

The Beauty of Bamboo Basketry

Suruga bamboo lattice ware (*Suruga-take-sen-suji-zaiku*) is a folk craft of Shizuoka Prefecture in which finely split bamboo strands (*takehigo*) are assembled into vessels. The delicate beauty of the basketry is now being incorporated into modern fixture designs, bringing a new lease of life to this traditional craft.



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IN Asia, where bamboo is abundant in nature, various household implements and agricultural tools have long been created out of bamboo. Similarly in Japan, dried bamboo has been cut into thin strips and woven into bamboo baskets, bamboo strainers and other vessels.

However, the craft of Suruga bamboo lattice ware handed down in Suruga (modern day Shizuoka Prefecture) differs from other regions in one key way. Instead of “weaving” the bamboo, the bamboo strips are “assembled” to create gorgeous bamboo products of delicate beauty. Holes are made in the large bamboo frame that defines the shape of the overall product, and several thin and rounded bamboo strands less than a millimeter thick are threaded through these holes to complete products that are both beautiful and practical, including insect cages, flower

bowls, trays, paper lamp shades, and handbags.

According to one explanation, the source of this kind of bamboo basketry can be traced back to a court aristocrat who loved the seasons and composed *waka* (traditional Japanese poems) about such things as fireflies in summer and the sounds of insects in autumn, and sought out fine baskets in which to hold the insects that represented these seasons. It is believed that the craft was further developed to produce containers to hold bait for falconry at the request of Tokugawa Ieyasu (1543-1616), who lived in Suruga after stepping down as Shogun. As the story goes, the focus shifted to making the items look beautiful largely because they were for the Shogun’s hobby.

Suruga bamboo lattice ware was designated as a traditional craft by Japan’s Ministry of International Trade and Industry (now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry) in 1976. Today, faced with competition from cheap foreign products and plastic

All photos: Courtesy of Shizuoka Bamboo-craft Cooperative Association



Suruga bamboo lattice ware products

items, the number of establishments practicing the Suruga bamboo lattice ware craft has declined to around ten. However, it is precisely under this adversity that Miyabi Andon Seisakusyo pressed forward in an effort to create products of masterful beauty.

“Our products weren’t selling well and we were in danger of losing our livelihoods,” recounts the company’s third-generation president Sugiyama Masatoshi. “That was why we turned our attention to Europe, where the appreciation for beauty and craftsmanship is deeply rooted, and decided to take on the challenge of creating unique products that would be treated as objects to last a lifetime.” But as the person actually making the products, thinking of their design at the same time was extremely challenging, he says. “Naturally I had ideas about what I could create in my head, but when I brought in a designer who wasn’t familiar with those techniques, they suggested innovative design that made me think, ‘it’s impossible. I can’t make that.’ From there, I took on the challenge of creating products that would capture people’s attention.”

The products created out of that process have transcended the boundaries of Japan and the West and attracted worldwide attention through their use as lamp shades at famous hotels, afternoon tea trays and various other products.

The vessels of Suruga bamboo lattice ware are boldly spreading beyond the realm of delicate Japanese beauty. 🍵



Stripping bamboo strands (*takehigo*) for the lattice work



Bending bamboo over heat to form the product frame. Holes are drilled in the frame into which bamboo strands are inserted to assemble the product.