



# Seal Engraver

Masaki Takeguchi

The painstaking craftsmanship of Tokyo hand-carved seals has been refined in each generation and passed to the next.

Profile ● Born in 1959. Second-generation owner of Takeguchi Sanseido.

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## Inherited skills, recognition as a certified Traditional Craft

With the spread of electronic signatures, the use of seals appears to be shrinking. "Indeed," says Masaki Takeguchi, second-generation owner of Takeguchi Sanseido, "over 700 shops were affiliated with the Tokyo Seal Engravers Cooperative Association in 1980, but as of 2026, there are under 100." He emphasizes, however, that seals, and hand-carved ones in particular, will retain an important role going forward. "Seals matter because they acknowledge, publicly, who a person is. Hand-carved seals are one-of-a-kind. We ask what the customer wants and carve the characters into the seal to create an impression that is unique to that person. Even today, people order them when they're taking on new responsibilities or are coming to turning points in their lives."

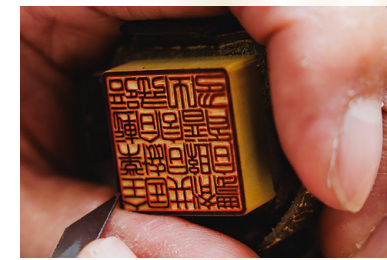
Masaki's father, Masaha-

ru, born in Fukui Prefecture, trained under a seal engraver in Tokyo's Nihonbashi. Mr. Takeguchi took over his shop in 1982 after graduating university. He learned hand-carving techniques at workshops run by the Seal Engravers Association. "This craft once had a traditional master-apprentice structure, but by my time, the industry as whole had a comprehensive system for cultivating skilled craftsmen, with elementary-through-specialized classes. I attended them for over 10 years, eventually studying the specialties and earning my First-Class certification as a seal engraver. All my instructors were superb, and Seiichi Ogawa, who taught the specialty classes, was a master of the particular calligraphy used on seals, especially what is known as small-seal script."

Tokyo Hand-carved Seals originated as the *goinbanshi*

made for the ruling shogunate and *daimyō* lords of the 1600-1800s. A single craftsman does a draft of the design on the seal's surface; prepares the surface for carving with a coat of vermilion; inscribes the characters with a brush (upside-down! so they'll appear correct on paper); carves them as thin as a strand of hair, to avoid damaging the seal; and finally applies ink and smooths the seal with a finishing knife. The process has been the same for 400 years.

"Tokyo Hand-carved Seals" became a brand after a Chuo-ku survey on local commerce recognized the craft as having great value. "I was surprised to learn that seals are considered "traditional crafts" and not just stationery items. But having won Chuo-ku's recognition, I thought we should seek



Cuts as fine as "a single strand of hair."

"The hardest part is not carving the seal, but considering the balance of the whole to create the draft," says Takeguchi.

Tokyo's as well. As Association chairman, and with the cooperation of our long-established member shops, I applied for certification from Tokyo. We became a Traditional Craftspeople of Tokyo in 2024, and in 2025, we were given the Traditional Craft designation at the national level, by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI)."

Mr. Takeguchi has given back to the industry that raised him and is now passing his skills on to the next generation. Today, his son, Yuki, works in the shop with him.

## Seals are a treasured part of life's turning points

"Seals are seen as proof of trustworthiness. A banker once said to me that he doesn't lend to companies that don't take seals seriously."

