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Japan Video Topics 2009/2010 No.1 May '09 English Summary

The Cherry Blossoms of Yoshino

4'22"

The mountainous area of Yoshino is possibly Japan's most famous spot for viewing cherry blossoms. It was in this culturally ancient region that the mountain ascetic practices of the *shugendo* sect first developed, and Yoshino's slopes are covered with cherry trees (30,000 of them) that were planted as offerings by pilgrims. Over the centuries the local people cared for these cherry forests, ensuring their scenic beauty survives today in all its glory.

Titanium Tiles for Temple Roofs

3'46"

Roofs in Japan were traditionally covered with heavy ceramic tiles. These gave excellent protection against fire and storms, but their weight was a drawback in this earthquake-prone country. The long search for a lightweight replacement finally resulted in titanium tiles, which are both stronger and 26 times lighter. First used, for safety and esthetic reasons, to retiling famous temple roofs, they are now being adopted nationwide.

How Old Firms Survive

3'31"

Japan has a very large number of old family firms still prospering a century or more after their founding. The secret to the success and survival of these firms through both good times and bad appears to be an attitude that combines respect for traditional skills and techniques with an open-minded readiness to react to changing conditions by adopting new methods and businesses.

Old Crafts in Modern Art

3'39"

Unique local industries developed throughout Japan based on locally created craft techniques and raw materials. Skills and techniques refined over the centuries gave Japan one of the world's most distinctive craft traditions. Today, the inheritors of such traditional skills are increasingly using them in the service of fine art, employing old craft materials like bamboo, lacquer and clay to create freshly expressive works.

The Cherry Blossoms of Yoshino

4'22"

01 (Map)

Nara is one of Japan's oldest capitals, and traces of ancient Japan are still plentiful in the mountainous area just south of Nara, in the mountains of Yoshino and Omine.

02 (Wooded mountainside)

These mountains, richly beautiful but also wild and dangerous, have been considered sacred since ancient times.

In the seventh century, the practices of religious ascetics training their minds and bodies in these harsh mountains developed into the sect known as *shugendo*, which later spread throughout Japan.

03 (Flowers)

Today, Yoshino is best known for its forests of cherry trees.

After the founder of *shugendo* saw the mountain god in a vision and carved his image into a cherry tree, pilgrims began planting cherry trees as offerings. Over the centuries their trees came to cover the slopes of these mountains.

04 (Close up of cherry blossoms)

Of all flowers, the Japanese probably love the cherry blossom most. Cherry trees bloom only briefly, losing their flowers in about a week. But the arrival of that brief season is intensely awaited every year.

05 (Cableway station)

You enter these flower-carpeted mountains by taking the cable car to Yoshino Town.

06 (Trees from cable car)

As you rise up the mountain, you pass through trees in different stages of bloom.

07 (Town in distance)

Finally, the busy temple town of Yoshino appears, nestling among the peaks.

08 (Pan right over temple)

Kinpusen Temple is the head temple of the *shugendo* sect. Its main building, the Zao Hall, is a masterpiece of 16th-century wooden architecture.

09 (Statue)

The main deity, Zao Gongen, originated here in Yoshino. Worship of this mountain god spread throughout Japan as *shugendo* became popular.

10 (Exterior – crowds & gate)

The best view of the cherry trees is from Yoshimizu Shrine.

11 (View over forests)

They say you can see over a thousand cherry trees from this spot.

12 (Woman's head from behind)

Many visitors like to enjoy a bowl of green tea with locally made sweets as they look out over the flower-covered mountains.

13 (Forest)

There are over 30,000 cherry trees on these slopes, carefully preserved and looked after by local volunteers.

14 (Interview - M)

"Mount Yoshino, as you can see from my window, is simply blanketed with cherry trees. From the moment they get up each morning, our volunteer members are scanning the slopes, constantly checking the trees and thinking about ways to help preserve our Yoshino cherries. I think they are doing wonderful work."

15 (Flowers with walkers behind out of focus)

The path onward from Yoshino to Omine is a steep mountain trail.

16 (Shrine gate)

Most visitors make their way on foot as far as Yoshinomikumari Shrine, just below the peak.

