

Uno Hake Brush

Brush creation that retains a clear focus on quality with an eye constantly on the present

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A workshop like no other, making
each brush individually by hand

The Uno family had no children. It was 1947 when Chieko, who was the daughter of an aunt to the Uno family, was formally adopted. Thereafter, Chieko learned the skills of brush making together with the artisans of Uno Brush Manufacturing, going on to work at the company. This was also a time that coincided with the beginning of Japan's high growth period, which heralded major changes to the lifestyles of Japanese people. Uno Brush Manufacturing responded by starting to manufacture western-style brushes, in addition to the Japanese-style brushes it had made until that point. Although other companies opted to adopt automated mass manufacturing techniques, to this day Uno Brush Manufacturing has continued to focus on creating brushes by hand, using natural animal hair. The brush is created by drilling holes in a wooden base, into which the hair is "planted" and then finished. Every aspect of every process is done by hand. There are two Uno Brush workshops and the base for manufacturing has remained unchanged since 1926. Product collections cover a broad range of uses, from face, to body, clothes and shoes, and the company maintains its focus on quality that has remained unchanged since its founding.



Responding flexibly to change by opting to manufacture western-style brushes

During the Edo Period the area of eastern Tokyo that is today encompassed by Taito and Sumida wards was the location of the city residences of the Mito Tokugawa clan, an old samurai family. That all changed in 1923 when the Great Kanto Earthquake struck Tokyo and the surrounding region, reducing the Mito Tokugawa residences to ash and rubble. From the ruins of the city the people started to engage in reconstruction and also modernization. Prior to the great earthquake the east of Tokyo had been a center for entertainment. Many artists, based themselves in this district, but following the earthquake they were forced to move their homes further to the west of the city. This left the eastern region vacant and therefore a good site to become a new manufacturing base for the city. It is thought that from mid 1920s once reconstruction had been implemented to a certain degree, various craftsmen located their workshops in the east of the city, which brings us to modern times and the reason why the region is linked with various crafts. It was also in 1926 that Uno Brush Manufacturing moved to the area.

Uno Brush Manufacturing was established in 1917 by Mr. Mihoji Uno, and was initially located in Azuma-machi (present day Kyojima in Sumida ward). The store moved to its current location, Mukojima in 1926. The company initially manufactured brushes used for gluing, with the bristles of the brush fastened between two pieces of wood. From around this time it became common practice to fix the bristles in place using a metal band, known as a ferrule. The company started making western-style brushes from 1950. Although many manufacturers switched to machine production in response to growing demand, Uno Brush Manufacturing continued to focus on handmade products, using a wooden handle and base, stainless steel wire, plant fiber, and high quality animal hair from horses, pigs and sheep. Cleaning brushes were made from Mihoji's time, too. When Mr. Yuzo Uno took over the business in 1964 as the second generation of his family to engage in brush making, the company started to increase manufacturing industrial use brushes. Three years ago, following further diversification the company became an incorporated body. Currently, Ms. Chieko Uno is the representative director of the company and her daughter Michiyo is taking the business on into the third generation of the family. Reflecting Michiyo's unique ideas the company now products a diverse range of products that challenge conventional images of brushes.

The history of Uno Brush Manufacturing starts almost at the same time as Japan's own turning point. If streetscapes and lifestyles change, then so too do people's needs. Uno Brush Manufacturing also leveraged the skills and technologies it possessed in traditional Japanese brushes to focus on making western-style brushes. It was a case of choosing a means that would enable the company to survive into the future.

The biggest difference between Japanese and western-style brushes is not their physical construction, but rather the uses for which they are intended. Japanese-style brushes are said to have emerged around 710 in the Nara Period, and were used to paste paper to sliding screens and doors. These brushes also came to be used in the manufacture of daily items such as traditional paper umbrellas, and from 12th to 16th centuries they were ubiquitous in society. In other words, Japanese-style brushes were basically used for finely brushing glue or a similar liquid substance on to a thin material such as paper. However, from the late 19th century, lifestyles began to change as people adopted aspects of western life, which would gradually cause the use of such brushes to diminish. It was at about this time

too that western-style brushes are thought to have been first imported to Japan. These imported brushes were hardly used at all for “brushing” in any delicate sense of the word, and the term “*burashi*” at the time was used to refer broadly to “scrubbing brushes” with hard bristles for removing dirt and grime. Craftsmen in Japan at the time turned their hand to producing these western-style brushes, thus responding to demand.

“It was 1947 when I was adopted into the Uno family. After that I worked with the apprentices, helping little by little to make the Japanese-style brushes. Making these brushes was the main business at that time, but as demand gradually dropped off I saw for myself how the business transitioned to making other kinds of western-style brushes. It was probably because the number of typically Japanese buildings was also diminishing that the need for traditional brushes also fell. Perhaps it was inevitable. My predecessors were determined to respond flexibly to such changes and we worked very hard to expand our customer base. It is thanks to those efforts that we are able to do the work we do today.” (Chieko)





Ability to create brushes for multiple purposes is all
part of the uniqueness of the hand-made process

It is often said that the Japanese are serious and diligent. However, such diligence and dedication may not be sufficient to survive, and it is indeed the case that what may have been treasured in the past may change with the times.

