers." (Takashi)

"I have always been interested in traditional culture such as the tea ceremony and craftsmanship dedicated to making things by hand. When I saw Ogura's work at the Yuzen competition, I was captivated by their usage of color and design sensibility. Compared to traditional Kyo Yuzen which has division labor system, I think Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen allows the artisan to better express personal sensibility because he or she works on the whole process on their own." (Ms. Yoshida, artisan at Ogura Sengei)

Ogura Sengei's work is not only about skills and techniques, but the aesthetic sense hidden behind it.



The future open to Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen:
Reversing the stereotype into art with charm and humor

The average cost for an *obi* is 200,000 yen, while for a *kimono* is 400,000 yen. If they did not cost this much, the prices would not match the amount of labor artisans put into work, such as about 40 hours for just the design drawing. Therefore, comparatively wealthy customers occupy the majority of customers. However, through developing Takashi's idea of "selling designs of Yuzen", the time will soon come when the serene beauty of Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen will spread to wider customer base. His future activities are worth keeping an eye of.

The idea of "selling design of Yuzen" holds potential, seeing the fact Takashi and Teiyu adapts their sketches from their travels and daily life into their pattern drawing. Takashi admires William Morris, known as the father of modern design, who propelled the Arts and Crafts Movement that aimed to fuse daily life and the arts in the United Kingdom in the mid-1800s. If his schedule permits, he travels abroad and sketches church tapestries, animals, plants, and uses them for his *kimono* and *obi* designs when he returns home.

Ogura Sengei's works inspired by Europe include semi-formal *kimono* with a grape arabesque design that took three months to make, and *kimono* with abstract olive pits and leaves patterns. The beauty seen in the design is explained without reasons, revealing why Ogura Sengei has fans all over Japan.

"I think my creative process does not differ much from how western culture reached Japan through the Silk Road in ancient times. Of course, traditional classics are easier to use on such occasions. But having unique designs may result for someone to cherish the piece for a lifetime." (Takashi)





The design by Teiyu, illustrating the Kanda Myojin Festival in the Edo period is also interesting. If you look closely, the faces of each merchants holding character, reversing the “traditional craft” stereotype into art with charm and humor. This truly embodies the *iki* aesthetics, which Tokyo Tegaki Yuzen does also. This creation is a crossover of the modern-day Kanda Myojin Festival that Teiyu has actually witnessed, meeting his imagination of that in Edo period. It was created as a black formal *kimono* design to be worn by the parents of the bride and groom at a marriage ceremony. The design holds great impact when you look at it from distance, and invites curiosity as you draw closer and see detailed expression.

“In the past, it was a matter of course that parents wore black formal *kimono*. Before renting *kimono* became mainstream and when the wholesale store industry was prosperous, we always made black formal *kimono*. They had to maintain a good personal appearance toward the matchmaker as manner. Nowadays consideration is given to the other person’s home, and there is a tendency to choose *kimono* based on the price. We need new ideas in this modern age to have people choose *kimono* based on the beauty of their designs.” (Takashi)

“There are not many artisans who can draw such small facial expressions. I made it so that people would want to get a closer look at the details. I hope people would value and cherish items for a lifetime, this is what we could realize through handmade craftsmanship.” (Teiyu)

There is also beautiful detail made through gold thread embroidery applied by an outside artisan. On this embroidered part, gold leaf is applied at Ogura’s studio. This technique, which is also used for folding screens and Japanese paintings, requires about two weeks of work. While respecting traditional techniques and designs, Takashi and Teiyu Ogura are pioneering new forms of expression that will pave the way to the future.