17 (Walkers on mountain path)

One last stage takes you to the final cherry forest of Yoshino, at the very heart of the mountains.

18 (Still shot of mountains through trees)

The continuous love and dedication of the people who live here has ensured that - over a thousand years after they were first planted - we still enjoy the spectacular beauty of Mount Yoshino's cherry blossoms.

Titanium Tiles for Temple Roofs

3'46"

01 (Traditional street)

Traditionally, houses in Japan were roofed with tiles called *kawara*.

Long-lasting, fire-resistant and secure against strong winds, these tiles have one drawback – they are very heavy. The weight of the baked clay roof tiles places a great load on the building during earthquakes.

02 (Exterior of copper tiled building)

In recent times, more lightweight metal roofing materials such as copper sheeting have become popular.

However, copper corrodes under conditions such as acid rain, so builders were always looking for materials that would combine lightness with greater durability.

03 (Interview - M)

"Titanium is the only suitable metal that's more durable and longer lasting than copper. But developing titanium tiles was difficult because it is a really tough metal that is very hard to work with. However you bend it or form it, titanium has an extremely powerful tendency to simply spring back into its original shape.

04 (Factory interior)

Working with titanium is difficult even for factories with long experience making metal tiles. Conventional molds caused the titanium to wrinkle or crack.

05 (Plan)

To make titanium tiles with the same quality as traditional tiles posed a variety of problems, such as how to add decoration and what shapes would best resist rain.

06 (Stamping machine)

The last problem to be solved was to prevent cracking.

Engineers made repeated tests that eventually revealed the cause of the cracks and allowed them to design a new type of mold. More easily workable titanium was developed in collaboration with the metal manufacturer, and after five years of research and development, a titanium roof tile was finally perfected.

07 (Tiles on scales)

Weighing just 0.1 kilograms, a titanium tile is 26 times lighter than a conventional tile.

08 (Zoom back from tiles with swastika)

Even adding the weight of the supporting layer, titanium roofs are up to 13 times lighter than conventional ones.

09 (Pan down over blue tile)

Highly durable titanium has excellent resistance to acid rain and sea salt, so these roofs require no maintenance.

10 (Map)

Titanium tiles were first used on the Hozomon Gate of the Sensoji Temple in Asakusa, Tokyo.

11 (Pan left over roof)

Sensoji is a major tourist attraction, so safety considerations like earthquake resistance were a factor in the choice of titanium.

12 (Men working on wooden roof)

40,000 titanium tiles were used for the gate roof. A random mixture of different colored tiles recreates the roof's original appearance.

13 (Pan down – view through netting)

The next stage of the restoration is to retile the roof of the main temple hall.

This larger project involves replacing 90,000 tiles.

14 (Zoom in on temple exterior)

Titanium has now been used on many shrines and temples, and the metal is becoming a popular roofing material.

15 (Tile ends with swastikas)

Titanium tiles lighten roofs, reducing the load on old buildings while preserving their original appearance. This brand new technology is breathing new life into Japan's oldest structures.

How Old Firms Survive

3'31"

01 (Zoom in on shop sign)

Japan has a vast number of old family firms, in business for a century or more and still thriving today. Their secret is more than just keeping alive the old skills and traditions – these venerable firms have survived thanks to a constant spirit of innovation and invention.

02 (Zoom in on skyscraper)

This is the Tokyo headquarters of a company that processes precious metals into a wide range of products, from jewelry to electrical connectors.

03 (Black and white photo)

Founded in 1885, the company first prospered in the gold and silver exchange business. This was followed by success in the manufacture of platinum industrial components, and the firm continued to develop processing technologies to take advantage of the many special properties of precious metals.

04 (Circuit board)

Today it is the world's leading manufacturer of the super fine gold wire essential for bonding semiconductor connections. It took them many years to develop the technology capable of stretching one gram of gold into a wire three kilometers long.

05 (Interview - M)

"Our customers tell us what they need, and then we set to work to find a solution. We've had all kinds of problems thrown at us, but we always manage to work something out in time. I think that always rising to challenges like this is probably a major reason why we managed to develop such good technology and to survive in business so long."

