

Beijing showcases China’s design potential

Chinese history and artisanship inspire Japanese creators

DANIELLE DEMETRIOU
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Akiyuki Sasaki sits among his furniture creations — sofas, chairs, tables, all natural woods, clean lines and minimal forms with a nature-inspired palette of textiles — that at first sight feel unquestionably Japanese.

Yet there are subtle clues that this is no conventional Japanese brand, as the designer explains while picking up a small oak stool and running a finger along its gently curved sides.

“See this H-shape?” he asks. “It was inspired by a very old Chinese coin dating back thousands of years, which I saw in the National Museum (of China) in Beijing. My furniture has a lot of soft, flowing lines inspired by the Qing (1636-1912) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties.”

The stool is just one of many examples of Chinese-inspired designs showcased in Ika-sas, a furniture brand set up by Sasaki three years ago. The pieces mix inspiration from China’s rich cultural heritage with qualities so often found in Japanese design — a natural, minimalist aesthetic, craftsmanship, high quality materials and attention to detail.

And Sasaki is not alone. China is emerging as a rich source of creative inspiration for a growing number of contemporary Japanese designers, thanks to its dynamic design scene and a new generation of Chinese creatives shaking up the status quo with raw-edged innovation. Testament to this is the presence of a string of Japanese names — from Muji’s cult art director Kenya Hara to architect Shuhei Aoyama — peppering a flurry of recent high-profile design events in Beijing, a city in the throes of a creative renaissance. Even one of the best design hotels, The Opposite House, was created by a top Japanese name: Kengo Kuma.

Sasaki’s Ikasas was one standout exhibitor



Above left to right: Designer Akiyuki Sasaki of Ika-sas and his Yue series of furniture. COURTESY OF IKASAS

at Design China Beijing, a major new trade fair (and sister event to the wildly popular Design Shanghai) organized by Media 10 Ltd. The event launched last month, showcasing 92 exhibitors in the city’s National Agricultural Exhibition Center.

It was 15 years ago that Tokyo-born Sasaki, now 37, traveled to China for the first time while working with his late uncle Toshimitsu Sasaki, an acclaimed Japanese designer. It was a trip that would have a far-reaching impact on his life.

“I was visiting a factory in Shanghai,” says Sasaki, whose creations have already won accolades, including a Kids Design Award. “And I had assumed that China and Japan would have a lot in common — but I was deeply struck by how very different they are from one another. Since then, I’ve visited many museums across China and I am very inspired by what I’ve seen.”

A growing passion for China led Sasaki to set up the furniture brand Ika-sas, with a philosophy he describes as “complexity in brevity” as inspired by “oriental aesthetics.”



Sasaki’s interior furniture collections — minimal pieces in natural oak and walnut woods — are manufactured at a factory in Dalian, in southern Liaoning Province, and, aside from occasional pieces available at the lifestyle goods store Actus in Japan, they are mainly sold in China.

“In the past, Japanese and Chinese have had different taste in furniture,” says Sasaki, who also opened a concept space “930 lifestyle store” in Shanghai last year. “For most Chinese, there was this idea that the bigger, the better, whereas Japanese have often found elegance in simplicity. Now, as a growing number of Chinese travel overseas and broaden their horizons, there is perhaps growing appeal for similar tastes and styles as in Japan.”

For Japanese architect Aoyama, it was a sense of creative curiosity that initially led to his first visit to Beijing 15 years ago, shortly after graduating from university in Tokyo.

“A lot of architects had just started to become interested in Beijing, because of the Olympic Games and big name projects such as the Birds Nest (Olympic Stadium), CCTV Headquarters, National Theatre (National Centre for the Performing Arts),” he says. “I just wanted to see what was happening in the city, so I decided go to Beijing on an internship.”

As with Sasaki, it proved to be a fateful trip. Tapping into the energy of a city in a state of dynamic flux, today Aoyama runs the Beijing-based company B.L.U.E Architecture Studio, while living in a traditional hutong home in the heart of the city.

Highlights of B.L.U.E Architecture Studio’s oeuvre include the renovated Lost and Found furniture boutique in Beijing, a serene, minimalist space of glass, wood and traditional gray roof tiles centered around an inner courtyard in a historic district of

the city. Meanwhile, a tall box-like structure with a glass facade currently sits just meters from Beijing’s iconic Olympic Stadium as part of the innovative “House Vision 2018” exhibition of architecture, as curated by Kenya Hara.

