



# Doncho

## The Weaver's Giant Canvas

**The mighty theater curtains of Japan known as *doncho* are made of one, intricately woven piece of fabric. The curtains, made using sophisticated traditional weaving techniques, are considered works of art in themselves.**

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CURTAINS are a standard part of any stage set. Among the many types of stage curtains is the *doncho*, a drop curtain which is unique to Japan. Made from a single piece of fabric measured to match the size of the stage, *doncho* are raised and dropped vertically at the beginning and end of a performance.

*Doncho* trace their history back to the Edo period (1603-1867). Draw curtains that opened and closed to the sides of the stage were used in kabuki theaters certified by the Tokugawa shogunate, but for all other performances, the use of such draw curtains was not permitted. And so, simple curtains that could be raised and lowered were used at playhouses instead. The first modern-day *doncho* was that installed at the Shintomi-za kabuki theater,

which opened in 1879 in Tokyo. Former US President Ulysses Grant, who visited Japan the same year and attended a performance at the theater, presented the curtain to the theater, and this was remade into the *doncho* the following year.

In the period of reconstruction following the Second World War, when many theaters and public halls were built, the demand for *doncho* increased, and a unique *doncho* came to be made for each new venue.

Kawashima Textile Manufacturing (now Kawashima Selkon Textiles Co., Ltd.), one of many textile manufacturers in Kyoto, began making *doncho* in 1893. In 1951, the company created the *doncho* using the famed local *tsuzure-ori* weaving method<sup>i</sup>, recreating an abstract painting by Yoshihara Jiro. After first pulling the longitudinal warp threads tightly together, colorful threads made by twisting together five to six threads of various fibers are wrapped around thread cones ready for the transverse weft. Following the pattern of the design, skilled weavers pull each weft thread with their fingertips through the loom shuttle then draw

<sup>i</sup> *Tsuzure-ori* weaving is done mostly by hand with weavers using their fingertips to "spell out" the intricate designs.

A large loom used for weaving *doncho*  
Photo: Yanagisawa Miho



them together gently with a tool resembling a comb. This advanced weaving technique continues to be passed down even today. Examples of doncho made using the method can be found in the Kabukiza and National Theatre in Tokyo, among other prestigious venues within Japan. The doncho continue to delight the eyes of the theaters' many visitors.

Shimazaki Mitsugu, Group Manager of the Traditional Artistic Textiles Manufacturing Group at Kawashima Selkon Textiles Co., Ltd., has been involved in the making of doncho for many years. He says, "The tsuzure-ori weaving method is able to precisely express most pictures and designs. It also allows for an expression of limitless color and fine color gradations with ease. However, the quality of woven textile is not determined by how detailed the design is. While there is a skill in creating a subtle expression where the viewer may feel unsure if it is a woven textile or a painting, there is also a power

in rough woven textiles. Both are features of woven textiles and both have merit."

When using a picture as a template, the most time is spent arranging the design. First, a 1/20 size copy of the design is created. Once the design has been decided, a portion of the doncho is delineated as a sample and a one square meter prototype is made to test thread types and the weave. Then, a full-size sketch of the entire design is made, the color scheme is determined, and the weaving design plan is completed. As a doncho made to fit the size of a stage has a width of dozens of meters, the design plan is placed under a large loom, and the doncho is woven jointly by several weavers lined up side by side. The threads used are thick. Doncho made using the tsuzure-ori weaving method weigh about four kilograms for every one square meter on average, and a 200 square meter doncho has a weight close to approximately one ton, even though it is a single piece of cloth. For this reason alone, the physical fatigue experienced by a weaver when working on a doncho is different from that felt when working on an *obi* sash for a kimono, for example. Some weavers even report that their fingers grew fatter when making doncho. Even though it is a difficult job, many weavers say that they feel happy to be involved in the creation of art-like doncho.



A *doncho* weaver at work  
Photo: Yanagisawa Miho

The nature of requests for doncho has begun to change in recent years, with some customers asking for doncho that can be used as screens for projection mapping, for example. Though made primarily to demarcate the boundary between real and virtual worlds, doncho continue to play a role in delighting the eyes of an audience. Doncho may yet evolve further together with the changing of the times. 📖