

Shojiro Hasami Hamono Kougei

Masterpiece knives and scissors from the hands of the Ishizuka family

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Pure handmade craft blades that will last decades

Because of its reasonable pricing and rust resistance, stainless steel has become a standard material for household knives. On the contrary, "Shojiro Scissors And Knives Craft (Shojiro)" has kept its handmade iron cutleries in production for 6 generations. With an appropriate daily care, their knives could be used for decades without losing its sharpness. Since their blades run through the object so smooth, it almost feels as if you are "tearing" between rather than cutting it. Shojiro knives are not only about practicality, but the fact they have survived the mass-production-superior period. Moreover, what makes the products special is the warm humanity of Ishizuka family, the people behind Shojiro.



「 A six generations family originating from swordsmith 」

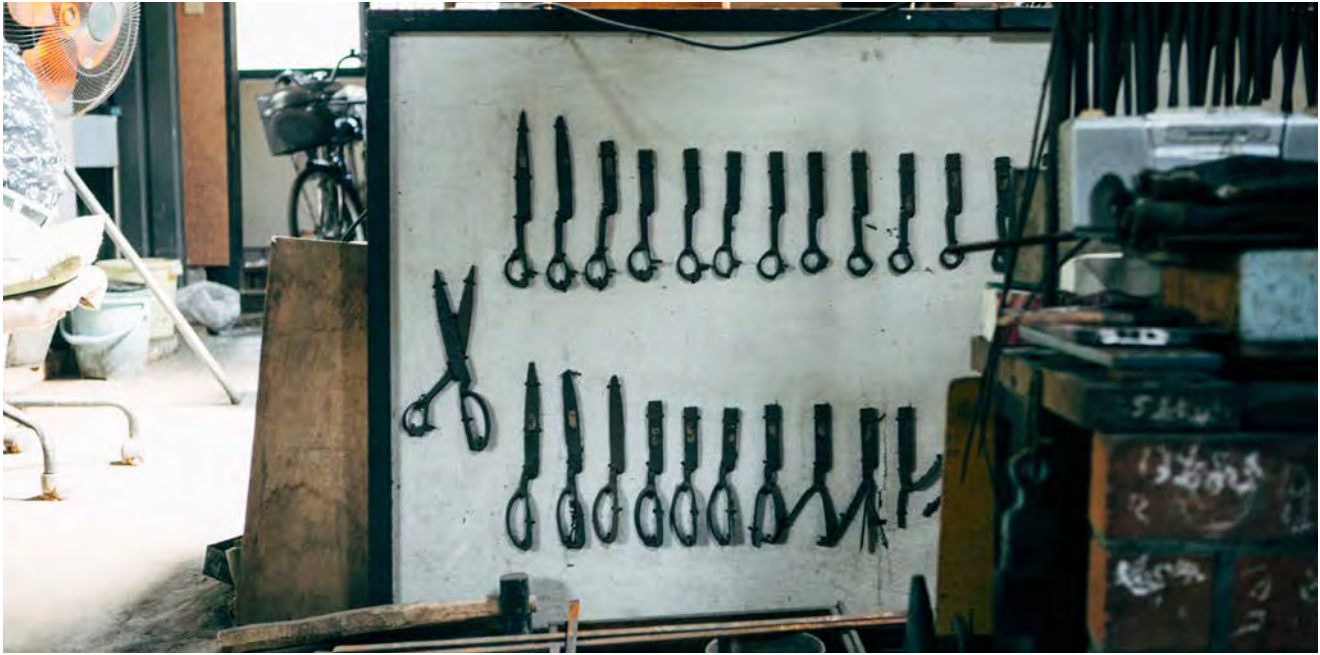
About 15 minutes walk from Narita-Yukawa Station, just one stop before Narita Airport, Shojiro's studio and Ishizuka family's house is located in a quiet neighborhood on the hillside. They used to have a studio in Arakawa, Tokyo, but moved in to this place in 1963 to earn a better environment for their craft. Now there are 3 people behind Shojiro knives; Youichirou Ishizuka (5th generation), his wife Masue, and Shoujirou (6th generation).

