

niponica

Discovering
Japan

にほにか

no. 36



• Special Feature •

All Things Pen and Paper in Japan



Top: See pages 4–7 for details on these writing implements.
Cover: 500 colored pencils (Photo: Felissimo)

niponica
にぽにか^o no. 36

• Special Feature •

All Things Pen and Paper in Japan

Despite all of today's digital, paperless communication, the passion for writing and drawing by hand is still strong in Japan. The world of Japanese stationery reflects this fact.

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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.

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Japan's Outstanding Stationery

A diverse array of ballpoint pens, notebooks, pencils, and fountain pens—just some of the achievements of stationery manufacturers and artisans on a quest to perfect the art of writing and drawing. Their passion for this cause has made Japanese stationery a world standard.

Ballpoint Pens



Water-Based Ink Ballpoint Pen

With its release by OHTO Co., Ltd. in 1964, the W, the world's first water-based ink ballpoint pen, gained a reputation in Japan and around the world for a smooth stroke that oil-based ink ballpoint pens could not deliver. The latest water-based ink ballpoint pen, the CR01, has a unique design that prevents the tip from drying out even when left uncapped. Photos: OHTO Co., Ltd.

W, the world's first water-based ink ballpoint pen

Frixion Retractable Ballpoint Pen

The erasable ballpoint pen revolutionized the world of stationery. The special eraser at the end of the pen, which creates frictional heat that causes the ink to react by becoming transparent, marked a new era in pens. Photos: PILOT Corporation



Erase

Write

Ballsign Gel Ink Pen

The Ballsign was the world's first ballpoint pen to use ink with pigment suspended in a water-based gel. The gelling agent added to water-based ink delivered the smooth strokes of a ballpoint pen and the durability of oil-based ink. This flowing jelly-like ink could hold a variety of pigments, which paved the way for ballpoint pens in a multitude of colors. Photo: SAKURA COLOR PRODUCTS CORPORATION



Jetstream Standard Ballpoint Pen

This ballpoint pen with ultra-low viscosity oil-based ink reduces friction to provide a smooth writing experience and thick, dark lines. Since its launch in 2006, the Jetstream Standard Ballpoint Pen has driven a global boom in low-viscosity oil-based ink ballpoint pens. Photo: MITSUBISHI PENCIL COMPANY, LIMITED



Conventional oil-based ink

Jetstream ink

Mechanical Pencils



Kuru Toga

This mechanical pencil maintains its sharp lines by rotating the lead with each stroke to ensure that it wears evenly. The Kuru Toga boasts cumulative sales of over 100 million since its launch in 2008. Photo: MITSUBISHI PENCIL COMPANY, LIMITED

High Polymer Pencil Lead

Fine pencil leads were made possible by utilizing the properties of synthetic resin, which carbonizes when heated and hardens when combined with graphite. In 1960, 0.9mm pencil lead was released, followed by 0.7mm and 0.5mm in 1962. Photo: Pentel Co., Ltd.



Felt-Tip/Brush Pens



Felt-Tip Pen

The world's first fiber-tipped, water-based ink pen was invented in 1963. Made of acrylic fibers, the pen tip provided a writing experience that combined the qualities of both pen and brush. The pen became a sensation in the U.S. when it was handed to then-President Johnson and was later brought onboard a NASA spacecraft. This water-based ink pen is a bestseller, loved around the world. Photo: Pentel Co., Ltd.

Art Brush

Gift tags and letters in Japan are often written with brush and ink, and this custom was revolutionized in 1970s with the introduction of the brush pen, making doing calligraphy as easy as writing with a pen. In an ever-increasing number of colors, brush pens are a popular art tool outside of Japan. Now available in 24 different colors that can be blended to expands the range of artistic expression. Photo: Pentel Co., Ltd.



Mark+

With the Mark+, simply rotate the tip to switch between two different colors with the same pen. This convenient feature is especially handy for categorizing by color, highlighting specific sections, or marking tasks completed to help manage your schedule. Photos: KOKUYO Co., Ltd.



Clickbright

The ink in these click-type fluorescent pens is formulated to readily absorb moisture from the air and keep the ink from drying out even when the pen is left uncapped. Photo: ZEBRA CO., LTD.





Fountain pens crafted with the Japanese *maki-e* lacquer technique have passed from generation to generation for 100 years. (Photo: PILOT Corporation)

Fountain Pens

Naginata Togi Nib Fountain Pen

Many Japanese stationery manufacturers have the expertise to design their own original fountain pen nibs. The Naginata Togi crafted by The Sailor Pen Co., Ltd. is one example. The unconventionally large point at the end of the nib is shaped like a long sword blade ("*naginata*" in Japanese), and sharpened to a smooth angle. This nib design creates thicker lines when the pen is angled closer to the paper and thinner lines when the pen is held upright, producing beautiful lines for the strokes in *kanji* characters.

Photos: THE SAILOR PEN CO., LTD.



Maki-e fountain pens from 1925

CUSTOM URUSHI

Nearly 100 years ago, the Laccanaite method of lacquering fountain pens made of ebonite was invented. Pilot released the *maki-e* fountain pen (left) in 1925, which featured painted designs with gold and other powders. In recent years, not only *maki-e* fountain pens, but other premium lacquer fountain pens coated to a mirror-like shine in red and black *urushi* have become popular.

