

# Any Requests?

## The Art of Cutting Paper

*Kamikiri*, or paper cutting, is a traditional Japanese performance art that involves cutting designs out of a single sheet of paper based on requests from the audience.

SATO KUMIKO



Hayashiya Imamaru on stage

JAPAN has a number of small variety theaters called *yose*, mainly found in Tokyo and Osaka. Here, audiences are entertained by performances that are centered around the traditional storytelling art forms of *rakugo* and *kodan* but also include *iromonon* variety acts such as juggling, acrobatics and *manzai* stand-up comedy. One such *iromonon* is *kamikiri*, or paper cutting, which involves cutting silhouettes of images such as good-luck charms and seasonal events requested by the audience out of a single sheet of paper with scissors.

Hayashiya Imamaru, a *kamikiri* artist with a career spanning some sixty years, says, “The origins of *kamikiri* can be seen in *katashiro* paper effigies of humans or animals used in Shinto purification rites. But it was in the Edo period (1603-1867) that it was established as a performance art. Later, with the advent of Western-style scissors, it evolved into the nimble cutting style we see today.”

All photos: Itabashi Yuichi

*Kamikiri* involves cutting paper while telling the audience an entertaining story, with *ohayashi* musical accompaniment featuring shamisen, drums and cymbals. In a matter of seconds or minutes, artists create images such as seasonal events, landscapes, lucky charms and topical subjects



Cutting out a lion on request

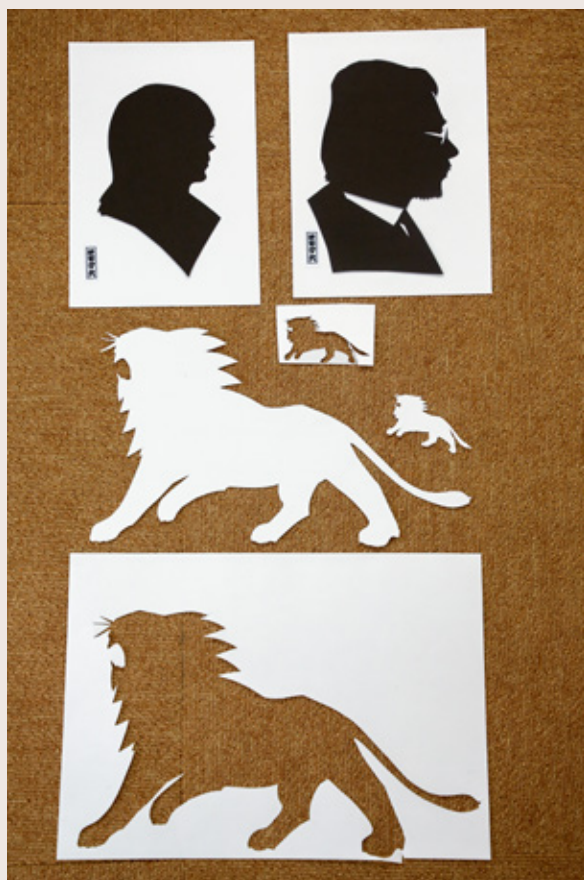
from a plain sheet of white paper without drawing an outline beforehand.

“When I perform, I try to do it in such a way that the paper cutting can be enjoyed even by those sitting toward the back of the yose and so that the images captured are conveyed at a glance. Above all, the appeal of the yose is the conversational interaction between the artist and individual members of the audience,” says Imamaru. Kamikiri artists create improvised cut-outs in response to audience requests. One such cut-out is a portrait of an audience member created on the spot and presented to the person as a gift. Many recipients of these cut-outs also ask for the paper from which the silhouette was cut, which has a beauty of its own.

Imamaru says that he browses the latest news so that he is prepared for any topical request from the audience. As well as being trained in drawing skills, which are the basis of the art form, kamikiri artists need to study classical Japanese dance and *gidayu*, and learn foreign languages (English and French). They also need to train in the use of scissors. Good tools are essential, and Imamaru uses scissors that were specially developed by the first kamikiri master Hayashiya Shoraku in collaboration with a long-established cutting blade business in Nihonbashi-Ningyocho.

Kamikiri is a performance art unique to Japan, and Imamaru is often invited to perform overseas. In 2017, he was sponsored by the Embassy of Japan in Canada to tour Toronto, Ottawa and Montreal, enacting all performances in both English and French. In 2018, he performed in Paris and in 2019 performed once again in Toronto. “I started studying languages as soon as I started training in the art of kamikiri. As I cut out a portrait, I ask about the person’s hometown and hobbies and work their responses into the image as I go. If these conversations were interpreted by an interpreter every time, it would slow me down and the audience would lose interest. Ultimately, the true appeal of kamikiri performance art would be lost,” he says.

Imamaru also holds kamikiri workshops in schools and residential care institutions in Japan and



Paper cut-out lion and face silhouettes

overseas. “We need many years of rigorous training to be able to create paper cut-outs exactly as we envision them, but I have devised teaching materials for elementary school workshops that make it easy for anyone to learn. Children get so engrossed in the fun of cutting paper to create silhouettes of their favorite animals that they forget about taking breaks,” says Imamaru.

After discovering the pleasure of kamikiri, some decided to take it up seriously by becoming apprenticed to Imamaru. Hayashiya Hana and Hayashiya Kinosuke are two examples. Hana became an apprentice of Imamaru and trained under him for more than ten years. Today, she is the first female kamikiri artist to perform at a yose. This traditional performing art that entertains people with paper and scissors is being passed on to the next generation. **7**