

Tokyo Yogasa (Tokyo Umbrella)

Katsumi Sugasawa

Dedicated to the craft of umbrella making for over seventy years, He continues to produce umbrellas that will be cherished for years to come.

Attractive and easy to open “The beauty of utility”

He unfastens the strap, loosens the fabric, opens the umbrella. No one else could perform these steps with such grace. Mr. Sugasawa's every movement seems to tell the story of a craftsman's life, of tens of thousands of repetitions, of mastery. Tokyo Umbrella was designated a Traditional Craftspeople of Tokyo in 2018, and in 2019, he was certified as a Tokyo Traditional Craftsman. He entered the craft at age 18; today, at 89, he remains dedicated to it.

Western umbrellas were introduced to Japan in 1854 by Commodore Perry, and were much admired. The first umbrella manufacturers were established in Tokyo in the 1870s. The domestically produced umbrellas made by Tokyo craftsmen quickly became popular; by the turn of the century, they had become a major Japanese export.

In 1965, Japanese-made Western-style umbrellas ranked highest in the world in production, consumption, and exports. Mr. Sugasawa, who witnessed the industry's golden age, was born in Niihari, Ibaraki Prefecture (today's Tsuchiura City). “My father was a rice farmer, skilled at weaving straw bales,” he recounts. “Maybe I inherited that: I was dexterous with my hands from a young age.” At 18, Mr. Sugasawa became an apprentice to Yoshiaki Yaguchi through a relative's introduction. “You probably think of the apprenticeship system as very strict, right? But my master rarely got angry, and he didn't teach me in a condescending way. “Just give it a try first,” he'd say. He let me do things my own way.” Mr. Yaguchi appreciated his character — his natural dexterity, curiosity, and diligence — and even hosted the wedding for

his young apprentice and his wife, Kazuko.

Five years after entering the apprenticeship, Mr. Sugasawa became independent and began visiting wholesalers to find work. “It's my nature to be meticulously thorough. Work came in steadily, but while I made one umbrella, my fellow craftsmen made two. I was constantly thinking about how to make high-quality umbrellas more quickly.”

Umbrellas consist of dozens of parts. He and other umbrella craftsmen handle all the steps, from cutting the fabric to attaching the handle. His ideal since his youth has been to make umbrellas with beautifully stretched fabric that open easily. “Always make a prototype,” he insists. “The fabric might have been in use for a long time, but the stiffness of the wood frame can change. Take the time



“Middle stitching” is the process of sewing the fabric to the ribs. The umbrella's beautiful silhouette derives from this meticulous work.

to make the prototype, and you'll be able to do the final work with peace of mind.” Making something is about building on each step, without error. Mr. Sugasawa speaks casually, but he is expressing the craftsman's ideal. “I'm getting older, and my eyesight is deteriorating, but my body remembers how to make umbrellas,” he says. He continues to strive to reach the pinnacle of umbrella craftsmanship.

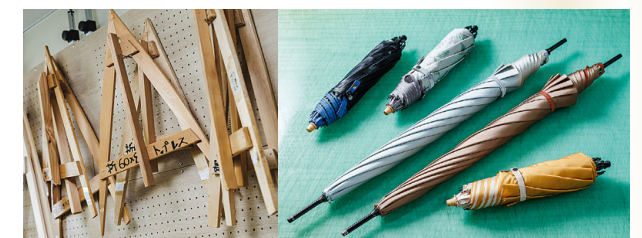
Ingrained with skills that will never be lost



“Many of today's young craftsmen are very skilled, which is reassuring,” Mr. Sugasawa says.

Left: The molds used to cut the fabric are considered the “heart” of the umbrella maker.

Right: Mr. Sugasawa supplies umbrellas to Komiya Shoten, a Western-style umbrella specialty store founded in Higashi-Nihonbashi in 1930. The umbrellas made by Mr. Sugasawa are fitted with handles and displayed in the store.



Profile ● Born in 1936. Apprenticed with umbrella craftsman Yoshiaki Yaguchi from age 18. Certified as a Traditional Craftspeople of Tokyo, 2019.

3-9-7 Higashi-Nihonbashi, Chuo-ku, Tokyo