Commenting on wildly contrasting creative climates in Japan and China, Aoyama says: “In Japan, the economy has been bad for decades and the population is declining. More and more houses are vacant and cities are shrinking, so Japanese designers are thinking about how to shrink. In China, the economy is still growing, cities are still growing, and designers need to think about how to control expansion.”

He added: “I think in China, people and society are just starting to realize the value of design. More and more people and enterprises are starting to place emphasis on design. On the contrary, in Japan, more and more people seem to be uninterested in design.”

With new-generation talents energetically redefining the “Made in China” label, it was perhaps only a matter of time before China emerged as a major source of inspiration for young global designers, according to Ross Urwin, the creative director of Design China Beijing.

“What does ‘Made in China’ mean today?” he asks. “For me, it means amazing quality, amazing innovation. It is the opposite of everything that in the past people criticized China for. Things have changed completely.

“If you go to any of the design shows here, you see such creativity. I love the fact that most designers are now looking toward their history and their heritage.”

For more information on Design China Beijing and House Vision 2018, visit www.designchina-beijing.com and <http://house-vision.jp>.



Retro Japan makes another comeback

Well that works

Bagworks Co., Ltd. carries a lot of baggage — but in a good way. Established in 1954, it has been designing and making specialized backpacks and totes, medical bags, luggage items and other custom-order utility bags for decades. When it launched Bag-



works, its own lifestyle brand in 2012, it came as no surprise that the entire range drew inspiration from real workers’ bags, including some classic versions. With names like Milkman, Electricman and Newspaperman, each Bagworks remake retains the functional features of its namesake’s original, but has been tweaked to fit a contemporary lifestyle. One of the brand’s first designs, the minimalist tote Milkman (pictured above ¥6,264), for example, is almost identical to a Showa-Era (1926-89) milk-delivery person’s bag. It’s made of durable waterproof tarpaulin, has extra-strong wide straps and an inner pocket that formally would have been used to store loose change. It even has eyelet holes in its base, which originally allowed any milk spillages to drain.

Bagworks’ newest addition to a line up of around 20 styles, which even includes a tarpaulin remake of a convenience store



plastic carrier, is the Fisherman (pictured left, ¥10,800). Like an angler’s tote, it’s waterproof inside and out and is ideal for the dreary wet weather ahead. It also has watertight zips and can be rolled up for easy storage. The Fisherman isn’t available to purchase yet, but keep an eye on the Bagworks website for more details.

www.bagworks.co.jp

Double-sided visions

Tenugui (small cotton towels), which have been around since the Heian Period (794-1185), became particularly popular by the Edo Period (1603-1868). Though less commonly used as towels today, their colorful printed designs still make them attractive gift wrappings, wall hangings, table runners and even scarves. Taking all of this to heart, textile dyeing company Takeno Senko Ltd. was inspired by *kasane no irome* — the meticulously chosen color combinations of robes that were worn in layers by Heian court women — for its Hirali lineup of new-style tenugui (¥1,404, pictured).



The concept may hark back to earlier times, but the series’ distinctively modern approach to traditional motifs turns patterns into an array of bold geometric shapes and stripes in both vivid and pastel colors.

The real innovation, though, comes in the form of technique: Hirali fabrics are double-sided dyed, meaning that unlike other tenugui, which are printed on one side only, there’s no less-attractive “reverse” side. It sounds simple, but ensuring that pigment applied to the flip-side of a textile doesn’t bleed through to ruin or change the color and pattern on the other side is no mean feat.

In fact, 60-year-old artisan Eiji Kakuno is currently the only tenugui dyeing expert who has achieved and perfected the process.

Printed using a specialized roller dyeing machine, Kakuno’s tenugui not only sport sharply defined patterns on both sides, but those patterns are completely different colors. The dye has to saturate the cotton to achieve an even finish and yet somehow there is no overlapping or bleeding. Kakuno is now also applying this technique to different textiles, having just released a range of Hirali gauze stoles and absorbent kitchen towels.

<http://takenosenko.jp/hirali>

Hightide for Showa

Stationery manufacturer Hightide is having a very nostalgic moment. Actually, with their frequent nods to no-frills old-school office supplies, quite a lot of Hightide’s series of folders, pen cases, diaries and other desk items evoke fond memories of a more analog past. But the company’s New Retro lineup goes the whole hog.



