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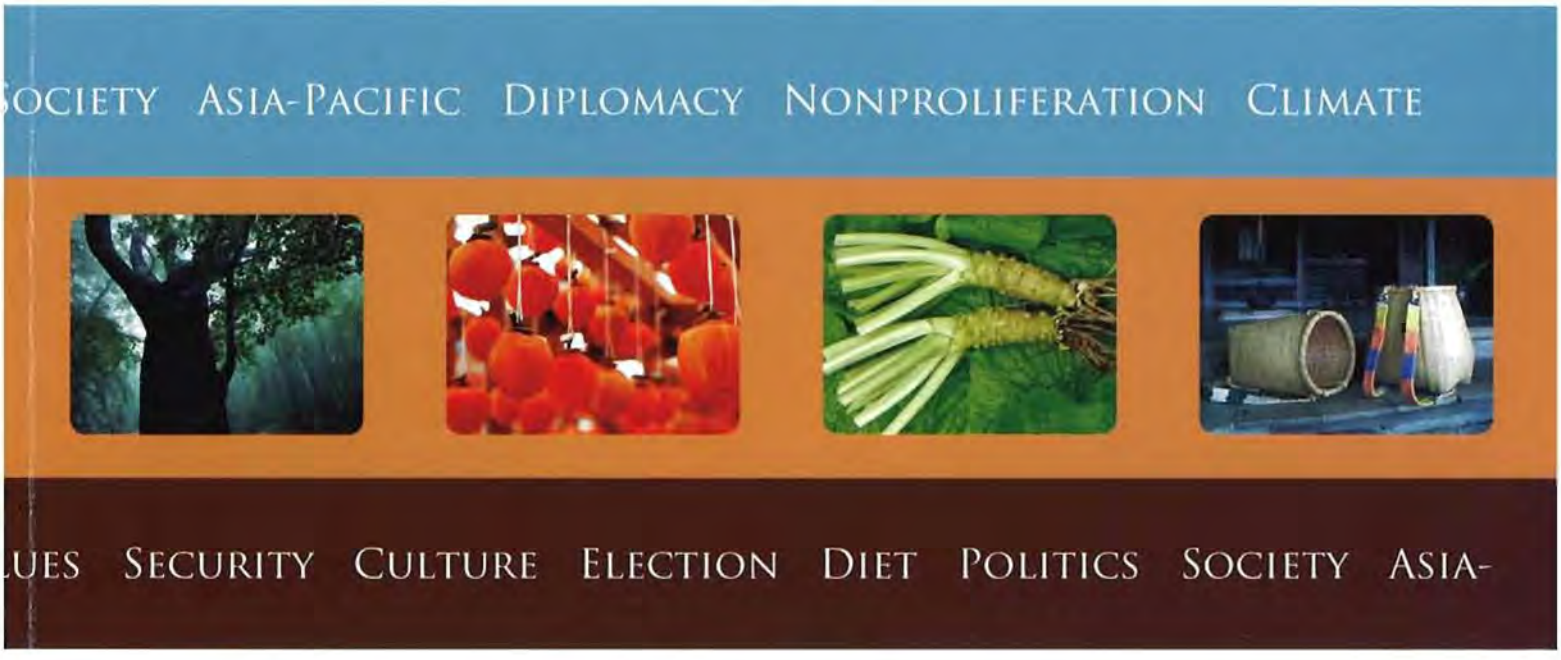

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A Taste of Japan

Japan's regions were once blessed with an abundance of their own traditional foods and handicrafts. Although globalization and a centralized distribution system have led to a more standardized landscape, there are still many remaining riches, waiting to be discovered.

The kaki, or Japanese persimmon, is one of the few fruits that are native to Japan. Until sugar production began in the early seventeenth century, dried kakis were the only form of sweetening, except for honey.

Freshly harvested wasabi roots are bright green.

Dried bonito is an important source of umami (savoriness) in Japanese cuisine.

Rice terraces are formed on sloping land.

Mage-wappa boxes made from cedar used to store lunch.

Decorative sashiko embroidery is hand-woven,stitch by stitch.

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CONTENTS

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Yuzuriha's Crusade to Keep Handicrafts Alive

By Tanaka, Yoko

Many of the handicrafts of northern Japan were born in response to the region's harsh climate and reflect a lifestyle in deep respect for and affinity with the natural environment. They also embody a rich, proud spirit that lies at the heart of Japanese culture, and efforts must be made to preserve them for generations to come.

