

Mikio Toki an International Star

Carrying on the Edo Tradition

When master kitemaker Teizo Hashimoto died 13 years ago, there was no one to carry on the ancient tradition of Edo kitemaking. Edo is the old word for Tokyo.

Masaaki Modegi, dean of Japanese kite collectors with his own museum in Tokyo, urged Mikio Toki to take up where Hashimoto had left off and Toki agreed to do it.

Now almost a decade and a half later, after half a dozen trips annually to festivals around the world and a suitable amount of global publicity because of his stunningly beautiful kites, Toki has fulfilled the promise seen in him. More than one international kite expert feels that Toki is headed for living national treasure status in Japan, a great honor conferred on craftsmen by the government. Such a title also tends to bestow financial independence, since the worker's output rises sharply in demand and value.

Born in 1950, the son of a journalist, Toki liked kites from childhood. Studying graphic design in school, he taught kitemaking and other toy traditions----- bamboo objects, origami, paper tops. He designed his own toys and made them of cane, boxes, handmade washi paper.

Meeting Katsuhisa Ota, a maker of traditional Edo kites, Toki learned all about Edos, a rectangular kite with elaborately painted sail and multiple bridle lines. Japan has many rectangular kites but Edos are typically narrower, in a 6 by 10 width to length relationship. Living near a river, Toki had the wind needed to fly these heavy kites ranging in size from two to six meters high and requiring a team of up to 20 to fly. The images painted on them typically come from the traditional "floating world" of the pleasure quarters of centuries ago. Scowling soldiers from traditional stories and famous Kabuki actors are often depicted.

Toki also made Yakko kites, the traditional servant image, and even fighters, equipped with razors to cut the line of other kites.

"Since kiteflying in Tokyo is particularly associated with the New Year," says Toki, "Edo flying is done in December and January, rather than in May as in other parts of the country. The wind is from the north and very cold, but since flying involves a lot of exercise it keeps the fliers warm." January 1 is particularly important for flying, Toki notes. This is the day residents pray for a happy year ahead.

When he became a full time kitemaker, Toki evolved a routine. Working months ahead, he makes 300 kites for each New Year, using the image of the animal appropriate to the year ahead-----cow, tiger, rat, rabbit, donkey, hen, dog, boar. These kites are sent to the kite museum in Tokyo and sold there. Toki also makes other Edos with traditional martial arts themes for sale and he does many corporate commissions, some quite expensive. During his busy season, he is helped by his family-----school teacher wife, two children, now 22 and 17, even his mother.

"I make about 400 kites a year," says Toki. "I use only old bamboo that has been smoked to kill insects inside the wood, handmade washi paper of mulberry bark, and for the most part natural dyes. These dyes permit light to shine through the kite when flying, like a stained glass window in a church."

"I'm a purist. I don't copy anybody. Although the changes may be subtle, and I do sometimes work in series, every single kite I do is an original."

With the quality of his painting steadily improving, according to the connoisseurs, Toki's future as a kitemaker seems well assured. "I love kites and I love flying. And very important, in my mind, is the need to keep the Edo kite tradition, more than 400 years old now, alive and well."

An outgoing guest at international kite flies, and always strikingly garbed as a traditional Japanese flier (good for TV interview purposes), Toki with his fluent English, big smile and infectious laugh makes it a point to have a good time day and night on his global travels. He did have one tense moment at a recent international festival in Bedford, England, where he had large, masterpiece Edos staked down on the ground awaiting sufficient wind to fly them.

When another flier miscalculated his candy drop, the parachute-borne "lollies," as the Aussie flier called them, headed directly for the international fliers. Suddenly, from all directions, and urged on by the public address announcer, boys and girls, even teenagers, came running madly to claim the candies. As Toki watched horrified, his hand clutching his heart, he saw children actually vaulting his large Edos, each worth \$5,000 or more. Being well mannered British children, they caused no serious damage. But it was a heart stopping moment for Toki.

Mikio Toki and one of his gorgeous Edos.