Photo: PILOT Corporation

Pencils

Hokusign

The specially manufactured lead in these pencils is about twice as strong as the lead in ordinary pencils, which allows even soft black leads like 3B and 4B to withstand strong pressure. The pencils are ideal for drawing and painting, as the graphite does not shed or mark up the hands. The pencil shaft color is called Hokusai Blue, inspired by the *ukiyo*e woodblock print artist Katsushika Hokusai.

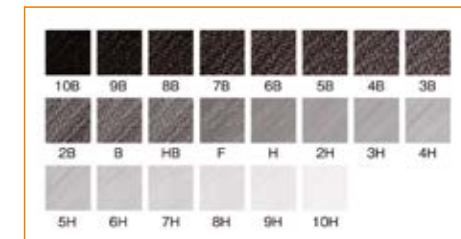
Photos: KUTSUWA CO., LTD.



Hi-uni Art Set

This set contains pencils with 22 different degrees of lead hardness, ranging from 10H to 10B. The leads are made from a uniform mixture of high-purity graphite and clay to provide smooth, black strokes. These pencils have long been a favorite drawing tool.

Photos: MITSUBISHI PENCIL COMPANY, LIMITED



Notebooks

Japonica Gakushucho Notebook

Since their release in 1970, Japonica Gakushucho notebooks have been a favorite of Japanese children. The lineup offers about 50 different types and sizes of ruled lines and graph paper to accommodate different school grades and subjects, as well as for different uses like writing essays or practicing *kanji* characters.

Photos: SHOWA NOTE CO., LTD.



Campus Notebook

This classic notebook counts not just students, but all generations, among its devoted fans. The Campus lineup offers ruled lines for all different applications, including graph paper, vertical ruled, and dotted lines, as well as narrow to wide ruled paper ranging from 5 to 10 mm spacing. These notebooks are also manufactured with the environment in mind, using forest-certified paper for the pages inside.

Photo: KOKUYO Co., Ltd.

The Continuous Evolution of Japanese Stationery

Japanese shelves feature an endless variety of products with highly refined functions. Why this abundance in the Japanese world of stationery? We spoke with an expert to trace the evolution of stationery in Japan.

Interview with Takabatake Masayuki



Karuta
Card game played by matching reading cards with picture cards
Uta-karuta ColBase



Japan is often referred to as a stationery powerhouse, and it is true that most new stationery items invented since the 2000s have come from Japan. The first of these was the erasable ballpoint pen, the Frixion¹, which was followed by the ultra-low-viscosity Jetstream² ballpoint pen.

Japanese stationery is highly regarded for its quality, functionality, design, and playfulness. This is especially notable since writing instruments incorporating this state-of-the-art technology can be purchased for as little as a few hundred yen. Other cultures may wonder at the Japanese approach to constantly improving goods, even those that seem to have peaked, by continuing to eliminate the slightest inconveniences to the user.

A Country of Stationery, A Country of Paper

When thinking about the relationship between Japanese people and stationery, it is important to remember that, since ancient times, the Japanese have had a strong attachment to paper. Today's method of making paper from broken-down plant fibers was invented in China around the 2nd century B.C. and introduced to Japan around the 7th century. It only found its way to Europe via the Silk Road around the 13th century, which means that, when it comes to paper, Japan is an early adopter.

About 70% of Japan is forested, and there are many rivers as well, so the plants and water used to make paper are abundant here. This is why paper has been used not only for writing, but also for crafts, interior goods, and clothing. Handmade *washi* paper was produced throughout Japan, and already in the 8th century there were discussions about which regional paper was best suited for which applications. The Shosoin Repository³ preserves *washi* from that time, and it is said that the empress chose her color of *washi* from the selection here. For 1,300 years, the Japanese have been carefully selecting their favorite sheets of writing paper.

In countries without abundant paper resources, the act of “putting pen to paper” was long considered a privilege of the nobility, showing just how precious paper was at the time. When paper first came into use in Japan, too, it was



Kavaraban
Woodblock-printed broadsheets reported the news on the street. Picture here tells of the damage caused by the earthquake in the 19th-century Edo.
Photo: Aflo

Chiyogami
Sheets of *washi* printed with colorful patterns. Used to produce handicrafts and other items.
Photo: Kurihara Osamu



of course used almost exclusively by the privileged classes, such as court nobles and shogunate officials, but it spread relatively quickly to the common folk. During the Edo period (1603–1868), *karuta* playing cards, *ukiyo-e* paintings of everyday life, *kavaraban* broadsheets, *chiyogami* sheets of handprinted paper became popular. Paper, pictures, and characters were widely used in entertainment for the ordinary public. It was around this time that stationery came to be valued as a tool for everyone. In the 19th century, fountain pens, ink, machine-made paper and other elements of Western stationery met the Japanese world of ink, brushes, and *washi*. The Japanese adopted the Western tools, introducing improvements as they did.

Today, paper expos are held throughout Japan. These stationery-focused trade shows draw huge crowds, with the December 2023 Bungu Joshi Haku Stationery Festival alone attracting 45,000 people. In Japan, a symbiotic relationship has developed between the stationery manufacturers who release new products every year and the consumers who enjoy and appreciate the evolution in ever-more delicate writing and comfortable usability.

Putting Thoughts into Words

In an age of ubiquitous smartphones and a world that is increasingly paperless, why do Japanese people love stationery so much? One reason could be the Japanese penchant for using the written word to capture emotions. Handwritten letters reveal an individual's personality and hint at whether they were crafted with care or dashed off in haste. The Japanese writing system combines three types of characters—*kanji*, *hiragana*, and *katakana*—often all within the same sentence. This offers an unusual tool for expressing changes in nuance simply by choosing between these three ways of writing any given word.

