

Tochio Temari

On the outskirts of Nagaoka, in the Tochio area, a group of skilled craftspeople upholds the tradition of handmade gifts known as *temari*.

Temari vary both in size and level of detail. Since each one is still shaped by hand, no two are ever the same. The smallest is about the size of a golf ball, while the biggest can be larger than a soccer ball. The core of the *temari* is traditionally a large moth cocoon into which seven seeds, symbolizing the *shichifukujin*, the seven deities of happiness, have been inserted. The core is wrapped with fiber obtained from fern fronds (*zenmai*), a delicacy harvested in early spring, and then tightly bound with colorful threads. The seeds rattle when the *temari* is shaken.

The outside of the *temari* consists of layers of silk thread wrapped to form a variety of patterns and images. Historically, the silk thread for *temari* was damaged silk floss or leftover thread from weaving. Crafting *temari* takes considerable time, effort, and precision. Depending on the size and the pattern used, it can take anywhere from two hours to two weeks. One pattern has twelve squares. This number is symbolic, as twelve was an auspicious number in Echigo, the old province corresponding to present-day Niigata Prefecture. A twelve-square *temari* represented a house stacked with rice-measuring boxes, where the children would never go hungry.

Tochio Temari is a highly specialized art form. Today, only 32 members of the Tochio Temari no Kai group that creates the *temari* are active. Many of these members are elderly. The group originally formed in 1983 with the express purpose of ensuring that the Tochio Temari tradition is not lost to history.

Generally speaking, *temari* come in two varieties: the toy type, and the decorative type. Children can play with the toy type, while the decorative type usually hangs in the home as a good luck charm. Both types require the same level of care in their creation. Before making a *temari*, the local craftsperson puts thought into which of the many available patterns they will use. Different patterns convey different meanings, so if you are picking out a *temari* as a gift, it is important to consider the pattern.

For example, a pattern of cranes and bamboo represents long life. It is typically given as a gift at a significant point in someone's life, such as a wedding or retirement. Red and white flower patterns, which are based on the Japanese plum plant, are also popular. Their blossoming buds make them a good gift for newborn babies.

Today, the Tochio Temari no Kai passes on the tradition of *temari* to the next generation. Elementary school children in Tochio learn the skills needed to make their own *temari* under the watchful eye of group members. We hope that these young people will join the group and ensure that Tochio Temari continues to thrive as a local tradition for years to come.