

# Somekobo Tsukuruya

Making *kimonos* as an everyday wardrobe item

## Information

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A *Yuzen* craftsman creating exquisite designs that reflect a deep understanding of what the customer wants

Somekobo Tsukuruya specializes in *Tegaki* (handpainted) *Yuzen*, one of Japan's traditional dyeing crafts for painting patterns of plants and landscapes onto cloth using a resist paste to prevent the colors from mixing. Unlike *Kata Yuzen* that uses stencils of carved washi paper for the dyeing process, each step in *Tegaki Yuzen* is done by hand; so it's possible to create a truly one-of-a-kind *kimono* that is unique in the world. Tokyo *Tegaki Yuzen* is one of the three central schools of *Yuzen*, along with *Kyo Yuzen* and *Kaga Yuzen*. This particular form of dyeing has its roots in the merchant class culture of the Edo period. Noted for its chic yet restrained use of color, and the freehand style of Tokyo *Tegaki Yuzen* allows the craftsmen to directly express themselves in the designs.

After working at a publishing company for several years, Makiko Kuwabara, the owner and the manager of Tsukuruya decided to follow the path of learning *Yuzen*. She underwent seven years of training before she was able to become an independent craftsman in 2009. Kuwabara now works alone from her studio at Sakura city in Chiba prefecture; it's just her completing all the processes to create a *Yuzen* item. This allows her to talk to her customers about what they really want, so she can create a bespoke item for them. Kuwabara is in charge of all aspects of creating a *Yuzen* item – even delivering it herself to the customer. She excels in providing her customers with detailed, personalized and courteous service from start to finish. Kuwabara wears a *kimono* on a daily basis for many hours, so she's developed an innate sense for coordinating the elements of a *kimono*, including the *obi* (sash) and other accessories. This enables her to create designs that are notable for their versatility in styling a complete *kimono* outfit.

Tsukuruya's main customer group are women, and as Kuwabara and her customers generally age at the same pace, she's able to present them with designs and patterns to suit their particular stage in life. This sense of both the craftsman and customer sharing the enchantment of *Tegaki Yuzen kimono* is another Tsukuruya's strength.



## Transformation from an office lady to a *yuzen* craftsman

*Yuzen* dyeing is one of Japan's signature dyeing techniques that is applied on *kimonos* and other items. *Kimonos* can roughly be grouped into two types: dyed (*somé*) *kimonos* made from white cloth dyed in various colours and patterns, and woven (*ori*) *kimonos* made from cloth woven using dyed threads. Although tie-dyeing (*shiborizomé*) and embroidery (*shishu*) have been the main techniques used to create patterns on *kimonos*, the emergence of *yuzen* has created a new approach that uses a resist paste to stop the colors from mixing as the craftsman draws patterns of plants, landscapes and other scenery onto the cloth.

*Yuzen* dyeing itself has two main methods. *Kata Yuzen* uses stencils of carved washi paper for the dyeing process, which makes it suitable for use in mass production. In *Tegaki Yuzen* though, which is the approach used at Tsukuruya, artisans hand draw and dye patterns onto each piece of cloth. This laborious and time-consuming technique of hand drawing produces truly unique and original *kimonos*.

There are three central schools of *Yuzen* originating from different regions in Japan. *Kyo Yuzen* is noted for its use of distinctive and vivid colors favored by Kyoto's nobility, while *Kaga Yuzen* from Ishikawa prefecture is characterized by its graphic designs of plants and flowers. Then there is Tokyo (or *Edo Yuzen*) with its chic use of color and freehand style that allows the craftsmen to directly express their unique sense in the designs. Dubbed the Top Three *Yuzen*, each of these three styles of *Yuzen* are intricately connected with their region of origin. Among the many artisans who have chosen to follow the path of *Yuzen* in the footsteps of their ancestors, Kuwabara is the first generation artist of the Tsukuruya studio she founded. So one could say Tsukuruya is Kuwabara's original brand of *Tegaki Yuzen*.

Kuwabara grew up in the lush natural environment of Sado Island, which locates in Japan Sea with a population of around 60,000. Having earnestly studied woodblock prints and Japanese calligraphy since a young age, she moved to Tokyo as a university student to major in Japanese calligraphy at the Faculty of Education of Tokyo Gakugei University. After graduating in 1997, Kuwabara worked at a publishing company for five years, where she edited textbooks and other publications. It was around then she started to learn how to wear a *kimono*, which led to her developing an interest in the process of making a *kimono*. Captivated by this essential item in any Japanese woman's wardrobe, Kuwabara reflects on that time. "I had started learning how to dress myself in a *kimono*, and I liked wearing it as well. This also got me interested in *kimono* itself as a craft which motivated myself to be involved in making it as well."

