

Stories from the Japanese Studio

# CRAFTING LIFE

Yukiko Tsuchiya  
Hikoju Makie  
Ōtsuchi Sashiko

Curated by  
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# INTRODUCTION

*Crafting Life: Stories from the Japanese Studio* explores Japanese craft from a fresh perspective, highlighting its dynamism and resilience. Far from static, Japanese craft practices have always adapted to a network of variables, including access to materials, shifting patronage, intergenerational learning, and environmental challenges, including natural disasters. The ability of craft practitioners to innovate while valuing the tacit knowledge underpinning their traditions has ensured their continued relevance in contemporary Japan, and their esteem worldwide.

This exhibition showcases three craft practices from different regions of Japan, including a ceramic artist from Karatsu (Yukiko Tsuchiya), a *maki-e* lacquerware studio company originally from Wajima, now based in Kanazawa (Hikoju Makie Co. Ltd.), and a *sashiko* needlework collective turned 'brand' from Ōtsuchi (Ōtsuchi Sashiko).

Their distinct practices and stories reflect the diverse contexts through which Japanese craft traditions are expressed today, in objects of rare mastery, prized for their precious materials and technical expertise, through to garments or vessels of everyday functional beauty, by those new to craft practice, developing craft traditions in fresh and meaningful ways.

Historically close to special patronage networks, these practices are now finding fresh collaborations with markets that value the handmade, including bespoke fashion and fine dining. In this way, *Crafting Life* foregrounds the stories of these makers, highlighting their distinct yet complementary concerns, and inviting reflection on the role of creative adaptation in maintaining the currency of craft practices, in Japan and beyond.

# YUKIKO TSUCHIYA

*Born 1971, Karatsu, Saga Prefecture*

The pottery of **Yukiko Tsuchiya** (土屋由起子) embodies the Japanese concept of *yō no bi* (用の美), or 'the beauty of utility' – the idea that objects designed for everyday use can, and should also be, beautiful. This alignment reflects the world Yukiko grew up in, surrounded by nature in the coastal city of Karatsu on the south island of Kyushu, a location famous for ceramic production since the late 16th century.

Known for its visual and practical strength and imperfect beauty, Karatsu ware is identified by the texture of its coarse clay and iron glazes, giving it a rustic simplicity and elegance highly valued for enhancing the beauty of Japanese cuisine, in particular *kaiseki* dining and the tea ceremony.

As a child, encouraged by her grandfather and father, Yukiko visited historic Karatsu kilns and began working with local clay. After graduating in fashion and interior design at Kyushu Industrial University, she decided to pursue her love of ceramics. Regular visits to the Nakazato kiln in Hamatama led to her training under master Takashi Nakazato (1937–), the fifth son of Muan Nakazato (1895–1985), who was a much-revered Living National Treasure and considered the godfather of the revival of Karatsu ware in the modern period.

In 2002, after three years' training, Yukiko decided to become independent, establishing Yukiko Kiln. She now enjoys a reputation as one of Japan's most exciting contemporary potters, whose work embodies traditional Karatsu techniques, enriched by her unique artistry and earthy aesthetic sensibility. Her work typically displays a rugged finish embedded with delicate details, reflecting the harmony of nature.

*A nightingale has started to sing.  
The old tree in the house across the way  
has opened its blooms, magnificently.  
Those strong, outstretched branches  
fill me with energy.  
And from now until the sun sets,  
I will work at the potter's wheel.*

—Yukiko Tsuchiya

鶯が鳴き始めました  
向かいのお家の老木は  
見事な花を咲かせました

自然の力強い  
枝振りに  
元気をいただきます

これから  
日が暮れるまで  
轆轤の仕事をします

—土屋由起子



Yukiko Tsuchiya



Views of Yukiko Tsuchiya's studio. Images courtesy of Yukiko Tsuchiya and Kathryn Hunyor.



