



Dyeing

Susumu Takabayashi

The artisans at this dyeing shop in Hamacho, Nihonbashi, are pursuing new directions while passing on Edo culture and techniques to the generations to come.

Profile ● Born in 1967.
.....
2-45-6 Nihonbashi Hamacho, Chuo-ku, Tokyo

From designing, to dyeing, to sewing Turning his hands to a wide range of work

Hamacho Takatora offers a large selection of dyed fabrics: *hanten* (short coats), *noren* (fabric dividers), *tenu-gui* (hand towels), and bags. All embody the elegance and style of Edo chic. Artists turn the customers' orders into designs; a dye factory does the dyeing, and tailors handle the sewing. Coordinating the process and working with the customers is Susumu Takabayashi, from his desk in the *tatami*-floored workshop on the third floor. He turns his own hands to the craft, too, involving himself in every step.

Mr. Takabayashi, who comes from Hamamatsu in Shizuoka Prefecture, has an unusual background. He studied at an arts high school and a school of fashion, and then took a job at an ad agency. But he was put off by how much his ideas changed as they passed through other hands. "That's

a natural part of the job, but I was young, and it didn't resonate with me. I wanted my ideas to connect more directly with customers."

At age 25, he set out from Ueno towards Nihonbashi, a guidebook of local artisans in hand, and knocked at the doors of woodblock carvers, printers, and crest shops. He was finally hired at the tenth shop, Hamacho Takatora, whose second-generation owner, Kin'ya Takahashi, began teaching him the basics. Mr. Takabayashi's natural curiosity, skill, and sense for art and design won him an ever wider array of assignments. "Writing, drawing, carving stencils, stretching gauze, dyeing, tailoring, sales... I've really done it all," he laughs.

In 2019, the company turned a garage into a workshop for stretching gauze — the process of applying a fine mesh of "gauze" to



Purses made by Kin'ya Takahashi and Takabayashi. The bag in the foreground features an abacus pattern, representing Nihonbashi, the commercial heart of Edo.

secure the design, parts of which can be lost in the stencil-carving process. "The woman who did this for Takatora was 80 years old," Mr. Takabayashi recounts. When she decided to close up shop, during the Covid-19 pandemic, "she looked at me and said, 'You're the one,' and she handed me her tools. So I took over."

As he stretches the gauze, his gaze is intense, expressing the very nature

of a craftsman. Then when he calls a customer to confirm details, he is every inch a merchant, his voice clear and strong. Perhaps the driving motivation behind all the work he does is that desire for "direct feedback" he had so long ago. "It's always satisfying when something I've made turns out beautifully dyed and the customer says, 'That's great,'" Mr. Takabayashi says with pleasure.



Mr. Takabayashi interacts actively with people not only in Nihonbashi but in Asakusa, Shibuya, and elsewhere. "I try to hone my sensibilities by experiencing the local atmosphere and culture of other places," he explains.

The blessing of direct feedback

Urushi lacquer is used to bind the stencil to the fabric. The artisan carefully adjusts the humidity as the lacquer dries, to remove any buildup in the fabric.