Like other smith forging craftsmen around Tokyo and Chiba, Shojiro started as a swordsmith during Edo period. Youichirou's grandfather, Choutaro who was active in the late 1800s, trained under Yajuro Yoshida, who was the founder of *Rasha Kiri Basami* (Polish scissor making) in Japan. Then Youichirou's father, Shojiro who inherited Choutaro's techniques started making knives, which eventually led him to make kitchen knives. Youichirou started getting involved to his family business from 1968, and started using the "5th generation" title from 1989.

Shoujirou has been involved in knife craft ever since he could remember. He would cut out wood from nearby forests to make handles, and as a summer vacation homework he would make knives with his father.

"When I was in third grade, I was already helping my father attach steel to iron. My first job was a car dealer, but after 4 years I decided to inherit my family business. Of course it was such an ordinary thing for me, and most of all, I knew my father was very happy when he was selling what he made by himself. I thought I could be devoted too no matter what." (Shoujirou)





History and overview of Smith forging in Japan

Shojiro's knives are specified as traditional crafts from Tokyo Metropolitan Government under the category of *Souhizukuri* (smith forging). There are other traditional cutlery crafts that goes under the name of each area all over Japan.

Common knife industries in rural areas of Japan has division of labor using machineries so that numerous craftsmen could get involved. In contrast, Shojiro's *Souhizukuri* craft does not require machines or molds but done by striking steel and extending its length. This originates to Edo period (1603-1868) when the craft supported swords to be used by samurai warriors. This may be why most smith forging craftsmen / studios are around Tokyo and Chiba Prefecture, although it is rather a rare industry throughout the country.

Swordsmiths during Edo period has used this technique to make swords, while they would make household knives and razors aside their main business. After swords became prohibited in 1876, the shift to household knives making was unavoidable for these craftsmen. This also led them to incorporate foreign knife making techniques such as *Rasha Kiri Basami* into their crafts, along the drastic evolvement of social circumstance.

At Shojiro, they could make up to 6 blades per day, while they could make 2 complete products per day. The variation of cutleries include kitchen knives, petit knives, folding knives, scissors, which they could produce less than 1000 pieces per year in total, each and every one a masterpiece slightly differing from each other.



[Traditional smith forging production process]

01_Hizukuri (smith forging)

Smith forging is the essential and the most difficult step in the whole production, which requires considerable experience. This step starts with preparing a thin rectangular ferrite (soft iron) and carbon steel sandwiching a powder including iron, borax, and boric acid. Heating this material in a pile of coke burning around 1000 degrees centigrade in the center, the ferrite and carbon steel bonds together, soft enough to be struck by a hammer and pedal hammering machine. By repeating cokes heating and hammering, the carbon steel is molded to become twice the length of its original form.



02_Grinder finishing to neaten the blade



03_Polish powdering

Polish powder is adapted to the ferrite so it is heated uniformly in the continuing step, *Yaki-ire* (quenching).

04_Yaki-ire (quenching)

After step3, the carbon steel is inserted inside heated pine charcoal (around 780 degrees centigrade). The red-hot pine charcoal excretes carbon gas, which increase the percentage of carbon contained inside the steel, boosting density and solidness. This traditional method was used from the swordsmiths' time, and a requirement to be marked as traditional craft.



05_Yaki-modoshi (tempering)

When the carbon steel becomes "the sunset color" (which could be recognizable because of the polish powder) from top to bottom, it is about time to be withdrawn from the pine charcoal and cooled inside a bucket of oil for 15-30 seconds. This step stabilizes carbon density and raises cutting quality. As a set, quenching and tempering is important to produce a steady blade.

06_Neaten crooked parts

07_Cut out excess ferrite by grinder

08_File with cloth buff / polish with scale insect wax
Scale insects cover its surface by emitting wax from its own body to avoid water. By using this expensive material, the blade shines and gains its best waterproof property.

09_Carve inscription



10_Handle making

Shojiro's products mostly use bamboo, rattan, and wood.

