

# Enchanted by *Washi*

Rogier Uitenboogaart from the Netherlands has established a guesthouse and *washi* Japanese paper studio in the mountainous region of Yusuhara-cho, Kochi Prefecture. Masako Yamada paid him a visit.



**R**ogier Uitenboogaart first encountered *washi* Japanese paper more than thirty years ago. At that time, while working at a bookbinding company in the Netherlands, he was studying modern art at night at an art university. By chance he saw a sample of some *washi* where he worked and was immediately captivated by its beauty.

“With just one glance I was enchanted beyond words by the beauty of *washi*. I felt a desire to create such paper with my own hands,” Uitenboogaart recalls. “I had almost no interest in the culture and tradition of Japan at that point, but I decided right then and there to go to Japan.”

Uitenboogaart came to Japan by himself less than a year after first seeing *washi*. He visited more than ten paper production areas in various parts of the country and learned about the working styles of *washi* craftsmen. The

production method and materials of *washi* differ by region, and its texture and colors are diverse. While traveling through the production areas he met Chikako, whom he later married, and in the process, he was drawn further into the depth of beauty of *washi*.

“*Washi*, with a 1,500-year history, is engraved with elements that remind us of the culture and history of the production area,” Uitenboogaart says. “The process of Japanese papermaking, among Japan’s many traditional crafts, is deeply connected with mountains, rivers and other natural features. When I look at *washi* I can even feel as if I’m seeing these natural landscapes. *Washi* is a priceless cultural item that was born essentially from local nature and ways of living.”

In 1992 Uitenboogaart established his studio in Yusuhara-cho, Kochi Prefecture. Tosa *Washi*, which dates back over 1,000 years, is made in Kochi, and Yusuhara-cho was a production area of the hybrid mulberry trees and *mitsumata* (Oriental paper bush) used for making it. There are only twenty-five households and fifty people living in the Otado dis-



Rogier Uitenboogaart’s studio and guest house (center) in Yusuhara-cho, Kochi Prefecture

ALL PHOTOS MASATOSHI SAKAMOTO

Rogier Uitenboogaart performs the *washi*-making process called *nagashizuki*. Uitenboogaart is a designated *Tosa no takumi* (master craftsman of the Domain of Tosa [now Kochi Prefecture]).



trict of Yusuhara-cho where his studio is located, and most of the residents are over sixty-five years old.

“This district still has unspoiled Japanese scenery. You can see this exemplified in the terraced rice paddies that used to be found all over Japan. This was the primary reason the area attracted me,” Uitenboogaart says. “What’s more, this town at the headwaters of the Shimanto-gawa river has abundant clear water and the paper mulberry trees and especially the *mitsumata* essential for making *washi*. It is the ideal place to build a studio.”



*Washi* lampshades in the guest house of Rogier Uitenboogaart

*Washi* is said to last over 1,000 years if protected from bugs and moisture. It has been used for traditional Japanese arts such as hanging scrolls and calligraphy accompanied by paintings. These days it is also used as a material for lamp shades and paper artwork. However, Japanese papermaking has continued to decline each year due to the decreasing num-

ber of successors, similar to the circumstances facing other traditional crafts. In view of this situation, Uitenboogaart attempts to enthusiastically convey the charms of *washi* by offering trial Japanese papermaking programs to people who stay at his guesthouse and by holding papermaking classes at local elementary schools. He has also held papermaking workshops in Tokyo and grown the source plants for *washi* on building rooftops. These efforts led to him finding a Japanese female apprentice for his studio last year. Many foreign tourists have visited his studio after learning about his work on the Internet.

“Tourists not only from the Netherlands but also from the United States, China, Australia and other countries have visited my studio to experience Japanese papermaking. Many say they want to see another aspect of Japan in addition to touring Tokyo and Kyoto,” Uitenboogaart says. “They seem to enjoy this Japanese papermaking process that in some ways may seem primitive, and they enjoy it as much as the Japanese do.”



*Masako Yamada is a freelance writer.*