

Tahusa Senshoku

Murayama Oshima Tsumugi, an intriguing product woven from repetitive simple tasks and sincereness

Information

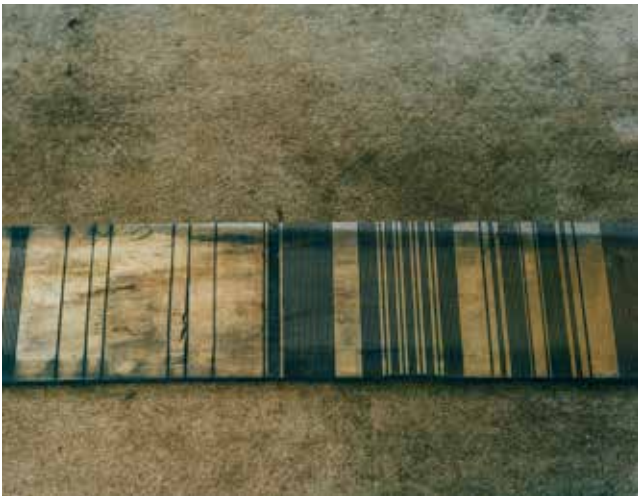
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The one and only “from craft to sales”
Murayama Oshima Tsumugi craftsman

As a weaver of Murayama Oshima Tsumugi silk, Tahusa Senshoku handles all aspects of the fabric at its studio in Musashi-Murayama City from scouring the raw silk to dyeing and weaving. Second generation Takahisa and third generation Takeaki craft this fabric at their studio. There are around 20 businesses registered as “traditional craftsmen” in the Murayama Textiles Cooperative Association, but in reality many only participate in demonstrations at educational programs organized by the association. Of the association members, only Tahusa actually sells clothing such as kimonos and accessories made with the textile throughout the country. The studio has continued on to the present as a result of its efforts to focus on maintaining quality and development of sales channels without wholesalers.

Maintaining quality specifically entails a dedication to “carefully building up each process”. With 40 individual processes in total required to produce Murayama Oshima Tsumugi silk, a mistake in any one process cannot be covered up elsewhere. The manual labor involved requires significant time and effort. Mastering the vast amount of simple tasks requires the perseverance to work closely with a master craftsmen for all 365 days of the year. Meanwhile, cultivating sales channels and acquiring customers is always a significant challenge. If requested, Tahusa will go anywhere in Japan, but while their fabric may be inexpensive among the world of *kimono*, it is certainly not cheap as clothing. It’s quite common for customers to directly express hesitation about making a purchase on the spot, and finding customers who will purchase the high-end product is another challenge. To that end, communicating the background of the product is essential in order to convey the attention to detail, effort and time that have gone into producing it, and gain the customer’s understanding. Beyond simply selling the product, how should Murayama Oshima craftsmen communicate this to the customer? The trial continues.



Not only producing but selling is
necessary for longlasting craftsmen

The “Oshima Tsumugi” most well-known in Japan is that from Kagoshima Prefecture’s Amami Oshima, and boasts a history of about 1,300 years. Meanwhile, the origin of Murayama Oshimagi Tsumugi, which shares similarities with Oshima Tsumugi in that the silk is hand-woven from silk and is yarn-dyed as well as being woven with both warp and weft patterns, dates back to the late 1800s. What is now Western Tokyo’s Musashi-Murayama City and Mizuho Town (in the Murayama region) were then a place of production for Murayama Kon-Gasuri textiles (cloth woven with cotton) made with indigo dyeing, and as research and development progressed in the early 1900s, the amount produced also increased. Around 1920, the *itajime* technique (a dyeing method in which yarn is sandwiched among boards of various design to express patterns) was introduced from Gunma Prefecture’s Isezaki, and around the same time the technique was merged with Sunagawa Futo-ori (silk fabric made from double cocoons) from the neighboring region of Tachikawa, and consequently a significant amount of silk fabrics using Kon-Gasuri came to be made.