“Demand for the traditional style brushes continued to increase through the Meiji and Taisho periods (late 1860s to 1920s) and my father was quick to set up in business for himself. I understand that the first workshop was extremely small, but my father and his apprentice lived and worked there together. As he didn’t have any children of his own and I was a girl, he probably focused on training his apprentice. Another thing is that he didn’t work just in his own workshop, but also often worked with other people. In this way he accumulated friends and acquaintances and formed an informal group of people engaged in brush making, which he headed. My father had no desire to monopolize the brush business. He placed importance on cooperation and passing down skills to future generations.” (Chieko)

It goes without saying that in those days such traditional Japanese brushes were not being made only in Tokyo. As urbanization progressed, so too did land prices in Tokyo start to spiral. However, it was no easy matter to hike the cost of daily-use items such as brushes. While efforts were made to control procurement costs by buying the entire annual supply of animal hair in one lot, it became increasingly difficult to maintain the retail price of the brushes. Sometimes it is imperative to implement change in order to continue in business. Uno Brush Manufacturing realized the realities of the situation and moved nimbly to produce western-style brushes. What remained unchanged, however, was the company’s focus on the quality that a hand-made production process brings to a product. That is the reason why customers old and new remain loyal to Uno Brush Manufacturing.

“As was the case when demand for Japanese-style brushes dropped off, the automated mass production of brushes pushed down prices ever more, so that all that people wanted in a brush was for it to be cheap. That is because with just a perfunctory glance it is difficult to tell the difference between a machine-made brush and a hand-made brush. However, it is only when you actually use the brushes that the difference become glaringly obvious. The only thing that we haven’t changed throughout the history is that we left this essential quality of our handmade products.” (Chieko)

Uno Brush Manufacturing has a tremendously diverse lineup of brushes for various uses, everything from clothes, body and shoes, to hair, pets and teeth. The hair used in the brushes is selected depending on what it will be used for and taking into account the hair’s natural oil content, texture and toughness. The hair from goats, horses, pigs and wild boar are all used and each have their own characteristics. For example, hair from a horse’s mane and tail are also different to each other. Both Chieko and Michiyo consider the hair quality and characteristics carefully, meticulously creating products that pay extra attention to the density of the hair and the way it is cut. It is this ability to create brushes for multiple purposes that can be said to be part of the uniqueness of the hand-made process.



Brush variations that give long life to all materials, without inflicting damage

So what, specifically, are the differences between machine-made products and hand-made products?

“The biggest difference is the density of the hair. If density is low then the hair soon lies together, making it impossible to brush properly. Brushes are not simply artworks or ornaments, they are things to be used and therefore have no value if you cannot see how good they are when you use them. Another thing is that, for example, some people like to have shoe brushes made that match the size and shape of their shoes. When you are making something in a different shape or pattern for a mass-produced line, you first have to create the mold or template for the base into which you will insert the hair. However, for hand-made products it is possible to respond to various requests freely. That is something else that is good about the hand-made process.” (Michiyo)

Chieko adds, “I remember something that made me really happy in the past. It was when we were doing an exhibition and sale in a department store. A customer had purchased a cashmere suit on one of the sales floors below where we were selling our products. Apparently the store assistant said to this customer, ‘If you intend to use this suit for a long time to come, it would be best to take care of it properly, so I recommend that you also buy a good clothes brush.’ The customer then came up to our floor, just to buy one of our brushes. Another point is that as there are not so many places where you can buy hand-made brushes, some of our customers have a look at what other stores are selling and then finally come back to us. It is that kind of customer evaluation and the joy you feel at such times that you couldn’t achieve unless you engaged in your work seriously.”

These comments make it clear that it is difficult to input variation into mass-produced products and that the materials used are often hard and stiff. If bristles are hard grime is easily removed, but it easily damages fine textiles such as cashmere and angora. Only hand-made products are capable of responding to needs and matching the brush to the material it is intended for. Michiyo adds another happy episode about the work she does.

“A shoe polisher informed us that he wanted to use our brushes in a contest he was going to compete in. Uno Brush Manufacturing has a broad and varied product lineup from dust brushes for clothes to shoe polishing brushes. Brushes made from natural materials are actually used in the shoemaking process, therefore it is only natural that our products are a good match for those who make shoes, or either wears them. Something soft can be used on something so hard demonstrates what an almighty power these brushes have.”



Design skills required to
ensure needs are met

Let us next take a look at the actual production process. Firstly holes are made in a wooden base made by wood carpenters, then the hairs are “planted” in these holes. Next the uneven hairs at the end of the brush are trimmed using a cutting machine to achieve a uniform length, after which a cover attachment is affixed and the brush is polished and finished.

In order to last the traditional ways of brush production, they need to increase fans and needs, and retain them. To that end some minor design changes are required.

“It used to be the case that the standard shape was an oval, but we noticed that a square shape was easier to hold in the hand. We are constantly trying such things out and exhibiting the new ideas and products we are developing, moving to full production if these ideas chime with our customers.” (Michiyo)

Uno Brush Manufacturing products are available not only in Japan but also in various regions of Europe. By far the most popular product overseas is the body brush. In order to maintain traditional techniques and pass them down to posterity it is imperative not to be unduly stubborn, but to put traditions to work for other purposes and match them with “now.” This is something that is clear to see when you look back on the history of Uno Brush Manufacturing. Both women are united in their determination to maintain this stance and continue to surely and steadily demonstrate the appeal of hand-made brushes to as many people as possible.

