



Photo by Tokyo 2020 / Shugo TAKEMI
Tokyo 2020 Olympic Games medal

Precious Medals from Friendly Teamwork and Synergy

A huge number of old electronic items are recycled to help create Olympic and Paralympic medals.

by **Matthew Hernon**

Thanks to a ground-breaking initiative and a Herculean effort from the Japanese public, with contributions from embassy officials, foreign dignitaries, etc, every single one of the approximately 5,000 medals that will be handed out at the Olympic and Paralympic Games Tokyo 2020 will have been made from metal recycled from used electronic devices. The Tokyo 2020 Medal Project led to the collection of over 6 million used mobile phones as well as other devices such as laptops, handheld games, and cameras. The gold, silver, and bronze material required for the medals was extracted from 78,985 tonnes of used products under the theme “Be better, together—for the planet and the people.”

According to the Tokyo 2020 Organising Committee, “The initial collection rate was slow, however, it increased sharply in the last few months of the project as a sense of excitement built throughout Japan.” For many, it was a chance to contribute used appliances filled with memories such as mobile phones used in school days. “As well as hitting our target, it was great to hear many different stories,” says a Tokyo 2020 spokesperson. “By cooperating with educational institutions, it was also a great opportunity for children to learn about the existence and value of urban mines and the significance of recycling home appliances.”

Four years ago at Rio 2016, around 30 percent of the medals came from similar recycled materials. To get that

number up to 100 percent is a remarkable achievement. To find an appropriate design for the medals, a competition open to professional designers and design students was held. It was a rule to apply with a set of designs for both Olympic and Paralympic medals. Over 400 applied and that number was then whittled down to three each for both the Olympic and Paralympic medals.

Judges discussed their opinions openly before choosing Kawanishi Junichi as the Olympic medal designer. “I learned about the application in a public relations email from a design association,” says Kawanishi. “It is amazing that the Olympic Games will be held in this country, but I never thought it would be possible to participate in a competition to design medals for the top athletes in the world.”

Kawanishi quickly sent in his application and then set about creating a unique design featuring a “ring of light” that reflects light wherever it is viewed; “I had the idea of polishing a gemstone of talent and creating a diamond in the form of an athlete who puts their heart and soul into the Games,” he says. “I thought I could express their passion, energy, effort, and glory with a shining light. The most difficult thing was trying to produce a circle of light that could

express diversity and harmony among people from all over the world. It was important to create a curved surface that reflects light from any angle.”

He realized his objectives and in July 2019 was named the competition winner. A month later came the announcement that Matsumoto Sakiko had been selected to design the Paralympic medals. “My boss told me about the competition and I decided as there would not be such an opportunity again, I should go for it,” says Matsumoto. “With the design, I had three objectives. To express our Japanese character, I used the design motif of the traditional Japanese folding fan known as *ougi*. The athletes bringing people together regardless of nationality or ethnicity are represented by the pivot point that holds all parts of the folding fan together, and the tactile elements of the design are finished so that everyone could appreciate the medals more than just visually.”

The medals that will be used this summer will be remembered not only for their beautiful design, but also because of the way the material was collected. The Japanese public played a huge role in the creation of the eco-friendly medals, which each tell a story.

The reverse side of the three Olympic medals designed by Kawanishi Junichi shining brightly due to their “Myriad Circle” (page left), the Paralympic medals, also the reverse side, with the Japanese folding fan motif, designed by Matsumoto Sakiko (below).



Photo by Tokyo 2020 / Shugo TAKEMI
Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Games medal