The technique of *itajime* is still one aspect that differentiates Murayama Oshima from other dyed fabrics. Oshima Tsumugi is very time-consuming because it involves tightening up the *kasuri* pattern with machine, while Murayama Oshima does not require as much time. Therefore, Murayama Oshima was considered more casual and prices were much more affordable compared to the high-grade and high status Oshima Tsumugi silk fabric. Moreover, the fact that Murayama Oshima is light and comfortable, offering excellent breathability and warmth, made it very useful for regular wear, and women who wore *kimono* were certain to own at least one made of this fabric. Around the 1970s, it was designated as a Tokyo Metropolitan Intangible Folk Cultural Property, and was also registered as a traditional craft. This is how Murayama Oshima became established as a traditional craft industry.

However, as demand for wearing *kimono* in daily life decreased after the 1980s, the number of industries and craftsmen also decreased. There are many accessories and miscellaneous goods described as Murayama Oshima, but there are also instances where products are merely “Murayama Oshima style,” and it is difficult to ascertain whether or not they were produced as legitimate Murayama Oshima Tsumugi. Tahusa Senshoku, based in Tokyo’s Musashi-Murayama City, is “the only studio involved in the entire process of Murayama Oshima Tsumugi silk from production to sales”.

Tahusa Senshoku was founded in 1914 by Fusakichi Tashiro. Today, Takahisa and Takeaki work as a father-son operation overseeing everything from production at the studio to sales activities and exhibiting at special events. The midst of Japan’s economic bubble was an era in which production volume equaled sales amount at any craft site. However, as the economy headed into a downturn and demand changed, the wholesale business came unraveled and sales routes changed, and as products that lacked sales power would cease to exist, businesses were forced to develop their own sales channel. Many studios were unwilling to take such steps to preserve their crafts, opting instead to either give up their activities altogether and go out of business or change their business. Takahisa, who is now 67 years old, has witnessed the boom and bust of the industry from the early 1990s, and has been striving to respond to the times with consistent quality and a sales system.

For Takeaki, who was born in 1981 and was used to having a residence and studio on the same site since his childhood, it was quite natural to see several craftsmen besides his father and grandfather working at the studio. Initially he did not plan to take over the family business, and chose to study mechanical engineering at university. But since Tahusa was one of the few studios at the time working on Murayama Oshima Tsumugi from production to sales, Takeaki felt “Since we were the only ones left doing this entire process, I thought I’d better try this work. I’m fortunate in that my father’s efforts to cultivate sales channels provided a really solid foundation.” He started spending time in the studio from about the age of 20 when he was in university, and started to pursue the path of a craftsman in earnest after graduating. He’s now 37 years old, and counts 15 years working as a craftsman. Takeaki is continually busy, either working together with his father at the studio or traveling to exhibit at events held all over the country.



Not a single failure allowed, focusing on perfect quality

Murayama Oshima can be divided into a total of 40 steps, including thread preparation, dyeing the thread, fixing the color, winding warp and weft on a machine, and weaving. It is impossible to proceed to the next step without carefully completing each step in the process. For example, there is the *seikei* (warping) work in which thread is hand-wrapped in a specific order around the handloom's stakes to make 1,200 strands for the warp which must be prepared in advance on the wooden frame. As Takeaki quietly goes about his work, he sometimes pauses to jot down something on a piece of paper lying next to him.

"I did some calculations on this note. Usually woven fabric has 1200 warp threads. One slit on the frame should contain 2 threads, which means you need 600 warps, so you need 60 *aya* (unit of lease rod where the thread is entwined), I have to go back and forth 10 times. When I get done from the top stakes to the bottom stakes, I will be ready with threads necessary for three *tan* (about 40 meters) fabrics."

The *aya* must also be carefully made by hand. This is because the textile will not form if the threads overlap. Since there are times when the thread breaks partway through, it is necessary to visually check on the thread.

"Theoretically this work could be completed in just a week, but what's important is whether one can recover when a mistake occurs. One mistake means doing everything all over again. For example, work that could be done in about an hour without a hitch would end up taking five hours with a mistake. The difficulty in Murayama Oshima lies in the fact that you cannot proceed to the next step without thoroughly completing the current process, and a mistake in any one process cannot be covered up elsewhere. Everything must be done to perfection. Weaving involves countless repetition of simple tasks, as well as the world of mathematics. All of the processes are important precisely because they are based on simple tasks. The kind of person that is suitable to become a Murayama Oshima craftsman is someone that is very persistent." (Takeaki)

For them, work means not only making but also selling their goods. On this day, it had been two weeks since they had been in the studio as they had been out exhibiting at events in a different region of Japan until the day prior. The work carried out at the studio cannot really be assigned, and the person that happens to be available carries out the work that is necessary at a particular time.