The Japanese people's attachment to stationery items and the insatiable quest of engineers to improve these tools have been passed down for many generations. It is this dedication that forms the foundation for the evolution of Japanese stationery.



Bungu Joshi Haku
Various stationery items from pens to stickers are exhibited.
Photo: Bungu Joshi Haku Expo Organizing Committee

1. See page 4.
2. See page 4.
3. The repository at Todaiji Temple, in Nara City, holds the Imperial Family's most prized possessions.

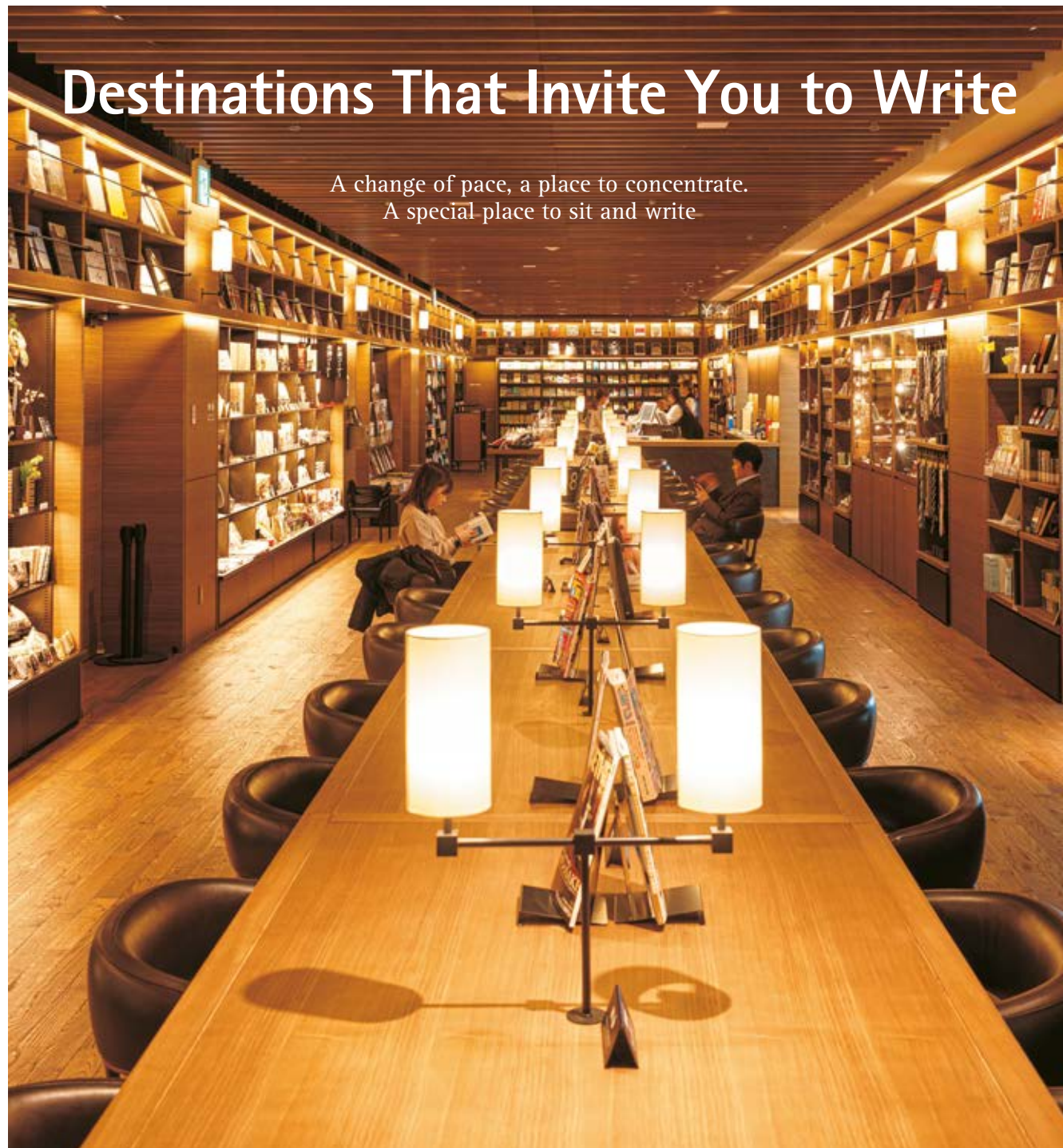


Takabatake Masayuki
Born in Kagawa Prefecture in 1974, Takabatake competed on the popular television show *TV Champion* in the national stationery category, winning three consecutive championships and earning himself the nickname, “The Stationery King.” After 13 years as a product planner and marketer at the stationery company Sun-Star Stationery Co., Ltd., he retired and signed a professional independent contract with the company. He is chief editor of the stationery website *Bungu no Tobira* and a YouTuber who focuses on stationery goods.