11_Finish with grind stone





「 Tough blades made by controlling fire and iron 」

In other knives productions besides smith forging, it is common to use compound iron material, sandwiching a ferrite inside and punching it into the shape of a knife. Some may call their products “handmade” regarding the fact they polish the blade with machine operated by hand. These types of blades end up slightly thick and lacking stiffness compared to smith forged ones.

Like those at Shojiro’s, smith forged blades gain density, stiffness, and cutting quality through repetition of heating and hammering. Flat blades like kitchen knives are roughly formed through pedal hammering machine by adjusting hammer speed, then refined through hammering by hand. By repeating this, a piece of carbon steel becomes so sharp the user could cut an object effortlessly. Usually scissors are divided for papercut use and fabric cut, but Shojiro scissors suits both usage in single blade without losing its sharpness.

“Punched out knives comparatively lack stiffness and is not a long-life product. Smith forged knives, on the other hand, gains density and waterproofness because it is hammered from above and sideways. You can feel the difference in the long-term.” (Shoujirou)

During the smith forging process, the timing when carbon steel could be drawn out from the pike of cokes is decided depending on the color, sound, and sparks from the burning cokes. The craftsman should make severe judgement, or the steel could not be molded to an intended form, or makes flaw on the surface while hammering. This extremely delicate sense of handcraft, how they control fire and iron, and most of all, the enormous effort behind it is worth huge respect. Even more astonishing, when they make scissor handles, they use chisel to split the steel and form the round shape; all done by hand.

Handcrafted knives has the advantage that the shape can be customized to any extent according to the application and order. Custom-made products can be made freely according to the height and hand size of the ordering customer. Basically, Shojiro products are adjusted to have the same shape as much as possible, but individual differences is inevitable compared to mass-produced products. However, rather than pursuing ease of production, what Shojiro values is whether customers can continue to use high-quality products for a certain time.





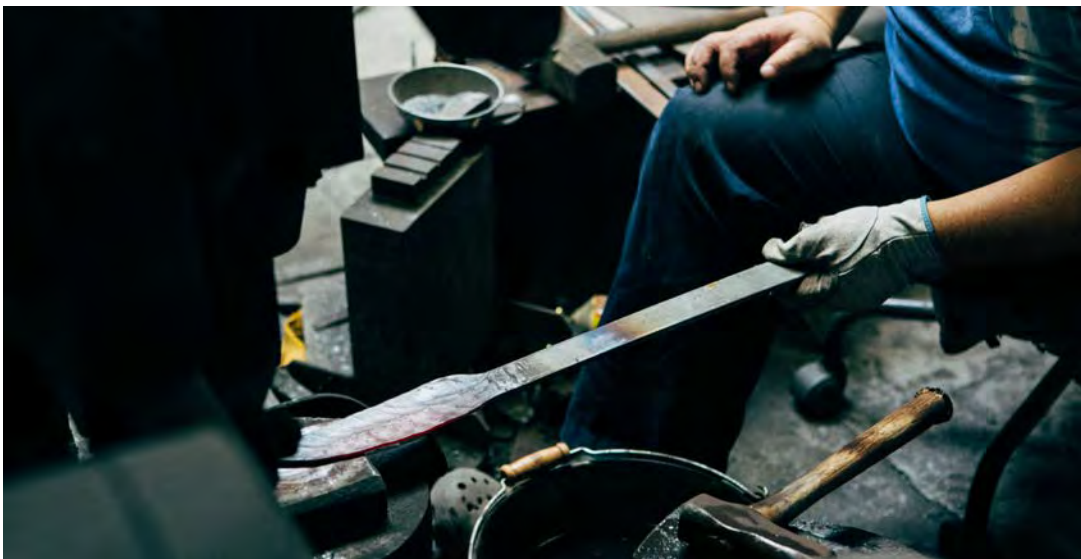
「The good rust” black rust leading to long-life knives

Good blade quality is maintained through daily care. Shojiro kitchen knives may be used for decades if it is put through warm water after usage and wiped off immediately. It also results in fewer polishing frequency compared to stainless steel knives. But the most important maintenance, is to leave rust at the beginning of usage which is usually removed for hygiene reasons.

