

LIFE &
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More than a memory

THE HANDICRAFTS OF TOHOKU
REVEAL A LOT ABOUT THE PAST
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**DISNEY PIXAR
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A BOY and girl meet in modern-day Tokyo, Japan. They fall in love and decide to marry. She returns to her hometown, Aizu in the Fukushima prefecture. It is one of the six prefectures that make up the Tohoku region in northern Japan.

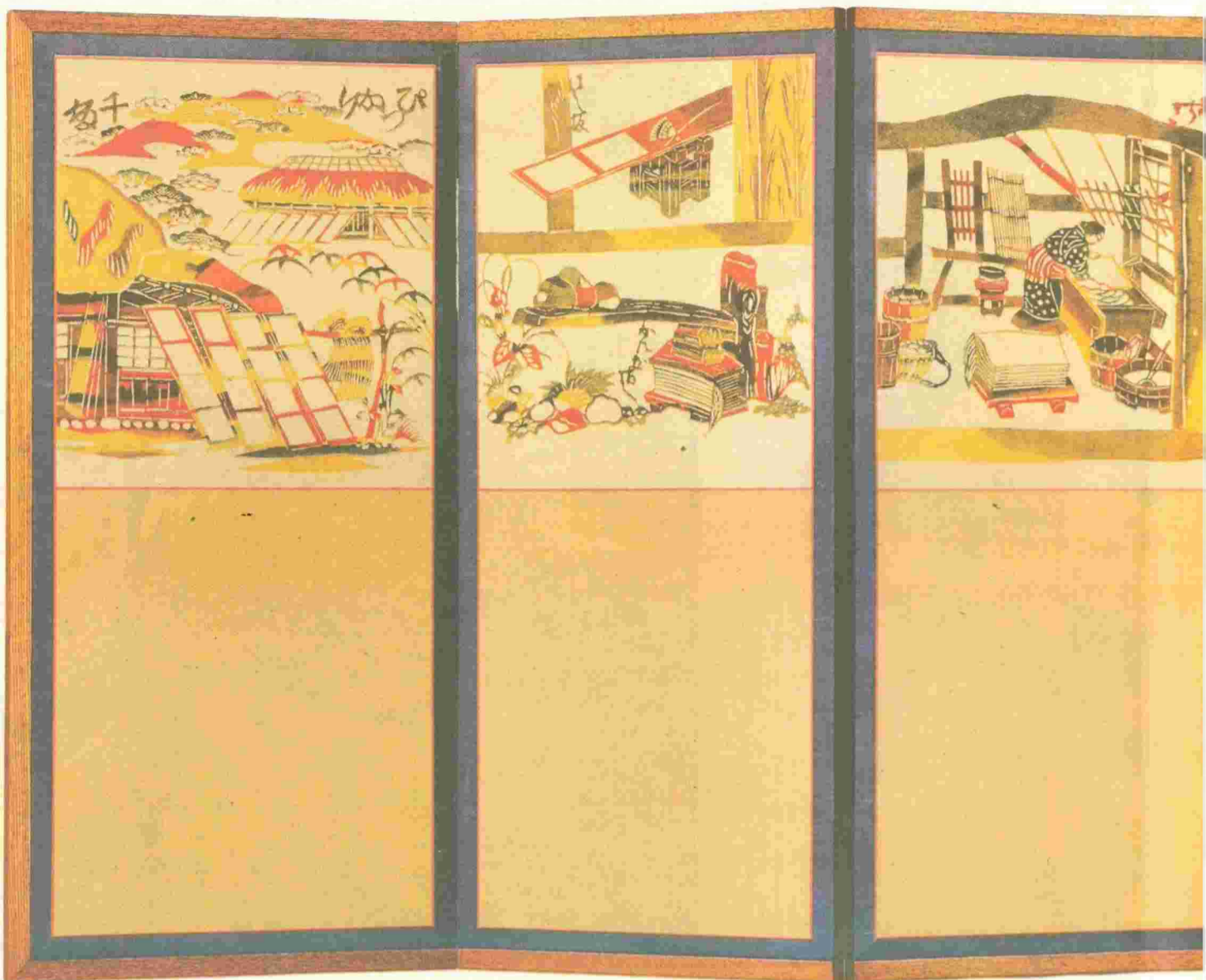
She informs her family of her decision and they are all happy until they hear where this boy's family comes from. Unable to help herself, one aunt blurts out: "How can you marry that Chosyo bastard?"

The boy in the story is one of Yuri Yamada's cousins. A programme officer at the Japan Foundation in KL, she explains that such resentment harks back to a bloody and tragic war between the people of Aizu and the southerners. Emotions obviously still run high even though the battle in question was fought in the 1860s during the last stages of the Meiji Restoration.

"It (the Tohoku region) is a very tragic country," laments Yuri. Indeed, the region is the site of the devastating earthquake and tsunami on March 11, 2011. To mark its anniversary, the Japan Foundation is holding an exhibition called Beautiful Handicrafts of Tohoku, Japan. Prior to Malaysia, the exhibition has travelled to many countries including Thailand, China and Indonesia. After Malaysia, it will make its way to Fiji.

