

OKE-EI

EIFU

KAWAMATA





Eifu's Goldfish Bowl was inspired by a *nishiki-e*, a Japanese multicolored woodblock print painting made in the Edo period. This item is one of *Oke-ei's* signature creations. The combination of contrasting plain wood and glass materials produces a refreshingly cool impression. The wood base is removable.

GOLDFISH BOWL
W360 D270 H460





A *mizusashi* is a water jar used in tea ceremony containing water for refilling the *kama* pot and rinsing utensils. Typically, a *mizusashi* is porcelain or earthenware. The distinctive bulge in the middle of this *Oke-ei mizusashi* is achieved by a technique used when making *yui'oke*. A lid of knotted wood adds a bold and original touch.

EQUIPMENT THAT CONNECTS DEITIES WITH HUMANS

MARI HASHIMOTO

The pure and clean grain of the wood is soft to touch, and even though it has been finely processed to an almost frightening degree by human hand it still brings to mind a large tree tranquil deep in the forest. A sacred tree that has been disassembled, reconstituted, and abstracted, perhaps. A container for storing the rice that deities and humans have shared among them since time immemorial—indications of the divine abide today in the form of the *yui’oke*, or wooden tub.

Due to heavy rainfalls through its rainy season, typhoons, snowfalls, and the four seasons generally, the Japanese archipelago is blessed with an abundance of forest resources even by global standards. One could say that the fact that a culture of wood has developed since antiquity is the favor it has bestowed. Horyu-ji, a temple that dates to the late 7th to early 8th century and is known as the world’s oldest extant wooden structure, is a prime example of Japan’s culture of using wood, and tools, utensils, and equipment of various tree species and techniques have remained a part of people’s lives and are still in use. For example, there are farm implements, artisan tools, weapons, cooking and processing equipment, tableware, household furnishings, measuring implements, spinning and weaving tools, containers . . . One of these is the *yui’oke* wooden tub, made by lining up short strips of wood and binding them with a hoop. It is thought that these tubs (*oke*) were named *yui’oke* (*yui*, meaning “tie” or “bind”) because in the beginning vines and other such plants were used to tie them up to create a hoop.

While today the role of things like storing water and preserving sake has been taken over by objects made of glass, metal, and plastic, in the past it was played by tubs and barrels made of wood, and jars and pots made of porcelain. In Japan, carved-out wooden tubs (*kurimono’oke*) made from tree trunks with base boards attached have been found from historic ruins that date to some time between 350 BCE and 50 CE. When we get to 7th century sites, the excavations reveal increasing numbers of *magemono’oke*—bentwork tubs made by bending (*mage*) thin strips of wood to create the body and then attaching a base board. However, the carved-out wooden tubs were heavy, and they easily lost their shapes when dried. On the other hand, bentwork tubs lacked strength and their capacity was limited.

Containers that were lighter, stronger, and furthermore larger were wanted. The *yui’oke* was the answer to those wishes. To date, Japan’s oldest *yui’oke* seems to have been those excavated in northern Kyushu that

dates to the latter half of the 11th century CE. Given that the tubs were found in an area that was populated by Chinese merchants—a veritable “Chinatown” of its day—it is thought that they were brought as everyday utensils from China where the techniques for making such tubs had long been widespread.

However, this “new technology” did not spread across the Japanese archipelago until after the 15th century. The first reason is that technological innovations for tools occurred during that time that made it possible to process strips and planks more precisely and efficiently. Another reason was that, thanks to being pressured by the need to transport products from various regions in greater volumes more efficiently owing to the development of a commodity economy, traders had to shift from using jars, pots, and bentworks as containers to *yui’oke*. Thereafter until the modern era, such tubs were widely used in all areas of life. They were also used, as one might expect, in brewing industries for sake, miso, and soy sauce, but also in such other industries as agriculture, fisheries, and mining.

Unfortunately, tubs made of wood gradually rapidly disappeared after the mid-19th century. Eifu Kawamata—the fourth generation artisan heading the Oke-ei shop for Edo-style *yui’oke* wooden tubs established independently in 1887 in what today is Tokyo’s Fukagawa district—is an artisan who has inherited the last and the peak of those techniques and pride.