The pristine forests of Towada are full of life and energy.

"All the good things in life have been made by hand since the prehistoric Jomon period, including food, utensils, homes, bridges, and Buddhist statues. . ." This is a comment I read somewhere that made a very deep impression on me. Our ancestors made everything they needed for their survival on their own, utilizing the plants and animals near at hand. Japan's traditional handicrafts, consequently, embody the ingenuity born of a lifestyle in deep affinity with nature and through close contact with their neighbors. This no doubt gave rise to the country's beautiful yet utilitarian handicrafts that have a universal appeal. Life today has become very convenient, but at the same time we have also lost touch with something very precious; this is something we are reminded of every time we run into a meticulously handcrafted item or are in the midst of family and friends.

Yuzuriha Gallery and Shop on the shore of Lake Towada in Aomori Prefecture have been

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Tanaka, Yoko President, Craft Shop Yuzuriha.

showcasing the handworks of northern Japan for 22 years. The items on display have been painstakingly chosen by visiting the artisans in person one by one. Through a process of trial and error, I worked with them to explore how craftworks can help enrich the modern lifestyle and endeavored to convey to customers the story behind each handmade product.

Decorative sashiko *embroidery is hand-woven, stitch by stitch.*

The long, forbidding winters make many parts of the Tohoku region of northern Japan nearly inaccessible, but they have also engendered a rich assortment of handicrafts. One example is Aomori's *sashiko* (embroidery) made by women, including during the months of heavy snowfall. It was originally a way of repairing torn daily garments and work clothes with patches in the shape of familiar flowers or animals, but this functional stitching technique is used today to produce highly decorative and beautifully refined quilts and embroidery. Tohoku's winters are too cold to grow much cotton, so even tattered, worn-out pieces of cotton fabric were precious. Stitching patches to hand-woven linen cloth provided greater warmth, enabling people to survive the frigid winters. Fabric was more than a daily necessity; it was as important for survival to the people of northern Japan as the food they ate, and women treated pieces of cloth with as much as care and love as they showed for their families.

Mage-wappa *boxes that men in mountain villages used to make from thinly sliced pieces of Akita cedar.*

One item produced by men in mountain villages is the *mage-wappa* box made from thinly sliced pieces of Akita cedar. The slices of cedar wood are steamed, allowing them to be curved into shape, and spliced together with the bark of the cherry tree. *Mage-wappa* boxes are suited to storing lunch, as cedar keeps away bacteria and absorbs moisture, so food items remain fresh and delicious. The pattern formed by the cherry bark served as a "signature" of the person who made the box, so when they ran into an accident in the mountains, they could release the box into a nearby stream as a way of alerting villagers further downstream. The mountains were also sources of vines, taken from *akebi* and wild grape trees, which were woven into *kago* baskets that served an invaluable role in people's daily lives. People expressed gratitude to the mountains for "sharing" the vines with them, despite the severe seasonal limitations on when such blessings could be gathered.

People of the past held the powers of nature in deep respect and adapted their lives to the harsh conditions, acquiring in the process a steadfast will to live, pride in their lifestyle, and humility. In this age of material affluence and the emphasis on mass production and cost effectiveness, we must not forget that the objects we require for daily life were originally all made by hand, and that the materials used were obtained from nature. All handicrafts, including those that are no longer produced today, recount a rich and engaging tale of people's intimate ties with nature and with others. They also embody the spirit of the Japanese people, unchanging despite the changing times, that serves as the wellspring of Japanese culture.

The forests of Towada in Aomori Prefecture are resplendent in their natural beauty. With each winter, the leaves on the trees fall one by one until none are left, and while on the ground they serve as fertilizer until next spring under a blanket of pure white snow. Snow-covered forests are so beautiful, people say, because they clothe so much underneath. The same, perhaps, can be said of people, developing a natural richness and luster as we go through life's experiences. Preserving such richness for future generations is a mission toward which I feel we should all contribute what we can.

Photos: Takeshi Hosokawa (from Yoko Tanaka's Yuzuriha no uta*)*

A young Japanese serow walks across a frozen lake in the severe Tohoku winter.

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