Ukiyo-e
Colorful woodblock prints developed during the Edo period. Text is written within the prints. *Goteniyama Hanami Mitatehana no Utague* by Utagawa Hiroshige
Collection of National Diet Library

Destinations That Invite You to Write

A change of pace, a place to concentrate.
A special place to sit and write



Long Bookstore Table for a Break Before the Journey

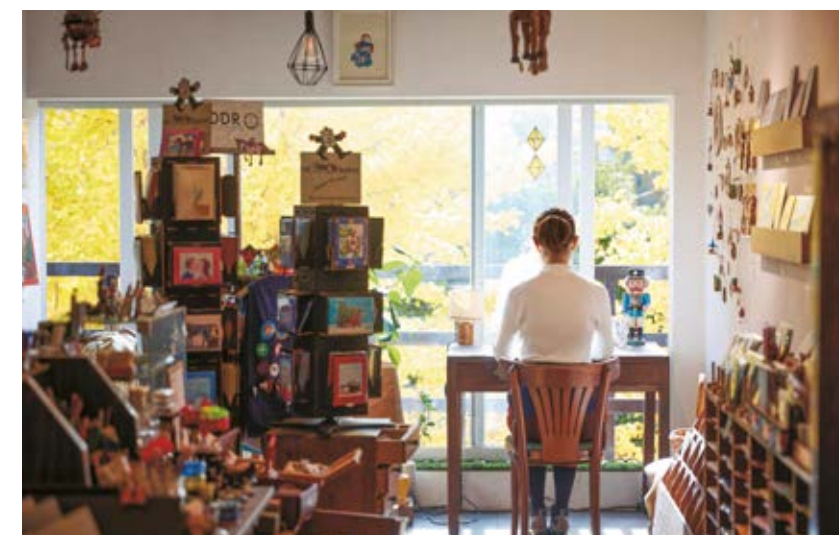
The Haneda Airport Tsutaya Bookstore is a space of calm and quiet in the midst of a busy airport. A long table runs down the middle of the store, a place to sit, relax and read a book from the store's wide selection ranging from books introducing Japanese culture to novels and manga. The table is open to anyone, and many businesspeople sit down, open their planners, organize their schedules, and collect their thoughts before boarding their plane. Customers can bring in beverages from the adjacent cafe, as well. The space offers travelers a bit of luxury, a place to write in a relaxed atmosphere away from the hustle and bustle.



Top: Long table surrounded by bookshelves
Bottom: Enjoying a moment to write while watching the airplanes on the tarmac
Photos: Kurihara Osamu

Zakka Store with Letter-Writing Desk

If you are looking for a place to sit and write an unhurried letter, Post-sha, a *zakka* store in Osaka that sells fancy goods like stationery and picture books, is the place to go. The store sells around 30 unique types of letter paper and envelopes. With a purchase, you can borrow one of the store's glass pens—a type of dipping pen—and ink. Just settle in at the well-worn wooden desk by the window, look out at the trees in the park and the city street below, and your sentiments will flow as naturally as the pen glides over the paper.



Top: Compose a letter at a writing desk at the back of a *zakka* fancy goods store.
Bottom left: Original letter paper from Post-sha
Bottom right: Glass pens sold at the store
Photos: Yamaguchi Shinichi

An Inn for a Writerly Experience

In a practice called *kanzume*, writers in Japan hole up at inns or hotels to concentrate on their writing when facing writer's block. Homeikan in Tokyo is a traditional *ryokan* inn that offers a unique *kanzume* experience. The simple, yet elegant Japanese-style rooms in the main building, which are said to have been used for *kanzume* long ago, have a low wooden table for the guest to sit on the floor, open up a manuscript, and feel like a literary giant.



Far left: Feel like a writer penning a manuscript
Left: Homeikan, built in 1898
Photos: Kurihara Osamu

Gratifying Color Play

An ink lab where customers can create their own unique colors of ink. Children and adults alike hooked on multicolored oil pastels. These are just two examples of the insatiable fascination with drawing and painting that has given rise to the Japanese passion for color.

Photos: Arai Akiko



Inkstand is on the second floor of the stationery store, Kakimori. Courteous staff take good care of customers.

Create one-of-a-kind colors: Inkstand

There is a stationery store in the Kuramae neighborhood, near Asakusa, one of Tokyo's most popular tourist destinations, that is home to Inkstand, an ink lab offering exclusive bespoke goods.

Customers choose from a total of 18 colors—original inks in 14 colors, as well as red, blue, and black, plus a thinning solution—mixing their own formula, using a dropper to add the inks one drop at a time to a beaker. Customers record the colors and number of drops used as the inks are added, then Inkstand staff use this formula to mix the one-of-a-kind color and bottle it in a special ink bottle. This service grew out of numerous requests from customers for greater variety of colors and particular intermediate shades of certain colors of the specially formulated inks the stationery store had begun selling.

Initially, the store offered dye inks which, though water-soluble so that they are easily absorbed by paper, tend to bleed and have quick-fading color, which were problems. For the solution, Inkstand placed a special order with an ink manufacturer to develop a unique pigment ink not commonly used with writing implements. This resulted in optimal inks that deliver long-lasting vivid color without clogging the pen nib.

Generally, no more than three colors of ink should be mixed together. Any more than that and the ink turns black and muddy. To give a color fluorescent vibrancy, a thinning solution is added. Mixing specific hues and shades is a process of trial-and-error that results in utterly unique color with a subtle nuance not found in commercial products. Inkstand has gained a reputation as a memorable travel experience and is now a stationery destination that attracts fans from all over the world.



Above: Customers formulate their own unique inks, testing them with a dip pen to check as they mix colors.
Right: An original, one-of-a-kind ink is bottled.

Learn to draw color: Oil Pastels

Oil pastels are the most popular art medium for young children in Japan. Of the many products available, oil pastels developed by a particular Osaka-based art materials manufacturer with a long history have been a staple for Japanese children for over 100 years. The secret to their popularity is that they combine the hard, non-sticky, and easy to handle characteristics of crayons with the soft, easy-to-blend coverage that you get with pastels.