“To use our kitchen knives and scissors for a long time, use them all year round. There will be black rust appearing but if you polish it, it will scratch and accumulate moisture, corrode and constantly create new harmful rust. After some period of time it will become a ‘good rust’ that will prevent further rusting.” (Shoujirou)

The black rust is not only effective in preventing corrosion and waterproofing, but also a kind of iron that is harmless to the human body which holds slight sterilizing power. It does not attach to meat or vegetables when cutting. Occasionally, customers who have been using Shojiro’s kitchen knife for a long time come to the studio to bring the product for maintenance, but when looking at the knife with a solid black rust, “We thank them to have used it in such a precious way” says Youichirou.

Unlike the stainless steel knife, which hardly rusts even if small amount of moisture remains, many people may be confused when using iron knives unless they know this. It seems as if the knife itself encourages the users to value time to care for the tool, which should have been an everyday action before products pursuing convenience became a standard. It’s not something new and special, but reminds the users of the simplest things.





「The genuine and sincere attitude toward customers」

Like other studios with a long history, Shojiro should have gone through challenges in the stream of time, economic and cultural situation change. Youichirou admits he did consider production system change so they could produce more amount of knives.

“Mass production-oriented, rust-resistant stainless steel blades has become mainstream around 1970s, and there were times when our products were thought to be way too expensive. But letting a new facility that enables mass production in a studio takes time and money, and while there is desire to make more, I decided to stick to handcraft so we will survive the other way around. Nowadays, consumers are bored with the values that came up during the high economic growth age. They would rather appreciate to cherish something that would last a lifetime, which matches our craft principles; something we have carried out nearly half a century.”(Youichirou)

Their craftsmanship is not only about knives, but the relationship rooting between their customers. Masue shared a remarkable episode was when the studio was introduced live on a morning news program in 1985. Immediately after the 5 minutes long broadcast, the phone persistently rang in their studio, eventually making a 7 year waiting list by customers who was moved by Shojiro knives through television. As Masue recalls, “Because we strived that restless 7 years making knives for the waiting list, we are able to do business in the present.” The pure, warm and humanistic attitude toward each customers is one thing that characterizes Shojiro, and may be a reason regular customers naturally “help out” at pop-up stores, telling stories to new customers who pass by.

“They tell newcomers ‘Black rust is good for your health’ so I thank them for doing a great job for us (laughs). They are the ones who have actually used our knives for twenty, thirty years or more. I think letting them speak from themselves about daily care and the product quality strikes the newcomers much more than ourselves telling them the fact 100 times.” (Shoujirou)

Some fans have had knives handed over from their parent and passed on the knives to their children, buying new knives for themselves. The purchaser who believed in the value of handcrafted knives in the era of mass production dominance, now tells the charm to others proved from real experience. This is how new relationship between the knives and people are born through Shojiro fans.



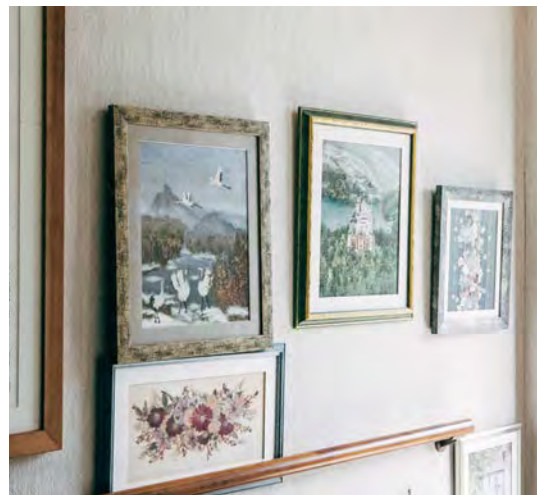
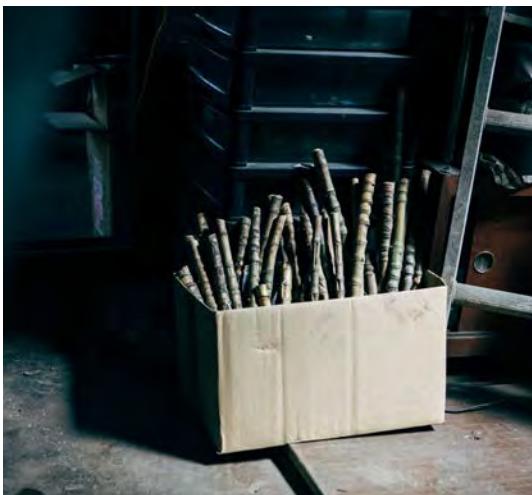
「 A woman sparking with creativity:
the original craft of Masue 」

