

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

The Captivating World of Japanese Stationery



Stationery originally referred to equipment for writing, cutting, and pasting, and until now attention has focused on items of stationery that pursued practicability. Recently, however, numerous cute, stylish, and convenient stationery items have appeared, and they are capturing the attention even of people who previously had no interest in stationery at all. Indeed, the Japanese now speak about “catching the stationery bug,” special books and magazines on stationery have been published, and clubs of stationery fans have been launched. Stationery really has taken off as a hobby. Thanks to these people, the range of stationery is expanding, and there are many enchanting items in Japan that will tempt shoppers.



What's more, increasingly people in other countries appear to be catching the stationery bug too. Recently it is said that some foreigners actually visit Japan out of their growing love for stationery. Certainly, when I go to large stationery stores these days, I often see people who look like tourists from overseas enjoying their shopping there.

I visited Cute Things from Japan, a stationery store in Tokyo that is popular among foreigners. The store owner, Ayako Takao, told me that from her childhood she corresponded with pen pals overseas. At that time the overseas pen pals were unable to purchase Japanese stationery, so she searched for online shops in Japan that she could introduce to them. But there were no shops that handled sales in English, and even those shops that did deliver overseas only responded to order requests in Japanese. Realizing how difficult it was for foreigners to make purchases, 10 years ago, in 2014, Ayako began an online shop selling stationery in English. “These days, especially in the United States, the number of online shops and actual physical stores handling Japanese stationery has increased,” she commented, “so I really do feel that the enthusiasm for Japanese stationery has grown over the past decade.”

Why has Japanese stationery come to attract so much attention? Ayako, who herself has experience of living in Canada, told me about the difference. Overseas, she explained, there are few places selling stationery. And even when stationery is on sale, it often occupies the smallest possible space in corners of supermarkets or stores selling office supplies. There are no outlets like stationery stores in Japan, which have a variety of colorful products available in one place and thoughtfully choreograph the space. Even the online shops in Japan display lots of items with exciting colors and designs, and many people are drawn in by their cuteness. In addition, Ayako said, stationery with Japanese-style designs, such as *kokeshi* dolls, beckoning good-luck cats, and Shiba dogs, is popular among foreigners, who enter such sites out of their interest in Japan.

Many foreigners who like Japan also like stationery. Conversely, many foreigners like stationery and, as a result, come to like Japan as well. “Initially we only launched the online store and had no plans to open a physical store,” Ayako explained. “But many of our online customers would come to Japan, and increasingly we were being asked where the shop was, so we ended up opening one. I get the impression that there is considerable overlapping between people who love stationery and people who love Japan.” Apparently, since many customers of the English-language online shop became fans, almost all of the physical shop’s customers are visitors from abroad. I asked Ayako what stationery items were especially popular among these overseas visitors.

Popularity of Japanese notebooks, especially Traveler's and Hobonichi Techo notebooks



Broadly speaking, there are two types of people who like Japanese stationery. There are those whose liking for Japanese stationery comes from writing instruments, such as fountain pens and ballpoint pens, and those who like stationery in general. On the one hand, many people whose love of

Japanese stationery stems from writing instruments use fountain pens, ballpoint pens, and notebooks; they do not use stickers or masking tape very much. On the other hand, a significant proportion of the people who like Japanese stationery in general use either Traveler's notebooks or Hobonichi Techo notebooks, and many of them purchase such items as stickers, masking tape, and seals to decorate their notebooks. "There is a Traveler's Factory shop in Nakameguro that opens at noon," Ayako said. "The other day a group of Americans who were on a tour came shopping here in the morning and said they were then going to the Traveler's shop. There are many people like that."

Japan-born masking tape boom

Masking tape is very popular in Japan. Indeed, Japan is the birthplace of the idea of using this colorful item for decoration. A company called Kamoi Kakoshi Co., Ltd. (kamoi-net.co.jp/en/), which began making fly-catching paper and other products in Okayama, also started manufacturing masking tape for industrial purposes to stick over places



where coloring was to be avoided. Then a group of three stationery-loving women told the company that they wanted it to make masking tape with various different colors, and their request led to product development. "Kamoi Kakoshi is said to have been the first company to manufacture masking tape as a design product," Ayako said. Now such masking tape, called washi tape, is all the rage worldwide and comes in various colors and designs.

