

Wagasa Maker in Kyoto Shares More Than 300 Years of Tradition



Janome are a type of slender Japanese umbrellas distinguished by a circular ring pattern. Literally translated as “snake’s eye,” the pattern represents the eye of a snake, a messenger of the gods, and traditionally has been used to ward off evil spirits.

***Wagasa* are traditional Japanese umbrellas made of *washi* paper attached to a bamboo frame and treated to ensure it is waterproof. We visited a venerable *wagasa* maker in Kyoto, which has been creating *wagasa* for more than 300 years, to learn about the history and characteristics of this traditional Japanese item.** (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

There are various theories as to the origin of *wagasa*, but it is more or less accepted that their predecessor was the so-called *kinugasa*, which was brought to Japan from the Korean Peninsula in the 6th century as a type of Buddhist ritual utensil together with Buddhist statues and sutras. At that time, the term “*kinugasa*” referred to an umbrella or a type of cover, or, in other words, a canopy, which was placed over the head of Buddhist statues. It was not until much later, in the 12th century, that common people began to use umbrellas. Until then, umbrellas were usually held by attendants as they accompanied

members of the aristocracy, high priests, and other persons of noble rank.

Nowadays, *wagasa* are a practical item used to keep away the rain or to provide a shield from the sun, especially when wearing a kimono. *Wagasa* are also a familiar presence at weddings and other celebratory occasions when kimonos are worn, and they are used by high-ranking Buddhist and Shinto priests at temples and shrines for ceremonies and traditional festivals. Recently, *wagasa* have found innovative applications, both in Japan and abroad, as interior decoration items, etc.

Tsujikura, the *wagasa* maker featured in this article, was established in 1690 in Kyoto. Apparently it is the oldest existing *wagasa* maker in Japan. Ever since its establishment, Tsujikura has consistently used only domestically produced *washi*, bamboo, and vegetable oils as primary materials. Furthermore, the entire manufacturing process is done by hand. In the past, there was division of labor, but today a single craftsman is in charge of the entire assembly process. The



Bangasa (sturdy umbrellas) are larger *wagasa* with a simple design. They originated as an improved, simplified and more reasonably priced version of the slender and exquisitely crafted *janome* umbrellas, and were made to be used by the common people.



Left: A kimono-clad woman holding a *wagasa* as she walks down a street steeped in historic old capital charm is a typical Kyoto sight.

Right: The left photo features a crimson *janome* umbrella. In the photo on the right, a *geiko* is holding a purple *janome* umbrella. Kyoto's *hanamachi* districts offer a condensed experience of traditional culture, including performing arts, as well as the unique Japanese culture of *omotenashi* (hospitality), and *wagasa* are a part of this experience.

appeal of the Tsujikura brand of umbrellas is their exquisite beauty backed by craftsmanship and tradition. Seven dedicated craftsmen strictly adhere to the traditional methods handed down through the generations. As the saying goes, “Open it and it is an umbrella; close it and it is a bamboo cane,” the *wagasa* must be crafted to transform back just like a single bamboo cane when closed. The Tsujikura umbrellas are born from this refined handiwork that makes it possible to take a bamboo cane, split it into 40 to 50 pieces and form the frame in such a way that the order of the pieces does not change. As a result, when closed, the Tsujikura *wagasa* are slender, neat, and beautiful, and when opened, they create a rich and elegantly designed space enclosed by *washi* paper and bamboo and filled with the ambience of the four seasons of Japan.

Kyoto was the capital of Japan for 1,000 years, and as a result it developed culturally as well, providing a conducive environment for the birth of numerous highly skilled traditional crafts. *Wagasa* was one of them. While remaining a practical item, Kyoto *wagasa* was refined by the sophisticated spirit of the ancient capital, and evolved into an elegant and perfectly

crafted object that can rightfully be called work of art.

“I would like to pass on the beauty of *wagasa* to the future generations while preserving the traditions and culture,” says Kinoshita Motohiro, the head of Tsujikura, Kyoto. In Kyoto, in the so-called *hanamachi*¹ districts, many *geiko* and *maiko*² still live and work. In fact, they continue to use *wagasa* as a daily commodity. “The sight of *geiko* or *maiko* holding *wagasa* as they walk down the charming streets of Kyoto is one of the scenes that symbolize the ancient capital’s unique allure. I hope that visitors to Kyoto will be able to savor the city’s unchanged atmosphere of ages past.” 



Wagasa are an indispensable item for an outing in a rainy day when wearing a kimono.

1. *Hanamachi* (also read as *kagai*, lit. “flower town”) is a district of restaurants where customers can be entertained by *geiko* and *maiko*. In Kyoto, there are five famous *hanamachi* districts, collectively known as *Gokagai*.
2. *Geiko* and *maiko* are professional entertainers who live and work in a *hanamachi* district. Their role is to enliven banquets by performing traditional dances and playing Japanese instruments. *Maiko* are *geiko* apprentices. *Geiko* and *maiko* dress quite differently and have distinctive hairstyles. *Maiko* wear kimonos with long *furisode* sleeves. *Geiko* wear wigs, while *maiko* style their own hair into elaborate arrangements.



Left: The process of attaching *washi* to the umbrella frame using an adhesive made from natural ingredients (tapioca starch)

Center: Drying umbrellas by exposing them to sunlight after applying oil to waterproof them

Right: The process of threading the inner framework for reinforcement. The framework features impressively beautiful geometric patterns.