06 (Map)

Many old family firms have escaped financial crises by re-evaluating their business and developing

completely new products. This sake brewery was founded over 150 years ago. When the current president took over in the 1970s, Japan's traditional rice wine had fallen out of popularity and the sake business was in crisis.

07 (Bottle)

They began researching ways to use their highly advanced brewing and rice fermentation technologies to make products other than sake.

08 (Interview - M)

"We're a small firm and we had to start again from basics, so it was a long hard process. Our family has a saying that you cannot prosper through unjust actions, and I see this as meaning not just that we mustn't profit from doing wrong, but also that we should contribute to society. Otherwise neither the family nor the business will survive. That's why, when faced with our crisis, I started examining new ways we could be helpful to society."

09 (Flasks)

Over two decades of research and development resulted in a method for producing an extract derived from rice that has proven very beneficial in treating skin problems.

10 (Products)

The old sake firm is now a successful biotechnology company with products ranging from cosmetics based on rice extract to a kind of sake that helps heal stomach ulcers.

11 (Street scene)

Respecting and preserving traditional skills while always ready to adopt new methods and concepts – this is how Japan's old family firms continue to survive and prosper.

Old Crafts in Modern Art

3'39"

01 (Painting a lacquer bowl)

Over the centuries, traditional craft techniques developed in each region of Japan formed the basis for local industries making distinctive products that were both beautiful and useful.

02 (Gallery with sculptures)

In recent years, these old pre-industrial materials and craft techniques have been finding a place in the world of fine art.

03 (Frontal view of doughnut-shaped object)

These pieces were made by Shochiku Tanabe, fourth generation head of a family of bamboo-work artisans. The techniques of splitting and weaving bamboo were originally developed to manufacture everyday products such as baskets.

04 (Man weaving bamboo)

Using the traditional craft skills he has inherited, Tanabe continues to explore their potential for creating fine art.

05 (Exterior with plaster walls)

Traditional building techniques are also inspiring modern artists. The old techniques for plastering walls with a mixture of clay, plant fibers and water can be used to create highly expressive art works. Shohei Hasado, who turned to art after mastering his family's craft of plastering, begins by seeking clay of the right color and consistency, which he then mixes and leaves to ferment. With a craftsman's deep understanding of these natural materials and highly refined skill with the plasterer's tools, he expresses his vision through artworks inspired by old clay walls and other traditional objects.

06 (Sculpture of woman)

Traditional craft techniques are used extensively in the making of these life-sized sculptures.

07 (Man working on sculpture)

Sculptor Tomotaka Yasui works in lacquer - a material with a long history in Japanese traditional crafts. The core of each sculpture is built up with the same methods used for ancient Buddhist statues, and the lacquer finish is applied with techniques still employed for artisan furniture and household utensils. Extremely particular about the quality and luster of the surface finish, Yasui painstakingly applies multiple coatings of lacquer, polishing each one before adding the next. He decorates the clothing with traditional lacquer ware ornamentation such as mother of pearl and gold dust.

08 (Interview - M)

"Well, if I were asked to explain it in simple terms, I suppose I could say that in the old days they used lacquer the way we use plastics today. When I'm using lacquer, it does feel similar to how I used to work with plastics. For a person like me, despite living in the modern world, I actually find that using this old, traditional material is a way of finding inspiration, giving me new and fresh ideas."

09 (Sculpture)

Traditional techniques and materials, developed over the centuries to make craft works of superb quality, are now finding a place at the leading edge of fine art.

12 (Interview - M)

"It makes me feel good to think of families gathered round our *donabe*, enjoying cooking and eating together out of the same pot."

13 (Pot with bread mix)

A new idea for using this traditional pot has recently become popular.

Place wheat flour fermented with yeast in a *donabe*, and simply heat in an oven for 15 minutes.

14 (Removing pot from oven)

Bread baked in a *donabe* is as deliciously soft and fluffy as that baked in a traditional stone oven.

15 (Zoom back from pot)

Boiling, steaming, grilling or cooking rice – there's no end to the versatile uses of this earthenware pot. The *donabe* is a beautiful, traditional utensil that still has a treasured place in every Japanese kitchen.

Japan Video Topics 2009/2010 No.1 May, Contact List

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How Old Firms Survive

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Old Crafts in Modern Art

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