

The Spirit of *Mottainai*

Wrapping Beautifully with *Furoshiki*



The *hana zutsumi* (flower wrap)
The *furoshiki* resembles a flower in blossom.

By Julian Ryall

Like many of the very best ideas, the *furoshiki* is rooted in absolute simplicity but has been elevated to both fashionable accoutrement and icon of the eco-friendly movement.

A *furoshiki* is a traditional Japanese wrapping cloth, the first examples of which were used in the Nara Period, more than 1,200 years ago, to wrap the valuables of emperors and noblemen.

The benefits of a square of decorated material for a whole host of uses spread throughout Japanese society. Early on, a *furoshiki* was used as a mat to stand on while undressing before taking a bath and then tied to hold clothing while the person was bathing. Merchants also seized upon the idea for transporting their wares.

As well as being a convenient way of carrying things, the *furoshiki* meshed neatly with the culture of making sure that even seemingly insignificant objects were wrapped neatly and attractively, which remains prevalent in Japan today. Carefully wrapping a gift, for example, implies respect for the recipient, and handing over something that has not been wrapped is considered impolite.

Even though the *furoshiki* was an important part of everyday Japanese life for hundreds of years, its use began to decline after World War II because of the popularity and convenience of plastic bags. More recently, there has been a backlash among consumers and companies against the sheer number of plastic bags used every year, accompanied by a realization that Japan's traditional ways may have been better after all.

Modern generations of Japanese have bought into the mantra of reduce, reuse, and recycle (3R) with gusto, while companies have been encouraged to follow in their customers' ecologically minded footsteps by launching campaigns, such as one spearheaded by the recently elected governor of Tokyo, Yuriko Koike, when she served as Minister of the Environment for more than three years, beginning in September 2003.

Governor Koike was behind the *Mottainai Furoshiki* campaign, which loosely translates as "use a *furoshiki* to avoid waste." Announcing the scheme at

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a March 2006 meeting in Tokyo of senior officials of the 3R Initiative, Governor Koike highlighted all the positive attributes wrapped up in a *furoshiki*. "The Japanese word *Mottainai* means it's a shame for something to go to waste without having made use of its potential in full," she said as she unveiled her creation, a unique and

environmentally friendly *furoshiki* made of a fiber manufactured from recycled PET plastic bottles with a birds-and-flowers motif drawn by Ito Jakuchu (1716-1800), a painter of the mid-Edo Period.

"The *furoshiki* is so handy that you can wrap almost anything in it, regardless of size or shape, with a little ingenuity, simply by folding it in the right way," she added. "It's much better than plastic bags you receive at supermarkets or wrapping paper since it is highly resistant, reusable, and multipurpose. In fact, it's one of the symbols of traditional Japanese culture and puts an accent on taking care of things and avoiding waste."¹ Governor Koike added that it would be wonderful if the *furoshiki* could both serve as a symbol of Japan and encourage people to build an environmentally friendly society in which reusing and recycling are the norm.

Keiko Kikuta, the owner of the *Furoshiki-ya YAMATONADESHIKO*, a specialist shop in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward, agrees wholeheartedly. "I opened my store in October 2007 after learning more about the beauty of Japanese culture, including *furoshiki*, while I was an art student in France," she said.

Ms. Kikuta's shop stocks hundreds of *furoshiki* bearing different designs, ranging from traditional depictions of autumn leaves or summer flowers to more contemporary images of animals or geometric designs. The cloths are carefully displayed on shelves,

with many used to demonstrate the numerous ways in which they can be used to wrap items, from the simple *otsukai tsutsumi* (the basic carry wrap) to the folds required for the *hira tsutsumi* (flat object wrap), the *kakushi tsutsumi* (hidden knot wrap), or the *sao tsutsumi* (padded carrying wrap).

"I am fascinated with *furoshiki* because, unlike a plastic bag, it can be used over and over again and because of its versatility," Ms. Kikuta said. "It can be used as a table cloth, scarf—any number of things, really."

And she has discovered that it makes the perfect souvenir for visitors to Japan.

"We have many foreign customers recently, from Europe, China, and other parts of Asia, and I think they like *furoshiki* for many reasons," Ms. Kikuta said. "It is light and easy to carry. It is traditionally Japanese, and the designs can be very beautiful and include images such as copies of Japanese paintings."

1. Ministry of the Environment website:
<https://www.env.go.jp/en/focus/060403.html>

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The *katakake bukuro* (shoulder bag)
The *furoshiki* has many uses.



Photos by Tatsuo Watanabe
Furoshiki no kokoro SHOGAKUKAN Inc.