The only materials that he uses are from natural sawara cypress and hinoki cypress that are at least 300 hundred years old. With its high oil content, sawara cypress is light and less likely to crack or deform even after repeated wetting and drying. The aroma is lighter than that of either cedar or asunaro, and it does not lend its scent steamed rice. Sawara is purchased as unprocessed timber. Once the strips have been hacked with a machete curved to match the shape of tub, they are left to dry for six months. Once the strips have sufficiently dried, their inner and outer surfaces are scraped and shaped with a rounding plane that itself curves the blade. Since these boards with their respective inward and outward curvatures are fitted together in such a way that with only bamboo nails there is no leakage, the processing accuracy naturally is also high. Making the most of the textures that come from materials that offer the finest of grains, the surface is polished with no paints applied.

Hoops made of copper were used during the Edo period, but with Eifu’s

this was changed to an alloy that does not readily change color or corrode. The tubs—bound with silvery hoops that abound in flexibility and bending workability and can be shaped more finely than copper—give off a sharp, more modern look. Finally, the base board is laid in, striking a balance between the forces attempting to project beyond the side woods and the binding force of the hoops.

In the case of tubs for steamed rice (*meshibitsu*), a lid that been processed in the same way forms a set with the body. Can you imagine the degree of difficulty involved in precisely matching the lid and body that make up the *meshibitsu* so the lid can be lifted off and put back on smoothly without any ricketiness? Viewing the lid from straight above, the lines between each strip of wood jointed together with hardly a gap can be very faintly seen.

While tub makers in the provinces deal with tubs for countless uses, in a big city like Edo steamed rice tubs (*meshibitsu*), sushi rice tubs (*sushi'oke*), and hot water tubs (*yu'oke*) were made by artisans specializing in each specific type. For Japanese, rice has long been a staple food. It was at the center of the annual taxes they paid, and they shaped the calendars of their daily lives around its cultivation. Rice for them is a sacred food. Eifu's grandfather and father would always ritually purify themselves when it came time to make their containers.

Eifu himself says that until he reached his 50s, his frame of mind was outward directed. He wanted to enter his work in exhibitions and to make things that would surprise people. However, since he has entered his 60s, he has concentrated on making things more simply. It is not as though he is doing something special. When it comes to all of his standard tub products and not just the steamed rice tubs, he merely injects them with precision without neglecting a thing in everything from the selection of materials to each process involved.

If he went so far as to point one thing out, it would be that thing he gives them most attention to now is the sharpening of the blades used in the shaving process. Finely shaving soft and oily wood is far more difficult than shaving wood that is hard. By sharpening the blades, the precision of a product that you will not be able to add to or subtract from in the future improves bit by bit. Eifu already knows that persevering with those repetitions generates a spiral that will lift the *yui'oke* to new heights.



RICE KEEPER
(EDO-STYLE)
W210 D210 H135



RICE KEEPER
(EDO-STYLE)
W210 D210 H135







OVAL CONTAINER
W310 D225 H150





OVAL CONTAINER
W310 D225 H150







SAKE CUP
W60 D60 H65

LIPPLED BOWL
W90 D110 H95



LAYERED
CONTAINER
W150 D150 H125



A *yuriganna* is a Japanese spear-shaped single-edged plane used to chamfer *oke* wood tubs. *Oke-ei* artisans use a *yuriganna* with a bamboo leaf-shaped blade called a *sasakanna* to achieve oke with round and smooth edges.



137 YEARS OF OKE-EI CRAFTSMANSHIP

Fukagawa is in Tokyo's *shitamachi* area on the left bank of the Sumida River. Despite its location in an area of modern land readjustment projects, the cityscape here still retains the atmosphere of the 17th to mid-19th centuries, when Tokyo was still called Edo and when the area flourished as a water transportation hub for a variety of industries.

Eifu Kawamata is the current head of Oke-ei. Born and raised in Fukagawa, he makes *yui'oke*, Japanese traditional wooden tubs and containers using traditional craftsmanship from the Edo period.

His atelier is located on the first floor of a building on the main street. His workspace is located behind shelves lined with materials as well as tubs and containers in the process of being made, and the walls are lined with uniquely shaped hand tools used to make the tubs.

He cuts a log into slats, joins the slats together, planes the wood, binds them together with hoops called *taga* the hoops called *taga*, planes the wood again—making a *yui'oke* is a profoundly detailed process involving a long sequence of meticulous steps.

It begins with the choice of wood. Oke-ei makes tubs from 300-year-old sawara cypress and hinoki cypress from the Kiso region of Nagano Prefecture. The wood is selected from the raw timber of these oil-rich and water- and acid-resistant coniferous trees. Moreover, Oke-ei selects logs that are about 60 cm in diameter and with dense annual growth rings that indicate a uniform shrinkage rate and resistance to warping.

