

Yodoe Parasol Tradition Hall

Kasa, traditional Japanese parasols, are made of oiled *washi* paper stretched over a skeleton of thin bamboo ribs. Beginning in 1821, the seaside hamlet of Yodoe became home to dozens of parasol makers who developed a distinctive style known as Yodoe-gasa. By the early twentieth century, this local industry was producing 170,000 parasols per year, sold throughout the country. Today, only two of the makers still exist, laboriously hand-crafting the parasols. The Japanese Parasol Tradition Hall is a museum that showcases the history and design of these colorful and dramatic items. It is run by the Yodoe Parasol Tradition Association, which operates the largest remaining parasol workshop next door. To this day, they make durable Yodoe-gasa in sizes ranging from about 1 meter in diameter to over 2 meters in diameter. The latter, called *nodate-gasa*, are used at outdoor tea ceremonies. The workshop's exquisitely made Yodoe-gasa are collectors' items, sought after by leading kabuki actors and tea masters and praised by members of the Japanese imperial family.

Painstaking Work with Bamboo and Paper

Yodoe-gasa require specific strains of bamboo for different parts of the frame and handle. Each parasol requires 100 thin ribs, and shaping them is painstaking work. Though this was once done entirely with hand tools, the workshop uses 100-year-old machines that split the bamboo quickly and accurately. The ribs are left in their natural color for many designs, but can also be dyed. Colorful silk threads called *ito kazari* (thread decoration) are intricately woven on the underside of the parasol to connect the ribs and maintain tension. These color combinations are one of the hallmarks of the style.

Striking Traditional Designs

Handmade *washi* paper is then glued to the ribs using *warabiko*, a gelatinous natural adhesive made from bracken. The *washi* is finally treated with a combination of linseed and other oils that render it waterproof. Over time, natural white *washi* that is oiled will age to a warm golden hue. Although Yodoe-gasa made for festivals or other special occasions may be decorated with calligraphic legends painted in black sumi ink, in most cases colored paper is cut and applied to make striking geometric designs. Typical patterns include a simple black ring around the perimeter, large stripes, and hexagons. One of the most popular designs, called *janome* (snake eye), consists of a small light-colored ring near the center, believed to resemble the eye of a snake. A variation with a

large wavy ring motif based on the plum blossom is considered an auspicious design, and is often used at traditional weddings. In earlier decades, freshly oiled parasols made in Yodoe were dried on the nearby beach, their handles pushed into the sand, angled to face the sun. The sight of thousands of Yodoe-gasa covering the beach like gigantic flowers was a notable sight.