

THE ENGLISH RESTORATION

AN INTERVIEW WITH CEO OF KONISHI
DECORATIVE ARTS AND CRAFTS
DAVID ATKINSON



David Atkinson graduated from the University of Oxford with a degree in Japanese Studies. He worked for many years in Japan as an analyst at Goldman Sachs. He is the author of numerous books, among them last year's bestseller *Shin-kankō rikkoku ron* (New strategies for a tourism-oriented country). Atkinson is pictured here in Konishi's Tokyo office. Behind him is a painting of the kind in which Konishi specializes.

Photo: Yuichi Itabashi

DAVID Atkinson is CEO of Konishi Decorative Arts and Crafts, a 380-year-old Tokyo-based company which restores national treasures. When the retired banking analyst assumed the role in 2009, Konishi was on the verge of bankruptcy. Seven years later, the company is in rude financial health and Atkinson finds himself serving on a range of government committees concerned with boosting tourism. In a frank interview, Atkinson explains the nature of his company's work and how Japan might better leverage its cultural properties.

What exactly does Konishi do?

We restore mainly the outsides of temples and shrines, mostly shrines. We employ sixty-five full-time craftsmen and usually have about twenty projects running at the same time all over the country. Most of our business is with the top end of the listed building spectrum, and the vast majority of our contracts come via government auction. Although the kind of lacquering, painting and gilding we do is a very specialized business, companies employing only two or three people with no experience are also able to bid for these contracts and compete mainly on price. When, for example, we strip old lacquer from buildings, we strip by hand. This involves a time-consuming chipping process in which feel is important. If you use electric sanders, as one of our competitors does, you can take away a millimeter or so of wood beneath the lacquer. A building can only be restored to the level of the last restoration. Thus, what I try to instill in our staff is the need to produce their very best work that will set a standard for those who come after them.

How do your employees acquire their skills?

For a while Konishi hired people with university degrees, but none of those people stayed around for very long so I stopped that. Now we generally take in 18-year-olds who have no prior knowledge

and therefore no baggage. They gain experience through spending their whole lives working on buildings at the top end of the heritage spectrum. Authentic listed buildings are authentic because they preserve a now not commonly used methodology. If you update the methodology you negate the very reason you are doing the work. We hear a lot in Japan about the importance of passing on skills. It's easy to say, but what it actually means is getting out there and hiring young people, giving them jobs and finding them work to do.

You serve on a number of government committees...

In an effort to get the government to spend more money on cultural heritage, I wrote a book on tourism last year that has become a massive bestseller and which resulted in me being asked to join a number of government committees, the most important of which was the [Meeting of the Council for the Development of a Tourism Vision to Support the Future of Japan]. Heritage is not the only thing that creates a tourism strategy, but if you don't have a tourism strategy then it's relatively difficult to come up these days with a good heritage strategy. At too many cultural properties in Japan there is no explanation, nowhere to sit or eat and drink, no related cultural events, no real reasons for people to come back. Too many places charge low admission fees, reflecting a total lack of presentation. This sense of entitlement that culture is something that should be paid for and not something that owners should work at is one of our biggest challenges. This mindset will change. If Japan hopes to meet the new 40 million inbound tourists by 2020 target, there is no alternative. █

Inverview by ALEX HENDY
