



Meet the Kite Maker

Greg Kono

Kite artist and designer Greg Kono is a third generation Japanese American (*sansei*), who grew up on a farm in Sacramento, California. He made his first kites from greenhouse plastic, newspaper, and bamboo or wood dowels. Sometimes he would invest a dollar for a commercial delta kite to fly over the family's twenty-five acres of farmland.



Design challenges have always interested Greg. He describes a weekend that he spent with his grandparents and other relatives when he was a boy of seven or eight. "One of my uncles brought out a couple of wooden puzzles (*kumiki*), and we began to try to take them apart. Neither puzzle seemed to budge at first. Dad pulled out his car keys to push on one of the puzzle's sides. It finally came loose. After a while we got both puzzles completely apart.



Wooden puzzles

Photo by Greg Kono

Now came the hard part—getting them back together. It was getting late and everyone except me was going to bed. I was obsessed with trying to put the puzzle back together. My aunt finally convinced me to take one of the puzzles upstairs so I could work on it in bed before I fell asleep. But I kept working on that puzzle throughout the night and into the next morning.

Finally, as the sun was beginning to rise, I was able to fit the last two pieces together. I rushed downstairs and completed the second puzzle in no time. I couldn't wait until everyone was awake to show them my accomplishment. They must have noticed my enthusiasm, because less than a week later I received a box in the mail filled with more than a dozen wooden puzzles. I was in hog heaven! I quickly dove into the box

and pulled out one puzzle after another. I took them apart and put them back together again. As they became easier to solve I started taking them all apart, piling them on my bed, and timing myself to see how long it would take to assemble them all. I then repeated the process over and over again.”

Greg studied Environmental Design at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. After graduation he designed museum exhibits, including several for children’s museums, and studied sculpture and metal design. In 1991 he formed his own design studio, Kono Design. He keeps his wooden puzzles on a shelf in his studio for inspiration. Look at Greg’s website (www.konodesign.com) to see some of his other creations. His “Automata” section showcases moving wooden sculptures. A pig flies, a woodpecker bobs his head, a lion roars, a couple kisses, a guitarist strums.

What lured Greg back into kite making? In 2001 the Kono clan held a family reunion in San Francisco, for which Greg created a commemorative poster and several kites from the poster design. As he began to experiment with kites of paper and bamboo, he came across a Japanese kite building workshop in 2002, taught by master kite makers, Nobuhiko Yoshizumi and Scott Skinner, at The Drachen Foundation in Seattle, Washington. Within six months he began working with the organization. He designs traveling exhibits and teaches kite building workshops, while continuing to develop his own kites and artwork.



Reunion Poster

Photo by Greg Kono



Radish Kite



Butterfly Kite

Photos by Greg Kono

Greg says, “As a Japanese American I choose to explore the culture and materials used by my ancestors. I often use bamboo and *washi* (Japanese paper), excellent materials that have been used for centuries to make kites in Japan, due to their strength and light weight. My approach to kite making is to unify all parts of the kite in harmony. I pay as much attention to the framework (bamboo) as I do to the skin (*washi*) when building my kites. I strive to make the back of the kite as aesthetically pleasing as the front. In flight the sun backlights the kite, highlighting the framework

through the skin. The challenge for me is to not overbuild the frame, to the point where it will not perform, yet to give it enough substance to hold its shape in flight. For paper I especially like *unryu* (Japanese for “dragon cloud paper”) because the long strands of mulberry fiber running throughout the sheet make the paper strong. It’s also lightweight and is somewhat transparent. For color I prefer to use fabric dyes, inks and watercolors to reinforce the transparency I seek.”



Stewie (left) and Family Dog

Photos by Greg Kono



Greg may use traditional materials or shapes for his kites, but he may then transform these traditional elements by reshaping them with contemporary imagery or tools. For example, he has used an image of Stewie, a character from the cartoon *Family Guy* in the shape of the traditional *khleung ek* kite of Cambodia. On *washi* Greg may print a computer-generated image or photograph,

then enhance it by brush painting with inks or dyes. One challenge? Making sure that the *washi* does not jam in his ink-jet printer.

