



Kyo-sensu folding fans

Photo: Courtesy of Miyawaki Baisen Co.,Ltd.



A Kyo-sensu folding fan made in collaboration with Kyoto-based *nihonga* (Japanese-style painting) artist Sadaie Ayuko
Photo: Courtesy of Miyawaki Baisen Co.,Ltd.

KYOTO FOLDING FANS

Beauty and Utility



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- 1 Hiogi fans are an essential feature of traditional court attire
- 2 Ondotori float directors at the Gion festival holding sensu fans
- 3 Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd. is passing on traditional skills by training highly proficient craftspeople

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Since long ago, folding fans have been used in Japan's hot humid summers to create a gentle cooling breeze. Among these fans is the *Kyo-sensu* (Kyoto folding fan), which is characterized by its delicate construction.

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A folding fan, or *sensu*, is made of paper glued onto a bamboo or wooden frame and is small and light enough to fold and slip into a bag or purse and carry around. When you want to cool down you can simply take it out and open it to create a gentle breeze. The high portability and convenience of the *sensu* has led to its enduring presence in Japan through the ages as a practical summer accessory.

Sensu are produced in a number of Japanese regions, and those produced in Kyoto are called *Kyo-sensu*. As well as having an appealing tactile quality, smooth opening mechanism, and ease of use, *Kyo-sensu* are decorated with colorful, original hand-painted designs created in past ages, and are thus known for their seamless fusion of beauty and utility. Minami Tadamasu, the eighth-generation head and president of Miyawaki Baisen Co., Ltd., established in 1823, and president of the Kyoto Folding Fan & Round Fan Association of Commerce and Industry, explains the characteristics of *Kyo-sensu* as follows.

“The term ‘*Kyo-sensu*’ refers to products made by craftsmen in Kyoto Prefecture using materials from Kyoto and the surrounding areas. The tip of the *Kyo-sensu* becomes thinner when closed, and the preferred designs are hand-painted motifs depicting beauties of nature that evoke the seasons, such as dragonflies.”

The original *sensu* are said to have derived from wooden slats called *mokkan* that were bound and used to record information. The *hiogi* fan made from slats of *hinoki*, or Japanese cypress, was derived from that shape. The oldest existing *hiogi* fan is inscribed with “the first year of the Genkei period” (877). From the Heian period (late eighth to late twelfth century), it was the correct form for women to hold a *hiogi* fan when they wore the layered *junihitoe* robe, the formal attire of women

at the Imperial Court. According to the literature, the *sensu* made of paper were first made in around the tenth century and exported to China in around the thirteenth century. These fans later found their way to Europe, where they evolved into Western folding fans.

Today, some *sensu* are made from silk cloth and thinly shaved fragrant wood such as sandalwood, but *Kyo-sensu* are typically produced by inserting a skeleton of thin bamboo strips into a sheet of paper. Production actually involves eighty-seven processes, from shaving the bamboo to processing the paper and through to final assembly of the *sensu*, entailing a high degree of division of labor between artisans.

Says Minami, “Nowadays, *sensu* are mainly used for practical, everyday purposes, but they were originally used for such things as court ceremonies. Even now, the *sensu* is an essential item for rituals and solemn occasions.”

In Japan, the shape of an open fan is referred to as *sue-hirogari*, literally “spreading out like an open fan.” This shape is widely considered to be auspicious, with the gradual widening of the fan toward the end signifying increasing prosperity. As such, the *sensu* is an indispensable accessory for the bride and groom when holding a wedding ceremony dressed in kimono, traditional Japanese attire.

The *sensu* is also a feature of the Gion festival in Kyoto, a month-long festival held in July. The highlight of the festival is the Yamahoko procession, when thirty-three spectacular *yamahoko* floats are pulled through the streets of Kyoto by 40 to 50 people led by *ondotori* float directors holding *sensu*.

In recent years, young people have also been rediscovering *sensu*. Miyawaki Baisen too is collaborating with fashion brands to create *sensu* for the younger generation. “As well as bringing in new ideas, we see it as our duty to train craftsmen in order to ensure that the skills are passed down to the next generation,” says Minami.

With a history and tradition of over one thousand years, *Kyo-sensu* continue to add gorgeous color to Japanese summers, while epitomizing both beauty and utility. 