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Sweet thing

In Japan's ancient art of *amezaiku*, or "candy sculpture," shapes are conjured from balls of taffy. But now a new kid on the block has revolutionized the art form. Here's what happens when Shinri Tezuka takes his sugar for a spin

Scissors cut into the soft candy ball, giving shape to a fin, and in that instant it seems a goldfish has come into the world. The fish reveals its shape little by little as the craftsman moves his scissors, and soon it looks as if it might just swim off. The candy craftsman's work is reminiscent of the way carvers of Buddhist statues bring a fully formed image out of a single chunk of wood. The scissors in his hand are like a magic wand that wakens the goldfish sleeping inside the taffy-like ball.

Japan's foremost practitioner of *amezaiku* – "candy sculpture" – is Shinri Tezuka, who, at the tender age of 26, is the CEO of his own company, Asakusa Amezaiku Ameshin (a hefty logo, but Asakusa is the neighborhood where you'll find the store, while Ameshin is Shinri's professional name, mixing his own name with the *amezaiku* he fashions). He was just 20 when he made the leap from fireworks pyrotechnician to candy sculptor.

"I always loved making things with my hands," says Tezuka. "I worked as a pyrotechnician for two years, but then it dawned on me that most of Japan's fireworks are foreign made. In fact, many spectators at firework displays are unable to distinguish between Japanese and foreign-made products, so even if you're serious about

making something new, it's hard to feel much creative satisfaction. Once I started having doubts like these and thinking I'd like to be more of a real, honest craftsman, the time had come for me to change direction."

Tezuka embarked on a search and in the end felt most moved by the work of the *amezaiku* craftsmen. He liked the simple fact that it all came down to one person's skill, and also that you'd be valued not just for the quality of your finished product but for the movements of your hands and, as is often the case with glass blowing, the display of your technique in bringing that new-formed gem to fruition before a crowd of spectators.

The art of *amezaiku* is thought to have been introduced from China some time in the eighth century and was probably first used in Japan for candy offerings made at Buddhist temples in the then capital, Kyoto. Much later, during the Edo period (1600-1868), the craft spread beyond the temples as street performance flourished and entertainers made a living by showing off their skills to the assembled throng. Some *amezaiku* purveyors allegedly attracted customers by wearing outlandish costumes and singing or dancing; others dramatized their skill, sculpting candy "rain birds" (*ame no tori*) by blowing air into the soft, sticky mass. In time, these craftsmen could be found displaying their talent at fairs and festivals, something they still do today.

Most *amezaiku* pieces sold now to delight crowds of onlookers tend to be pastel-colored variations on animals or cartoon characters. Compared with these, Tezuka's creations are in a league of their own: a horse that feels as if it's galloping; Pegasus, wings spread, soaring through the sky; a goldfish practically finning its way around a pool. And not one of Tezuka's figures is a standard, bilaterally symmetrical shape, like a toy. Each is made with true photographic perspective, in a pose engineered to display its three-dimensional perfection. Particularly stunning is his creations' light-filled transparency, which until now hadn't been a feature of Japanese *amezaiku*. This inner glow, plus a lively expression, add to the sense that every piece is about to move. There's a reason. Tezuka says he decided one key thing when he lit on this intricate art, and that was to get as far as possible from the old-style *amezaiku* imprinted on Japanese memory.

"I wished I had a teacher to show me what to do," he says, "but there was no one I wanted to learn from. That sounds cocky, but the truth is, they all wanted to make 'good, old-fashioned' *amezaiku*, which didn't need any outstanding technique." He grins and shakes his head. "If you're satisfied with imitating the same old designs, you might give people a sentimental buzz, but eventually that's going to fade. What a waste of effort! So I taught



A pugnacious little goldfish splish-splashes toward the surface in its bowl. The astonishingly finely made fins catch and hold the light, giving every impression that they're rippling



A hunting eagle descends to its prey, wings splayed to hover, talons poised to strike. The translucent feathers could be made of glass or ice (left). And a wild horse gallops across the plain, kicking up its hooves, arching its neck, and tossing its mane with joy. Quite the opposite of the eagle, this time you can almost feel the sun beating down on its back and see the dust flying (right)





A dazzler from the maestro of spun sugar: an ornate Chinese dragon, symbol of power, strength, and good luck, rears up, its tail lashing (this page); a big-eyed telescope goldfish – only this one is a mossy green – trails its long fins as it glides (right); and (far right) a koi carp boasts a delicate pattern, its scales shimmering red, orange, and black against a background of pearlescent white



myself techniques that used the ancient skills, but I came up with new concepts that would appeal to our times, and young people.”

And how are these toothsome wonders formed? Tezuka’s amezaiku begins with making a glutinous candy, *ame*, the formula for which he arrived at after painstaking research. He heats it to 194°F until it softens to exactly the right consistency, then pinches up the right amount from the hot mass and rolls it into a ball with his bare hands, an often painful feat. This is the “egg” from which creations will spring. Tezuka’s only tools are a pair of Japanese scissors (a molded piece of spring steel that seems to “bounce” in the hand) and his skill. He shapes the “egg,” mounted on a stick, by dexterously cutting, twisting, and stretching it, constantly changing the angle of the scissors. Tezuka may be making a contemporary specimen, but all these actions were performed, too, by the showmen who plied their trade at stalls in markets in the seventeenth century.

In Western candy art, the approach is to make each piece separately and assemble them at the end, but in Japanese amezaiku, you never cut anything away from the “egg.” Instead, you give it shape as a whole by ingenious use of your scissors, so you never

Struggling with the heat, he shapes the candy by cutting, stretching, and twisting it, using only scissors and skill

produce scraps or waste. The Edo period craftsmen prized their materials, and their wisdom and techniques have been carefully handed down. Yet compared with Western candy art, the time devoted to crafting each piece is far shorter – at most, you have three or four minutes before the *ame* begins to cool and harden. Amezaiku is a traditional craft that severely tests an artist’s skill.

“More important than sheer manual dexterity is how you manage to output to your hands what you’ve input to your brain – the way you’re going to insert the scissors, the order of steps, and the image of the finished piece,” says Tezuka. “As architect Mies van der Rohe said, ‘God is in the details,’ and in amezaiku, the accumulation of details greatly influences the finished product. Take the making of a goldfish, for example: even if the overall balance is good, the figure won’t look right if one fin is a little

off. Technique lies in your ability to create, to give concrete expression to the ideal form, and I think this ties in with the work of any outstanding amezaiku craftsman.”

The final coup is to paint these sculptures with colorful edible dyes, giving the finished piece even more convincing character.

Tezuka has overturned the idea of what constitutes traditional amezaiku and established it as an astonishing new art form. He now has five young apprentices. “I want to pass on amezaiku techniques that last five hundred years, a thousand years, while exploring new possibilities in keeping with changing times.” Big smile. “And what a joy to think my shop curtain might still be hanging there to greet customers in such a distant future.”❖

Translated by Jay Rubin
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