Oil pastels are made of pigment, wax, and liquid oil. Pigment is added to melted wax, and liquid oil is added. The mixture is then kneaded, poured into a stick mold, and left to cool and harden. In 2011, to celebrate its 90th anniversary, the popular oil pastel company commemorated the occasion by releasing 700 different colors. In developing the release, color artisans from the company's research institute created about 2,100 colors, paying meticulous attention to creating a uniform gradation of shades for adjacent colors. Since the difference between this many colors is difficult for the naked eye to discern, and the lineup was narrowed down to a third of the original total.

Another aspect of the art materials created for children is that they use the traditional Japanese names for colors, which are derived from nature, in order to teach children about color. For example, bright orange oil pastels are called *daidai*, which comes from the Japanese name for a bitter orange citrus fruit. The dull reddish yellow known as russet is named *kuchibairo* for its similarity to the color of fallen autumn leaves. In doing this, Japanese children unconsciously experience their culture through color.



Top: Cray-Pas are made from both natural and synthetic pigments.
Bottom: Cutting away the overflow of mixture from the molds at the factory. The scraps are then added back to the mixture to make more oil pastels.
Photos: SAKURA COLOR PRODUCTS CORPORATION



Left: Cray-Pas® oil pastels developed by Sakura Color Products Corporation. The name Cray-Pas is a nod to the fact that they combine the characteristics of crayons and pastels.
Right: Cray-Pas® in 700 colors stored in an acrylic case. The subtle differences in the colors were achieved thanks to the discriminating eye of the company's researchers, who blended the pigments by hand.
Photos: SAKURA COLOR PRODUCTS CORPORATION



Manga artist Tanaka Teko sketches in pencil. To create her manga, she uses a combination of stationery tools and digital devices.

Tools the Manga Artist Cherishes

What tools are used to create manga? Explore what the professionals use and how they use these tools to create manga.

Photos: Kurihara Osamu
Cooperation: Wacom

Manga are enjoyed by readers around the world. In recent years, most manga are drawn by artists entirely on digital devices. But there are still artists who create on paper — using pen, paper, and ink for everything from drawing the sketches to applying the finishing touches. Furthermore, more than a few groups have gone hybrid, using both pen on paper and digital tools to produce their work.

A favorite of the manga artist has always been, and still is today, the dip pen with a nib that is inserted into a barrel. The dip pen is essential to the inking process, in which the artist traces over initial sketches done in pencil. Of all nibs, the G-pen nib is most often used for outlining manga characters because of its deep, open slit down the center and the ability to vary line thickness by adjusting the amount of pressure used. The Maru-pen nib is used to draw fine, sophisticated lines for things like eyes, hair, and backgrounds. Whichever they choose, there are manga

artists who believe that only hand drawing can truly imbue their characters with soul, and they are extremely particular about their non-digital tools, meticulously selecting the nibs, barrels, pencils, and inks they use.

The advent of computer-connected LCD pen tablets with digital pens has created new opportunities in manga expression. Like with pen and paper, the digital pen also reacts to drawing pressure, making it possible to draw lines and apply color just as expressively. The artist can select one of hundreds of millions of possible colors, and the backdrop can be altered instantly with imported photos or added background patterns, for instance.

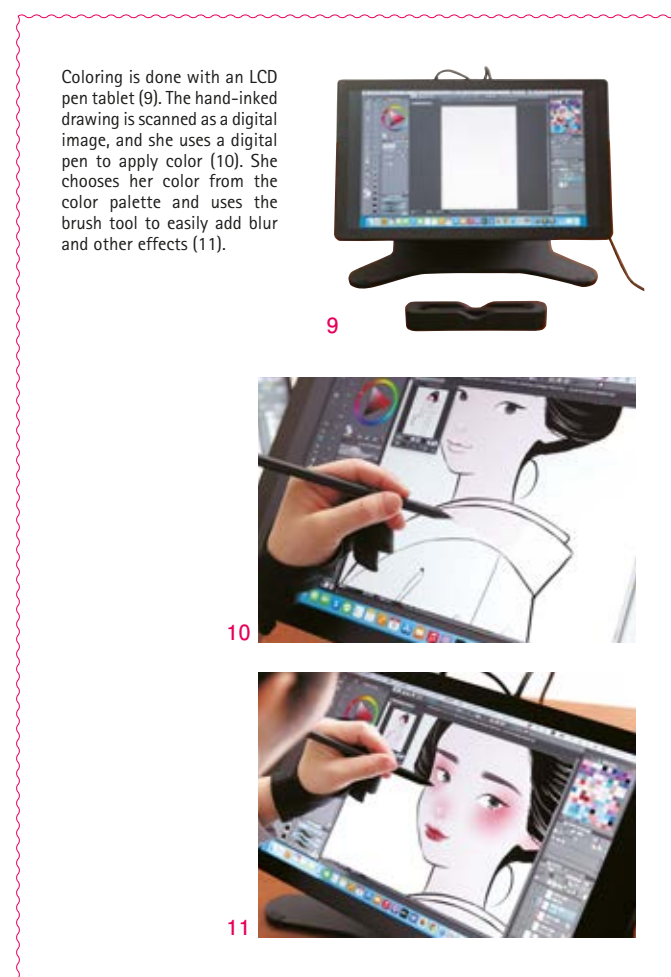
From plotting out the story to applying the finishing touches, completing a manga book is no small feat. Manga will surely continue to evolve as artists make use of the advantages of both analog and digital tools.



