

Our Special Guides for Foreign Dignitaries Delve a Little Deeper into Japan's Attractions!

Carrying on the Exquisite Beauty of Edo *Tsumami-Kanzashi*



Bride's ornamental hairpin



Decorative ball (*kusudama*)

A long time ago, in my childhood, I wore a kimono and made up my hair for the Shichigosan festival for children aged seven, five, and three, and I can still vividly remember that thrilling moment when finally a beautiful *kanzashi* (ornamental hairpin) was put in place. I was absolutely dazzled by how gorgeous just a single *kanzashi* made me look.

Sometimes I have gazed at that *kanzashi*, which my mother carefully preserved, and gasped at its beauty. In ancient times women realized this beautiful power of *kanzashi* and also used to wear them in their hair to ward off evil spirits. This time I decided especially to introduce the world of Edo *tsumami-kanzashi* (literally, pinched ornamental hairpins), a technique that has been carried on since the Edo period (1603–1868) and is now designated as a traditional craft of Tokyo. So I visited Sugino Shoten, commonly known as *Kanzashi Sugino*, and talked with the third-generation president there, Mamoru Sugino, and his wife Satoko Sugino, who is also active as an artist.



Mr. Mamoru and Ms. Satoko Sugino

Attractions of *tsumami-kanzashi*

The craft of *tsumami-kanzashi* involves pinching a small piece of cloth with tweezers, shaping it into a flower petal or something, and combining these shapes into an ornamental hairpin; it really is the magical beauty of tiny pieces of cloth. And it is a

unique craft of Japan.

There are various types of kanzashi, but since the Edo period it is the tsumami-kanzashi that have decorated the hair of girls and women on special occasions celebrating milestones in their lives, such as the Shichigosan festival, coming-of-age events, and wedding ceremonies. These hair decorations are all handmade and one of a kind. The light, gentle texture and varied colors stem from the unique seasonality elicited by the kimono. Although the design itself is not altered very much, the colors of the kimono, obi, *obidome*, and other accessories change delightfully with the seasons. The finishing touch is the kanzashi, which is an accessory encapsulating Japanese beauty. It is well known that *maiko* (apprentice geisha) change their kanzashi every month. The kanzashi is an especially symbolic decoration for their basic desire to add a seasonal sense, so much cherished by the Japanese, to the banquet room.

Historically, the custom of kanzashi began in the early Edo period, when court ladies at the Kyoto Imperial Palace, based on origami techniques, made flower decorations using kimono lining and offcuts. This practice was imitated in Edo (present-day Tokyo). At first it became popular as a new fashion among noblewomen. But then these kanzashi were depicted in ukiyo-e and other works, and later they became the rage among townswomen as well. Tsumami-kanzashi were reasonably priced and beautiful items with vivid colors, so provincial feudal lords, who by law had to reside in Edo in alternate years, often took them back to the provinces as souvenirs.

Edo is famous for having been an environment-friendly society, and tsumami-kanzashi were ahead of their time too. Making use of offcuts after a kimono had been made so as to match the pattern, and kimono lining as well, they can be said to have been a forerunner of the current Sustainable Development Goals.



Shichigosan



Coming-of-age ceremony



Elaborate technique

The term *tsumami-kanzashi* is said to come from the action in which the artisan pinches (*tsumamu*) small and thin pieces of *habutae*, a type of silk used in kimono making, with tweezers. First, the artisan cuts the cloth into squares on a cutting board using a *tachibocho* (long and slender knife). Then there are two basic types of pinching: *marutsumami* (round pinching) and *kakutsumami* (pointed pinching). The texture changes depending on the size of the cloth. Some pinched cloth can measure only one square centimeter. The artisan's expertise lies in the skillful handling of the tweezers.