# CURATORIAL REFLECTION: KATHRYN HUNYOR

**What is your connection to your chosen artist, Yukiko Tsuchiya and her birthplace, Karatsu, in Saga Prefecture?**

I first encountered Yukiko's work in 2016, in a shop close to where I lived in Tokyo, called *Amahare* (rain/shine). I connected immediately with its aesthetic sensibility – drawn to the dark green, grey and silvery tones of the glaze, and the painterly quality of the surfaces that changed with the light. The strength and confidence of the forms she created were at once powerful, earthy and feminine.

I actually knew nothing about who created these compelling works, but I wasn't surprised to learn that Yukiko was a woman around my age, and from Karatsu. I had wonderful memories of visiting the beautiful coastal town years earlier and had begun collecting Karatsu ware. Now every time I take Yukiko-san's work in my hands, I'm transported back to Karatsu, and her beautiful studio.

**What is your attraction to ceramics?**

Growing up in 1980s Sydney, plastic was more prevalent than pottery. Yes, there were some beautiful exceptions at home – Japanese teapots and Arabia plates – but it wasn't until my first visit to Japan that I felt the aesthetic power of pottery.

Simple family meals unfolded on the table like a painting on canvas, the antithesis of white European dinner settings; no two items were the same. Differing shapes, patterns and textures came together in a rich, colourful tapestry of tableware. A feast of another kind, I was told: 'In Japan, you eat with your eyes.' But I found you also need a sense of touch to truly appreciate the textural charm of Japanese stoneware.

Since then, the beauty of glazed pottery – in particular Karatsu ware – has become a passion. The way the light plays with the surface of the object, and the cuisine sits in perfect aesthetic harmony with the ceramic vessel: together conveying a warmth and earthiness, an embrace from nature.

### What does 'crafting life' mean to you?

Waking with the sun, moving with the seasons, and creating work while attuned to the natural world. In other words, the simple, focused life of a Japanese craft artist.

I've always admired their modesty and humility, which reminds me of the ideal of *wabi*. In the words of Buddhist philosopher D.T. Suzuki, "To not to be dependent on wealth, power and reputation, and yet to feel inwardly the presence of something of the highest value, above time and social position: this is *wabi*."

Inspired by this, I aspire to a life where tasks, mundane or profound, are approached equally with the care and rhythm of an artisan; be it arranging flowers, writing words, or engaging with the people and world around me.

In this sense, 'crafting life' is an aesthetic ideal; where we thoughtfully and purposefully create an environment that harmonises with nature and fulfills us creatively.

# HIKOJU MAKIE

**Hikoju Makie** (彦十蒔絵) is a contemporary Japanese lacquer studio founded by the late Takashi Wakamiya (1964–2025), a renowned lacquer practitioner known for his craftsmanship and innovative approach to *maki-e*. This traditional technique involves sprinkling metallic powders onto a wet lacquer surface, creating intricate designs. In early 2025, Wakamiya entrusted the studio's leadership to the next generation. Hikoju Makie Co. Ltd. is now led by Teiren Taka and business partner Banjo Yamauchi of the Yamauchi Family Office.

The studio's origins trace back to Wajima, a historic lacquerware hub in Ishikawa Prefecture. Under Wakamiya's leadership for over twenty years, Hikoju Makie operated as a collaborative workshop, producing exquisite lacquerware, from tea utensils and writing boxes to contemporary objects. Working with 15 skilled artisans, Wakamiya dedicated his life to preserving and innovating Japanese lacquer traditions. He actively fostered emerging talent, challenging design conventions and pioneering material experimentation. His contributions extended beyond the studio — he served as President of the Wajima Lacquer Youth Association (2012), Cultural Exchange Envoy of the Agency for Cultural Affairs (2014), and was Director of the Lacquerware Association until his passing.

Hikoju Makie's works embody spiritual and philosophical narratives linked to Japanese identity. Inspired by history, classical literature, and folklore, the studio's meticulous brushwork and sculptural forms showcase exceptional innovation. Their renowned material mimicry technique renders lacquer to resemble natural surfaces. The studio's works feature in international exhibitions and collections, including the Victoria and Albert Museum (London) and the Museum of Lacquer Art (Münster, Germany).