The timing was also right for Kuwabara to quit her job at the publishing company and embark on the path of studying *Yuzen*. Many of Japanese traditional crafts companies, including *Tegaki Yuzen*, are family run businesses that have been passed down through generations; so it took some time for Kuwabara to make the decision to start studying this technique on her own. Fortunately, she was able to find a studio willing to take her on as an apprentice, and she learnt the craft under the tutelage of Minoru and Tamae Ueda. As the only apprentice there, Kuwabara spent seven years at the studio studying the fundamentals of *Tegaki Yuzen*, but also being busy with other daily chores from early morning to midnight. She reminisces about that precious period as being a kind of "life training" for her.



Kuwabara's training started with learning how to trace the master's sketches and designs in pencil in order to copy their lines. Even studying a single pattern can be a challenge due to the various drawing styles and forms used by each *Yuzen* school; but this was also how she was able to learn the subtleties of *Yuzen*. By 2009 Kuwabara had acquired enough skills to work independently as a *Yuzen* craftsman, and in 2010 she set up her combined home and studio Tsukuruya in Sakura City, Chiba prefecture (in the outskirts of Tokyo).



In her studio she has various sketches and designs and a temple, which is an adjustable stretcher used to keep the cloth stretched flat during various processes such as *shinshi* (stretching out the cloth on tenterhooks), *tegakizome* and *hikizome* (hand and brush dyeing), and *ji-ire* (basecoat application). It has sharp prongs at each end to attach the cloth onto. She uses an Aobana-eki colorant (obtained from the petals of the tsuyukasa blue dayflower) on the cloth to draw rough sketches; the color disappears with water, so it's easy to make corrections or adjustments to the sketches. Kuwabara also has an assortment of brushes for painting on the colors, and *itome nori*, an amber-colored resist paste which stops the *yuzen* dyes from mixing into each other. She fills the *itome nori* into a cone, and carefully squeezes it out as she closely follows the contour lines of the sketched patterns. Her other tools include cones for *itome nori*, and color samples for checking combinations and hues of various colors. Kuwabara uses silk as her base cloth, although the silk itself comes in various patterns and weaves; so she buys and sorts the silk according to the type of pattern or *kimono* she wants to create.

One of the issues facing all traditional crafts in Japan is a declining demand for the finished products, and the subsequent dwindling number of associated industries and artisans that are carrying on these traditional techniques and creating the required tools. For instance, there are fewer people making base materials, such as brushes, base fabric, the resist paste used in the *ji-ire* (basecoat application) and *fuse nori-oki* (resist paste application) processes; this impact is clearly visible in the industry.

Kuwabara does everything on her own. She drafts the *yuzen* design and refines it through ongoing discussions with the customer, so she can check if it is what they want; she even delivers the finished product to the customer herself. Kuwabara prefers to sell her *yuzen* items at pop-up events at department stores and other retail and wholesale outlets.

Kuwabara is also focused on broadening the range of her work. She has started teaching *yuzen* and how to wear a *kimono* in Tokyo city and Chiba prefecture, and recently she has been taking part in traditional craft exhibitions including local town revitalization events.



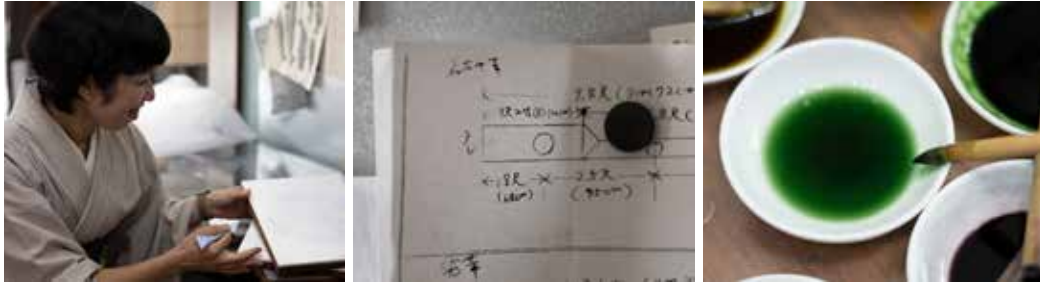
## Handcraft creation inspired from nature and seasonal features

Kuwabara has been working alone ever since she started Tsukuruya. This means she does everything by herself – from creating *yuzen* items to selling them, running workshops and completing various other tasks. *Tegaki yuzen* is an extremely labor-intensive and time-consuming process in which everything is done by hand.

