

OUT OF THE SHADE: INSIDE THE OZEKI FACTORY

Craftsmen at the Japanese company Ozeki have been making chochin paper lanterns for over a century. Now the family-run business has teamed up with Barber & Osgerby to give new form to its delicate, sculptural lights

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Shafts of sunlight filter through piles of fine white paper as Toshihiro Ishikawa's fingers perform a blurred dance stretching, tying and gluing a coil of wiry bamboo around a wooden mould.

Generations of craftsmen have replicated the same high-speed performance before him in order to create one of Japan's most treasured artisan items: chochin paper lanterns. The end result on this occasion, however, is no conventional product. Ishikawa may be making a lantern rooted in traditional craftsmanship, but this

one is resolutely modern in design: a vast white structure measuring nearly a metre in height, consisting of two minimally conjoined spherical forms.

The sculptural creation is the culmination of a groundbreaking collaboration between Ozeki, Japan's most respected paper-lantern manufacturers, and the London-based design duo Barber & Osgerby. The new Hotaru collection – Japanese for “firefly” – was unveiled during this autumn's London Design Festival and consists of lightweight, minimal lanterns fashioned into two different shapes: the Double Bubble and the Buoy.

The lanterns are the first international



LEFT Toshihiro Ishikawa spent two years developing Barber & Osgerby's Hotaru collection

OPPOSITE The wooden mould for the Hotaru Buoy lantern

design collaboration undertaken by Ozeki. In Japan, however, the company is a household name. Launched back in 1891, the family-run business has long been a pioneer of Japan's traditional lantern-making techniques. And, in addition to providing handpainted lanterns to department stores across the country, since the 1950s Ozeki has also produced the Akari range of moon-like paper lanterns designed by the artist Isamu Noguchi, which have spawned a million imitators around the world,

"Ozeki lanterns have an overwhelming feeling of craft and quality, like most Japanese handmade products," says Edward Barber, whose studio's acclaimed designs

range from the colourful Iris table to the 2012 London Olympic and Paralympic torches. "Every lantern is perfectly shaped and each seam is exactly aligned. The lanterns are still made in the same way they were when the company was founded in 1891."

It was two years ago that the idea for a collaboration first took root, when Barber took a detour while on holiday in Japan to visit Ozeki's headquarters in central Gifu, a sleepy city surrounded by dense green mountains. "I met up with the owner primarily to visit the factory to see how the lanterns were made," says Barber. "After spending a few hours in the workshops

and looking through the archive we discussed the possibility of working on a new collection of lanterns." He adds: "We loved the making process of the lanterns and wanted to apply our own shapes."

In the third-floor workshop space of Ozeki's 1960s concrete headquarters, the sun filters through cream curtains that bear an uncanny resemblance to lantern paper, as a team of artisans work silently at tables piled high with origami-like folds of paper. Here, Ishikawa, a talented 24-year-old craftsman, describes how he spent two years fine-tuning the transition from Barber & Osgerby's design concept to handcrafted reality. ►



LEFT Ishikawa lays mulberry paper across the bamboo frame

BELOW Ozeki's headquarters in Gifu, central Japan



THE SCULPTURAL CREATION IS THE RESULT OF A GROUNDBREAKING COLLABORATION



“Normally, when you work on existing products, everything is already decided,” he explains. “But for this project, we had to do everything from the start – work out the dimensions, choose the materials, communicate with the designers. It was challenging but rewarding.”

Ishikawa, who trained in lantern-making for two years at Ozeki, gestures towards a row of wooden moulds resting on stands in the centre of the workshop – the heart of the lantern-making process. Each is created from a circular formation of interlocked curved wooden planks, which create the shape of the light.



Demonstrating the most challenging step in the creative process, Ishikawa starts to fix strands of wiry bamboo around the ten-piece wooden mould of a Double Bubble lantern to create the frame. His dexterous fingers move at high-speed as he winds the bamboo around the mould with rapid precision in equally spaced rows, attaching the ends of metre-long strands of bamboo with knots of fine white cotton.

Next, he picks up a wide, flat black brush, dips it expertly into a tray of rice glue and dabs it across a segment of the lantern, before carefully laying down sheaves of fine white paper made from mulberry bark and trimming the edges with a small knife. A short while later, when the glue is dried, Ishikawa repeatedly taps the lantern's paper surface while disconnecting the interlocked inner planks that form the mould and removing them.

The end result? A lantern that is resolutely rooted in traditional craftsmanship, but is also simple, strong and sculptural in form. That's according to Simon Alderson, founder of twentytwentyone, the London company that is exclusively distributing

the two Hotaru lanterns in large and small sizes (between 57cm and 99cm in height). “Although paper lanterns may be perceived as ubiquitous, the mulberry paper and specialist construction distinguish the Ozeki lanterns as arguably the very best in the world,” he says. “The designs by Barber & Osgerby embrace scale and form. They have a unique sculptural presence, a trait that can be found in many of their designs.”

The collaboration was clearly a bold move for Ozeki, which like many family-run artisan manufacturers in Japan has traditionally focused on a domestic market. However, as Toshihiko Ozeki, director of product development and the sixth generation involved in the business, explains over green tea: “We felt this was a good opportunity to promote the quality and craftsmanship of Ozeki lanterns to people overseas.”

And for Barber & Osgerby? This is clearly just the beginning of their Japanese artisan love affair: not only are they already working on a new range of Ozeki lantern shapes, they are also collaborating with ceramic artists in southern Kyushu. ♦