Special Feature

The Ties Binding the Heart of Japan
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niponica is published in Japanese and six other languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish) to introduce to the world the people and culture of Japan today.

The title niponica is derived from “Nippon,” the Japanese word for Japan.

 niponica is published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2-2-1 Kasumigaseki, Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 100-8919, Japan.
https://www.mofa.go.jp/

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Mizuhiki decorations tied in the shape of cranes, which are venerated as symbols of longevity, and the plum blossom that adorns early spring.

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Ties in Japan: Symbolizing Various Hopes

Ties through a prayer

The massive Gotobiki-iwa boulder tied with shimenawa, a Shinto straw rope, marks a sacred location on a precipitous cliff called Amanoiwatate. This is where the local gods are said to have first descended to earth.

Kamikura Shrine (Kumano Hayatama Taisha Shrine) / Wakayama Prefecture

Photos: PIXTA

① A mighty shimenawa, made by tying an enormous volume of straw that has been devotedly grown from rice plants.

Izumo Ooyashiro (Izumo Grand Shrine) / Shimane Prefecture

② Two rocks joined with shimenawa resemble a married couple at each other’s side. This Moto Iwa, literally meaning “wedded rocks,” symbolizes a happy marriage and family.

Futami Okitama Shrine / Mie Prefecture

Photos: niponica
Tying together relationships

Weddings tie new relationships between groom and bride and their respective families. The white strings seen on the bride’s bustline are tied with a tight awaji-musubi which cannot unravel easily.

Tying together landscapes

Bamboo nodes are lined up and tied with black ropes with careful consideration paid to the balance and harmony with the surrounding landscape.

Take-no-Michi (Bamboo Road) / Kyoto Prefecture

Tying adornments

Having evolved as decoration from around the 8th century, kumihimo literally meaning “braided strings,” were later used as sturdy cords to support heavy armor weighing several dozen kilograms.

Forging bonds through heartfelt gifts

Strings called mizuhiki, created by twisting washi (Japanese traditional handmade paper), are tied in the shape of auspicious plum blossoms to wrap betrothal monetary gifts.

Tsuda Mizuhiki Orikata / Ishikawa Prefecture
Forging Bonds Through Heartfelt Gifts

Gifts are given to extend congratulations to someone dear for us, or to express feelings of appreciation to someone who has been helpful and supportive to us. The culture of exchanging gifts is a cherished, time-honored custom in Japan. The origata tradition that lives on today, embodies those sentiments and customs; and, mizuhiki decorations are used to adorn places of celebration.

Origata, with a 600-year history, is a protocol with detailed rules that instruct how gifts are wrapped and tied with strings. This protocol was passed down among samurai families as a form of etiquette, and later it entered into the lives of the common people as well.

Gifts are wrapped in a way so that recipients can open them easily with their dominant hand. The giver extends their consideration for the recipient by leaving a part unwrapped, thereby allowing the recipient to see the contents partially.

Scissors are never used for origata, even with the most intricate wrapping designs. Rather, items are wrapped by folding washī (Japanese traditional handmade paper) in multiple layers. The size and quality of the washī express respect and are selected to reflect the quality of the gift and the status of the recipient. Elegant and pure white washī is most typically used, but this is sometimes layered with several sheets of pastel washī to provide further formality.

Court nobles used hemp or silk string to tie the wrapping, while samurai used koyori, which is string made by twisting thin washī. In later years, it became popular to use red and white or silver and gold mizuhiki strings hardened with starch.

Origata has long been part of traditional Japanese culture, having been passed down through the generations. The type of origata used is determined by what kind of gift is to be wrapped; however, the sentiment behind origata is not bound by its forms and is actually quite liberal. The regard for others that underpins the custom of gift-giving continues to live on in the hearts of the Japanese people today.

Yamane Kazuki, Head of the Yamane Origata School

Yamane Kazuki devotes himself in spreading the historically grounded principles and charm of origata methods so washī culture may be incorporated into people’s modern lifestyles. “Origata is about making the effort and keeping good faith to better relationships with others,” he says. “Regard for others is what underlies the unbroken tradition of origata.”

All works on p.8-9 are by Yamane Kazuki.
**Mizuhiki Decorations**

*Mizuhiki* is made by twisting thinly-cut *washi* (Japanese traditional hand-made paper) strips to form a string and then hardening this with starch. This makes it not only pliant, but it also has a sturdiness preventing it from breaking easily and allowing it to be tied into various forms.