There are 14 steps in *tegaki yuzen*.

(The process order and number of times for each steps may vary depending on design)

1. Coming up with ideas and sketches of designs, and selecting the cloth to use.
2. Drawing the actual size patterns based on the designs.
3. Copying the patterns from full-scale drawing onto the actual cloth (using Aobana-eki colorant for the sketches).
4. Tracing the patterns on the cloth using resist paste. (*itome nori-oki*)
5. Fixing the paste on the cloth (*ji-ire*)
6. Mixing the dyes, and painting them onto the patterns. (*Irosashi = Yuzen*)
7. Steaming the cloth in high temperatures to fix the dyes (*mushi*)
8. Applying resist paste to the patterns to cover them (*fuse nori-oki*)
9. Paste *Funori* (Endocladaceae paste) and bean juice to fabric in order to make *ji-zome* process qualified (*second ji-ire*)
10. Dyeing the background (non-patterned sections) using a big brush (*ji-zome*)
11. Steaming the cloth again.
12. Washing the cloth to remove all of the resist paste (*mizumoto*)
13. Steaming the cloth to remove wrinkles from it, and then straightening and adjusting its width (*yunoshi*)
14. Finishing the cloth by correcting the colors, and decorating it with gold leaf/powder and/or embroidery and other embellishments.



Unlike *Kyo Yuzen* in which the work for each process is divided among different craftsmen, all processes in Tokyo *Tegaki Yuzen* - apart from *mizumoto* (washing off the resist paste and excess dye) and *yunoshi* - are done by one person.

When making *Yuzen*, the craftsman mixes the dye in hot water each time in order to make the right color, achieving the right balance of color ratio. The humidity, temperature and other factors on that day can subtly change the color, which means the color could only be made on that certain time. Also, the dye needs to be constantly adjusted to keep the right condition, so it is imperative the craftsman is completely focused on the work in order to use as much of the dye as required; the painting process really tests the skills of a *Yuzen* craftsman.





Creating exquisite designs, while also  
teaching *Yuzen* and how to wear a *kimono*

The *kimono* was one of the main clothes worn by Japanese people during the Edo period; however, the influx of Western culture since the Meiji period has made Western-style clothing the mainstream in Japan, and these days there are fewer opportunities to wear a *kimono*. Purchasing a good-quality *kimono* can be quite expensive, so many people regard it as something that will last a lifetime. But Kuwahara considers a *kimono* to be part of woman's daily wardrobe, just like Western clothes.

Kuwabara herself became interested in *Yuzen* when she started learning how to wear a *kimono* and had more opportunities to actually wear one. She believes it's important for her customers to also first become familiar with a *kimono* again by learning how to wear one. It's easy to think that wearing a *kimono* as ordinary clothes is too much for most people; but Kuwabara thinks *kimono* is ideal as fashionable daily wear, as it does not have much change in trend and style.

Kuwabara makes *kimonos* mostly for women. She often wears a *kimono* herself, so when she is making one it's easier for her to consider aspects such as coordinating the *kimono* and *obi*. For instance, if she is asked to make a *kimono* to match an *obi* a customer already has, she will suggest patterns and designs with colors and elements that will create a complementary balance between the *kimono* and *obi*. Kuwabara also keeps in constant contact with her customers to make sure she understands what they really want, and then creates a *kimono* that embodies their preferences and requests.



Introducing *Yuzen* to the world with a new range of items

Kuwabara draws inspiration for her creations from the nature surrounding her studio, which is also her home. So she gets ideas when she's gardening and from the greenery around her, especially the leaves of various trees. Her works are also strongly influenced by the changing seasons, as seen in the motifs of autumn leaves and other seasonal plants and flowers.

Although Kuwabara's work centers on making *kimonos*, *obis* and other related items, recently she has been receiving more requests to incorporate fresh ideas into her range. So she has been developing new methods and trying out innovative ideas for preserving and using the traditional techniques of *Yuzen*, and expanding her range to include tote bags, coin purses, scarves, and other daily fashion items. Kuwabara is hoping to launch this new line of *Tegaki Yuzen* items in the overseas market, where there is no custom of wearing a *kimono*. She is excited about elevating the techniques and expressions of *Tegaki Yuzen* into a Western context and marketing her items overseas; and so are we.