Launched last summer, New Retro’s initial products looked like they came straight out of Japan’s Showa Era (1926-89): soft-cover pocket notebooks with tiny pencils tucked into the spines, PVC book covers with heat-bonded edges, plastic *odôgu-bako* stationery boxes, and leather kisslock change purses — almost all printed with gold lettering and a bird logo.

This year, Hightide added plastic ballpoint pens and small cases, and also brought the brand into the present by applying the retro designs to iPhone cases. With prices ranging from ¥281 for a pen to ¥2,808 for the notebook-style iPhone case (pictured top right), New Retro is a charming celebration of how some things that were once considered “cheap and cheerful” but functional can still be design classics.



<http://hightide.co.jp/newretro>

No kidding: Goats prefer to interact with happy faces

LONDON
REUTERS

Goats shown happy and angry human faces prefer the happy ones, according to research published by a team of life scientists from Britain, Germany and Brazil.

The study, led by Alan McElligott at London’s Queen Mary University, is among the first to provide evidence that goats can read human expressions. Dogs, horses and pandas can also distinguish between facial expressions, similar studies have shown.

Researchers tested 20 goats at Buttercups Sanctuary for Goats in Maidstone, Kent, using pairs of black-and-white photographs of the same person. The photos, pinned at one end of a gated arena about 1.3 metres apart, included one of a person smiling and another of the same person looking angry. Researchers found the happy pictures led to greater interaction from the goats that looked at the images, for instance, by examining them with their snouts.

“The goats really did stop in the enclosure and look at the photographs and examined them closely,” says McElligott. “They didn’t just walk over and try to pull the photographs off the wall or chew on them.”

McElligott, who now works at the University of Roehampton, says the study has implications for understanding how animals process human emotions: “These findings have important implications for our understanding of livestock in general, not just animals that were domesticated as pets or companion animals such as dogs and horses. We hope our research can now go forward using species such as sheep or cattle or pigs.”

McElligott also hopes the study may help change our understanding of goats.

“There’s a public perception of goats being stupid,” he says. “So for the public to realize that they can actually tell the difference between an angry and a happy face, we hope (this) will promote good animal welfare for this species.”

The study found that the goats were more inclined to approach a happy face if it was positioned on the right of their enclosure, suggesting that, like humans, they use the left hemisphere of their brains to process positive emotion.

“What we would like to do is determine if goats can tell the difference between various human voices. For example, between familiar and unfamiliar people,” says McElligott, who is planning the next stage of research. “Also if they can tell the difference between an angry versus a happy human voice because that has important implications on how farmers interact with livestock.”

The study, which McElligott co-authored with Christian Nawroth at Queen Mary University, Natalia Albuquerque and Carine Savalli from Brazil’s University of Sao Paulo, and Marie-Sophie Single from the Technical University of Munich, was published in the journal Royal Society Open Science.



Watch your back: A goat stands on a woman’s back, in a still image taken from a video of a party in Los Angeles REUTERS

Los Angeles’ new party animals

LOS ANGELES
REUTERS

Spanky and Pippin are literally party animals in the Los Angeles nightlife scene. The Nigerian Dwarf goats are professional party-goers, bringing their special brand of magic to city celebrations and starry soirees.

So-called goat mom Scout Raskin, a lifelong animal lover and former child actor, set up Party Goats LA in early 2017 and charges \$99 an hour to bring her goats to a party or event. One of the most popular interactions with the goats at parties is to have them jump onto revelers’ backs while they kneel on all fours.

“They’re so friendly and they’re just so nice to be around, because you can definitely tell they love humans and they are just a lot of fun,” says student Torian Mylott, who found the goat experience fun and therapeutic.

Despite being the same breed and age, the goats have very different personalities.

“Usually people have their favorites,” Raskin says. “Some love Pippin because he’s really cute, but he’s the cute dumb one. Others really like Spanky because he’s more chill and quiet and they feel like they can connect with him.”

Both goats appear unfazed by loud music and crowds of people says Raskin, who has taken them to parties where she was at first a little concerned about their reaction. “Pippin fell asleep and was totally calm and chill in that environment, and it didn’t seem to hurt their ears or anything like that,” she says.

Before hitting the town, Raskin dresses the goats in purple, lace-cuffed velvet jackets and neckbands and wraps their horns in brightly colored tape, for decoration and safety.

Then they’re ready for the party you’ve just got to goat to.