"More than technical matters, I learned many intangible aspects about the business from my father such as that 'it's better to make something that can sell over something that won't sell' and having the right mental preparedness so as not to mess up. I still don't feel fully qualified. Even all of the elderly craftsmen will say that they are still learning over the course of their life, so it's hard to say when I'd feel that I was finally a proficient craftsman." (Takeaki)

While they pioneer sales channels in order to sell their products, customers who truly understand the culmination of their efforts to finish all the processes with 100% quality provide the greatest sense of satisfaction.



Preciseness and beauty coming from handwoven compared to machine-made

Takeaki said that he again realized the high quality of Japanese textiles after undergoing training in Italy last year. He felt that not only customers in Japan but also overseas customers could understand from the fabric's luster, stretch, and feel how such textiles are carefully made in a time-intensive process.

For example, even a little focus on something like "crossing 150 denier warp and 180 denier weft" results in a good textile with more sheen and depth than fabric woven with threads of equal thickness. When actually looking at their products up close, one can see the spread of a shadow that shows how the fabric is three-dimensional. The shine is different.

In order to help people understand that the product is made complete with this little touch, the father and son team are acutely aware that they all they can do is communicate about the commitment, effort, and time invested in the product, and persuade them to accept the high price because of the manual work required.

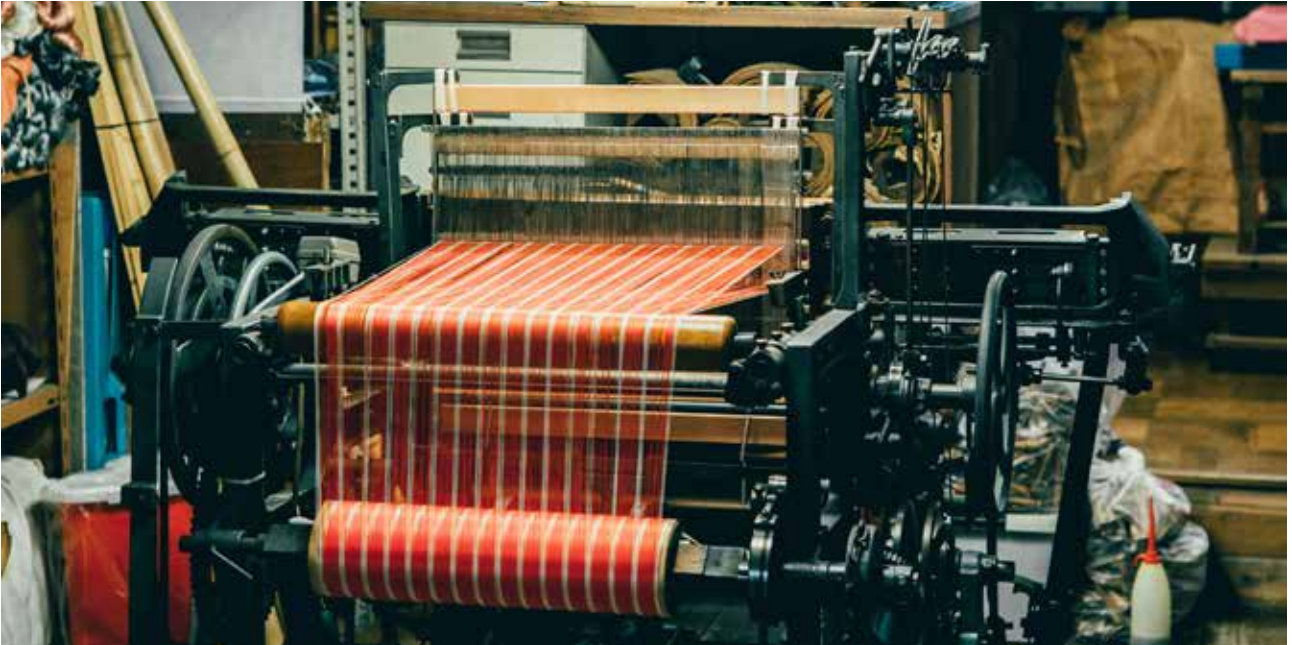
"Fabric woven by a machine is uniform and certainly beautiful but lacks appeal. Yet a consequence of trying to make handmade fabric as uniform as possible is that you can have areas that are slightly bunched up or take on their own uniqueness. I think that aspect (even as the producing side) is interesting. One doesn't get tired of something that took a great deal of time and effort to make. In other words, it becomes a "good fabric" offering a variety of appearances." (Takeaki)

