

TimeOut | Lifestyle & Culture

Mina Perhonen:
a natural-born styleDanielle Demetriou
SPECIAL TO THE JAPAN TIMES

Be it a dress, a teacup or a chair, there is something instantly recognizable about a Mina Perhonen creation. Perhaps it's the natural motifs, exquisite textiles and unexpected color combinations. Or maybe it's the nostalgia-tinged atmosphere paired with clean-lined contemporary silhouettes.

Whatever the reason, there is no denying that since setting up his fashion and textile brand in Tokyo in 1995, Akira Minagawa has become a celebrated master at fusing Finnish-inspired aesthetics with Japanese craftsmanship. Testimony to his popular trajectory, he now operates nine shops across Japan — including a flagship Mina Perhonen in Daikanyama, two Kyoto boutiques and the recently opened select store Call in Tokyo's Spiral Building — with another opening in Kanagawa next spring.

The quietly illustrious Minagawa is also frequently busy with global exhibitions and collaborations — from designing Tokyo Skytree staff uniforms and creating furniture collections from leftover fabrics and blemished woods with Maruni Wood Industry to opening a pop-up store with Artek at this year's Helsinki Design Week.

As he sips from a pretty butterfly-strewn teacup in his Shirokanedai pressroom, Minagawa — as poetically understated and thoughtful in person as his designs — talks to The Japan Times about the roots of his Finnish love affair, the appeal of the contradictory and why he always has a sketchbook in his pocket.

How did you first become interested in Scandinavian aesthetics? My grandparents had an import furniture shop. I remember one of their ranges included Scandinavian furniture. Then, when I was 19, I visited Sweden and that was how I came to appreciate the lives of northern Europeans.



How influential was that trip? I was backpacking, staying at youth hostels, traveling by train — I even went to the Arctic Circle in mid winter, with temperatures of minus 30 degrees Celsius. What impressed me most is that even in that cold weather, normal daily life still continued — children went to school, for example.

My idea of daily life and what it meant was overturned because it was so different. I remember going to Paris at the end of the trip to help at a fashion show, but while I was there, I realized I felt much more drawn to Scandinavia and its designs. They resonated more strongly with me. It made me realize that Paris fashion was not the only fashion.

Was it the similarities or differences in relation to Japanese and Scandinavian aesthetics that attracted you? There are certainly similarities. Scandinavian aesthetics are close to those of Japan. Back in the 1960s, there were many collaborations between northern European and Japanese artists, with pottery and crafts. Materials-wise, Japan and Scandinavia also have many similarities, particularly in terms of using wood. Even some of the trees that grow in Japan and northern Europe are similar.

I think in Scandinavia, people are very down to earth and the fashion reflects their daily life. It's not about showing off, how rich they are or how much money they have — it's not a statement, it's very subjective.

How would you describe your own design style today? I try to incorporate a sense of imagination into the busy daily schedules of people's lives, through fashion and products. We create uplifting clothing for everyday life. We hope that people who wear our clothes simply feel happier.

What is important to you as a designer? Quality is very important and I want to take time with my craftsmanship. I don't feel the need to follow trends and I don't want to create something that is quickly consumed. I feel that the fashion industry cycle is becoming shorter and shorter — people are always wanting something new everyday. I want to make things that are more long term and timeless. I'd like peo-



Clockwise from above: The cafe area of the Mina Perhonen select store Call; "Ladder" textile design; Akira Minagawa portrait by Takashi Okano. Bottom left: Fushi Kakeru Walnut Chair for Maruni Wood Industry
COURTESY OF MINA PERHONEN



ple to keep these things forever.

What is the creative starting point for you when designing — the materials, the form, the product in mind? I have the image of the clothes in mind as I create the fabric — so the fabric and clothing run simultaneously in my head as I create them. Also, I always carry a small sketchbook with me. I sketch daily, normally using a German Lyra pencil. I would not necessarily sketch for a particular season — but when it comes to the right time, I would pick drawings to use for the new collection.

