

Title:

Discover the Light of Japan

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573

Summary:

"We may simply have lost our appreciation for handmade goods." Igarashi san has been making chochin paper lanterns in his small shop for his whole life.

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Article Body:

"We may simply have lost our appreciation for handmade goods." Igarashi san has been making chochin paper lanterns in his small shop for his whole life. His father too, and his grandfather and great grandfather and even great, great grandfather. The tools & equipment that surround him today, in fact, have outlasted his ancestors, their wooden surfaces worn smooth with age. Since the start of the Meiji era (1868 - 1912) Kanazawa citizens have been buying Igarashi chochin from the store, in the heart of old Kanazawa's merchant district, near the back of the castle. The shelves are stacked high with beautifully decorated lanterns - vibrant bursts of colour peppering the dusty confines of the little workshop.

Chochin lanterns have a fairly long history in Japan - there is evidence of them being used in temples in the 10th century - and were used primarily as a portable means of lighting. Only occasionally used inside, they customarily hung outside a house, temple or business or else in the entrance, ready to be suspended on a pole and carried before anyone going out at night. Igarashi-san reckons that at one time they were so widely used there would have been around 40 or 50 chochin shops just in Kanazawa. Nowadays there remain only himself and one other local craftsman in the trade and the other fellow (Matsuda-san) has long since diversified, making traditional umbrellas his mainstay.

Making a chochin is a fiddly, fairly delicate procedure despite the attractively simple appearance of the end product. And, when asked what are the most important qualities in his profession Igarashi-san replies, his bright eyes dead serious, "patience and concentration." The average sized lantern according to Igarashi-san, at about 30 cm across, can be produced at a rate of about two a day by one man including most of the painting. However some truly huge ones have

left the Igarashi shop over the years - his biggest was a matsuri monster measuring 5 shaku (1 shaku = 30.3cm in the old Japanese measuring system) in diameter with an intricate year of the rabbit design on it. The old lantern maker is realistic about the fact that people want cheaper, mass-produced, plastic covered lanterns these days - he even sells them himself - but he is confident in the knowledge that a well-made paper lantern is a lovely thing, superior in many ways to these garish modern impostors.

"You can repair a good chochin," he tells us, "you can replace one rib or fix a hole in the paper no problem." "Plastic lanterns have no internal frame and can't be patched." A paper lantern no matter how well made lasts only about a year (natural beauty is always fleeting) whereas a plastic one might last twice that and cost half as much. On top of that, we as a society may have simply lost our appreciation for handmade goods. Price has become our main motivation as customers. We do not care to know how things were made nowadays, or who made them, or else Igarashisan would be the prosperous head of a chain of shops.

The walls of the Igarashi Chochinya and his ready-to-hand scrapbook sport innumerable monochrome pictures and press clippings showing a proud, broad-shouldered young man with strong, thick arms and a fetching grin showing off elegant paper spheres with matsuri lights glimmering in the background. Humbly showing us them, his warm, friendly smile only slips slightly as he tells us that he will be the last of his family line making lanterns here.