

## JAPANESE TRADITIONAL CRAFTS

# Excitement of Traveling

By SENJI GODA

Thomas Nevins first visited Japan in 1970, on the final stop of his one year round-the-world trip during college.

During this two month stay, Nevins was totally immersed in labor research field studies for Cornell University.

Two years later, as a Cornell graduate student, he returned to Japan to continue his Cornell labor research and ended up staying. He made most of his money translating, working in labor unions and a little *eikaiwa*.

It was actually a Cornell Labor Relations professor who was responsible for having Nevins discover Japan. His second trip was after studying Japanese one year at Cornell.

During this trip, Nevins' daily schedule was packed with surveys and interviews, yet he still managed to find time to travel, hitchhiking his way to and across Shikoku and Kyushu with only 40,000 yen in his pocket.

The trip offered Nevins an opportunity to experience Japanese culture and he was touched by the warm-hearted people he met.

When he was in or around Nagasaki, an unforgettable event occurred.

It was late when Nevins arrived in the city, and most restaurants had already closed for the night. Luckily, he stumbled upon a sushi shop that was about to shut up shop for the night, and with his limited Japanese, Nevins began talking to the owner, who was putting away his *noren* (shop sign).

"Are you all finished for the night? I only have this much money, but I was wondering if you have anything to eat," Nevins asked. He had only 500 yen in his hand.

Realizing leftover raw fish could not be used the following day, the owner welcomed Nevins and he filled himself up with a variety of good sushi, while chatting well into the night with the man and his wife.

Toward the end of the night, the owner suddenly asked Nevins where he planned to stay that night.

"I just arrived in town so I have not found anywhere yet," Nevins said.

"Why don't you stay here for the night?" the owner asked.

Nevins experienced the warm-heartedness of the local people and managed to acquaint himself with some of the surviving traditional local crafts. He recalls watching craftsman meticulously turning a pottery wheel and being amazed at the methodical technique needed to produce *washi* (traditional Japanese paper).

He may have seen ceramics made in the Imari/Arita-yaki or the Karatsu-yaki styles from Saga Prefecture, the Hasami-yaki style from Nagasaki Prefecture, or the Koishihara-yaki style from Fukuoka Prefecture.

He likely saw *washi* produced in the Shikoku area, where Oosu-washi made in Ehime Prefecture, Awa-washi made in Tokushima Prefecture and Tosawashi from Kochi Prefecture are famous.

After such a successful trip to Shikoku and Kyushu, Nevins was eager to see more of Japan. Six months later, he visited the Tohoku region and, as on his previous trip, he encountered a variety of traditional crafts, including beautifully polished lacquerware.

The Tohoku region is known for its lacquerware, and Nevins likely came across Tsugaru-nuri lacquerware from Aomori Prefecture, Hidehira-nuri and Johoji-nuri lacquerware from Iwate Prefecture, Naruko-shikki lacquerware from Miyagi Prefecture, Kawatsura-shikki lacquerware from Akita Prefecture or the Aizu-nuri lacquerware from Fukushima Prefecture.

## Deeper Into Society

By now, Nevins' temporary stay in Japan had stretched into three years. During that time, he had been working as a translator and *eikaiwa* (English teacher), but he now began to wonder whether this was what he wanted.

"For a career, I wanted to work in the labor management consulting industry, but I was unsure exactly what I should do at the time," he said. "I asked myself whether I should be living in Japan as an *eikaiwa sensei*, where I had a 'shallow' relationship with the world around me. If



Thomas Nevins

that was the case, I told myself I should head home."

"That is why a friend of mine and myself decided to borrow some money to push ourselves into real careers and, as a result, blend in more with Japanese society."

With this belief in his heart, Nevins set out to buy a summer home in a beautiful rural area at the foot of the Yatsugatake Mountains in Yamanashi Prefecture. The house was in the traditional Japanese style with a *kayabuki* (straw roof) and was between 50 and 60 years old.

"It had an *irori* (Japanese fireplace) with a *jizaikagi* (an iron bar hanging from the roof that is used to hang kettles and pots above the fire) hanging in the middle of the room," said Nevins. "The living room was a 20 tatami room, and behind it there were four bedrooms of eight tatami size."

"All the rooms were off the hall, which was lined with *yukimi-shoji* (sliding wood and paper doors with glass at the bottom) and beautifully decorated *ranma* (wooden plates with carvings) on top. We were told it was made by a *miya-daiku* (a carpenter who specializes in building temples and shrines) and that no nails were used in its construction."

Nevins added a gorgeous outdoor bathing area with an expensive *hinoki* (Japanese cypress) wood ceiling and tub. The floor was covered with flat rocks like those seen at *onsen* resorts.

## Tradition Surviving

From then on, Nevins' life in Japan was on the up, and he set up his own business at the tender age of 28.

TMT is a consulting company that provides human resources, labor management consulting, recruiting and skill development know-how to foreign capital companies with Japan-based operations.

Through TMT, Nevins consults with foreign company bosses on the running of Japanese business management and organizations to help them better understand and develop their business in the Japanese market.

Being a foreigner with an understanding and experience of Japanese culture provided



The traditional Japanese garden in front of Thomas Nevins' second summer house in Chiba Prefecture

# Is Meeting Different Cultures and People

Nevins with the knowledge necessary for such a business to succeed.

A visitor to Nevins' office may expect to find it crammed with Japanese traditional crafts, but would be disappointed. Instead, antique souvenirs from India, Indonesia, Nepal and China, souvenirs from trips there, have pride of place.

"I guess because I have been here (in Japan) for so long, my collection consists of antiques from other Asian countries," Nevins said.

He also still has the summer home in the mountains of Yamanashi.