*I believe putting in all of one's heart,  
mind, and strength is true craftsmanship.*

-Takashi Wakamiya, Hikoju Makie

全身全霊を傾けたものづくり  
という風に考えているわけです

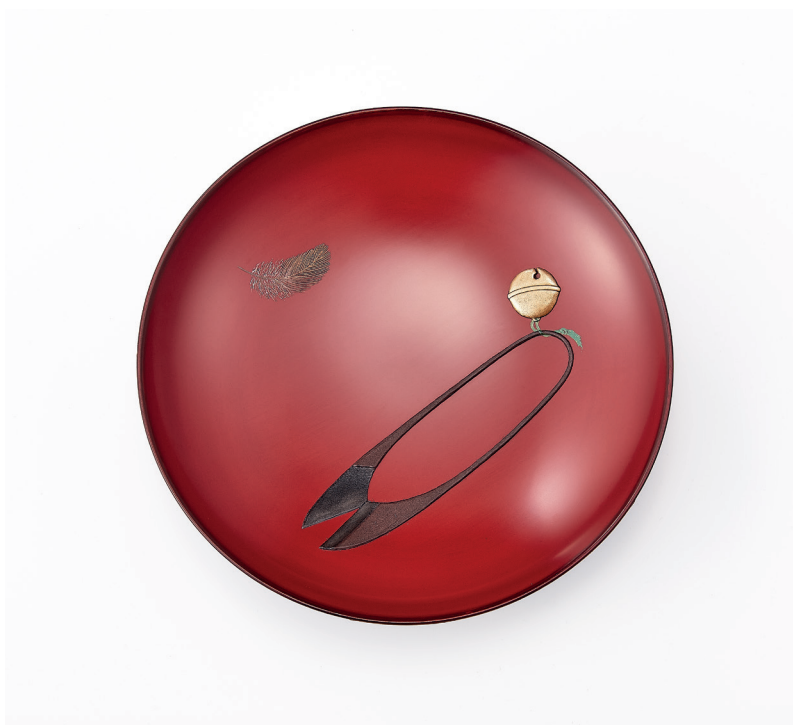
-若宮隆志、彦十時絵



Takashi Wakamiya



Hikoju Makie  
 舌切り雀  
 (The Tongue-Cut Sparrow)  
 Maki-e  
 Sake cup  
 φ10.2 × H2.5 cm





Top: A wooden spatula (*hera*) is used to build the substrate layers of lacquer over a form.

Bottom: A long, narrow brush (*fude*) is used to apply detailed designs in the *maki-e* process. Traditionally different animal hair is used in brushes for stiffer or softer effects. Images courtesy of Hikoju Makie Co. Ltd.

# CURATORIAL REFLECTION: BIC TIEU

## **What is your attraction to lacquer?**

Growing up, I was enchanted by the souvenir lacquer objects brought home from my parent's travel from Vietnam. Instead of playing with toys, I was enthralled by the goldfish image on a shiny black surface. During my undergraduate years, by chance, my mentor showed me a book on East Asian lacquer. This ignited an awakening and curiosity into learning about this material.

Lacquer is an ancient natural material endemic to the Asian region, with a history of over 5000 years. It was first discovered in China and used on artefacts to protect material like wood from rotting. The lacquer was applied onto religious paraphernalia like tombstones, vessels and bowls. Eventually the material developed into an artform, fostering technical material innovation and trade, spreading across the Asian continent. Each country has its own stylistic aesthetic and practice and like many of the other crafts it has achieved remarkable technical applications.

What attracted me most to this medium was its lustrous characteristics and its potential as a surface design application and expression.

## **What is your connection to the Hikoju Makie studio, and Wajima, the town where it was established?**

My curiosity towards Japanese lacquerware really began when I came across an exquisite work in a beautiful publication during my undergraduate years studying design at the University of NSW. This inquiry into the medium led to a research-led, practice-based dissertation in which I examined Vietnamese lacquer and its application to contemporary jewellery and object design. I wanted to pursue the artform and knew that the Japanese were leaders in this field.