Making the side slats used when making *oke* is next. Using a Japanese-style machete called a *nata*, the wood is cut to the height of an *oke* tub and then quartersawn into slats with the vertical grain following the annual growth rings of the wood. To further ensure the quality of the container, when cutting the log only its inner, dense portion is used while the outer and core sections are removed.

To further enhance their quality, the side slats are repeatedly washed in water and dried in the sun for about six months. The wood is then dried to tighten the wood fibers in order to prevent shrinkage and make the material stronger.

Then comes the shaping and finishing work. The side slats are planed to fit the curves of the *oke*, and then joined together in a circular or oblong shape that fits the grain and quality of the wood. Because *oke* taper toward the bottom, a variety of planers are used to plane the inner and outer curves of the side slats and the angles where they are joined. This work requires precise technique and a very sensitive touch based on years of experience.

The snugly joined side slats are tightened with a temporary *taga* hoop

and the edges of the cylindrical *oke* are planed and smoothed. The temporary hoop is removed, and the *oke*'s surface is further smoothed and then it is tightened into shape with a metal hoop. Finally, the inside of the tub is planed, the bottom plate inserted, a section is carved out to make legs, the surface is polished to perfection, and the *oke* is at last finished.

Each process requires substantial time and effort, and each stage requires superior craftsmanship. As a result, a finished *oke* is durable, easy to use, extremely watertight, and becomes more beautiful with every wash and use.

Oke-ei's founder Shin'emon Kawamata established the company in 1887. To meet the demand from restaurants in the nearby entertainment district, he made tableware items, including tubs for storing steamed rice. It is said that Shin'emon's tubs were well known for their beautiful shape and ease of use.

Shin'emon's successor, Eikichi Kawamata, was a highly acclaimed artisan known especially for his Edobitsu, a tub with a lid. Later on, Eikichi Kawamata, who would become the third-generation head of the company, also joined the workshop. Demonstrating the skills and techniques taught to him by his grandfather and father, Eiichi earned commendations from the ward and the national government.

It was in the mid-1980s that Eifu Kawamata, the fourth-generation Oke-ei artisan, decided to put his talents to work on making *yui'oke* tubs. At that time, the number of *oke* artisans was decreasing because of declining demand for wooden tubs due to changing lifestyles. At one time, there were artisans who specialized in making a specific type of wooden tub, and there were also craftsmen in the Oke-ei workshop who specialized in certain preliminary work, such as making side slats. Eifu, on the other hand, had learned the methods for making every type of tub and container and all the techniques required to make them from his third-generation predecessor.

The idea was to present the *oke* tub—something that had once been a fixture of daily life—as an accessory that enriches modern life.

While the Edo *yui'oke* that Eifu, the current head of Oke-ei, makes are based on traditional techniques, there is also something new about them.

The “goldfish bowl,” which has become one of Oke-ei's signature pieces, was proposed by Eifu to his predecessor based on a *nishiki-e* (multicolored woodblock prints) he had seen in a museum, and which he had begun to make on his own. Goldfish swimming in a glass-enclosed white wooden bowl brings an elegant coolness to any living space.

The first “wine cooler” made from beautiful quartersawn white wood



was a custom-made product manufactured in the 1990s, when wine was becoming popular on Japanese dining tables. The superior advantage of a wooden bucket for keeping things warm and cool is fully on display here. Using a nickel-silver hoop for an overall presentation that is clean and pure yet gentle was also one of Eifu's ideas.

Eifu has also given the name “*kontena* (container)” to many of Oke-ei’s products. With its gently curved edges, the “Oval Container” can be used as a flower vase or bottle cooler, for instance. “Container Bitsu” is a container with a lid that is not only suitable for storing steamed rice, but also bread, ice, and other items.

Oke-ei's *yui’oke* is a wooden container made to be versatile. No matter how it was once meant to be used, the owners of these products can use them each in their own unique way.

As time continues to pass, Eifu, the fourth-generation Oke-ei artisan, is now Tokyo's only remaining Edo *yui’oke* artisan.

Even today Edo *yui’oke* are made by hand using methods that make the most of the characteristics of the materials. But at the same time that he breathes subtle new distinctions into his products, Eifu still considers himself a creator who works with traditional techniques.

