



BRUSH WORK

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In the Hiroshima Prefecture town of Kumano, craftsmen continue to use traditional techniques for the production of the brushes to which they give their name, *Kumano-fude*.



JAPANESE calligraphy, or *shodo*, is the art of expressing characters with writing brushes and India ink. In calligraphy, the run and the blur of the brush strokes are of great significance, so *fude* brushes must possess very delicate qualities indeed. Japan's largest output of brushes for not only calligraphy but also painting and cosmetics are *Kumano-fude* made in the Hiroshima Prefecture town of Kumano, which has a population of about 25,000.

The techniques for making Kumano-fude have their roots in industrial promotion policies implemented by the Hiroshima Domain at the close of the Edo period (1603-1867). Until the end of the Edo period, Japanese used brushes not just for calligraphy but in all forms of writing, from personal letters to official documents, so brushes were produced all over Japan. After modernization began in the Meiji period (1868-1912), however, writing instruments such as pencils, fountain pens and in due course ballpoint pens came into wider use. As a result, brushes were rarely used except for calligraphy, and the craft of brush making waned nationwide. Tradition has it that the craft didn't die out in Kumano-cho because the region was a basin surrounded by mountains, making it difficult for new industries to enter.

Even now, craftspeople involved in brush making account for a tenth of the population. About 1,500 artisans in Kumano-cho are engaged in making brushes, and twenty-two such artisans have been recognized as Certified Traditional Artisans by the national government.

"The ability to tell the difference among the strands is the most important skill," says Tokuzen Sanemori, a Certified Traditional Artisan. "This skill alone takes at least ten years to master." Sanemori has been practicing his craft for forty-seven years, succeeding to it from his grandfather's generation. Sanemori's own son, Tokuo, works alongside his father as a Certified Traditional Artisan.

Brushes made in other countries use only one or two types of animal fur. The hallmark of Japanese brushes is that they're made with a combination of seven to eight types of fur. The principle types are goat, horse, tanuki (raccoon dog) and weasel fur. Needless to say, the characteristics of the fur differ depending on the type of animal, and even the characteristics of fur strands from a single goat will differ depending on whether they come from the neck or tail. The overriding key to making high quality brushes lies in discerning the quality of the respective strands and combining them just right.

Ash from burned rice chaff is mixed with selected strands, to which a flat iron called a *hinoshi* is then applied. They are then wrapped in buckskin and rubbed together in order to remove any excess oils and impurities. Oil which remains will repel ink, but removing too much will make the strands brittle and shorten the life of the brush. Long years of experience are required in order to discern just the right level of oil to retain.

The strands are then combed to remove the fluff, and little by little they become aligned. After the ends of the strands are perfectly aligned, they are cut with a short knife, and the poor quality strands are removed, with great care being taken to retain only the highest quality strands.

The strands are then cut into five lengths since the brush will form a cone, into which the brush will be shaped by building up strands of different lengths. As a thin glue is applied, the strands of differing lengths are then combined together evenly. The strands are then inserted into a tube of a standard width depending on the standard size of the brush and in this way separated into individual brushes before being dried. During the finishing stage, each group of strands is wrapped in soft, fine strands and evened out overall before the base end is tied with hemp string and singed with a hot iron to bind it fast.

"The 'taste' of the brush is different depending on where and how each strand of fur is used," says Sanemori. "You can't make a brush unless you can make this subtle distinction. In the end, it's a matter of building up your experience. You have to look, feel, and through trial and error, master it with your entire being." 

1 Tokuzen Sanemori, a Certified Traditional Artisan engaged in making brushes for some forty-seven years.

2 Poor quality strands are removed using a knife.

3 Cosmetics brushes on display at Fudenosato Kobo in Kumano-cho.

4 Various events are staged at the Kumano-cho brush festival held every September, including brush sales, calligraphy exhibitions and performances in which huge brushes are used to write characters on massive sheets of cloth.