

Isshu

Challenging traditional doll craft-makers with a contemporary style

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Adapting Kimekomi doll making to modern Japan

March 3rd is the day when Japanese households with young girls celebrate and pray for their future with "Hina dolls", or traditionally dressed emperor-empress dolls displayed upon a special step-altar. This traditional event which started in the 1700s, is shrinking its culture due to the change of social circumstance in Japan; declining birthrate, nuclear family increasement and housing matters. Still, companies like Isshu strives to keep the tradition with modern lifestyle essence. Producing and crafting Hina dolls through traditional Kimekomi dollmaking since 1948, they have innovated the industry with new materials and execution which led other doll makers' standards shift too. What glows their product is their aesthetic toward lifestyle and inspiration derived from the rich Japanese season features.



History and overview of Kimekomi doll making

Kimekomi doll is said to have begun as “Kamo Doll” around 1740 at Kyoto. A priest of Kamo Shrine put on a leftover fabric to a wooden carved doll after making a wooden box. Laterwards its name changed to “Kimekomi (=to tuck into a wood) Doll” and was introduced to Edo (present Tokyo) through a doll craftsman. It was designated as traditional craft in 1978.

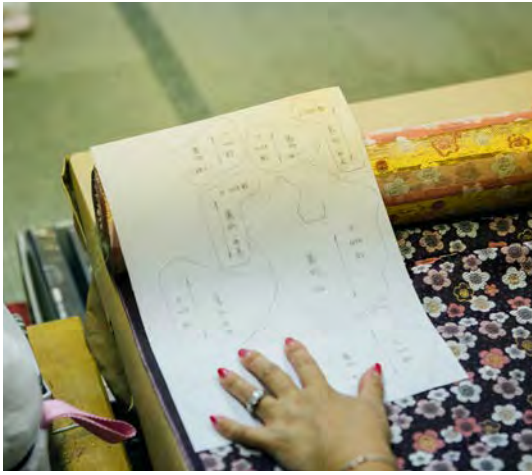
Usual Kimekomi dolls in Isshu’s production may use plaster for head, urethane for body, rayon, polyester and other nylon materials. To be marked as traditional craft, it must use 100% natural materials such as ceramic for head, *toso* (paulownia sawdust) hardened with paste for the body. After molded and dried, the body is carved to fit in costume fabric made from pure silk.

Isshu’s craftsmen produce the head and body parts. Kimekomi dolls are basically produced through divisional laboring among other companies, but head and body parts are each company’s original, which makes each product unique. Drawing the facial features, making crowns and hair, props and step-altar set are finished by vendors. Fabric are collected from all over Japan. These features are eventually put together inside Isshu to be completed as a product.

35,000 Isshu dolls are made per year, which is rather a big number in the industry. Some are sold under Isshu brand, some are wholesaled to other doll stores and retailers (Isshu original product and order products), at times there are personal orders.

[Traditional Kimekomi doll crafting process]

- 01_Original mold for the doll body is made from clay.
- 02_The mold is filled with *toso*, which will be dried after it is removed from the mold. Dried *toso* will be carefully carved with various range of files to remove uneven surfaces. To perfect its quality so the fabric will be tucked in precisely, this process will be repeated for 1-2 weeks.
- 03_*Gofun* paste (white chalk powder made from shells) and *nikawa* (an adhesive composed mostly of gelatin made with animal bone, hide and other ingredients) is coated on the body. This prevents the body color to show through the fabric as well as improving waterproofness.
- 04_Carve grooves on the body to tuck in fabric as doll costumes. At Isshu, they mainly order this process to outside suppliers with direction sheets and paper patterns. Those carved inside Isshu are usually marked as traditional craft, which they could only make up to 2 per day even with speed.
- 05_After fitting fabric to the body, head part is fitted. Isshu is in charge of the fitting phase only, while the doll’s facial features are drawn by outside craftsmen. Isshu gives overall direction of the expression nuance and coloring. Besides the traditional “*Kakime*” or eyes drawn by brush, some dolls insert eyeball parts from inside the plaster-made head, which may be usually seen in Western dolls. It does not take much time to adjust the head parts, but takes time drying after crowns and other head ornaments are applied.



[Production cycle]

- *After March 3rd, the Doll Festival Day: Start sample production for the company exhibition.
- *April: Planning & meetings for original products with outside suppliers
- *May: Exhibition season for step-altar / props making companies
- *June: Isshu's product sample exhibition for next year. During this time of the year, doll makers in Tokyo adjust schedule with each other so wholesalers and customers from all over Japan could thoroughly tour each company's exhibition.
- *August-September: Catalogue production for next year
- *November thru next February: Product shipping starts for next year's Doll Festival Day. Hina dolls are sold at retails from the end of the year. Shipping approaches its peak around December and continues until the end of February. Production proceeds restlessly throughout the year to meet the schedule.