There are several theories about how *mizuhiki* originated in Japan, but it is said to have started in the early 7th century, when hemp threads dyed red and white were used to wrap offerings to the Imperial Court of Japan. As *mizuhiki* gradually started being used in place of threads, it became possible to tie elaborate decorative knots and uniquely evolved thereafter.

In Japan, when couples become engaged, there is a traditional rite called *yuino* for both families to meet and forge a new bond. The custom here is to exchange betrothal gifts, which embody special sentiments and are beautifully adorned with *mizuhiki* decorations.

Cranes and turtles that symbolize longevity, pine and bamboo that are vibrantly green even in the winter, and plum blossoms that flower before spring are auspicious motifs in Japan. These *mizuhiki* decorations which adorn the celebratory occasion are indispensable to betrothal gifts.

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**Left:** The basic *mizuhiki* knot for a celebration. *Awaji-musubi* is difficult to unravel once tied.

**Middle:** *Musubi-kiri* is used when one wants to convey congratulations more casually.

**Right:** *Yorikaeshi* symbolizes the wish for successive good fortune, like a sequence of waves. This is used for celebrations other than marriage.

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Mizuhiki decorations are used as elaborate adornments during celebrations. Taking betrothal gifts as some examples, let’s look at the congratulatory sentiments expressed with each item.

**Tomoshiraga**
Tomoshiraga literally means “together until gray haired.” This is tied with sturdy hemp thread that won’t break and symbolizes the wish that husband and wife will live happily together into old age.

**Betrothal monetary gift**
Money is placed in a box inside the wrapping. The amount is written in a single stroke so the number cannot be altered afterward, a custom that remains to this day.

**Ring case**
Festive *awaji-musubi*, a *mizuhiki* decoration which is perfect for a heartfelt gift.

**Suehiro**
*Suehiro* refers to a traditional fan used in ceremonial occasions. This represents the wish that both families will continue to prosper and live happily for many years to come. *Mizuhikinomi* in Suehiro is approximately 90 cm, and is never cut, because it is considered to be the bond itself. If it is too long, the tips are curled up for adjustment.

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Tsuda Mizuhiki Orikata, with around 100 years of history since its founding, follows the basics of traditional origata, but they have also incorporated creativity and ingenuity into their beautiful work of *mizuhiki* decorations. This maintains the tradition of tying together sentiments of celebration while also blending in with the modern lifestyle.

The photo is of the fifth-generation proprietor, Tsuda Rokusuke.

“Betrothal gifts are precious in establishing a bond between the families of the bride and groom,” he says. “Each gift has different meaning, and we tie the *mizuhiki* decorations from our heart. Our commitment to making these as beautiful as possible adds to the celebration.”

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All works are by Tsuda Mizuhiki Orikata, in Ishikawa Prefecture.
Embracing Style

Obi-musubi (Sash knots)

With the arrival of the 18th century, Edo (present-day Tokyo) grew to a population of one million and became one of the top consumer cities in the world. As warfare ceased and society became peaceful, prospering tradesmen and artisans began to foster culture amidst remarkable progress in the economy.

Ori-musubi came into fashion around this time as well. Before then, obi was nothing more than a belt that tied the kimono. It gradually evolved to a broader, longer item—an accessory that people used not just for function, but also to look stylish. Obi became more elaborate with variations in weave, color, and pattern, which triggered trends in new ways to tie them.

There was also a social class system at the time, classified by occupation—samurai, farmers, craftsmen, and merchants—and so forth by how someone tied their obi. Within those rules, people were creative and expressed their own sense of style with a diversity of obi-musubi.

It is said that there are now over a hundred ways to tie obi, but most are variants of knot styles born in the Edo period (1603–1868). This culture has been passed down through the generations.

Sasajima Sumi researches obi culture and studied the art of wearing kimonos in the context of classical performing arts. For half a century, she has examined the history and significance of obi-musubi in Japanese culture as she has taught and demonstrated, both in Japan and abroad, how to wear a kimono. To her, tying an obi is “akin to embracing the individual’s spirit and straightening oneself,” she says.

