

# SATO SENI

## Spinning Unique Yarns

*Items in Sato Seni's numerous brands of ladies' clothing and accessories appeal to customers around the world for their meticulous manufacturing. Gavin Blair asked Sato Seni's president and creative director, Masaki Sato, about his philosophy for design.*

When Masaki Sato, fourth-generation president of yarn specialist Sato Seni, set about creating a fashion brand to go with the company's traditional business, he decided to launch it in New York even before making it available at home in Japan. The global visions for M.&KYOKO—founded by and named after Sato and his wife—were clear for a company that began life in the countryside of northeast Japan at the beginning of the twentieth century.

“Our aim was to create a contemporary Japanese brand that doesn't follow European fashion but has its own identity. What makes our company different to many other fashion brands is that we not only design the clothes but also make everything from the yarn to the finished product, as well as do the promotion, in-house,”

explains Sato, who graduated from Tokyo's famously demanding Bunka Fashion College, the alma mater of many of Japan's top designers.

The origins of the company date back to Sato's great-grandfather, who founded it to create an alternative industry in rural Yamagata Prefecture for the long snow-bound winter months when working the land was impossible. Sato Seni span silk for kimonos in its early years, but as Western clothing became the norm in Japan, the company shifted to making woolen yarn.

Although influenced by European styles of knit and yarn, the company continued to innovate and develop its own distinctive varieties of fibers. Much of this innovation relied on making adjustments to old spinning machines to

create threads such as ultra-fine mohair that were believed to be impossible to achieve by others in the industry.

“Since I took over about ten years ago, I've worked on creating unique yarns and variations that don't exist anywhere else,” explains Sato.



Samples of Sato Seni's yarns and weaves

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A wool jacket for a sophisticated lady

“When new machines are developed for our industry, the aim is on efficiency and lowering costs, rather than improving the quality and craftsmanship,” says Sato, pointing out that his company has a different focus.

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With the company’s clothes still made at its factory in Sagae City, Yamagata Prefecture, Sato Seni realized that it couldn’t compete on price with cheaper imported yarn and decided to focus on high-end materials created with an emphasis on *monozukuri* Japanese-style craftsmanship. Sato Seni also uses specialist craftspeople in Niigata, Nagoya and Osaka to create particular textiles. These fibers are used by high fashion labels around the world, including Nina Ricci for the mohair cardigan that Michelle Obama wore for her husband’s historic inauguration ceremony as president of the United States.

In order to source the best raw materials for the company’s products, Sato makes annual pilgrimages around the globe to farms as far afield as South Africa, New Zealand, Australia, South America, Mongolia and China.

“Different wools have different qualities, just like the hair of the different races of human beings,” says Sato, who describes himself as a wool *otaku*, or nerd.

Sato believes that many of the company’s

customers share his almost cultish passion for the attention to every detail that defines its products.

“Maybe only one in a hundred people are interested in our clothes, but those that do like them, really love them. That’s fine with us,” says Sato.

M.&KYOKO now has eight specialist shops in Japan and also sells the brand in Europe and Asia. Sato Seni has also launched other ranges including Masaki Kyoko, a knit accessories



Masaki Sato, president and creative director of Sato Seni

brand; m. by M.&KYOKO, a diffusion brand of M.&KYOKO and FUGA FUGA, a daily ladies knitwear brand.

Sato Seni now has six brands under its umbrella and its president and creative director says his dream is to launch more by collaborating with young designers who will have the chance to create their own ranges while controlling the entire process from start to finish.

“The single most important thing is to pass on the techniques and craftsmanship to the next generation,” says Sato. HJ

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*Gavin Blair is a freelance journalist living in Tokyo who writes for publications in the United Kingdom, United States and Asia.*