Greg’s playful spirit is very evident in the imagery he uses for his kites. Fruits and vegetables from the farm appear. “When my brothers and I were bored,” he says, “we used to chuck spoiled or overgrown watermelons at each other.” Now his watermelon kite is a “flying reminder of childhood.” Toys and robots show up, as do characters from the comics. His “People” series features a variety of perspectives, from bird’s-eye to worm’s-eye. He says, “I am also inspired by the *anime* films of Hayao Miyazaki, especially *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, *Castle in the Sky* and *Porco Rosso*. I enjoy them because of their vibrant use of color, highly detailed renditions of scenes, characters, and stories about flights of fantasy.”



Watermelon Kite (upper right), Rocket Kite (upper left) and People series (bottom)

Photos by Greg Kono

Sometimes the same subject may provoke both a naturalistic and a stylized treatment. Fishing was one of Greg’s boyhood hobbies. His series of kites based on fishing lures is beautifully crafted and takes full advantage of the texture and translucency of *washi*. Greg frames many of these kites for art collectors who prefer their kites on the wall instead of in the sky (but he does use hinged frames, in case the purchaser wants to take the kite out and fly it). Fish also figure in a series of kites he made when *Finding Nemo* was popular. Greg was starting to teach workshops for school children using Yoshizumi’s Fish Kite kit, so he turned to the animated film for inspiration.



Fishing Lure (top),
Nemo Fish Photos by Greg Kono



At the Beach

Photo by Greg Kono

Greg relies upon his training as a designer to solve challenges when he tests new kite designs. He says, “I enjoy creating functional works. Nothing gives me more satisfaction than seeing something I have built perform the way it was meant to.” For example, The Drachen Foundation asked him to create a design, easy to make from inexpensive materials, to introduce students to the principle of dihedral, the angle at which the kite’s wings meet that helps to stabilize flight. Greg’s solution for maintaining the dihedral angle? A paper clip.



Greg has also designed a series of “critter” kites—a beetle, a butterfly, a salmon—and he is working on others. Each is a flat kite (the salmon *can* be bowed), and is easy to make. But flat kites can be tricky to fly. He tinkers with each design at the beach near his studio, adjusting the amount of tail that each kite needs to fly well. Greg says, “Flying the kite is the final process in my art. I’ve heard that a kite does not have a soul until it has been flown at least once.”



Salmon Kite

Photo by Greg Kono

Key Vocabulary for the Reading

Aesthetically: artistically

Anime: a Japanese style of animation, characterized by colorful, stylized art

Automata: plural of "automaton," a self-operating machine or mechanism

Budge: to move slightly

Commemorative: honoring or preserving the memory of a person or an event

Dowel: round piece of wood

Enhance: to make greater in value or beauty

Functional: designed for or capable of a particular use

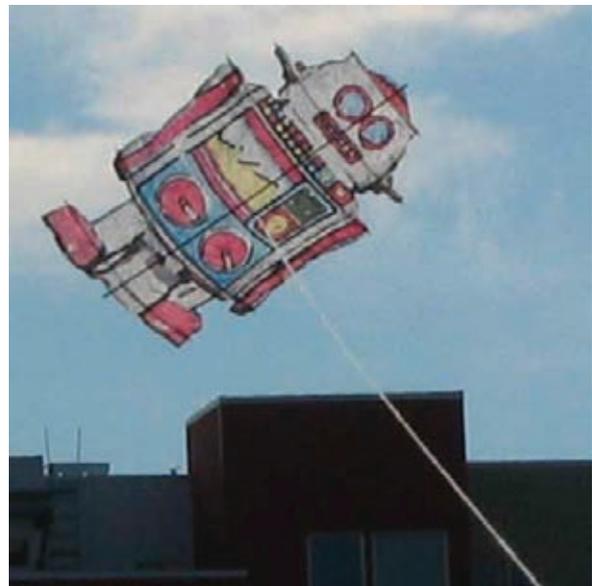
In hog heaven: colloquial for "very, very pleased"

Khleng ek: the signature kite of Cambodia

Naturalistic: producing the effect or appearance of nature

Stylized: not naturalistic; using artistic forms and conventions to create effects

Tinker: to manipulate experimentally



Photos by Greg Kono