Pioneer challenger in the traditional doll industry

Currently, Isshu is run by Yasuko Kimura and her daughter Aya, both entitled as Traditional Craftsman. Yasuko works as chief producer giving artistic direction and product development for the entire product lineup how to combine materials, and sometimes does the Kimekomi craft by herself. Aya also is a producer, mainly working on the altar set features. Yasuko's husband Kohei is the head of company who runs management. There are 35 employees who work part-time in the company studio, molding body parts, giving instructions to external companies, and finishing the product. The company is located in Adachi area, about 60km away from central Tokyo, where there are other companies in the same industry.

"Above Adachi, there is a town called Iwatsuki, Saitama where there are lots of doll parts craftsmen, and in the southern part there is Asakusabashi, where there are the wholesalers. My father moved in to this place because he wanted the company to be accessible to both people from either side." (Yasuko)

Yasuko's father, Bennosuke Kimura trained at Mataro Doll, which is said to be "the only authentic lore of Kimekomi dolls". After establishing his independent studio in 1948, he moved to Adachi in 1955. Yasuko started participating in her family business around 1972, when Isshu was incorporated. Simultaneously they started using urethane for the doll body, when using *toso* was an undeniable idea in the traditional craft.

It was the time of high economic growth, and baby boom pushed the Hina doll as "the more you make, the more you sell" product. To catch up to the speedy mass production, they were in necessity of a material that was steady enough for unexperienced doll craftsmen to handle. That was when a relative of Kimura family, who was working at a chemical material manufacturer, suggested them to use urethane as an alternative to *toso*.

"In the traditional way of making doll body, we use *toso* and finish it with *Gofun* paste to make it waterproof. But in the long run it is still a natural material, so it is damaged by insects and moisture. When it is displayed at department stores, the clothes will come off because of strong lighting. Urethane did not only solve these problems, but made it easier for doll craftsmen to tuck in stiff fabrics, and let us challenge delicate body forms we could never have realized with *toso*.

At the beginning, it was literally an adventure for us to earn understanding from other vendors and wholesalers. Of course there were criticism for this new material, but sooner or later it became the standard material in Kimekomi doll making." (Yasuko)

Even now, urethane-made dolls are struggling superstition to be "cheap but melts after certain period" when the production cost does not differ much compared to *toso*, and is highly durable even in the production phase. It has definitely expanded the range of expression of Kimekomi dolls.





Traditional dolls with a contemporary aesthetic twist

Another thing Isshu has accomplished to break the tradition was to add untraditional coloring to the altar set. The stereotype Hina doll set would usually have gold folding screen on a red rug upon a black platform. In the early 90s, Isshu used pastel pink for their collection inspired by cherry blossoms. This gained popularity, which also led them to distribute a brand collection named "Shu-ou" (Ou means cherry blossom). They have colored the standard with aesthetics influenced by sense of modern design.

Recently they have debuted a platform set with collaboration with an aluminum maker, which is with no doubt none like others. The color resembles a traditional Japanese feel, but fashionable enough and somewhat futuristic at the same time.

"These colors are results of discussing, suggesting each other of what we wanted. Since the industry is decreasing, we are in need to be more competitive, so originality is the key." (Yasuko)

By the way, this aluminum maker also has an original accessory brand which is sold at places such as MoMA Design Store. This collaboration is a fruit of two companies who are trying to expand beyond each territory, advancing what they could do.





Combining crafts from different industries to the doll feature

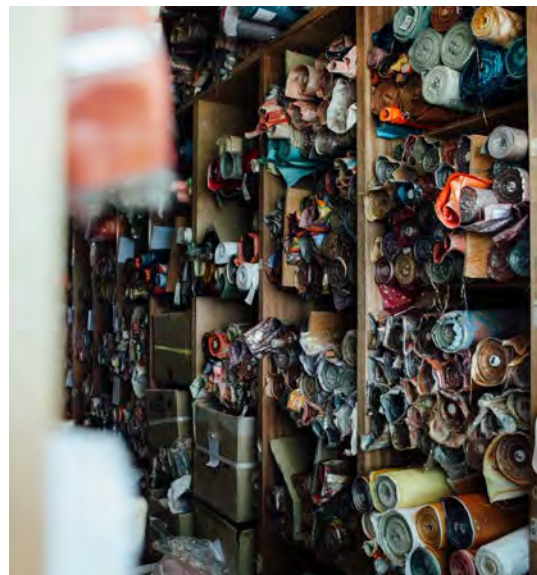
The exclusiveness of Kimekomi dolls lies in the combination of the fabrics tucked into their body. At Isshu, there are countless fabric stocks which Yasuko collected through her inspiration. Some are stocked as long as 30 years or more for the right time to be used. When a doll is designed, it means the number of production is decided from the fabric length. If the design is strictly determined based on the textile design, around 15 dolls could be produced from single fabric.

