



Profile ● Born 1949. Fourth-generation proprietor of Iwai Tsuzura-ten, founded in 1861.
2-10-1 Nihonbashi Ningyocho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo

Trunk Maker

Ryoichi Iwai

The art of traditional trunk-making still thrives on Amazake-yokocho in the Nihonbashi Ningyocho district. Ryoichi Iwai entered the family business at age 32 to support his busy father. Forty years later, he still works to preserve the art of trunk-making for the future.

Safeguarding craftsmanship and the everyday objects that are being lost

Tsuzura trunks, made of Japanese *washi* paper and bamboo, are light, durable, and breathable, and deter insects and mold. They were first created by Kanda craftsmen in the late seventeenth century, and became popular wedding gifts among commoners. At one time, every household had at least one, mainly for storing kimono. The Kanto region alone once had 250 trunk makers, but only four remain today in the entire nation; two are in the Kanto region. Ryoichi Iwai is thus one of a handful carrying on this tradition.

In the Kanto region, trunk-making is divided between the bamboo craftsmen who construct the frames and those like Mr. Iwai who paper them. Using a durable handmade *washi* paper from Ogawa, in Saitama Prefecture, he first reinforces the

frame's easily damaged edges by wrapping them with two sheets pasted together. He makes the process look easy, a mere 30-second task of applying a thin layer of paste to one sheet with a *hake* brush and then laying a second sheet over it, but there is not so much as a millimeter's offset between the two. "That method of using two pasted layers of *washi* was my father's. He never said more about the techniques than what was absolutely necessary, and now I can see why. After all, you only gain the intuition and absorb the skills you need through your own experience."

Once the reinforcing *washi* has dried, he moves on to papering the entire wooden base of the frame. He leaves no gaps. The rhythmic sound of his brush resonates in the quiet. He push-

es out any air between the *washi* and the base, and runs a sheaf of bamboo skewers along the surface until the paper and wood adhere to each other. Before beginning the lacquering process, he applies a base coat of cloth glue: this prevents the lacquer from soaking into the *washi* and losing its luster. Two applications of persimmon tannin follow, to prevent water damage and mold, and then layers of cashew lacquer. The final step is papering the inside with decorative *washi*. While each layer of paste and lacquer dries, he works on other trunks. Planning ahead is part of the job. Mr. Iwai can make about four to five standard-sized (about 78 x 78 cm) trunks in five days. He currently has a customer waiting list of at least two months.

Mr. Iwai says that peo-



The bamboo frames delivered to the store. Mr. Iwai will now turn them into boxes.

ple sometimes come to him unannounced, asking to be taught how to make trunks. One has become an independent craftsman and carries on the work in Ibaraki Prefecture. "These boxes are made of paper and bamboo, but they're very durable. The box my father gave me when I got married has lasted half a century. Lately, people have been ordering them as gifts, with their family crests and names. I would like to continue this work as long as there is demand for it."

"I'll keep doing this as long as there are people who want them."



The smaller 30 cm x 30 cm document box (*bunko*) has been popular in recent years. It comes in black, vermilion, and brown.

Left: Applying the *washi* paper without leaving any gaps.

Right: Blending the *washi* paper into the bamboo base using bamboo skewers. The *washi* conforms to the irregularities of the bamboo, becoming completely integrated with it.