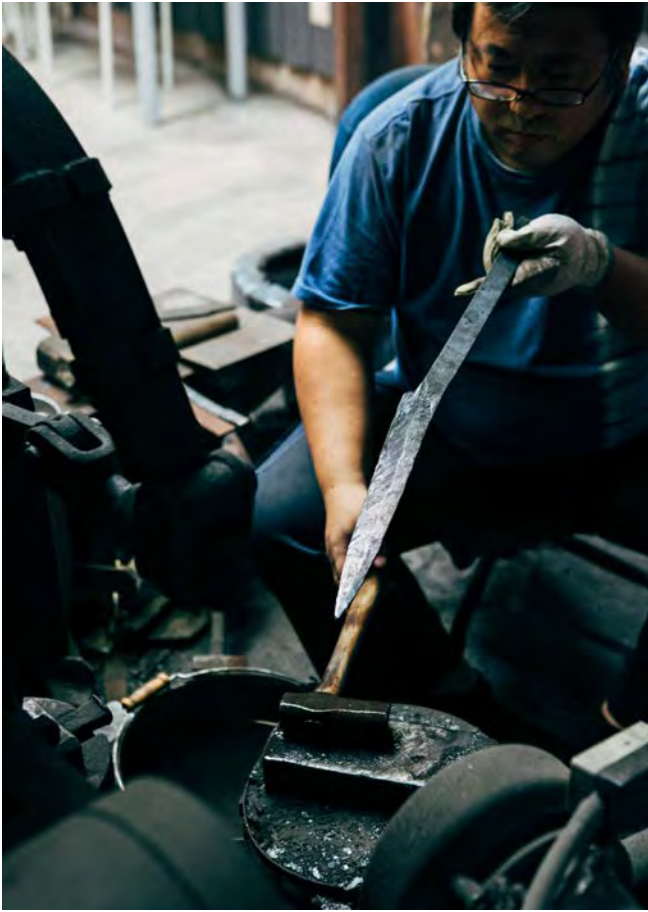
Besides Youichirou and Shoujirou, who makes the blades, Masue plays a role which perfects the product as a daily tool used and held by hand. She advises her family at the studio how it should be finished as a tool, and crafts the handles.

“My mother has the perspective and idea of a housewife who often cooks and do household tasks. My father and I tend to think in terms of ease of making blades, while my mother adds a customer’s view to it.” (Shoujirou)

Masue’s main work is to make scissor or knife handles mainly using bamboo, rattan, and wood. She also gives advice on the appropriate thickness and length of a product to be used comfortably. Surprisingly, Masue, who was a Japanese dressmaking teacher, began participating in the craft after she was married to the Ishizuka family in 1967, almost self-taught.

Her ingenious nature is also reflected in the pressed dry flower works at the house entrance, and how she also loves to cook and treat guests with supper. She is the very person who supports knife craft from a notable aspect, gathering every creative sense in everyday life and utilizing it to a product.





Timeless quality and sincerity communicated through knives

Although they have received some request from foreigners residing in Japan to customize kitchen knives, Shojiro has just begun overseas business development. Shoujirou participated in the New York training program, and discovered customer preferences and pricing techniques unlike those in Japan. Bamboo and rattan used as knife handles, and blades without mirror finishing were taken as "Japanese design", which surprised Shoujirou since he did not intend it that way.

There seems to be room for ingenuity in terms of design which influences the impression of the product, while Shojiro's value lies in its undoubtedly universal quality. Moreover, their sincerity and warm humanity which attracted each customers who has found value in life-long tools, will definitely communicate through their products and will be accepted even outside Japan.

Products

Please feel free to contact about order or products.

