

Furoshiki

---An old but new eco-friendly product---



On July 1, 2020, it became obligatory for all retail shops in Japan, including convenience stores, to charge for the plastic shopping bags that they give to customers. This move was made as a part of measures to reduce the amount of plastic waste, which is causing serious ocean pollution. As an alternative to plastic bags, reusable eco-friendly bags look like becoming essential items for shopping.

There may not be many readers who remember, but in the days before it was taken for granted that retail outlets provided paper and plastic bags for purchased articles, people used *furoshiki* (square cloths for wrapping) and baskets to carry gifts and do their shopping. Hearing that furoshiki, which have a long history, are being reappraised as a reusable, eco-friendly item, I went along to the Musubi furoshiki shop in Tokyo to find out more.

The Musubi furoshiki shops

There are two Musubi furoshiki “antenna shops,” one in Kyoto and the other in Tokyo. They are operated by Yamada Sen-I Co., Ltd., a Kyoto-based furoshiki maker. As well as selling furoshiki, the shops serve as information outlets, holding regular in-store



workshops and also outreach workshops to introduce the history of furoshiki and modern ways of enjoying them. I spoke with Etsuko Yamada, who is the company’s art director and publicity officer.

Q: What are the Musubi shops aiming for as “antenna shops”?

In the in-store workshops, we introduce furoshiki, which have a long history, as an important aspect of Japanese culture, and we also propose original products suited to the present times and ways of using them. Even if the designs and displays are nice, people will not use furoshiki if they don't know how. Many people think that furoshiki are difficult, but through the workshops they understand that using furoshiki is actually quite simple and a lot of fun.

As a business, we are engaged in everything from the development of original products to manufacturing and wholesale. We sell mainly to BtoB clients, both in Japan and overseas. As I just said, however, furoshiki will not sell if you just display them. So as well as proposing shop displays to our clients, we also conduct staff training, providing them with the know-how necessary to convey the attractions of furoshiki.

In addition, although we are so-called antenna shops, it is important not only to transmit information but also to watch the reaction of customers. We then reflect the customer needs thereby picked up in the making of new products, sales methods, and so forth.

We also hold outreach workshops. Among them, I think our collaboration with the International Hospitality and Conference Service Association [IHCSA] is very significant, because in workshops with diplomats from foreign embassies in Japan and their family members, we can introduce the attractions of furoshiki to people who have come to Japan from all over the world.



The history of furoshiki

Q: Please tell us about the history of furoshiki.

Originally *furo* meant a sauna-like steam bath. In the Nara period [710–794], steam baths were installed in temples and apparently used as a religious practice to purify the body and mind by emitting perspiration. [Even today, a bathhouse with a sign saying “Yokushitsu” can be seen at Myoshinji temple in Kyoto.] Later it is thought that this custom spread to the nobility and samurai. They would go to the bath with a change of clothes wrapped in a cloth and then place the cloth on the floor when changing. This cloth that was used at the bath was called a furoshiki [literally, bathmat].

Another of furoshiki’s roots can be found in the culture of wrapping cloth, an example of which can be seen today in the Shosoin repository at Todaiji temple in Nara. This cloth was used to store valuable items, such as imperial stoles and masks used in *gigaku* [ancient masked dance drama]. This cloth changed names over the centuries from *tsutsumi* to *koromo-tsutsumi*, *hira-tsutsumi*, and so on, but the custom of storing and carrying valuable items in a cloth continued.

Around the middle of the Edo period [1603–1868], following the spread of hot-water public baths among the common folk and the development of commerce and travel, these two types of square cloth came to be known by the general name of furoshiki. They were to become essential items for everything from daily life to weddings and funerals.



Townspeople using furoshiki are pictured in this ukiyo-e by Utagawa Hiroshige titled *Famous Places in Edo: The Daimaru Dry-Goods Store in Odenma-cho*.

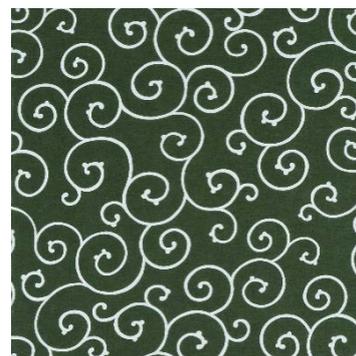
Furoshiki culture remained an intimate part of Japanese life until around the 1950s, but then their presence gradually waned as Japan headed toward a period of rapid economic growth in the 1960s. Lifestyles and fashion westernized, and the virtue of “waste not, want not” gave way to “mass production, mass consumption.” This economy-first trend greatly changed the lives and attitudes of the Japanese. Pressed back by the onslaught of convenient and easy paper and plastic bags, furoshiki faded, in the minds of the Japanese, into a thing of the past.

In recent years, however, warning bells have been sounded about global warming, and people’s attitudes toward environmental preservation have changed around the world. Under the impact of these currents, in July 2020 Japan also, at long last, imposed a fee on plastic shopping bags. As a result, furoshiki, the ultimate eco-friendly item, are being reappraised. Furthermore, as interest in “cool Japan” increases around the world, furoshiki are attracting attention both as a smart eco-friendly item and as an aspect of Japanese culture.

An arabesque design

Q: How have the designs and patterns changed over the centuries?

Originally it is thought that furoshiki were made by dyeing family crests or trade names onto plain cloth. For wedding-ceremony furoshiki, wealthy people used auspicious designs, such as pine, bamboo, and plum, cranes and turtles, or combinations of lucky items. Among them, the arabesque design became overwhelmingly popular. The



arabesque design, which was transmitted to Japan via the Silk Road, has been used for a long time on such occasions as wedding ceremonies, with the pattern likening the life force of plants to the prosperity of offspring or success in business. Indeed, when Japanese people think of furoshiki, it is the widely recognized arabesque design that comes to mind.