"We still own it. We had to have the *kayabuki* roof completely redone twice, since it needs redoing every 10 years," he said.

Carpenters able to carry out the remodeling on traditional *kayabuki* roofs are scarce and usually difficult to locate, but Nevins had no trouble.

"I had no problems. There is a *kayabuki* carpenters organization that meets up once in a while, and I visited it once. The older carpenters introduce younger men, saying they are too old so the job should be done by younger people, that way the techniques are passed on through the generations," Nevins said. "The same goes for the various traditional crafts from all over Japan. This wonderful tradition of passing on techniques and crafts is still strong in Japan." After years in Japan, Nevins



Thomas Nevins' summer house at the foot of the Yatsugatake Mountains in Yamanashi Prefecture

still hits the road on solo journeys around the nation.

"Many foreigners who travel around Japan plan ahead and reserve hotel rooms, but there are loads of small hotels all over the country, so accommodation is easy enough to come by," Nevins said. "That is why I think it is interesting and fun to wander off spontaneously and see where you end up."

"On my first trip in Japan, I understood there were many traditional crafts hidden in different areas of Japan. When travel-

ing to the countryside, discovering, watching, experiencing and then buying these crafts is a good way to enjoy a trip to remote areas of Japan," Nevins suggested.

Surprisingly, he also recommends Tokyo as a good destination.

"Tokyo is considered overcrowded, but if you go to the city center on the weekend, you'll find fewer cars and it'll be quiet," he said. "It looks like a city crammed with skyscrapers, but take one step off the main

road and you'll find an old district, lined with old wooden houses, small shops specializing in *washi* or *sembei* (rice crackers)—an interesting find. This is not only true of Tokyo, because Japan has a huge number of temples. Because I am interested in architecture, exploring the city and the rest of the country for temples is another way to enjoy a trip."

When Nevins sees a country fair where specialty products from around Japan are sold, he is eager to drop by for a peek

"although they usually sell food rather than traditional crafts," he said. Although he enjoys short day-trips in and around the city, Nevins said he misses being able to go on long-haul trips like those he experienced in his younger days.

"Because I am becoming a bit of an 'antique' myself, I look forward to enjoying and wish for more of Japanese traditional crafts," he said.

Nevins may have aged since his *eikaiwa* days, but he is still relatively young at 51.

## What Are 'Traditional Craft Products'?

Traditional craft products in Japan are art forms that stem from the history and culture of various areas, which have survived thanks to the experienced and skillful hands of *shokunin* (craftsman).

There are 195 traditional craft products designated as approved art forms by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

For a piece to be approved by the ministry as a traditional craft product, it must meet five conditions:

- It must be something used in daily life.
- A major part of the production of the piece must be done by hand.
- It must be produced using traditional methods and techniques (traditional meaning at least 100 years old).
- It must be produced using traditional materials.
- It must be produced within a specific area.

The Japan Traditional Craft Center was founded in 1975 to promote growth of the traditional craft products industry and create further understanding of the art forms.

To achieve this goal, the center has been active in various projects, including the National Traditional Craft Products Competition, which is a national competition of *shokunin*. The competition gives craftsmen an opportunity to present their traditional methods and techniques and

pursue further studies in their art.

In the 25th competition last year, 291 pieces of 133 various crafts made by 252 participants were part of the contest.

Last year's Prime Minister's Award

### Profile of Katsuhisa Sato



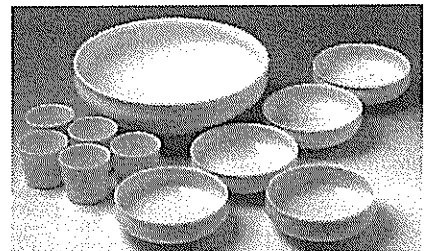
Born in Iwate Prefecture in 1935, Sato entered the metal casting trade in 1951. His works have been selected for display at the prestigious Nitten Exhibition eight times since 1976. He has been awarded various prizes and commendations honoring his superb skills.

(First Grand Prix) winner was Katsuhisa Sato for his Nambu-Tekki (ironware) Tsutsu-gama iron pot piece.

Nambu-Tekki is an ironware craft that originated in Mizusawa and Morioka City in Iwate Prefecture. It was created in the early 17th century, when the Nambu-han, a governing body that controlled the area, invited teapot craftsmen from Kyoto to Morioka. By continuously inviting molding craftsmen

and teapot craftsmen to the Nambu-han, the Nambu-Tekki grew as an ironware craft for weapons, teapots and daily commodities. It became especially well known for Nambu Tetsubin—teapots that were miniaturized during the 18th century and were easy to use, adding to their popularity.

But the production of molding items used in daily life also thrived in the area ruled by the Date-han in what is now Mizusawa City. After the Meiji Period (1869-1912), both areas began to exchange craft techniques. During the 1950s, molded craft items made in Morioka and Mizusawa City were



Imari/Arita-yaki ceramics set

dubbed Nambu-Tekki.

Sato is a well-known *shokunin* who has followed the craft for 50 years. He was approved as a Nambu-Tekki Traditional Craftsman in 1994. His award-winning Tsutsu-gama is a teapot molded to give it a sense of intensity, and it was highly acclaimed by competition judges.

Seiroku Nakamura's Imari/Arita-yaki ceramics set, titled "Hakuji-tsuyakeshi-kumimono" won the Second Grand Prix. Nakamura is an approved Imari/Arita-yaki traditional craftsman and is designated an Important Intangible Cultural Asset of Ceramics in Saga Prefecture.

Nobuhiko Shimoi picked up the Third Grand Prix award for his Shinshu-tsumugi textile, titled "Kunpu." Shimoi is a young talent and one of the big hopes for the Shinshu-tsumugi craft.



Nambu-Tekki iron pot