

Still Forging Ahead: KIKUCHI HOJUDO

A centuries-old maker of teapots in Yamagata Prefecture continues to cast products of exquisite practicality and beauty which now have admirers around the world. Gavin Blair reports.

Kikuchi Hojudo in Yamagata City, Yamagata Prefecture, specializes in traditional cast iron Japanese teapots. Noriyasu Kikuchi, the cur-

rent president, is the fifteenth generation of his family to run the business.

“The oldest written record of the company dates back to 1604 when Kiheiji Kikuchi got seventeen people together to start to make cast iron products, but we are pretty sure its history is actually even older than that,” explains the current head Kikuchi, who took over the family business at the tender age of twenty-three when his father passed away.

The Kikuchi group made their name making iron candle-holders and other items for shrines. From there the Kikuchis moved into making objects for everyday use such as teapots and sake containers.

“The focus then was on practicality, not just appearance. So for teapots, they had to be light, even though they were made of iron, not reveal how much tea remains when pouring, and make the tea or sake taste good,” says Kikuchi.

By the time of World War II, the Kikuchis’ techniques in working with metal were so well recognized that the company was ordered to make



BOTH PHOTOS BY JEREMY SUTTON-HIBBERT

Kikuchi Hojudo produces teapots in the traditional way, though today some 50% of the iron the company uses is recycled.

grenades for the Japanese Imperial Army.

After the war, Kikuchi Hojudo returned to its roots and now sells its teapots and other products through specialist shops in twelve countries around the world. However, the company has stopped displaying some of its products on the global section of its website, as it found the designs were being imitated in other countries.

Although Kikuchi Hojudo has embraced technology and globalization for its sales channels, in many ways its operations have remained largely unchanged in over four centuries of doing business. The same techniques for smelting and casting metal are passed on from senior workers to juniors over a kind of extended apprenticeship that lasts up to ten years.

“The roots of Kikuchi Hojudo are in the samurai and their Zen philosophy, and the pieces that we make embody that. For example, a simple thing like the spouts on teapots not dripping when being poured; for a samurai who might die the next day, aiming for perfection in everything was the way they lived,” says Kikuchi with obvious pride. The handles on Kikuchi teapots are inspired by the *katana*, or Japanese samurai sword.

Even when the company has updated its products to make them more relevant to modern times and to markets abroad, many of the elements that define the traditional essence and craftsmanship of the Kikuchi brand have been deliberately retained. The brightly colored square-shaped iron teapots, which sell



The bright colors of Kikuchi Hojudo teapots appeal to many users around the world.

for 5,600 yen, are an example of this. Even though the design is angular, the corners are rounded down to avoid sharp edges pointing at people who are sharing tea. Kikuchi explains that this is inspired by the Japanese tea ceremony and its purpose as a communication tool between people.

In recent years, Kikuchi Hojudo has begun using aluminum and has created a set of striking plates and dishes created out of recycled cans, which is now part of a permanent collection at New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

The company has been making efforts to use environmentally friendly manufacturing methods since the 1990s, before many more “modern” companies.

“We use iron that is 50% recycled even though it is more expensive, and we’ve cut CO₂ emissions by 30% since 1990,” says Kikuchi. “The government has called for a 25% cut, but we achieved more than that in 1990.” HJ

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