Hishikawa Moronobu is said to be a forebear of the ukiyo-e (Japanese woodblock prints) genre. His depiction of a woman in the Edo period pausing in motion and looking back gives us a glimpse of the fashion trends of the time. The edges of the tied obi droop to the left and right in a way known as kichiya-musubi, which was introduced by Uemura Kichiya, a popular onnagata (male kabuki actor who plays female roles). The young women of Edo were enamored with this obi-musubi style.

The bunko-musubi can be tied tightly and does not unravel easily. The modest yet dignified look was meant to signify the vitality of a samurai family woman.

This femininely-puffy and gently-looking tsunodashi-musubi is a knot style of the townsfolk.

The bunko-musubi can be tied tightly and does not unravel easily. The modest yet dignified look was meant to signify the vitality of a samurai family woman.

Tsunodashi-musubi was simplified and transitioned into having a cord used to secure the obi-musubi, thereby transforming it into the otsuiko-musubi. This spread widely throughout the population.

Bunko-musubi
Tsunodashi-musubi
Otsuiko-musubi
Kata-basami

Every January, Coming of Age ceremonies are held throughout Japan to celebrate youth who turn 20, the legal age of adulthood. Many women wear furisode (long-sleeved formal kimono) to attend this ceremony. The photo show modern-day arrangements of tateya-no-ji-musubi and bunko-musubi.
Kumihimo are cords made by braiding silk or cotton threads. Becoming popular among the nobility in the 8th century, varied and sophisticated Kumihimo braiding methods were gradually conceived to birth a decoration culture around them. As elegant and intricate works of art, they were used to adorn clothing and Buddhist altar items as well as sword straps for nobility. As Japan became a samurai society in the 12th century, Kumihimo became popular among samurai for not only their beauty, but also for their practical features, such as excellent durability and elastic tightness, making them useful for supporting heavy armor and other equipment that weighed several dozen kilograms.

In the 17th to 18th centuries, making of Kumihimo sword straps called sageo flourished in Edo (present-day Tokyo). It was considered the way of the samurai to make their own sageo, so it is said that many of them mastered Kumihimo techniques. However, carrying swords was banned in 1876. Sageo craftsmen and merchants were about to lose their livelihoods before they set their focus on obijime, which shares similar manufactured characteristics with sageo.

Obijime is the cord that is tied around the center of obi as a finishing touch to hold obi-musubi in place. Boosted by the wide popularity of the otakko-musubi, one of the variations of sash knots and which requires obijime, Kumihimo gained a new surge of demand and was revitalized. Thus, Kumihimo played an excellent supporting role to the kimono and rapidly developed to become an essential presence today in Japan’s kimono culture.

Founded in 1652, for over 360 years, Domyo has been making Kumihimo in Ueno, Tokyo. More than 500 types of obijime can always be found in their store. Domyo Kiichiro is the 10th generation proprietor of Domyo. He is dedicated to creating new Kumihimo while preserving the historical and enduring Kumihimo techniques found throughout Japan. “A unique Japanese aesthetic is incorporated into small Kumihimos, measuring just a few centimeters,” he says. “I hope to challenge myself technically by combining differing materials to create new ties tailored to the modern lifestyle.”
Decorative knots

Tying a single cord can turn it into a key or even a pretty flower. Yet no matter how elaborate the knot becomes, it will revert to a single cord when unraveled. Over the years, decorative knots have made a beautiful transformation through the delicate and refined handiwork of the Japanese people.

The ability to make creative and stunning decorative knots was considered to be an important skill for women of the nobility in the 12th century; thus, it was deemed to be one of the most important skills that they studied. Around this time, *hana-musubi*, literally meaning “flower knots,” were popular.

However, the history of the adorning *hana-musubi* met dramatic change in the Warring States period, from the end of the 15th century through the end of the 16th century. Samurai lords valued the tea ceremony, but they feared the possibility of poisoned tea. To avert this, the tea masters who served samurai lords initiated the custom of tying the pouches containing tea powder in their own complex way which could not be imitated. If by any chance the knot could be unraveled, it would be impossible to tie it again in the same way, making it obvious if someone had opened it. These untraceable knots were called *fuji-musubi*, literally meaning “seal knot”—a single cord which brilliantly served as a key.

**The Beauty of Knots, Refined**

**Decorative knots**

The *fuji-musubi* served as a key while taking the form of a beautiful decorative knot.