The pieces of cloth are then combined into various motifs, such as flowers, butterflies, or leaves. These shapes are created by placing the pieces of cloth on a board covered in paste. In Japanese this process is called *tsumami o fuku* (laying the pinched cloth). Interestingly, the same verb as in *yane o fuku* (laying the roof tiles of a house) is used. (Actually, it is because of this paste that the traditional technique of *tsumami-kanzashi* hardly exists anymore. The paste used comes from rice starch, and insects and small rodents tend to chew on it.) After the paste has been applied, there is a wait of a few days until the cloth dries. The difficult task is to assemble the finished parts so that they can be used as a hairpin decoration. The final appearance will differ depending on the arrangement and balance of the parts. One of the attractions of *tsumami-kanzashi* is that, depending on the assembly, there are myriad ways of seeing them.



Marutsumami (round pinching)



Arrangement on paste (*tsumami o fuku*)





Marutsumami (left)



Flower shapes and cloth



Paste and pasting trowel

Kakutsumami (pointed pinching; right)

Video: Preparing the paste <https://youtube.com/shorts/2aknl37x49Q>

Video: Marutsumami <https://youtube.com/shorts/fdprmYYsemY>

Modern enjoyment

Today, following the renewed interest of the young generation in Japanese-style attire, tsumami-kanzashi, an essential part of Japanese-style dress on special occasions, can easily be purchased online. There are more and more opportunities to encounter them when decorating the hair during kimono-wearing experiences too. Meanwhile, geisha in entertainment quarters often order custom-made kanzashi or repair and carefully use kanzashi inherited from their predecessors.

As a new initiative in recent years, the development of the Arenca series of kanzashi has been successful. By purchasing unassembled parts, people can be innovative in their usage, freely arranging them, adjusting the volume, sharing with friends, using them as everyday wear, and so on. The Arenca series, which was awarded the special prize in the FY 2022 Omotenashi Selection, a project to identify outstanding Japanese products, has proposed new kanzashi styles. Resembling a flower arrangement, the packaging can be enjoyed as an interior decoration too. The series is also attracting attention among foreigners as easily purchasable souvenirs.

The Arenca Series



Bouquet (interior decoration)



For use in parts



As a kanzashi



Shochikubai (Pine, Bamboo, Plum)



Hyakka Yaegiku (Flowering Chrysanthemums)



Future challenges

The biggest difficulty is the low birthrate in Japan and lack of artisans to continue the craft. Nowadays the majority of professional tsumami-kanzashi artisans are elderly, and in Tokyo their number has dwindled to fewer than 10. At Sugino Shoten, Satoko Sugino, the wife of the president, Mamoru, spent 2012 and 2013 practicing the tsumami technique under a master artisan, taking advantage of her previous experience as a nail artist. Satoko, who continues to be active as an artist, received the grand prix in the Takumi Tokyo 2021 exhibition. She crafts not only kanzashi for wedding ceremonies but also ball-shaped flower decorations that serve as bouquets for the bride.

While Kanzashi Sugino is a tsumami-kanzashi wholesaler, Mamoru Sugino also holds workshops, believing his mission to be the preservation and transmission of the Edo tsumami-kanzashi craft. He endeavors to introduce the attractions of the craft to the young generation through work experience programs for local elementary school children, seminars for educators, and other events. Furthermore, he does not consider the tsumami craft to be a privilege for women only. On the day of my visit, Mamoru was wearing a tsumami craft brooch that looked great on a man's suit. He appeared very smart and chic, and it certainly added color to the atmosphere. I would like to see such usage spread so that tsumami-kanzashi catch the eye of even more people.



Brooches for men



Bride's bouquet



We don't get much chance to see tsumami-kanzashi and tsumami artisanship in our daily lives, but actually they are not so grandiose at all. There is no need for any special equipment. If you have just a single pair of tweezers, anyone can start quite easily. Indeed, an increasing number of people are making pictures with tsumami craft and enjoying it as a hobby.

You never tire of looking at the beauty of tsumami-kanzashi. It really is like wearing a work of art on your body. In the future, I look forward to seeing more of this beauty of Japan not only on special occasions but also in our daily lives, taking various forms and attracting the attention of as many people as possible. I sincerely hope that the skills of today's artisans can be passed on to the next generation.

Edo tsumami-kanzashi are not as far away as you might think. Those fluffy and soft flowers, they really are pretty!



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Website: <https://sugino.business.site/> (Japanese site only)

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hfqiwnNiMs>

Link: <http://arenca.jp> (Japanese site only)