Lacquer studios in Japan are fiercely guarded and through the extraordinary support and effort made by Lesley Kehoe, I was able to study traditional Japanese lacquer at the Unryuan Kitamura Studio between the years 2009–2011. I was successful with an Ian Potter Cultural Grant, Asialink Residency Grant, and patronage from Pauline Gandel and Raphy Star which made it possible for a two-year residency studying this traditional art form. During this time, I developed a friendship with Teiren Taka (Wawa) who was working for another established lacquer studio – Hikoju Makie.

In 2018, I returned to Japan to spend time nourishing my metal and lacquer skills, this time working with Takashi Wakimiya-san and Wawa, alongside members of the Hikoju Makie Studio.

## What does 'crafting life' mean to you?

As a designer and maker working with metal and lacquer for over 20 years now, I am always learning about the material's potential through the works I design and make. It is a constant iterative process. The material is very much akin to my life; working with metal and lacquer is a lifelong journey. As a maker, you are embodying material intelligence, knowledge and innovation. Material is transformative: you can express, tell stories and inspire.

I feel honoured to have this connection with the world of Japanese *urushi* and *maki-e*, and a brief engagement with Takashi Wakamiya-san. His commitment to bringing forward this traditional craft was extraordinary, honouring material knowledge, craftsmanship and sustaining future preservation. The studio is now in the care and direction of Teiren Taka and Banjo Yamauchi and will continue to carry on this legacy. For more information, I welcome you to view their website [hikoju-makie.com](http://hikoju-makie.com)

# ŌTSUCHI SASHIKO

Ōtsuchi Sashiko (大槌刺し子) is a craft collective and brand that emerged from the Ōtsuchi Reconstruction Sashiko Project, initiated in response to the devastating Great East Japan Earthquake and tsunami of March 11, 2011. In the aftermath, Ōtsuchi, a coastal town in Japan's northeastern Iwate Prefecture, faced immense loss and upheaval, with many residents displaced into shelters.

Amid these challenges, the project was founded by volunteers to provide women in evacuation shelters with a meaningful activity and a sense of purpose. *Sashiko* – a traditional Japanese needlework technique that uses simple materials like needles, thread, and fabric—offered an accessible and healing craft. Women of all ages began stitching together, finding hope and connection through their work.

From its humble beginnings, Ōtsuchi Sashiko has grown into a self-sustaining brand, known for meticulous craftsmanship and respect for *sashiko* traditions. Collaborations with Japanese fashion and lifestyle brands like Muji or KUON, as well as international fashion houses, have enhanced the group's profile well beyond Japan. Still, Ōtsuchi Sashiko remains dedicated to its principles: to preserve handcrafts, foster pride among makers, support sustainable practices while revitalising traditional crafts and local communities through small-scale models, and to simply 'create a space' for people to make and share.

The women makers, or *sashiko-san*, in Ōtsuchi Sashiko continue to create with care, imagining the lives of those who will use their pieces. Their work extends beyond the craft itself, weaving together stories of resilience, community, and an enduring spirit of 'crafting' as a way and means of living. By bridging tradition with present challenges, Ōtsuchi Sashiko seeks to inspire a sustainable and connected future.



Members and collaborators from Ōtsuchi Sashiko, from left: Kazue Ikarigawa, Makiko Kamata, Tomiko Goto, Mieko Ōsawa, Setsuko Haga, Kishou Hitotsukabuto, Hiromi Kikuchi. Image courtesy Ōtsuchi Sashiko.