Tanaka Teko demonstrates each step in the process of creating color drawings. She uses blue lead (1) in a mechanical pencil (2) to draw an initial sketch that will not be visible when the drawing is printed, then uses a pencil (3) to trace over the sketch (4).



She then inks in the main lines. Inserting a G-pen (5) and a Maru-pen (6) nib into a pen barrel, she dips the pen in ink (7) and traces the lines (8). She chooses just the right nib for lines of the thickness she wants to achieve. This is a tense moment because hand-drawn lines cannot be redrawn.



Coloring is done with an LCD pen tablet (9). The hand-inked drawing is scanned as a digital image, and she uses a digital pen to apply color (10). She chooses her color from the color palette and uses the brush tool to easily add blur and other effects (11).



The vividly colored drawing is complete.

Advantages of Hand Drawing vs. Digital Drawing

Digital data is easy to share and gives a sense of security since you can always undo mistakes. When drawing on paper, on the other hand, lines cannot be undone, and this gives more intensity and power to the lines. Whether you use stationery or digital tools, practicing over and over is very important to becoming proficient with them.

(From an interview with manga artist Tanaka Teko)



Manga by Tanaka Teko
Hokago Ponytail ("Ponytail After School")
(Margaret Comics, Shueisha Inc.)





A Virtual Journey
through Japan

Regional Stationery Goods

Introducing local crafts made with techniques handed down for generations and goods featuring designs inspired by regional specialties or scenic landscapes. Take a trip through these pages to find stationery goods that reflect the unique regional characteristics of areas across Japan.



Ishikawa

Fountain Pen with Gold Leaf

The gold leaf fountain pen is a collaboration between gold leaf artisans in Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture, and one of Japan's leading fountain pen brands. It features the traditional Japanese art of painting themes of natural beauty in gold leaf and other materials.

Photo: Hakuichi Co., Ltd., Kanazawa gold leaf fountain pen by PLATINUM PEN CO., LTD.



Aomori

Apple-Shaped Inkwell and Glass Pen

An inkwell in the shape of an apple, a specialty in Aomori Prefecture, (left), and a glass pen with a small apple at its end (right). The glass pen is a writing instrument originating in Japan that sucks ink up through the transparent nib on its right side.

Photo: Tsugaru Vidro



Shiga

Ruler with Lake Biwa Template

You can trace Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake, at a scale of approximately 1/1,000,000 using this ruler with template. Use the silhouettes of creatures living in Lake Biwa, the castle, and other nearby tourist attractions to keep a fun record of your travels in the area.

Photo: Lake Biwa Template by KOKUYO Product Shiga Co., Ltd.



Hiroshima

Brushes

Kumano-cho in Hiroshima Prefecture, where about one in ten residents is involved in brush-making, is known as the brush capital of Japan. The delicate bristles of Kumano-cho brushes are handcrafted by master artisans. They are highly sought-after instruments for drawing precise lines and small details. Not only ink brushes, but also cosmetic brushes made with this technique, are popular outside of Japan.

Photos: Fudenosato Kobo

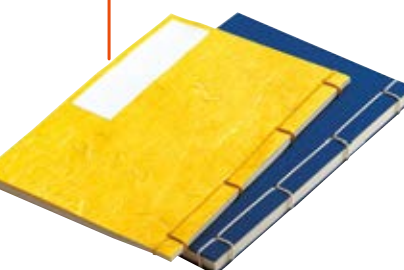


Nagasaki

Local Ink

Colorful inks in bottles adorned with images of famous Nagasaki goods and scenery make great souvenirs. The bottle of ink pictured here features the Kujukushima Islands, known for their dark green forests and placid waters.

Photo: Nagasaki Bikei Ink Kujukushima Islands Green by Ishimaru Bunkoudou



Kochi

Traditional Japanese Notebook

These notebooks are made with a traditional sewn binding method using meticulous thread stitching. They are beautiful to look at, and with no chemical glues, the binding does not break down over time. This prized bookbinding technique is still practiced in Kochi, where Tosa washi paper is produced.

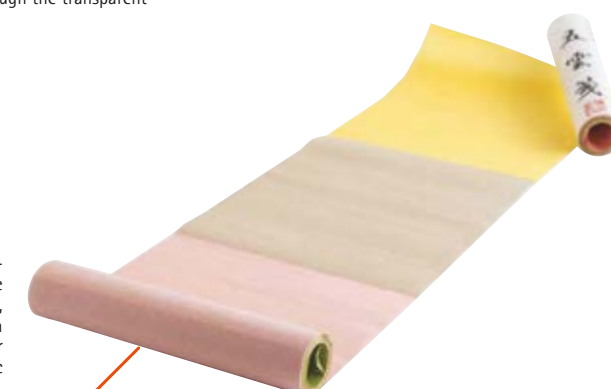
Photo: Kochi Seihon

Tokyo

Scrolled Paper

Traditionally in Japan, letters and documents were often written with ink and brush on scrolls of Japanese washi paper. Pictured here is scrolled washi in five colors, laminated together and treated to prevent blotting even when writing with pen. This scrolled paper is a popular item in the washi and paper product lineup that historic stationery stores have sold for over 200 years.

Photo: Gounsens by Haibara



Kyoto

Goshuin Seal Stamp Books

Visitors to shrines and temples in Japan may receive a goshuin seal stamped in red ink bearing the name of the temple or shrine and the date of their visit. Many shrines and temples offer bound books with traditional washi paper pages for collecting goshuin, and some tourists carry these with them as they make a pilgrimage to a number of these sites. The goshuin books pictured here feature covers modeled after kimono.

