**Preserving an Ancient Craft for Future Generations**

501-750 words (Web)

Washi (traditional Japanese paper) has been made in the Mino region since at least the eighth century. Hon-minoshi is the highest-grade washi produced in Mino. It is lightweight and translucent, with a delicate luster. It does not deteriorate or yellow with age, retaining its strength and beauty for generations.

*From sutra copying to shoji*

Washi from Mino was initially used in Buddhist temples for sutra copying, but it later became the standard for high-quality sliding screens and paper lanterns. In the twenty-first century, Hon-minoshi is used for art conservation in museums worldwide, valued for its fine texture and durability. The methods and materials for making Hon-minoshi have barely changed over the centuries, and the craft was added to the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2014.

*A deceptively simple art*

In principle, making Hon-minoshi is straightforward. The pulped bast fibers of the paper mulberry are mixed with water. A viscous dispersant is added, which prevents the fibers from clumping and aids in even distribution of the fibers through the water. This pulp slurry is gently scooped and strained on a fine bamboo screen to capture a film of interwoven fibers. It is then pressed to remove excess liquid, and dried in the sun. The process, from preparing the raw materials and mixing the ingredients to the optimal consistency, to capturing a fine, even layer of paper pulp, can take years to master.

*The essential materials and tools*

A variety of materials are used to make washi, such as the bark of *kozo* (paper mulberry), *mitsumata* (*Edgeworthia chrysantha***)**, and *gampi* (several shrubs of the genus *Wikstroemia)*. Hon-minoshi is made with the white bast fiber from the inner bark of *kozo* shrubs. The strips of *kozo* inner bark are sourced from Daigo in Ibaraki Prefecture (north of Tokyo), where *kozo* grows quickly, resulting in straight, slender stems that yield strong, flexible fiber.

A thick, viscous substance called *nebeshi* (also called *neri* in many parts of Japan) is added to a large tub of water and *kozo* pulp, to help the fine plant fibers disperse evenly through the water and prevent clumping. It also slows the drainage of the pulp slurry through the bamboo screen, allowing the maker better control over the thickness of the paper. *Nebeshi* is made by pounding the root of *tororoaoi* (sunset hibiscus), then soaking it in water to extract the clear, gelatinous substance.

Only handmade tools are used in the production of Hon-minoshi. Some, such as the chrysanthemum-patterned wooden mallets for pounding the *kozo* fibers, are unique to the Mino area. Each tool is made by a different specialist, but the number of tool makers is dwindling. There is only one artisan in the area who can make the delicate bamboo screens called *su* used for screening the paper. Each screen is composed of around 3,000 strands of split and shaved bamboo, bound with silk threads. It typically takes a week to make a single screen.

*Keeping traditions alive*

After World War II, the demand for sliding screens and traditional paper of various types has decreased. At the same time, rapid improvements in mechanization led to the production of high-quality paper at lower prices. At the start of the twentieth century, there were over 3,700 workshops making washi paper in Mino. Now there are fewer than 20 and, of those, just 6 make Hon-minoshi.

An association was formed to preserve and promote Hon-minoshi. Craft skills are typically passed down through family lines. However, the papermakers in Mino now take on apprentices to preserve the craft. Hon-minoshi is used for conserving books and artworks and to make contemporary lanterns. For example, Hon-minoshi was selected for the sliding shoji panels and sculptural lighting features at the Kyoto State Guest House.