*The origin of sashiko? I think, much like anywhere in the world, it comes from a culture of valuing things. Instead of wearing something once and throwing it away, it's about passing things down from one generation to the next.*

*That's why you see older fabrics being reused, sewn together with sashiko thread, that's tradition I suppose. Ultimately, it's about taking care of what you have.*

—Tomiko Goto, Ōtsuchi Sashiko

刺し子の原点？ これはね、世界各国どこもそうだけど、物を大切にするっていう文化があったんじゃないのかな。

一回着てすぐ捨てるのではなく、代々伝わってきたのでね。だから、いろいろ前の生地に入ったり、刺し子の糸で縫いだり、

伝統なのかな。  
要は物を大事にすること。

—後藤富子、大槌刺し子



*Noragi* jacket with hemp/linen leaf design. Created in 2016 under the guidance of *sashiko* instructor Keiko Futatsuya during a technical workshop. It features four types of *sashiko* pattern: *hakozaishi* (box stitch), *asanoha* (hemp leaf), *tokuasa* (special hemp), and *kagome* (basket weave). The jacket was made by stitching together 18 individual fabric pieces.



Sashiko Girls sneaker.  
Custom made from shoes received from customer.



Sashiko works made by Hitotsukabu Tokishō (一兜貴昭), from her collection.



# CURATORIAL REFLECTION:

## OLIVIER KRISCHER

### What is your connection to the Ōtsuchi Sashiko, and the town of Ōtsuchi in Iwate prefecture?

I lived in Japan from 2006 to the end of 2011, studying for my PhD and then teaching at the University of Tsukuba – but I have never been as far north as Ōtsuchi. While my interest was firstly in the makers and their project, I do have a serendipitous connection to Ōtsuchi which piqued my curiosity.

In March 2011, although I was living in Tsukuba, I happened to be back in Sydney when the earthquake and tsunami occurred. I returned to Japan two weeks later, and soon joined volunteers in the tsunami affected area of Ishinomaki, in Miyagi prefecture, helping to shovel deep oily mud from peoples' homes. I never returned, but those memories have stayed with me. I can't recall how exactly, but some months later I volunteered to translate for a publication sharing news stories from around Ōtsuchi, gathered from the *Ōtsuchi Future News* – which had popped up a little like citizen journalism, in the wake of the disaster, amid a gap in local reporting. The publication proceeds were set to help them keep sharing local stories, and this felt like a small thing I could do to help from afar. Later it was published as an e-book I believe. So when I heard about Ōtsuchi Sashiko, naturally I was especially curious, having had this tangential connection.

### Why are you attracted to *sashiko* needlework?

For *sashiko*, I was interested in the way that this technique blurs the old dichotomy of form and function. There is something so timely about repurposing and valuing existing garments, existing materials. More specifically, while I'm fascinated with the work of these makers it was also the story of Ōtsuchi Sashiko, the way in which it has emerged from disaster as a bottom-up initiative, transcending "recovery" to become now a new present, a new tradition, and a self-sustaining, supportive network. This is significant, because when we think about craft in Japan it's easy to imagine timeless tradition or generations of mastery. But here we find a new tradition, drawing on past practice to add value and meaning to a contemporary set of needs and opportunities. I like that it thwarts assumptions around craft and tradition in Japan, which of course has always been dynamic and pragmatic as much as it respects traditional ways and materials. I think one can learn a lot about what art historian Christine Guth calls "craft culture" in Japan from the very contemporary example of Ōtsuchi Sashiko.

## What does 'crafting life' mean to you?

I like that this phrase goes in two directions: a life of craft; and crafting or fashioning one's life. This speaks both to technique but also a way of life. In her recent book *Craft Culture in Early Modern Japan*, Guth explains she intentionally avoided focusing on specific makers or the "things" made, in order to highlight processes, which encompass much more complex relations. For this exhibition, we were very keen to approach the idea of craft in Japan from a similar perspective, bringing together makers who typically wouldn't be in the same space, inviting audiences to recognise some shared interests, techniques and challenges between these distinct practices, and not because there is a fixed or inflexible cultural identity between the works. 'Crafting life' speaks to this broader context of 'making', in which the singular refined object is just one part, in a typically complex set of personal relationships, material networks and practical concerns, which makers and their crafts have always had to navigate and adapt around. In this form, craft is a story of resilience and adaptation.



Views of Yukiko Tsuchiya's studio. Image courtesy of the artist.