In addition, Japan has four clear-cut seasons, so many furoshiki designs employ beautiful scenes of nature. Enjoying this seasonal feeling can be said to be a very Japanese aesthetic sense.

A furoshiki with a scenic design and an image of how it might be used

In the days when furoshiki were carried by people wearing kimono, basically the colors and patterns had a highly Japanese texture. In recent years, however, designs have changed a lot. For example, there are designs made in collaboration with designers and artists in various fields, and many character-based designs are beginning to appear as well. Furoshiki are continuing to change in response to the fashions and lifestyles of the time. Nowadays we can enjoy furoshiki covering a wide range of tastes, from traditional patterns to modern designs.



Example of a modern design

How to use furoshiki (basic techniques)

Q: Is it difficult to use furoshiki?

No, it's not difficult at all. If you know the two basic knots, *ma-musubi* [square knot] and *hitotsu-musubi* [single knot], you can use furoshiki perfectly well. Ma-musubi is an essential knot for using furoshiki in the normal way. It is exceptionally reliable. Once you have tied it, it won't come undone. The hitotsu-musubi knot is used when you want to use the furoshiki like a bag. The range of furoshiki arrangements is widened. Please watch the video about these two knots.



Video: <https://youtu.be/RYdVvvq525Q>

Wrapping with these knots is not difficult. Among the basic techniques, there is *otsukai-zutsumi*, which employs the ma-musubi knot and is used for a wide range of wrapping, from lunch boxes to gifts. Please watch the video.



Video: <https://youtu.be/a23yLamIjK>

If you use the hitotsu-musubi and ma-musubi knots together, you can make all kinds of bags that are popular among young people as well.



Video: <https://youtu.be/RQrHTSNg6oY>

Present-day uses of furoshiki

Q: Recently the colors, designs, and patterns of furoshiki have become enormously varied. What suggestions do you have for enjoying furoshiki?

As gift wrapping, I suggest using a furoshiki, because it does not create any waste. That is to say, the wrapping paper and ribbon are replaced by a single cloth. Another merit of furoshiki is that they can be used in any number of ways to carry square objects, round objects, or multiple objects. Compared with a paper-wrapped gift, a furoshiki-wrapped gift encourages communication and creates a memorable gift scene. Furoshiki wrapping is both environment-friendly and people-friendly, so I very much recommend it.



Video: <https://youtu.be/xhPRA7P0r7Y>



Video: <https://youtu.be/vRGctStk2sk>

Q: Nowadays it is said that everything must be sustainable. What is the relationship between this trend and furoshiki?



Japan also has imposed a charge on plastic shopping bags as a measure to reduce the amount of plastic waste, which is the cause of increasingly serious ocean pollution. As interest increases in efforts to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs], furoshiki wisdom is attracting attention among the young generation in Japan, and attention is rising overseas as well.

As an alternative to plastic shopping bags, furoshiki can be used in place of reusable eco-bags. The good points about furoshiki are that they can be used flexibly to fit the shape and volume of the contents, they can be folded up small and compact when not



being used, and they can also be employed as mats or covers. And another important factor, I think, is that they come in a wealth of colors and designs, so as well as the eco-friendliness, you can enjoy the chicness too.



Video: https://youtu.be/v0Z_B55K7ww

Q: Finally, please tell us about how furoshiki are attracting attention overseas as well in Japan?



In November 2018 an event called Furoshiki Paris was held in the square in front of the Hotel de Ville, which houses the Paris city hall. Tokyo and Paris are sister cities, and this event took place as part of a cultural and art program called Tandem Paris-Tokyo 2018 aimed at deepening friendship between the two

cities. The pavilion, which measured 10 m by 50 m in size, was designed in imitation of a red arabesque furoshiki, suggesting the message that “A large gift has arrived from Japan.” Furoshiki wrapping was also placed on 40 stone statues in the city hall. The

event lasted for a week and attracted a total of 80,000 visitors. It conveyed the idea that through Japanese furoshiki, especially now we want to link the traditions nurtured by our ancestors---that is, an environment-friendly and sustainable lifestyle, a culture that



incorporates art in daily life, and a culture of exchanging gifts to connect people's hearts--to the world and to the future. Young and old, men and women, all kinds of people attended the workshops throughout the day and enjoyed the experience. In addition, since three years ago we have been exhibiting at the Maison & Objet trade show and other events to raise recognition of furoshiki as a common word around the world and to broaden our overseas markets.

Finally, here is a video introducing ways that people can enjoy furoshiki, which add color to our daily lives.



Video: <https://youtu.be/BQCKnCKxXlk>

Editorial Cooperation

- Yamada Sen-I Co., Ltd.
URL: <http://www.ymds.co.jp/> (Japanese)
<https://www.musubi-furoshiki.com/> (English)

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Open: 11:00–19:00
Closed: Wednesdays



- URL: <https://www.kyoto-musubi.com/shopdata/tokyo.html> (Japanese)
<https://www.musubi-furoshiki.com/pages/tokyo-musubi-store> (English)

- Kyoto Musubi Shop
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Open: 11:00–19:00
No fixed holidays



- URL: <https://www.kyoto-musubi.com/shopdata/kyoto.html> (Japanese)
<https://www.musubi-furoshiki.com/pages/kyoto-musubi-store> (English)

(The shops do close in the summer and during the New Year's holidays. Schedules are posted in advance on the website.)