



Meet the Kite Maker

Mikio Toki



Japan's vigorous kite culture boasts a great variety of kite shapes and sizes, each adapted for the seasonal winds of particular cities or regions. Many of the designs solidified two hundred to four hundred years ago, and have been reproduced ever since by kite making families, who pass down skills through the generations, from father to son.

But the life of a traditional Japanese kite maker is taxing, full of repetitious labor and, usually, low pay. Little surprise, then, that the number of traditional kite makers has declined. In Tokyo, for example, the number of master kite makers dwindled from more than a hundred during the Edo period to thirty-seven before the second World War. Teizo Hashimoto, who headed the last professional family household in Tokyo devoted to kites, died in the early 1990s. The Edo kite making tradition might have died with him—were it not for Mikio Toki.

Toki came to kite making through an unconventional route. Though he had liked kites since he was a boy, Toki had a father who was a journalist, not a kite maker. Toki studied graphic design in school, and applied the skills he learned to a number of craft traditions—bamboo, origami, tops as well as kites made from paper.

Toki began to learn about Edo kites from Katsuhisa Ota, a traditional kite maker. The characteristic Edo (the old name for Tokyo) kite is narrower than many of Japan's rectangular kites and is well adapted to the stiff winds of Tokyo. Edo kites can be large and heavy—from seven to twenty feet high, with many bridle lines. In shape and size the sail offers a natural platform for detailed and elaborate kite paintings. Toki says, "I love kites and I love flying. And very important, in my mind, is the need to keep the Edo kite tradition, more than four hundred years old now, alive and well."



Japanese kite collector, Masaaki Modegi, who runs the Tokyo Kite Museum, encouraged Toki to fill the void left by Hashimoto's death. Establishing himself as a professional kite maker, Toki honed skills useful for building a career with both Japanese and international admirers. He is a popular guest at around the world festivals with his ready smile, convivial personality, traditional clothing (which television interviewers appreciate), and ability to speak English.

Toki plans ahead for the season when demand for kites is high. He says, "Since kite flying in Tokyo is particularly associated with the New Year, Edo flying is done in December and January, rather than in May as in other parts of the country. The wind is from the north and very cold, but since flying involves a lot of exercise it keeps the fliers warm. January 1st is particularly important for flying. This is the day residents pray for a happy year ahead."



Ika Nobori Agaru Serai (Kite-flying Competition in the Blue Sky). The print, by Utagawa Yoshiharu, shows the faces of twenty-one leading actors from the kabuki (popular) theater on kites, each image accompanied by *hiragana* and *kanji* boasting of his popularity with his star-struck fans (part of the print is shown above). Toki recreated each face on a full-size kite, two feet by three feet, giving the images of these nineteenth-century stars of the stage a contemporary graphic twist. The series provides an example of how tradition can be re-energized at the same time it is honored.

He works for months before the holiday, with help from wife, mother, and children (now grown), to make kites decorated with the auspicious animal—ox, tiger, dragon, rooster—for the upcoming year, as determined by the Japanese zodiac. These kites find a ready market in the kite museum, as do his other kites with traditional paintings. Businesses also commission Toki to design special kites with corporate images or logos, a part of his business which can be quite lucrative.

Toki says, "I'm a purist. I don't copy anybody. Although the changes may be subtle, and I do sometimes work in series, every single kite I do is an original." Kite collector Scott Skinner commissioned one renowned series. He asked Toki to produce contemporary versions of kites pictured in a famous nineteenth-century woodblock print,



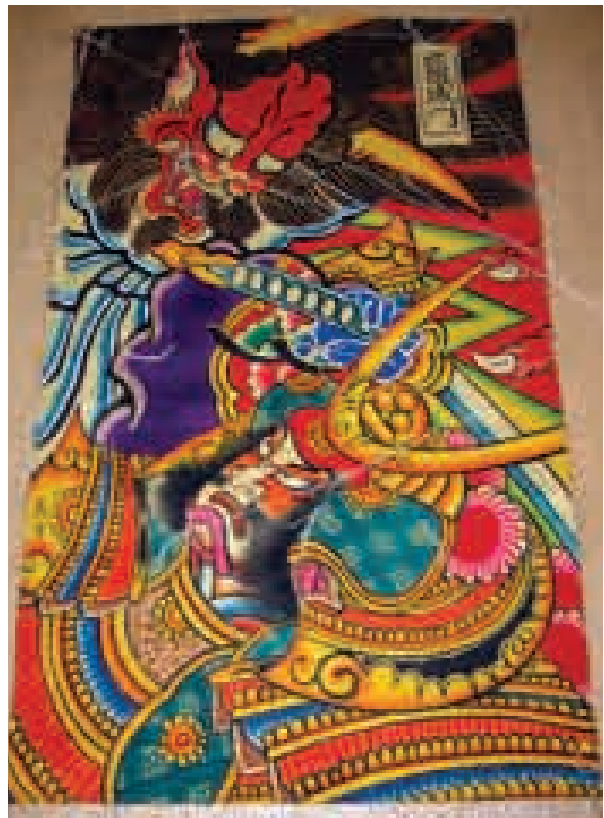


Toki usually works with traditional Japanese kite making materials—bamboo and *washi*, Japanese paper. He says, “I make about four hundred kites a year. I use old bamboo that has been smoked to kill insects inside the wood, handmade *washi* paper of mulberry bark, and, for the most part, natural dyes. These dyes permit light to shine through the kite when it is flying, like a stained glass window in a church.” But he can also bring his kite painting skills to bear on contemporary materials—a ripstop nylon sail attached to collapsible carbon-fiber spars. On a recent visit to an elementary school in the United States, he astonished students not only by the speed with which he could assemble and disassemble a ten-foot Rokakku but also by his technique in launching the large kite on an almost windless day.

Toki is taking another step in developing his career by building a new house next to the studio he established nine years ago. He will cut what has been a lengthy commute between home and “office” and make more efficient use of his time. From this new base he plans to visit local schools to share traditional kite culture. His studio is only five minutes from the beach. “Students can go right to the beach and fly any kite they make in a workshop with me,” Toki says. His new house will also have a large room that can function as a museum. When he teaches workshops in his studio, students or interviewers can also see a display of his kites.

“Toki-san is an excellent teacher, especially for techniques particular to the Edo kite – laminating the paper sails with cotton or silk, decoratively braiding the bridle lines, and preparing bamboo for specific applications,” says collector and kite artist Scott Skinner.

An admirer of Toki’s work, Skinner, believes that Toki makes an invaluable contribution to the continued liveliness of the Japanese kite scene. “Maybe it’s just coincidence, but Toki-san really came into his own as an artist after Teizo Hashimoto died. Toki had the training, but, more important, he had the passion to keep Edo kite making alive and thriving. He constantly refines designs that he has done for years, making them more lively and dynamic than ever before. I think all the kite making families of a hundred years ago would be proud to have Toki carry on their legacies.”



Sources

Ruhe, Ben. "Carrying on the Edo Tradition," in Drachen Foundation Kite Journal, Issue #12 (Fall 2003), pp. 26-27. Available online at www.drachen.org.

Skinner, Scott. Interview, Drachen Foundation Archive.

Theater of the Sky, Drachen Foundation Traveling Exhibit.

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