Soebumi-Sen



Soebumi-Sen is a set of small envelopes and writing paper made by Furukawa Shiko Co., Ltd., based in Mino City in Gifu Prefecture, with the aim of encouraging more young people to handle washi (traditional Japanese paper). There is a great variety of such sets, which can be used, for example, to express a little thanks or to send a small message along with a present. “This is a popular product overseas as well,” Ayako said. “It allows you to write a short letter on washi paper.”

Tsubame notebooks

The hallmark of Tsubame notebooks, produced by Tsubame Note Co., Ltd. (tsubamenote.co.jp/), is their high-quality paper. At its paper-making factory in



Hokkaido, Tsubame Note uses acid-free foolscap paper* to make its notebooks. The company is extremely fastidious. For example, because water temperature and bacteria in the water affect paper manufacturing, it only uses water in certain months of the year. The company also lines the paper

using a machine that is the only one of its kind remaining in Japan today. “Look closely,” Ayako told me, “and you will see that the lines are not perfectly straight. They are just a little wavy, aren’t they? That is because Tsubame Note still uses this machine for drawing lines that it has been using for ages. An artisan swiftly feeds the paper into the machine and quickly takes it out.” The lines in most ordinary notebooks are made with

offset printing using oil-based ink, so they tend to repel lines drawn with the water-based ink of fountain pens. To prevent this phenomenon, Tsubame Note draws the lines with water-based ink, which apparently does not interfere with the writing. “There are many manufacturers in Japan who, like Tsubame Note, have been making good old-fashioned products for a long time,” Ayako commented. “I think it is a strength of Japanese stationery that, when introducing products, we can talk about such history and stories as well.”

***Tsubame acid-free foolscap paper: Foolscap paper was developed as paper especially for writing. Tsubame Note manufactures Tsubame acid-free foolscap paper at its factory in Hokkaido. The special characteristic of the paper is that the fibers are visible when it is held up to the light. This paper is even better for writing than high-grade paper: it enables smooth writing with pencils, mechanical pencils, ballpoint pens, and fountain pens. In the case of fountain pens in particular, there is very little smudging or bleeding.**

Compared with other countries, apparently there are many stationery makers in Japan, and the stratum runs deep. There are companies like Tsubame Note, which stick to their own unique ways, and there are companies operating on the principle of competition, vying with other makers in turning out even better products one after the other.

Overseas notebooks are limited in variety. Even in the case of hard-cover notebooks, they only have simple horizontal lines. In Japan, as well as their design, many notebooks have various other creative devices too. For example, with ring notebooks, the central ring often brushes against the hand when writing, so to prevent this there are notebooks that deliberately remove the middle spiral. Since there are lots of products with such ingenuity, choosing the right one is fun. And the product lineup is substantial, so it will be easy to find one that meets your needs and is easy to use.



Original products as well

Original products include collaborative items developed by the above-mentioned Tsubame Note and Cute Things from Japan. “One creator [of cover illustrations] attended a stationery event in San Francisco last year and held a workshop there,” Ayako



said. “This year, in the summer, we will be holding a workshop together in New York. We are beginning to organize such overseas events. Until now it was only possible to buy Japanese stationery online. But these overseas events involve makers and creators actually going from Japan and meeting people face-to-face. Going forward, if such events increase, I think Japanese stationery will become even more familiar and even more popular.”

If the popularity of Japanese stationery increases, it could potentially further boost inbound tourism. It may even serve as an important entry point for getting people to fall in love with Japan too.

Welcome to the captivating world of Japanese stationery!

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The stationery items introduced in this article can be purchased at the physical store.

Online shop (English; overseas delivery only): [For your needs for Japanese craft supplies and planner items. – Cute Things from Japan](#)