**Bamboo fence knots**

Bamboo fences are woven with bamboo, and, more than just dividing the premises, they serve as a charming backdrop to many Japanese gardens. By the middle of the Edo period (1603–1868), bamboo fences were often portrayed as stylish motifs in *ukiyo-e* (Japanese woodblock prints) and were also adopted in the homes of commoners. Bamboo fences can be constructed to either make the inside garden visible from the outside or to obscure the inside garden. The tying methods using a black hemp-palm rope also vary from simple clean knots to decorative dimensional knots and knots with long, dangling working ends. Regardless, however, there is a beautiful contrast of color between the bamboo and rope knots, adding a unique aesthetic to Japanese townscapes while harmonizing with the rich colors of the four seasons.
Japanese bridge construction boasts the world’s leading levels of technology. Remaining steadfast in the face of various hardships, bridges have both made dreams become a reality and served as a link to the lives of countless people throughout Japan.

Kintai Bridge

Kintai Bridge is a wooden five-span bridge about 200 meters long and 5 meters wide over the Nishiki River in Iwakuni City, Yamaguchi Prefecture in the western part of Japan. The three sections in the center are arched. The elegance of the form inspired the name kintai, which means gold brocade sash, because of its similarity to the traditional brocade sash for kimono. Six types of meticulously-selected quality timbers and special rust-resistant metal fittings were used for the arch structure, and this is said to be an excellent example of engineering, even against modern bridge-construction standards.

The bridge is a culmination of technology, conceived with the fervent aim to construct a bridge that would stand steady against the torrents. Since about 1600, the people have built a bridge here again and again, only to be washed away by flooding. To create a bridge that could withstand the broad width of the river and furiously rapid currents, they began researching an arching bridge with no piers and arrived at the bridge as it stands today, with four stone-walled islands built across the river to support five spans. Piers were installed on both sides of the river, where the current is weaker, and three arching bridges without piers were constructed in the center. After approximately a decade since its conception, Kintai Bridge was completed in 1673. However, just a year later, the bridge was washed away. The foundations of the stone-walled piers were immediately upgraded and a stronger bridge was constructed. After then, it endured for 276 years until a powerful typhoon washed it away again in 1950. The Kintai Bridge that was rebuilt in 1953 is still with us today, projecting the legacy of what was first built 350 years ago.

Abundant nature surrounds the beautifully rhythmical construction of the five-span bridge granting beautiful views throughout the four seasons: cherry blossoms in spring, fireworks in summer, the changing colors of leaves in autumn, and snowy landscapes in winter.

The three famous bridges of Japan

Kintai Bridge is said to be one of the three most famous bridges in Japan, along with Megane Bridge, literally meaning “spectacles bridge,” in Nagasaki Prefecture and Nihonbashi Bridge in Tokyo.
The Japanese word en means relationships, connections, bonds and the like between persons and events. Desiring to find a wonderful romantic partner or a good job? Hoping to maintain amicable relations with friends and family? Japan’s en-musubi spots are traditionally known for making these wishes come true and for tying together positive en. Let’s visit several en-musubi spots!

**Hakuto Shrine (Tottori City)**

In the Kojiki, Japan’s oldest existing literary work, there is a myth of an injured white rabbit being saved by a god, and traces of this are scattered throughout Hakuto (literally meaning “white rabbit”) Shrine. It is also known to be a backdrop to the oldest love story in Japan.

**Chiringashima (Ibusuki City)**

Chiringashima is an uninhabited island in Kagoshima Bay. Only at low tide from March through October, a sandbar approximately 800 meters long emerges to “connect” the island and the land, making it possible to walk over. It is thus known as an island of en-musubi.

**Megane Bridge (Nagasaki City)**

Megane Bridge (literary meaning “spectacles bridge”) is Japan’s first arched stone bridge, constructed in 1634. It is named so because its reflection on the river resembles a pair of eyeglasses. Finding a heart-shaped stone in the embankment is said to make a wish come true.

**Bishamon-numa Pond (Yama District)**

Part of the Goshiki-numa (literally meaning “five-color ponds”) group of ponds and lakes, Bishamon-numa Pond is popular for being home to a white carp with a red heart on its side that is said to bring happiness to those who are fortunate enough to spot it.