Photo: Taniguchi Shoyudo Co., Ltd.



Nara

Sumi Ink Objet d'Art

Home to the capital of Japan in ancient times, Nara Prefecture has long been a center of sumi ink production. These elegant ink cakes, shaped as the masks used in masked dance performances that flourished around the 7th century, are meant to be treasured, rather than used.

Photo: Kaori-zumi Asuka by KINKOEN



Kumi-ame Hard Candy

Small, sweet candies with
a message

Photos: Kurihara Osamu
Cooperation: my ame



Top: *Kumi-ame* slabs are stretched long and thin (top), then assembled into a cylindrical shape (center), and stretched into a thin strand measuring 2 cm (bottom).
Photos: my ame
Left: *Kumi-ame* with the message "Thank you" in Japanese and English

Kumi-ame is a candy made in long cylinders that show the same design wherever they are cut. The discs, cut on a cross-section, display an array of designs such as faces, animals, flowers, and fruit.

Long ago, *ame*, the Japanese word for candy, referred to *mizu-ame* (glutinous starch syrup), which was made by using malt to turn the starch of such grains as non-glutinous rice and millet into sugar. This substance was then kneaded to create hard candy. When sugar became more commonly available during the Edo period (1603–1868), Japanese sweet candies came to be made by adding sugar to *mizu-ame*, and this became a well-loved confection among the general public.

Kumi-ame first appeared during the Edo period. A mixture of *mizu-ame* and sugar is boiled down, then

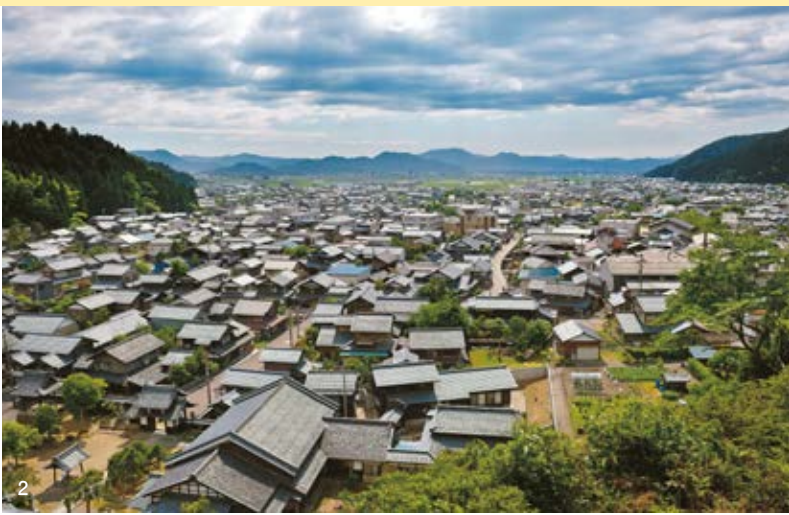
stretched, folded, and kneaded into several long, thin slabs, then colored. These slabs are then assembled to form a cylinder shape with a diameter of approximately 30 cm. When stretched thin and cut, the same design appears on every cross section that is cut. Confectioners have only 30–40 minutes, while the candy is still warm and soft, to assemble and stretch the slabs. This work must be done quickly, with a constant rolling motion to keep a neat cylindrical shape and not distort the design.

These candy designs feature not only images, but text, as well. A *kumi-ame* confectioner in Aichi Prefecture produces these candies with made-to-order messages. Specifications provided by a designer specializing in *kumi-ame* give detailed instructions on the color and assembly

methods for each order, which can express complex characters requiring some 100 different slabs. Assembly requires great care, since any distortion or misalignment of the slabs will render the letters illegible. Surprisingly, if there are too few letters in a word or strokes in a character, balance becomes a problem, because it is hard to get the letters and spacing right. It takes the experience and intuition of a true craftsman to envision the finished product and assemble the slabs in an efficient manner.

Candies like these with words can convey personal feelings. They are a casual gift that expresses encouragement and kindness in a tangible way. Though small in size, pop just one candy in your mouth to feel the aroma and sweetness absorb deep into the body.





1. Patterned Echizen Washi paper
2. Traditional buildings in the Goka district
3, 4. The main building of Okamoto-Otaki Jinja Shrine, erected in the 19th century. The shrine is dedicated to Kawakami Gozen, the goddess of paper (left).



5. *Washi* is made from *kozo*, or Japanese paper mulberry. These fibers come from the inner bark of the mulberry tree trunk.
6. Making paper using traditional wooden tools at the Udatsu Paper and Craft Museum
7. Removing the dust and imperfect fibers produces beautiful white *washi*.



Keeping Traditional *Washi* Techniques Alive

Echizen

Echizen is home to some of the finest *washi* paper produced in Japan. Visit a landscape steeped in the handicrafts of a thousand years.

Photos: Kurihara Osamu





8



9



10



14



15



16

8. At Yanase Ryoze Seishijo, visitors can try their hand at papermaking.
9. A metal mold is placed on top of freshly made *washi* and water is poured over it to create a pattern.
10, 11. Dyed and patterned *washi* is also used for small items such as fan-shaped bookmarks (photo 11).