For example, with Murayama Oshima Tsumugi in which the color of the thread is dyed before weaving, deciding how to combine the warp and the weft can yield an unlimited variation of color. That is why depending on the angle, a far deeper color can be produced compared to dyeing after the weaving. What they showed this time was a piece in which purple threads were mixed once every five times with the intention of making a black fabric. This has the effect of producing an even more intriguing color with depth that comes out in the black.

"I'm pleased when the weave is completed as I had intended it to be. Being able to determine what kind of threads to combine to produce a certain color is something that requires experience. You learn this not only by theory but also by cultivating a sense of what works." (Takeaki)

The difference with manual work is said to appear not only at the time of a product's completion but also in the process. For example, warping work can be done with machines, which means there should be no error in preparing the stakes, but the problem is what to do when a thread breaks. As a result, manual work is quicker and more reliable, and trusting the body's intuition gained through experience makes it possible to know the moment when a thread breaks and also to adjust the force so that it does not break.

Relying on the sense of each craftsman and consequently achieving better precision than a machine as well as a more attractive finish... what does this all mean for the industry as whole that is trying to shift to the power of machinery and digital technology? While there is no definite answer, the development of Tahusa's future activities will likely provide a hint.



How to match products with customers: Issues in expanding overseas

Currently, selling products is the biggest and most daunting challenge Tahusa faces among all its activities. It is also necessary to have an ability to perceive the style of *kimono* that are in fashion, and the purchasing motivation of customers who are going to open stores. Ideally buyers would regularly provide feedback about market demand, but how to seek out general customers is important under the present circumstances.

Basically all products are assumed to be unisex, but when looking at the proportion of men and women among *kimono* demand, older women make up the bulk of the customers. However, Murayama Oshima's cloth is on average about 15,000 yen to 20,000 yen per meter. Items that take time to make are expensive. For example, trying to procure everything from a man's *nagajuban* (one type of *kimono* undergarment) to footwear all at once would cost around 500,000 yen, and so there are many who hesitate because of the price or react negatively and then simply leave.

"When exhibiting in a department store where many people gather, we can obtain different reactions and tastes are divided. I'd like to think about that positively, but since there is a tendency to think negatively or become worried, few craftsmen are able to withstand the negative comments and keep on going. I think that many of the people who sell in department stores are very strong in the face of criticism." (Takeaki)

Not everything is positive, but that is what amplifies the joy of selling all the more. Thinking about even a small number of customers who share pleasant words provides inspiration to keep going.

"What really made me happy the other day was when this woman about 80 years of age said 'I've been looking for this' as soon as she came to the counter and purchased fabric right away. People like that who take such joy in finding our products really make our activity worthwhile." (Takeaki)

In addition, Takeaki says he feels there is possibility in the fabric being used not only as for *kimono* but also in other fields.

"Since it is a fabric that is not created just for kimono, we welcome those who want to purchase the cloth and use it for other purposes. There are actually even examples of it being used in *fusuma* (a sliding door used to partition off rooms in a traditional Japanese house)." (Takeaki)

However, it is a matter of how to overcome the high cost of around 20,000 yen per meter and the fact that it is not very suitable for water-resistant and light-resistant surfaces. Moreover, during his training in Italy, people pointed out the issue of how the narrow standards would be used in the European market. Since the *itajime* and other such tools are suited for a rather small Japanese body type, it will be necessary to modify the specs of all the tools in order to adjust them to sizes appropriate for the West.

Making use of its "smallness" may also make it the best material for haute couture's small-scale production not only in Japan but also in Europe and the United States. In addition, there is a high possibility that it will not necessarily be perceived as a disadvantage but rather serve as inspiration and a positive challenge for the creators, such as with development of everything from small accessories that make the best use of narrow widths to large interior designs.



Reference : <http://www.city.musashimurayama.lg.jp/kankou/tokusanbutsu/1005601.html>
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