Before Yuri starts the tour of the handicrafts and shares the stories behind them, the diminutive lady shares about her volunteer efforts in the aftermath of the natural disaster. Aware of her physical limitations, Yuri chose to clean photographs washed up on the beach and coated in bacteria. If left uncleaned, these photographs would disintegrate in years to come.

Yuri found the task satisfying and sad in equal measure because many survivors saw these cleaned photographs, recognised their relatives and realised that this would



be the only tangible memory of them as the said relatives had perished.

APPRECIATING WISDOM

Likewise, many of the handicrafts made by the people were also washed away. This exhibition, therefore, comprises 70 objects that have survived the onslaught of Mother Nature. They also epitomise the highly-developed techniques of local artisans and the functional elegance of daily implements used since medieval times.

The hope is that Malaysians will

"This exhibition, therefore, comprises 70 objects that have survived the onslaught of Mother Nature."

Yuri Yamada

WISDOM OF EXQUISITE HANDICRAFTS

There is much wisdom to be gleaned from the handicrafts of Tohoku, Japan, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**

appreciate the wisdom derived from the people of the Tohoku region who have lived close to nature and the manual skills and dexterity they have cultivated out of such wisdom.

One must keep in mind, insists Yuri, that the weather in Tohoku is bitterly cold and winter begins in October. It lasts so long that it is common to see snow in April. As there is little sunshine and hardly any flowers, the people of Tohoku decorate their candles with paintings of flowers. A case in point is the very pretty candles called aizuwakamatsu from the Fukushima prefecture. "This way," says Yuri, "at least they can see some flowers."

The weather also had an impact on the kind of clothes the people wore. At least until the 19th century, in the Tsugaru district of the Aomori prefecture, peasants and farmers wore kimonos made of hemp, which were clearly unsuitable for the harsh winters. Why didn't they wear clothes that would keep them warm? "The Shogun told



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The Japanese paper making process in Ogawa Village by Keisuke Serizawa.

Beautiful Handicrafts of Tohoku, Japan.

VENUE: Galeri Shah Alam, Persiaran Tasik, Tasik Barat, Shah Alam.
WHEN: Until June 21, 2016.
DETAILS at www.jfklorg.my



Winnowing basket, maple, wisteria, Iwate prefecture.

ISITE
RAFT

them to wear only hemp," is Yuri's blunt answer.

Ever loyal to the hereditary commander-in-chief in feudal Japan, the people of Tohoku followed such sumptuary edicts, but modified the fabric in an ingenious way. The women developed what is now known as the kogin technique of six-stitch embroidery. When they were permitted to use cotton threads, women would reinforce the hemp clothes with these dense cotton stitches. Once complete, the garments could protect the people from the harsh winters. It was said that some of the women competed with each other to create some of the most beautiful stitching patterns.

COLLECTORS' STORIES

As is the case with many an exhibition, collectors of such exquisite pieces have their own stories. One of them was Keisuke Serizawa who started his career as a designer and created richly original works on mediums such as folding screens, scrolls, kimonos and book cover designs. He cultivated his eye for beauty by collecting numerous folk art and handicraft pieces from around the world. Although he died in 1984, he was still recognised as a Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property (Living National Treasure), a title given by the Japanese government in 1956.

One of the handicrafts from Serizawa's collection is called The Japanese Paper-Making Process in Ogawa Village. A six-panel screen, it is a detailed piece of stencilled work on paper. Viewed from right to left, it is a pictorial representation of the process of making washi (Japanese traditional paper).

"Look at the third panel," instructs

Yuri. "Can you see that basket-like thing hanging from the ceiling?" That item is called mi (a winnowing basket) used in paddy cultivation. Yuri then points to an actual winnowing basket on display. It is from the Iwate prefecture. Since the bamboo from the Tohoku region can be thin and brittle, many times, the wood of choice used to make these items is maple, walnut or even grapevine.

SUPERB NATURAL RESOURCE

There is one very important natural resource from this area: The superb quality of the water. "That's why the sake in Tohoku region is very good," says Yuri in a matter-of-fact manner.

This statement also serves to introduce the next artefact, a pair of sake bottles from the Akita prefecture. Yuri believes these were probably used to store large amounts of sake. To make it easy to serve, the sake would be transferred into smaller lacquered lipped bowls like the one called katakuchi from the Iwate prefecture. The sake is then brought to the table and

poured into smaller bowls for serving.

There are two elements of these particular sake bottles that make them unique. The first is that it is Joboji lacquerware. This indicates that they are crafted in a place called Joboji, where raw lacquer is produced. The people of this region have preserved the method of collecting sap from the lacquer trees in a way that protects these trees from any damage.

The second important element is the decoration. Yuri says they were probably used in wedding banquets because of the crane and the turtle motifs painted on them as both animals symbolise longevity and good luck. "The crane," adds Yuri, "is also a symbol for fidelity because cranes are known to be monogamous for life."

The affable Yuri smiles as we come to the end of our tour. In it, there is an obvious sense of pride that, in some small way, she has succeeded in transmitting an appreciation of the beautiful handicrafts by master craftsmen from a somewhat battered, but rejuvenating, part of Japan.

Decorated candles, wax, aizuwakamatsu, Fukushima prefecture.