11

Roughly three hours from Tokyo on the Hokuriku Shinkansen, Echizen Takefu Station in Echizen City, Fukui Prefecture, opened in the spring of 2024. The city lies in a basin surrounded on three sides by mountains and was once a seat of political power as the *kokufu*, or provincial capital. The city served as the gateway to the Hokuriku region from Kyoto, enjoying a thriving exchange of people and goods that gave rise over the centuries to a singular culture and unique set of industries all its own.

Traces of these traditions can be found throughout the temples, shrines, and neighborhoods. Yet, to truly learn about the local history and culture, an exploration of Echizen Washi is a must. Its impressive quality is mentioned in ancient documents from the 8th century. In the Edo period (1603–1868), the official documents of court nobles and shogun military leaders were written on Echizen Hosho, the highest quality Echizen Washi. This paper later came to be used for banknotes and Japanese paintings, and to this day Echizen is known for producing some of the finest *washi* paper in Japan.

The center of Echizen Washi production is the Goka district, home to Okamoto-Otaki Jinja Shrine, which is dedicated to Kawakami Gozen, the goddess of paper.

The streets of the Goka district are still lined with 50 *washi* crafters today. The first place to visit is the Udatsu Paper and Craft Museum. Located in an 18th century building, the museum welcomes visitors to observe the *washi* making process up close. The tree bark used to make the paper is boiled to soften it, cleaned of impurities, pounded to loosen the fibers, mixed with a substance called *neri* from the aibika plant, and placed in a *sukibune* vat. A wooden frame called a *sugeta* is moved through the mixture with a gentle rocking motion to scoop the pulp until the frame is filled with a sheet of pulp. The pulp is then peeled off the *sugeta* and left to dry into a sheet of *washi* paper. The sight of papermakers, hands submerged in cold water, deftly rocking their *sugeta*, has been common here since ancient times.

Yanase Ryoze Seishijo uses traditional handmade techniques to craft Echizen Washi, but with a modern twist. This *washi*, which is patterned using molds, is so supple that it can be used as wrapping paper and book covers. The workshop welcomes visitors to try their hand at the papermaking process, a chance visitors will not want to miss.

Takefu Knife Village is located near the Goka district. Here, passionate bladesmiths are still hard at work

14, 15. Echizen *soba* at Uru-shiya, a restaurant that has been serving customers since the 19th century
16, 17. Japanese sweets and coffee are a popular order at HAYASHI Coffee, a cafe on the Kura no Tsuji road.



17

producing Echizen *uchihamono* blades at 700-year-old shared forgeries. The well-designed letter openers and kitchen knives intricately crafted by master artisans are things of beauty.

When it's time for a meal, head to the city center for the local specialty, Echizen *soba* served at any number of restaurants. The noodles, piled high on the plate and served with grated *daikon* radish and dipping sauce, are an addictive combination of pungent radish and aromatic *soba*. Along the Kura no Tsuji, a historical road lined with white-walled merchants' buildings, visitors can relax and enjoy coffee and sweets in an atmospheric renovated warehouse.

Echizen is a place where skills and techniques refined for centuries are still thriving. A trip to this part of Japan is a special opportunity to explore masterful traditional craftsmanship in the modern day.



12



13

12,13. The sophisticated artistic display of products at Takefu Knife Village. Beautifully contoured letter openers are popular souvenirs.



Echizen Area Map

- ① Okamoto-Otaki Jinja
- ② Udatsu Paper and Craft Museum
- ③ Yanase Ryoze Seishijo
- ④ Takefu Knife Village
- ⑤ Uru-shiya
- ⑥ Kura no Tsuji (HAYASHI Coffee)

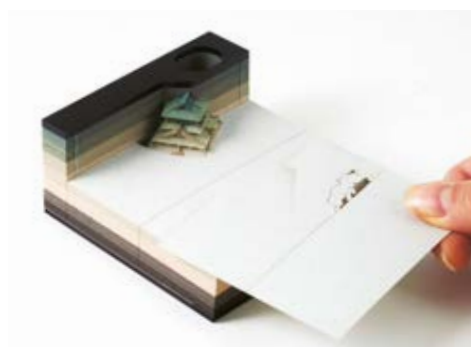
•Access
Echizen-Takefu Station is approximately three hours from Tokyo Station via the Hokuriku Shinkansen.

•Contact information
Echizen-shi Tourist Association official website
<https://www.echizen-tourism.jp/e.any.hp.transer.com/>



Decorate Desks at
Work and School

Unique Notepads



Top: KUDAMEMO notepads shaped like apples and pears (Photo: DRAFT Inc.)
Bottom left: Futamata Fusen sticky notes stand upright, conveying messages like "Here are the materials for today's meeting." (Photo: KING JIM CO., LTD.)
Bottom center and right: OMOSHIROI BLOCK—Osaka Castle—as sheets of paper are gradually removed (above center), the castle takes shape (above right). (Photo: TRIAD Inc.)

Notepads and sticky notes are handy for quickly jotting down an idea or writing a message to someone. Even though digital devices have become more commonplace these days, notepads have not lost their place in Japanese offices and schools.

They are not only easy to use, but also interesting for the sense of fun they bring. For example, you can peel a sheet from a fruit-shaped pad, just like cutting off a slice of fruit to eat. Or you can watch a complex three-dimensional form emerge from the notepad as

you gradually use the sheets — a kind of art for savoring the passage of time. Or you can lift the spirits of your recipients with sticky notes featuring charming character designs, even if the message on them is all business.

These notepads help motivate and lighten the mood. Notepads and sticky notes with unique designs play a supporting role in the workplace and classroom, adding a touch of fun.