Main textiles used in Isshu doll's clothes are from Nishijin, Kyoto and Kiryu, Gunma. At times they use expensive silk fabrics that were used in late Princess Diana's wedding dress or Hermes products which costs more than 5,000JPY per 30 centimeters while usual silk costs around 1,000JPY per meter. These exclusive fabrics are likely to be seen on traditional craft marked products.

These stories may let them sound like a luxurious high brand, but the condition behind Kimekomi dolls is concerned with decrease of inheritors like other traditional crafts, especially craftsmen who make doll parts.

"Considering the effort and time against the pay, less and less people are choosing Kimekomi doll craft as a job. The shrinkage of Hina doll culture is also letting people barely come up with the idea of making dolls. Same thing is happening with textile craftsmen too. For doll making, only few dozen of lengths will do, but for the craftsmen they should make hundred or more meters of fabric at once. Since their fabric is beginning to lack usage after production, more and more craftsmen and studios are vanishing." (Yasuko)

Introducing the beautiful combination of materials is one thing Isshu is practicing through their product lineup. Their creativity filled with new ideas may be a hint to activate the declining industry behind the dolls.





Rich product variations for diverse values,
suggesting new ways to enjoy dolls

A compact Hina doll set may averagely cost 100,000 JPY, while the biggest Hina doll set consisting from 15 dolls with 8 steps-altar set may cost around 500,000-600,000 JPY. Due to changes in housing conditions, there are still a few areas where “the larger the dolls are, the better”. In addition, pink and pastel colors are popular among young people, but elderly people still enjoy traditional coloring. The reason why the sales price range varies along with their design variation, is because it depends on the materials and size of the dolls in order to fulfill various consumer's diverse values towards the traditional event. In particular Isshu has an impressive range of design and size among the industry. For them, enjoying Hina dolls is not only for families with children. In a country like Japan, where it has been facing birthrate declining for over a decade, they propose a unique way to enjoy Hina dolls “for the second time”.

“The Hina doll festival is usually an event for wishing a healthy growth of the child, decorating the hina dolls inside a house. But we also made a Hina doll set for customers over 60 years of age to celebrate their second Hina doll festival, rather a celebration of the season, the life itself. We use dark colored fabrics and gold lining to match elderly people's taste.” (Yasuko)



「Color and forms made from fondness towards lifestyle」

“To celebrate the season, the life itself”: In the studio, Yasuko’s attitude is obvious from illustrated books on nature and seasons, haiku books lined in the bookshelf which has been there since Bennosuke’s time. She says she is also aware to celebrate other traditional seasonal events as much as possible.

More than 50 years in business, Yasuko used to attend fashion school before entering the studio. She studied more about colors and *tosso* molding later on. Besides work, she loves to go to fashion & interior design select shops, walk around furniture shops, and getting in touch with Kutani ceramics and other traditional craft works. The fondness toward everyday life and aesthetics derived from her lifestyle, and an eye toward the non-traditional is something appearing in the doll designs.

“Cooking is also something I’m fond of. Thinking of the combination, the colors; it’s the same as doll making. Color in particular, it is something I’m always talking about!” (Yasuko)

Aya, who has studied at United Kingdom after high school and went to interior design shops for pastime, also inherited her mother’s sense.





Beyond standards, beyond Japan

Besides Hina dolls, Isshu just started producing more accessible Kimekomi products. Mount Fuji, daruma dolls, Kabuki mask objects using Kimekomi techniques are sold at souvenir shops in Narita Airports and major terminal train stations, fairly a good sale among inbound tourists. They will continue to wait and see the customer reactions.

The difficulty to distribute products between tradition and present manner is something every doll-makers are against. Aya, who has done her training program at New York, gained a new point of view she could not have had only living in Japan.

"It is difficult to adapt Kimekomi dolls to other countries just as it is in Japan, because that means you also have to share the premise of the tradition and sense of celebrating it. It is also rare for non-Japanese people to take these as 'kawaii' products. But adapting the Kimekomi techniques in different forms is one hint to make a new step outside Japan. For example, collaborating with a fashion brand maybe ideal." (Aya)

Since Kimekomi dolls are consisted of divisional labor, it is likely to have the potential for collaborative work.

For Isshu, which has already collaborated with an aluminum maker and adapted new materials from different industry in the past, this collaboration idea is not an impractical dream to realize.



At the studio along with dolls under production process, lied a set of Hina dolls Beninosuke made almost 100 years ago, and dolls from 50 years ago when Yasuko joined the business. Either dolls' head forms, expressions, the proportion varied and represented the aesthetics and standard faces Japanese people would have had during the period. Dolls are incarnation of the generation and culture, which embodies fashion and lifestyle. Through Isshu's design and attitude, the essential doll making is realized every day.

Products Please feel free to contact about order or products.