**Toyoni Lake (Horoizumi District)**

This is known as a sightseeing spot for sealing romantic relations. Surrounded by majestic primeval forest, an aerial view of the lake reveals it to be in the shape of a heart.

**Mieshima Observatory (Watarai District)**

The spectacular view of the beautiful heart-shaped bay of Kasaragi Pond is exclusive to the Mieshima Observation Platform inside Ise-Shima National Park. This is also referred to as a special spot for lovers, who can lock a “love devotion padlock” on the key rack placed there.

**Kawagoe Hikawa Shrine (Kawagoe City)**

Every year in July and August, over 2,000 Edo wind bells resonate with their refreshing timbre. For weddings, there is a unique ceremony for the bride and groom to mutually tie special red strings, signifying the couple’s destiny, around their pinky fingers.
Chakin-zushi is made by mixing rice with various ingredients and wrapping it with a thin omelette. The name comes from chakin, which is the rectangular fabric used to wipe the tea bowl during the Japanese tea ceremony that inspired the shape of the thin omelette.

It is said that about a century ago, a cook who served a noble family first conceived of chakin-zushi for a tea ceremony, and it became popular thereafter.

The rice in chakin-zushi is seasoned with vinegar, salt, and sugar. Richly-flavored ingredients from the mountain and sea are mixed into the rice, such as kampyo (dried gourd strips), shiitake mushroom that have been cut into strips and simmered, sesame seeds, as well as grilled red snapper or crab flakes and so forth.

The rice is formed into a small ball with a seasonal touch. In the spring to summer, it is topped with a large, sweet runner bean and in the fall, with a sweetly-simmered chestnut. This is then wrapped with a thin omelette, tied up with a thin strip of kombu (kelp) so the rice doesn’t spill. When it is in shape, the chakin-zushi is complete.

Today, there are various arrangements and presentations for chakin-zushi, and a range of recipes are enjoyed at festive occasions with family and friends. The ingredients that go into the rice and how it is eaten are arranged as preferred. This is a dish which brings smiles to the table.
Where people, history, and nature are tied into one

Nikko

Located in north-western Tochigi Prefecture, Nikko City welcomes over 10 million domestic and international visitors yearly.

Altitude variation is extreme in Nikko, ranging from 200–500 meters in the central area to 2,578 meters on Mt. Shirane, the highest peak of the Nikko mountains. Because of this, cherry blossoms bloom and autumn trees change color at a staggered pace allowing long flower- and autumn foliage-viewing seasons enjoyable at different locations throughout Nikko.

Despite being in the central area, visitors can revel in the sense of traveling to the distant past on the Cedar Avenue of Nikko. Its three roads (Nikko Road, Reiheishi Road, Aizu-Nishi Road) combined are approximately 37 kilometers long and lined with about 12,000 giant cedar trees on both sides. This is listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as the longest avenue of trees. Even across a gulf of 400 years, when these trees were first planted, the three roads give us insight into the pulse of the travelers of those ancient days, leading to Nikko Toshogu Shrine, the virtual symbol of Nikko.

The Shrines and Temples of Nikko comprise the 103 religious buildings of Nikko Toshogu Shrine, Nikko Futarasan-jinja Shrine, and Nikkozan Rinnoji Temple, and the surrounding remains (cultural landscapes). These were created by integrating the sentiments of people toward nature, with the shrine buildings constructed with the vast fortune and power of the Tokugawa Shogun family (the nucleus of the Edo Shogunate that was founded in 1603 by Tokugawa Ieyasu and continued until 1868).

The white dragon sculptures over Yomeimon gate are especially eye-catching at Nikko Toshogu Shrine. This was built in 1636 and is representative of the skills of the top metal and lacquer craftsmen at the time. One enjoyable part of Nikko Toshogu Shrine is in the discovering of its many carvings and paintings of creatures. There are more than 500 highly refined carvings alone of persons and animals.

Near the entrance to the Shrines and Temples of Nikko, visitors can immerse themselves in a retro-modern mood amidst the scenery of several historical buildings—including a historical hotel founded in 1873 as one of the first resort hotels in Japan, and souvenir shops, offering the traditional handicrafts of Nikko and also local specialties.

The “Hundred Years Rice Curry” recreates the traditional taste of a secret recipe.