Since the first-generation Oki-ei artisan, their technique has been handed down for more than 130 years. It was around 15 to 20 years after he began making tubs that Eifu realized that if he adhered to these techniques, he could make *oke* that were second to none. At the same time, however, experience has taught him that it is also true that many aspects of creating these products is determined by the sense and intuition of each individual artisan. For instance, to bring out the best quality of the material, it is up to the artisan to decide how long to expose a tub to water and sun or whether to plane one or two more layers of wood.

Just as an artisan needs to fine-tune his skills to suit his own hands and body when performing the same technique as any other artisan, to ensure that the tubs and containers remain first-class products he also needs to add his own ingenuity to the methods he has learned. As he continues to make wooden tubs today, this is something that Eifu keeps close to heart.

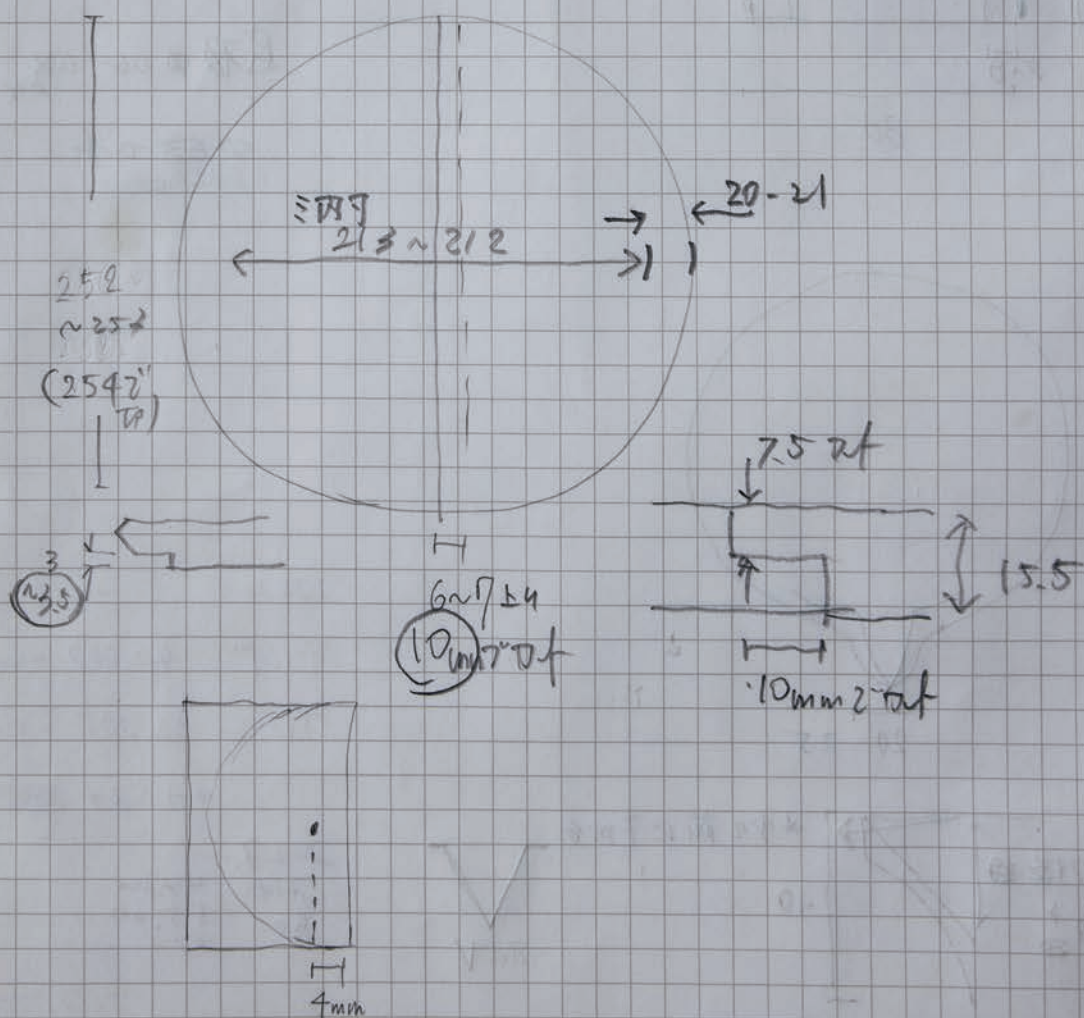
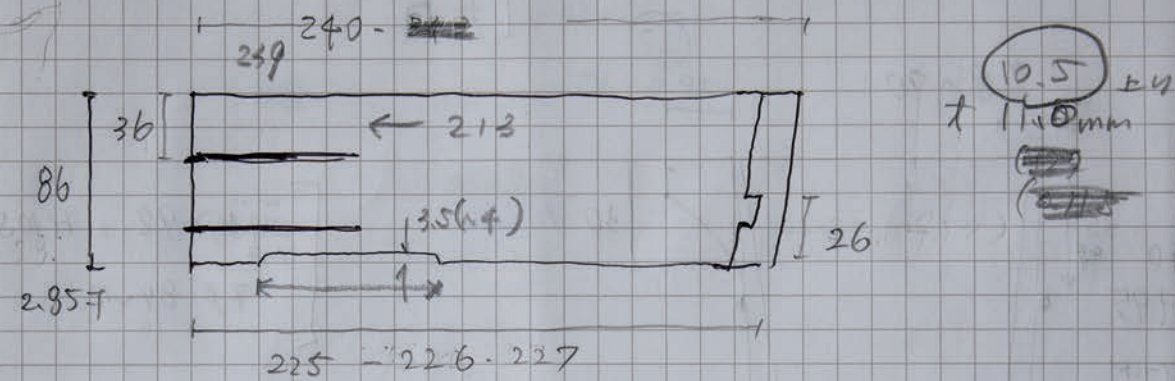
When things and the techniques used to make them are no longer needed, they eventually wither and disappear.

