

# Master Japanese Kitemaker Remembered

Editor's note: Following is a reminiscence on one of the last master Edo kitemakers by Masaaki Modegi, Japan's preeminent kiting personage. The following is excerpted from Modegi's essay *Early Kites and Kitemakers* in the book *Kites: Paper Wings Over Japan* (Thames and Hudson, New York, 1997).

By Masaaki Modegi

Hashimoto was born in Hikifune, Mukojima, Tokyo, in 1904. When he was four years old, his family moved to an area behind the Shimotani Shrine in Ueno. Having been born into a family of kitemakers, Teizo began to help with the family business while still in elementary school. While he learned the tricks of the trade from his father Tomekichi and his step-grandfather Fusakichi as he grew older, it was through his own concerted efforts that he secured his place as the third generation of this traditional Edo kitemaking family. Though Edo became Tokyo, there was no change in the status of kiteflying: kites were flown in the older downtown district as well as in the newer, highbrow uptown Yamanote area. At this time, many kitemakers were still left.

When he was younger, Hashimoto's father worked for Hasegawa Shoten, a maker of seasonal goods whose business was located on the banks of Yanagihara in the Kanda district. There he made carp banners for Boys' Day on May 5, fans for the hot summer months leading up to the Festival of the Dead, and kites. The resident artist was Yoshitoyo Utagawa, whose son Umemitsu was exercising his expertise on kites. He also had a friend, Sakamoto Fusakichi, a dyer by trade, who applied to paper the stenciling techniques originally used on cloth. Whereas India ink prints had heretofore been colored by hand, this innovation allowed for the efficient mass production of multicolored kites.

Soon after the war, in 1956, Teizo Hashimoto married Kiyo, two years his senior. She worked so hard alongside her husband that she soon developed calluses on her left hand, and yet all the while she managed to handle both the business and household affairs for this consummate craftsman. The entire first floor of



*An elegant Edo Ji-dako letter kite by Teizo Hashimoto.*

their home, a two-story wooden structure built in the old-fashioned style, was a dedicated workshop, complete with a gap in the wall through which to sweep out the dirt. Not only was this convenient for cleaning, it also improved the ventilation in the summer and could be closed with a small door during the cold winters. This gap was also used as an entrance by the cats, which the Hashimotos, who had



Hashimoto's rendering of the Yakko kite theme.

no children, treated lovingly as members of the family. I witnessed numerous occasions when the cats would paw at a ball of kite string or walk over the kites—all without a word of rebuke. On the workshop floor were scattered old paintbrushes, cans full of painting equipment, cutting boards, and Japanese paper, and overhead, above the bamboo, completed kites were visible. Realizing that among these items were some that had been used by all three generations of this family of kitemakers, one could not help but feel the weight of history.

Some of these things are on display, along with the kites, at the Tokyo Kite Museum. These kites are a piece of the common man's culture from the Edo period, a 300-year stretch where the nation remained secluded from the outside world and developed a pure and uniquely Japanese culture.

Of the 37 master kitemakers before the war, there remains today perhaps but one. Though it is sad to think that men like Teizo Hashimoto, deceased in 1993, whose life was devoted to the Edo kite, are now gone, it is comforting to remember that both his works and photographs of them remain with us today, serving as models for a new generation of kite builders from all over Japan.

## 'Distant Music of Harps'

*Editor's note: James Abbot, a British army officer, published his Narrative of a Journey From Herat to Khiva in 1843. Khiva is on the Oxus River, south of the Aral Sea in Central Asia, in a region then called Transcaspia. Following is an excerpt from that book.*

"As we entered Khiva, we heard a pleasant melodic sound, resembling the distant music of a hundred Aeolian harps. Seeing some children on the road with their paper kites, I approached to examine the contrivance by which these toys emit a musical sound whilst floating in the air. The kite is square, formed upon two diagonals of light wood, whose extremities are connected by a tight string, forming the sides of the square. Over the whole, paper is pasted. A loose string upon the upright diagonal receives the string by which the kite is to be held, and a tail is fastened to the lower extremity. The transverse diagonal, or cross-stick, is then bent back like a strung bow, and fastened by a thread or cat gut. Of course, every breeze that passes the kite vibrates this tight chord, and the vibrations are communicated to the highly sonorous frame of the kite. And, as numbers of these kites are left floating in the air all night, the effect is that of aerial music; monotonous, but full of melancholy interest."

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## The Kite

Out of the hand and into flight,  
Its colors brilliant and bright.

Flashing cheerfully in the sunlight,  
First to the left then to right.

Dipping and darting, pulling the string tight.  
Tugging and pulling trying the reach great height.

Dancing with the wind, what a beautiful sight.  
Watch a kite while it's in full flight.