

COVER STORY

From right, clockwise: Liner PCM Recorder PCM-D1 (Sony), Hiroshima (MARUNI WOOD INDUSTRY), Soy sauce dispenser (Kikkoman), Copen (DAIHATSU MOTOR), Pushpin "SOFT PIN" (Kokuyo S&T), Opus-1 (EVERGREEN INTERNATIONAL), name-off (inf.DESIGN), SPLASH (Asano Design Studio)



COURTESY OF SONY



YONEO KAWABE



COURTESY OF INFDESIGN



COURTESY OF ASANO DESIGN STUDIO



COURTESY OF KIKKOMAN

Japanese by Design



COURTESY OF EVERGREEN INTERNATIONAL



COURTESY OF KOKUYO S&T

COURTESY OF DAIHATSU MOTOR



Since World War II, Japanese products have come to be appreciated for their high quality and found fans all over the world. Now, Japanese design is also drawing attention. This applies to diverse areas including fashion, furniture, architecture, food and daily life. The high marks given to diverse designs created in Japan not only reflects beautiful appearance and uniqueness, but also comfort, convenience, and care for users. This month's Cover Story discusses the history, features, and roles of designs created by Japanese that are taking the world by storm, and the thoughts of the people who have dedicated themselves to design.



PHOTO: C-OMEYAN/COURTESY OF JAPAN FOUNDATION

WA: The Spirit of Harmony and Japanese Design Today at the Japan Cultural Institute in Paris, France

Between 2008 and 2011, *WA: The Spirit of Harmony and Japanese Design Today Exhibition* (hereafter, “WA Exhibition”), hosted by the Japan Foundation, toured France, Hungary, Germany, Poland and South Korea, to a tremendous response in each of the countries. About 160 products selected by four curators were exhibited, in diverse fields including tableware, home appliances, stationery, clothing and vehicles.

“Japanese designs created in recent years have been founded on the spirit of harmony. Things that appear remote have fused to create a design, such as urban and rural, traditional craft and high-tech, and Japanese and Western,” says Professor Hiroshi Kashiwagi of Musashino Art University, who is among the curators of the WA Exhibition. “For example, a designer who lives in a large city collaborated with persons working in local traditional in-

dustry to create a product. Initiatives like this have been made all over Japan.”

There are characteristics peculiar to contemporary Japanese design. In the WA Exhibition, about 160 works were grouped into twelve categories and based on six keywords. One of the keywords is “*kawaii* (cute).” In the WA Exhibition, “*kawaii*” cars, stationery and other products were exhibited.

“The Japanese word ‘*kawaii*’ has been translated as cute. These days, the scope of designs described as *kawaii* has widened significantly,” says Professor Kashiwagi. “Something that is feminine, fragile and soft can also be described as *kawaii*.”

Among the other characteristics attributed to Japanese design are “craft” (lighting, tea cups and other traditional crafts have been made with new techniques and materials), “fine-grained” (fine workmanship exemplified by hairline finishing on metal



Japanese people have long cherished small items, such as *netsuke*.



In Japan, ordinary people have incorporated beauty into their daily lives with the use of crafts such as lacquerware.

surfaces), “tactile” (care for the touch on products), “minimal” (simplicity without decoration), and “thoughtful” (consideration for users).

“I visited the Exhibition when it was held in *Maison de la culture du Japon à Paris*. Visitors were looking at the exhibits with great enthusiasm, and this left a deep impression on me. I met with *Germain Viatte*, who formerly served as the director of *Centre Pompidou*. He praised the exhibition strongly, calling it wonderful and beautiful,” says Professor *Kashiwagi*. “And many people were asking where they could purchase the exhibited products. I hope there will be more shops overseas that handle products with excellent design. For example, furniture made in Japan has been accepted worldwide, and it seems to have excellent potential.”


Beauty of Japanese design

What is the history behind these characteristics of Japanese design? Cultural critic *Masakazu Yamazaki* has mentioned three features of the beauty of tradi-

tional Japanese design formed prior to the Meiji period (1868–1912). The first is a love of the miniature. The Japanese people have cherished small items. Examples include *netsuke*, bonsai and tea cups. Second is the beauty found in daily life. In Japan, ordinary people have incorporated beauty into their everyday lives. Lacquerware and *ukiyo-e* prints are just two examples.

The third feature of Japanese designs is that they may be appreciated in the hand. In the West, works of art are viewed from a distance, but in Japan, traditional craft works of art may be carried with the owner and enjoyed. *Yamazaki* points out that there is no borderline between fine art and applied art in Japan. For example, fans were invented in Japan and brought to China and the West. They are portable and held in the hand. If decorated elaborately, a fan becomes a high-grade work of art.

Designs of traditional beauty of Japan influenced European design also. Japonism was a popular movement in European art that arose around the mid-nineteenth century, influenced by *ukiyo-e* prints and other craft works of Japan. For example, the beauty of curved lines and nature found in the *Art Nouveau* style also show the influence of Japonism.

It may be concluded that the long history of Japanese design has supported contemporary Japanese design. 



Many fine Japanese craft works can be used and enjoyed in the hand.