That is why craftsmen must remain committed through thick and thin to what they make and to carrying on their craft. This is the essence of carrying on tradition, and it is how Oke-ei's modern Edo *yui’oke* are made.

MICHIKO OTANI



Container 24









WINE
BOTTLE COOLER
W180 D180 H210



OVAL WINE
BOTTLE COOLER
W210 D290 H210





OVAL WINE
BOTTLE COOLER
W210 D290 H210





WATER JAR
W150 D150 H230





FLAT SQUARE
PLATE
W300 D180 H30
Other sizes



RICE CONTAINER
(FOR *CHA-KAISEKI*
TEA CEREMONY
DINING)
W195 D195 H285



STOOL
W330 D180 H270
ROUND PAIL
W220 D220 H115
PAIL
W150 D150 H240



CONTAINER
W195 D195 H130





CONTAINER
W195 D195 H130



A *sen* is a plane with a handle on each end used to shave side slats. *Sen* come in a variety of sizes and shapes to accommodate slats of varying size and curvature. In the past, there were even artisans who specialized in making tools for making *oke*.





PROFILE

EIFU KAWAMATA

The 4th lineage of Oke-ei, the Edo Wooden Tub maker.

- 1961 Born in Fukagawa, Tokyo; the area known for lumberyards.
- 1983 Graduated from Rikkyo University Department of Sociology.
- 1986 After working for a company for several years, came home to learn directly from his father, Eiichi, about tub making.
- 2007 Becomes Oke-Ei representative.
- 2010 First International Triennale of KOGEI in Kanazawa, 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa
- 2011 "sugao" ESSENTIAL DESIGN in JAPAN merci, Paris
- 2013 Oke-ei Exhibition Isetan Shinjyuku, Tokyo
- 2014 "KOME the Art of Rice" 21_21 DESIGN SIGHT Tokyo Midtown, Tokyo
- 2016 Maison et objet Paris January 2016, Nord Villepinte, Paris
Google Arts & Culture "Made in Japan : Japanese Craftsmanship, the Edo Wooden Tub"
130th anniversary of Oke-ei founding, "Kawamata Eifu" Exhibition, Ginza Ippodo Gallery, Tokyo
- 2017 The Edo Wooden Tub Kawamata Eifu Exhibition Nihonbashi Takashimaya,
Exhibition commemorating the 150th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Japan and Denmark, Tokyo
Everyday Life - Signs of Awareness 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa
"Japan - Denmark 201 Exhibition" A Petersen Collection & Craft, Copenhagen, Denmark
- 2018 HOMI MILANO 2018 Fiera Milano Rho, Milano
- 2019 SHISEIDO WINDOW GALLERY Chapter of Water 2019 SHISEIDO THE STORE, Tokyo
- 2020 Oke-ei Exhibition "Kitomukiau" gallery ON THE HILL, Hillside Terrace Daikanyama, Tokyo
- 2021 Edo yui-oke wooden tub "Okeei" Eifu Kawamata Exhibition "Joining Plain Wood" HULS GALLERY TOKYO
- 2023 "Japanese Design Today 100" Tokyo Mindtown Design Hub, Tokyo

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