

# QR

## Special Selection

The Shozo Izuishi Selection No.1

Bamboo bags by Yusai

### Bamboo craft soars to new heights with beautiful bags

Photography/Satoru Naito Text/Shozo Izuishi

The temple of Horyuji in Ikaruga, Nara is home to a large collection of zushi (miniature shrines) passed down through the centuries. Zushi are boxes for storing precious items such as Buddhist statues and sutras. Fairly compact, with doors on the front, that can be opened and closed most zushi are wooden, but the Horyuji collection includes one example made entirely from bamboo. Records state it was used on October 1,761. This means it was already there, and bamboo work of great finesse was already being produced at least 1200 years ago.

The Shosoin repository at Todaiji Temple in turn houses a sizeable collection of keko: woven bamboo baskets used as temporary receptacles for fresh flowers and most likely employed in sange, the Buddhist ceremonial scattering of flowers as an offering to the souls of the dead. These baskets were woven first in a twill (ajiro) pattern, shifting to zaru-ami (a "sieve" pattern named for the bamboo sieves commonly used in Japanese kitchens), and finally finished by binding the edges. It is evident that bamboo ware of some sophistication was already being produced in the Nara period.

Leaping forward more than a millennium we come to the invention of the

incandescent light bulb by Thomas Edison in 1879. Everyone has heard of Edison, but few know that the filament for that first bulb was actually made from Japanese bamboo. Common bamboo (in Japanese, madake) is also known for its imperviousness to stretching and shrinkage, which is why it has been used in the manufacture of rulers for centuries.

#### The wonderful soothing power of bamboo

The "Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove" were seven wise men in China's Wei period who forsook the everyday world and congregated in a bamboo forest. Wise or not, we too cannot help but feel a certain calmness come over us when walking in a bamboo grove. The faint, caressing rustle of foliage, the vibrant stalks of vivid green bamboo, the fragrance... Could those towering ramrod forms, stretching endlessly upward, harbor an ability to soothe the careworn human soul?

Thus bamboo is not only a graceful, highly flexible, and indispensable material; it is also a plant with a wonderful power to soothe and console. Madake is thought to be native to China, and is still found throughout southeast

Asia, but Japanese madake is the material of choice for bamboo work. Also, madake only flowers once a century, displaying an exquisite bloom for a fleeting time. Just imagine: a plant that flowers only once every hundred years. This alone gives madake an aura of mystery.

#### Only the finest

Master bamboo craftsman Kenichi Mouri, who works under the traditional family name of Yusai, generally uses three-year-old bamboo. His studio is in the city of Usuki in Oita Prefecture. Bamboo is found in all areas of Japan south of Aomori, but bamboo from Kyushu is deemed particularly suitable



The bag's interior is designed as a silk purse

# 竹籠

#### Wave pattern twill weave bag

Wave pattern twill weave bag  
Exquisitely woven high-end bamboo bag with rich color tone  
H 20.5cm X L 43cm X W 14cm  
Handle height 14.5cm  
¥472,500 incl. tax



From top

**Wisteria pattern twill weave bag (black)**

H 22cm X L 30cm X W 9.5cm  
Handle height 13cm  
¥81,900 incl. tax

**Hexagonal weave bag (purple)**

H 15cm X L 33cm X W 13cm  
Handle height 13.5cm  
¥147,000 incl. tax

**Wave pattern twill weave bag (green)**

H 16cm X L 26cm X W 11cm  
Handle height 13.5cm  
¥79,800 incl. tax



**Twill weave bag**

Roomy enough to hold A4-size documents with ease. Edges are finished with top-quality Italian leather, its attractive sheen a perfect complement to the woven bamboo.  
H 30cm X L 30cm X W 8cm  
Handle height 13cm  
¥136,500 incl. tax



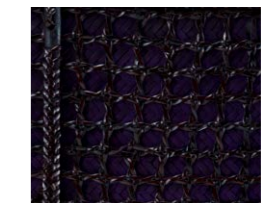
Three-year-old madake of good character is used

**Twill (ajiro) weaving**



Warp strips are packed tightly together and the weft strip skipped over two or three at a time, creating a step with each row to form a diagonal pattern. A very old style of weaving, it is also used for the ceilings in Japanese teahouses.