What inspires you? I don't really have to travel or research something in order to be inspired. For me, that flip switch of inspiration in my mind can come from anywhere. Sometimes from nature. Sometimes from words. Sometimes from images.

I'm often drawn to the idea of contradiction — words like "black white." I would imagine white paper in a darkened environment and ask myself what kind of textile or pattern could I create from that.

Can you tell us about the new store in Kanazawa is opening next spring?

The location was chosen because it is important to me to find a place where the culture is not only Japanese but it is also getting outside (overseas) recognition.

Kanazawa has both an inside and an outside perspective. The building (we chose) is the former residence of a *zaimokusho* timber merchant. By European standards, it's very young — about 100 years old. It's made in traditional Kanazawa style, using very special trees. I want to transform it into a shop without changing it too much. People might not recognize it is actually a shop (laughs).

And finally, what is your long-term goal?

From the very beginning, the idea of a long lasting brand has been very important to me. The work itself is not the goal — but to relay it to people who come after, future generations. What I'm doing might last only for 20 years but the brand can last 100 years. It's all about timelessness.

Tokyo offers a wealth of innovative design for free

Mio Yamada
STAFF WRITER

Tokyo Design Week has kicked in, with its first session ending on Oct. 31 and its second session running Nov. 2 to 7. But if the innovative products, architecture and robotics in Meiji Jingu Gaien are not enough to satiate your design curiosity, there are several free exhibitions in the city that are worth dashing to before they end in the next few days.

Japan's cosmetic powerhouse Shiseido is hosting its second "Link of Life Exhibition" (<http://bit.ly/linkoflife>) at Hanat-subaki Hall in Ginza (until Nov. 3) and at Shiseido The Ginza (to Nov. 15), with the theme this year being "Aging? Future!" Shiseido has described this annual event as an "experiment in design" and it involves artists, scientists, researchers and corporations working together to produce unusual concepts that encourage us to re-

think our ideas of beauty, art and products. Exhibits this year highlight the slow life and aging gracefully, and include a soothing vibrating tatami mat, dance choreography incorporating the aroma of fresh coffee, and a clock that slows down when you look at yourself in a compact mirror.

"Paper Attraction" (<http://bit.ly/paperattraction>) at Living Motif in the Roppongi Axis Building until Nov. 6 explores the flexibility of paper as a material with colorful contributions from artists working in various fields. Well-known design names include Haruka Misawa, who recently garnered much attention for her waterscape fish-tank project; jewelry maker



Akiko Oue; and architect/interior brand Torafu Architects. Exhibits go beyond the 2-D, with origami-like toys, games and ornaments (pictured left), and an array of quirky stationery.

Torafu Architects, known for clever and playful designs, also has a solo show at Roppongi's Toto Gallery Ma until Dec. 11. "Inside Out" (<http://bit.ly/torafuinout>) brings together a selection of the brand's architectural models and products to create a diorama through which brightly colored children's wooden blocks travel via a miniature train track. Also on display are a number of Torafu Architect's iconic designs, including an artistic ceiling display of its paper vases.

If you're looking for a more comprehensive overview of design, the "Good Design Award 2016" (<http://bit.ly/gddesigaward>) exhibition — at Tokyo Midtown in Roppongi and the Hikarie Building in

Shibuya — is presenting all the winners of its 2016 awards until Nov. 3. That's well over 1,200 exhibits, covering everything from stationery and kitchen utensils to personal electronics and vehicles.

The Good Design Award has always focused on functionality and the ability of design to bring about change, rather than pure aesthetics, so the range here is eclectic. It also brings to the fore some concepts that are often overlooked, such as Dentsu Inc. and Nosigner's easy-to-follow disaster preparedness manual, and Narukawa Laboratory and Authagraph's ingenious re-invention of world-map cartography, which won the 2016 Good Design Grand Award.

The exhibits at the Hikarie Building in Shibuya are free to see, though for the main venue in Tokyo Midtown, there's a ¥1,000 entry fee (¥500 via the website), which allows re-entry for the duration of the exhibition.

