

Handmade Washi Artisan Shares Traditional Techniques

Rogier's *washi* artwork installed in the elevator hall of AC Hotel by Marriot Tokyo Ginza in Tokyo

Rogier Uitenboogaart came to Japan from the Netherlands in 1980, enchanted by a single sheet of Japanese *washi* paper¹. Today, he is an artisan who crafts handmade *washi*. He lives in Yusuhara Town, Kochi Prefecture, where he continues to pursue the possibilities of this craft while preserving traditional production methods.

Murakami Kayo

Rogier first encountered *washi* at the age of 25, in a bookbinding studio in the Netherlands. “When I held the sheet up to the light, I could see the fibers of plants. I was fascinated by the beauty of this unique material, which was nothing like European paper. I came to Japan driven by a desire to see the actual process of making *washi*,” he recalls.

He spent about a year travel-

ing around Japan and visiting *washi* workshops in various regions. What impressed him the most were the sights and sounds of clear running water at each workshop he visited. He eventually arrived in Kochi Prefecture, which is famous for its production of *kozo* (paper mulberry) and *mitsumata* (oriental paper bush), the primary material sources used to make *washi*. Following the advice of a *washi* artisan that he should grow

the primary materials himself if he wanted to make traditional *washi* Japanese paper, Rogier decided to settle in Kochi Prefecture, as it had all the right conditions for making *washi*. He started learning and practicing cultivation of materials and paper-making on his own, and for more than 40 years since then has honed his skills as a *washi* artisan. In 1992, he moved to Yusuhara Town, near the headwaters of the Shimanto River,² which is known for its clear waters, in search of an environment more suited to his vision of *washi*-making.

His workshop, Kamikoya Washi Studio, is surrounded by sprawling, beautiful *satoyama*³ scenery worthy of the description “an original Japanese landscape.” Trees and plants that pro-

1. It is a general term for paper made by a method unique to Japan, and basically refers to paper made by hand using plant fibers such as *kozo* (paper mulberry) and *mitsumata* (oriental paper bush).

2. A river with a total length of 196km, which flows through the western part of Kochi Prefecture and into the Pacific Ocean.

3. Mountain villages and neighboring agricultural lands, forests, etc. *Satoyama* are intermediate zones between pristine nature and urban areas, and consist of settlements and surrounding secondary forests, mixed with farmlands, irrigation ponds, and grasslands.

4. See Highlighting Japan July 2021, “A Town Handing Down Forest Resources to the Future”
https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202107/202107_04_jp.html



A field where primary material sources for *washi* are cultivated



Rogier Uitenboogaart from the Netherlands, an artisan who crafts handmade *washi* Japanese paper

Photo: Hosogi Takuya

Kamikoya Washi Studio doubles as a guest house. Lampshades made of handcrafted *washi* attached to lacquered frames illuminate the guestrooms.



Rogier makes *washi* using traditional methods

duce the primary materials for *washi* paper grow on the property and are cultivated without agricultural chemicals or fertilizers with the cooperation of local people.

“What I cherish in *washi* making is the connection with nature. It is impossible to create high-quality *washi* without beautiful mountains, clear water, and good materials. That is why I grow most of the materials myself. I also treasure the traditional methods for making *washi* without preservatives and chemicals that have been handed down for more than 150 years.”

The finished texture of *washi* varies depending on the materials and the method used to make it. Rogier creates unique paper based on traditional *washi* from Kochi Prefecture

called “Tosa Washi” by incorporating in the production process long-established techniques for European handcrafted cotton paper. The presence of the plants used as primary materials stands out, and the texture and appearance are not uniform, but rich and beautiful. It is this beauty of his *washi* that has made it the material of choice for interior furnishings and decorations in architect Kuma Kengo’s buildings⁴ and prominent hotels.

In 2007, Rogier was designated *Tosa no Takumi* (master artisan of the Domain of Tosa [now Kochi Prefecture]). *Washi* artisans often visit his workshop to learn from him the fading traditions of *washi* making. He also manages a guest house at Kamikoya Washi Studio where visitors can try

their hand at *washi* making, and works to convey the appeal of this ancient craft to tourists who come to Japan inspired by a desire to experience traditional Japanese culture.

“The opportunities to use *washi* as part of the modern lifestyle are gradually diminishing, and the number of *washi* artisans is also on the decline. However, it is precisely because we live in such times that I want to continue to pursue the possibilities of *washi* and convey its appeal to a broad audience, without forgetting the original reason I was enchanted by *washi* in the first place.”

Going forward, Rogier will continue his quest to create traditional Japanese paper that will inspire the hearts of many people.