**Hexagonal (mutsune) weaving**



Six strips are arranged diagonally to form a hexagon, from which weaving progresses outward. An ancient technique which is also seen among treasures of the Shosoin.

**Wave pattern twill (nami-ajiro) weaving**



A type of advanced twill weaving technique in which patterns, script etc. are formed by varying the step or offset between rows. This particular example is a wave pattern.

believed to be the finest.

Yusai's father was also an acclaimed bamboo artisan, who moved to Oita in search of the supreme materials for his craft: further testament to the superior qualities of the region's bamboo. Born and raised among this renowned bamboo, Yusai notes that as far back as he can remember, bamboo was almost his only plaything.

**Chosen and cut by a master**

Still, why three-year-old bamboo? In human terms bamboo of three years growth is adolescent, with the most vigorous, sturdy and substantial fibers and flesh. The reason for choosing three-year-old bamboo is obvious ten years on, intricately woven into a piece of bamboo ware. Items woven from it do

not lose condition. If younger bamboo is used, gaps will begin to form no matter how tightly woven it is, because the bamboo will shrink slightly, becoming thinner.

Yusai only uses bamboo harvested as winter's chill is starting to set in, from late November to early December. This is the job of a master bamboo cutter, who chooses a cold, clear day to head into the hills to search for three-year-old bamboo of good character. Yes, like people, some bamboo is of good character, and some less so, and it is not always easy to tell from outward appearances. But it is said an expert bamboo cutter knows which bamboo is ready for cutting right now. Perhaps he alone can hear the bamboo whispering "Hey, over here, over here. Pick me, pick me..." Relying purely on these silent voices, the cutter harvests the best

three-year-old specimens.

Cutting is also a delicate business, because bamboo scratched or bruised during gathering will be of no use later. The long poles are handled as gently as the limbs of a child. Once cut, they are carefully laid down to rest on the spot, in what is an important ritual in the production of bamboo ware. The bamboo is left there for about two months to settle, before being cut into shorter lengths for easy handling and brought down from the hills to rest once more. In this way it finally becomes ready for use in bamboo work.

Why, incidentally, is bamboo harvested as the weather grows cold? Because this is when the sugar level in the fibers is highest. It is this sugar that gives the end product its glossy sheen.

**To strips, then works of art**

The process of converting cut bamboo into the fine strips used in weaving involves a number of steps where the bamboo is split, peeled, and transformed into thin, supple pieces resembling piano strings. After this, all that is left to do is to labor hour after hour, painstakingly plying warp and weft. Both of Yusai's hands, all ten fingers, move like those of a concert pianist to gradually produce a work of art.

But the same type of strips, woven using the same technique, will never produce exactly the same bag. It is this, in part, that defines Yusai's creations as art. His bags are sculptures rendered in delicate bamboo. As such, it would not be at all surprising to find them in use a hundred or even two hundred years hence.

Bamboo deteriorates less than leather, wood, or metal. Yusai's bags are precious heirlooms to be passed down from mother to daughter, daughter to granddaughter, granddaughter to great-granddaughter.

The madake strips used for weaving are straight and strong. Proud, even noble. But in the warm fingers of Yusai, they bend obediently, meekly acquiescing to their destiny at the master craftsman's hands. Or is Yusai conversing with the strips through his fingers, his spirit and life force breathing into the bag as they chat and joke? Perhaps this is why one can see a human face in every one of Yusai's bags. And why, in my view, bags crafted by him are living works of art.

**Shozo Izuishi**

Born 1944. Joined the fashion industry in 1964. Izuishi has forged a career as a fashion designer, consultant, and critic. Author of numerous books including *Otoko wa Naze Nekutai wo Musubu no ka* ("Why do Men Wear Neckties?") (Shinchosha), and *Bruu Jinzu no Bunkashi* ("Blue Jeans: a Cultural History") (NTT Shuppan). His recent work *Suutsu no Hyakka Jiten* ("An Encyclopedia of Suits") (Banraisha) lecturing males on how to wear a suit properly has attracted favorable reviews.

**Event**

From Thursday 10 to Wednesday 16 March 2011 bamboo bags made by Yusai will be on display and for sale on the first floor of Ginza Wako.

For any inquiries please contact Current Art (www.currentart.co.jp)