The history of the renowned Nikko Kanzaya Hotel can be gleaned from the ambiance of the front desk.
Irohazaka Slope, a sightseeing road that connects central Nikko and Okunikko, is very popular for its stunning scenery during the autumn foliage season. They are a pair of roads—one ascending, the other descending—and they have a total of 48 tight curves. There are many waterfalls throughout Nikko that offer breathtaking sights of spraying water against a beautiful natural backdrop. The Kegon Falls is especially famous; the water of Lake Chuzenji cascading down a steep 97-meter cliff is a magnificent spectacle. In the surroundings, the wetlands of Senjogahara Plateau stretch over an area of 400 hectares. From the observation points built at various spots, visitors can experience the sights of a grand and richly diverse ecosystem.

If you wish to enjoy a typical Nikko delicacy, we recommend yuba. This is made by simmering soy milk and extracting the film that forms on the surface. This delicacy spread throughout Nikko, with its many shrines and temples, as a valuable protein source for monks who, as part of their ascetic training, abstain from eating meat and fish. Nikko’s yuba is thick and satisfying to eat. This can be eaten raw with a sauce, simmered, or deep-fried. Nikko is also revered for its creativity. Delicate shaved ice made with thinly-shaved natural ice and local-specialty strawberries that have been sweetly simmered and frozen are the perfect combination.

Nature of the four seasons can be enjoyed at Lake Chuzenji.

Exhilarating rafting down the torrent of Kinugawa River.

Nikko area map
1. Nikko Toshogu Shrine
2. Nikko Kanaya Hotel
3. Cedar Avenue of Nikko
4. Kegon Falls
5. Okunikko Onsen
6. Senjogahara Plateau
7. Irohazaka Slope

Access
Tokyo 200 min. by Shinkansen
Utsunomiya (Approx. 40 minutes by JR Nikko Line)
JR Nikko Station
Asakusa (Approx. 2 hours by Tobu Limited Express)
Tobu Nikko Station

Contact information
Nikko City Tourism Association
https://www.visitnikko.jp/en/

Delicate shaved ice made with thinly-shaved natural ice and local-specialty strawberries that have been sweetly simmered and frozen are the perfect combination.

Craftsmen from all over Japan have been brought to Nikko to construct the many temples and shrines, and their advanced workmanship has taken root in the region in the form of traditional crafts with a unique depth.

Nikko-bori woodcarving is distinctive for its flowing curves created with special chisels and the vermillion lacquer coating, which is unique to Nikko and highlights the beauty of the grain.

Nikko-geta are made by attaching geta (traditional Japanese footwear) wooden soles to the bottom of the straw sandals that are worn when entering shrines and temples. The surfaces of the straw sandals are woven with bamboo bark. These were conceived to prevent slipping and extracting the film that forms on the surface.

This delicacy spread throughout Nikko, with its many shrines and temples, as a valuable protein source for monks who, as part of their ascetic training, abstain from eating meat and fish. Nikko’s yuba is thick and satisfying to eat. This can be eaten raw with a sauce, simmered, or deep-fried. Nikko is also revered for its creativity. Delicate shaved ice made with thinly-shaved natural ice and local-specialty strawberries that have been sweetly simmered and frozen are the perfect combination.
**Cloth Flower Vase**

*Made of beautiful woven fabric*

We embrace the changing seasons with flower decorations. This can be enjoyed at any time with this flower bottle cozy, inspired by the material used in *kakejiku* (Japanese hanging scrolls). Even if you don’t have a vase specifically for flowers, this useful item can be used as a cloth festive flower vase simply by placing it over an empty bottle.

*Kakejiku* in Japan highlight calligraphy or paintings, and have a beautiful textile frame. These meticulously-woven fabrics with traditional Japanese patterns are called *hyosogire*. Patterns vary, such as stylized natural motifs like clouds and water, or plant themes, such as plum blossoms and pine trees. These exquisite fabrics, woven with gorgeous gold threads or a variety of traditional colors, make for a charming interior item.

1. Pour water into an empty bottle or other container and slip the "Cloth flower vase" over it.
2. Put flowers, and here’s your vase!
3. *Hyosogire* with the motif of clouds, which are said to be an omen that something auspicious is about to happen.

*Courtesy: TORII Co., Ltd., Igarashi Design Studio*