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# Crafting Japan's Design Future

Apple's Steve Jobs understood explicitly the power of design, which is why he saw the tech firm's design chief, Jonathan Ive, as his "spiritual partner." Since joining Apple in 1992, Ive has been a member of the team that has brought the world such groundbreaking products as the iMac, iPod MP3 player and iPad tablet.

Speaking to Nippon.com in 2012, the award-winning product designer Toshiyuki Kita said that with countries like China and South Korea now recognizing the economic potential of design, Japan had to rejuvenate its own well-established tradition of quality design and artisanship.

"Japan already has a rich foundation for design and plenty of skilled workers, so once lifestyles start to change, we would probably see dramatic improvements," he said. "It's quite simple: people have to make a conscious decision to enjoy their lives more....That's the first step to reinvigorating Japanese design and the traditional industries that support it."

Minoru Yokoyama (pictured) is an interior designer, the author of the book *Five Senses of Design* and a professor of art, design and global fashion at Bunka Gakuen University in Tokyo. *iNTOUCH's* Nick Jones spoke to the Club Member about the role of design in modern Japanese society. Excerpts:

**iNTOUCH:** What are the characteristics of modern Japanese design?

**Yokoyama:** Every designer has a different perspective, but I think design is not just about style and decoration; it reflects the wisdom, history, culture, lifestyle, spirit and sometimes the succession of tradition of [a country]. From the end of the 20th century, people began to think that design was just about visual [elements], but in Japan we have a long history of using our five senses to appreciate products, food, everything, really. But I think we are losing [our ability] to use these senses as a result of

our convenient lifestyles. Since early times until now, traditional characteristics have always been found in Japanese design: [attention to] detail, like you can see on the intricate work of a *katana* [sword] guard or modern car; simplicity or Zen emptiness, which you can see in Katsura detached houses in Kyoto, with their *tatami* floors and simple spaces; delicacy or fragility, as you see in delicate staggered shelves in Katsura homes. Another characteristic is [meticulous presentation], so things are carefully wrapped or carefully considered. I've never seen this phenomenon of wrapping anywhere else. We also have a tradition that precious things should be wrapped two or three times. Useful beauty is also key in Japanese design.

**iNTOUCH:** To what degree does modern Japanese design incorporate elements of traditional Japanese design, such as minimalism and wabi sabi [the aesthetic of imperfection]?

**Yokoyama:** A lot of designers have started to design modern types of teahouses, pottery and utensils for traditional sado tea ceremony, and I can clearly see how tradition has continued from the past to the present. But that does not apply to everything. For example, lots of things, or mono, are piled up in Japanese homes these days. So minimalism and wabi sabi [are evident] in just some areas or in some



Katana guard



interiors, the reality is actually of cluttered Japanese homes and workplaces, isn't it?

**Yokoyama:** I think it's because of working lifestyles. So for my father's generation, for example, it was common for people to entertain their coworkers at their home after work. Such a tradition we began to lose after that period when people started to work very hard and not invite their coworkers to their home. They then thought they could pile things up at home because nobody saw them. That kind of lifestyle change affected the style of living a lot. Compared to the bubble age, people now go home earlier, so maybe it's a good time to start thinking about living and entertaining people. It's also good for design, as people think about changing the fixtures, for example, and that's good for the economy.

**iNTOUCH:** Are we seeing a return to the use of more natural materials in Japanese design?

**Yokoyama:** Yes and no. Some people have become more sensitive about the air and materials in their house, like chemicals and [allergens]. That could be the start of a movement to use more natural materials.

**iNTOUCH:** In a 2012 interview, designer Toshiyuki Kita said, "Japan's traditional craft industries enjoy a high reputation all over the world, but in Japan itself they are on the brink of extinction." What can be done to reinvigorate traditional craftsmanship in Japan?

**Yokoyama:** Some younger designers are working with craftsmen in Tohoku, for example, to make new products. But the key, in my mind, is education. High schools are focused on university entrance examinations and don't spend much time teaching art, culture and aesthetics. But if we continue to value only entrance exam scores, we'll lose the beauty of traditional Japanese culture. Craftsmanship will be lost because people won't be willing to pay for products that will last 100 years.

**iNTOUCH:** Is it still possible to save Japan's tradition of artisanship?

**Yokoyama:** It's not too late, so long as we develop a contemporary system for younger people to learn the skills of artisans. All of this will lead to better design in Japan. □

sophisticated shops or restaurants. But I'm concerned about whether the younger [design] students understand Zen spirit. A majority don't seem to pay attention to Japanese tradition.

**iNTOUCH:** How much do designers consciously blend those traditional Japanese elements with modern design?

**Yokoyama:** Once when I was a design student, I asked a master of Japanese culture, "How can I get a sense of Japanese tradition in the designs that I will produce?" And he said, "As long as you are speaking Japanese, you have a sense." I think a lot of people think in this way. And to some extent, I think it's true, if they are conscious of it.

**iNTOUCH:** During the economic bubble era, did Japan encourage a throwaway culture at the detriment of the country's traditional appreciation for well-crafted, long-lasting products?

**Yokoyama:** There are two trends in Japan. On the one hand, there is this idea of constantly buying inexpensive goods. On the other hand, there is also a trend of buying expensive, quality items that will

last a long time and age well. We are struggling with this, I think. It isn't very visible yet, but some of the manufacturers and designers are following this latter trend. Also, the problem is the attitude of the government. For example, the government is encouraging people to buy electric cars by offering tax deductions, but no tax incentives are offered for vintage cars. So these old things are not valued.

**iNTOUCH:** How vibrant is the Japanese design scene right now?

**Yokoyama:** It's so-so, I would say. It differs from one design field to another, but if you look at the design of airports, for example, and compare Narita with Changi Airport [in Singapore] or other airports in Europe, I think we need more development. I think we are in the process of becoming vibrant. When we have a big event, like the 1964 Tokyo Olympics, it changes all of Japan from a design point of view. And I'm expecting another vibrant design period in the years leading up to the 2020 Olympics.

**iNTOUCH:** While an enduring image abroad of Japan is of minimalist, Zen-like