

# Wrapped in Artistry

*Traditional fabric dyers collaborate with the peak event of sporting excellence to showcase their world of fine craftsmanship and a willingness to adapt.*



The Tokyo 2020 Olympic Emblem Tokyo Somekomon Wrapping cloth (left) and the Tokyo 2020 Paralympic Emblem Tokyo Somekomon Wrapping cloth (right).

Tokyo has been one of Japan’s three major fabric dyeing centers since the Edo Period (1603-1868). As the population swelled in Edo (present-day Tokyo), many dyers set up businesses in the Kanda and Asakusa areas, where good water was abundant, to meet the demand for kimono fabric.

As the rivers became polluted in the process of Japan’s modernization, many of the dyers relocated and eventually settled in the present-day

Shinjuku area, with access to the clean waters of the Kanda River. While Shinjuku is known for skyscrapers and shopping today, the area is still home to these craftspeople, who have passed down their traditions over generations. Around 60 dyers are still operating as a local industry.

Tomita Some Kogei (Tomita Dye Craft) is a long-standing producer of traditional Tokyo Somekomon fabrics. “Our ancestors moved from Kyoto to Tokyo 150 years ago, and our family has been in the dyeing business in Shinjuku since 1914,” said the fifth head of the firm, Atsushi Tomita, who has been designated as a master traditional craftsman by the national and local governments.

Tokyo Somekomon is a dyeing technique that results in finely detailed geometrical patterns that can only be seen up close. The technique largely developed during the Edo Period for samurai warriors’ ceremonial *kamishimo* clothing. Various patterns, such as hailstones, sharks and bamboo baskets, were each used exclusively for a particular family. In the middle of the Edo Period, common people began to use such patterns for their daily kimono, leading to the development of more sophisticated dyeing techniques and a wider variety of free-minded, chic and smart designs.

The quaint old dyeing studio of Tomita Dye Craft has sat on the bank of the Kanda River for over a century. A young craftswoman showed visitors around the studio while explaining the Tokyo Somekomon dyeing process—from cutting the paper stencils, creating the colored starch and printing the patterns to steaming, washing and drying. The studio stores around 120,000 paper stencils, including basic patterns as well as unique tiny motifs of animals and letters, some of which date back 200 years.

It requires highly skilled craftsmanship to dye these fine patterns on the fabric. An experienced craftsman put a paper stencil on a bolt of fabric spread on a long wooden board, and applied colored starch in one swift motion with a pallet. Only the carved patterns and motifs were dyed, creating a sharp image. Then he moved the stencil to the next position on the fabric before applying the next color. The stencil must be placed accurately in order to make the patterns run properly. Every process is done by hand, as it is too delicate to make an adjustment by machine. “It takes at least ten years to become accomplished,” master craftsman Tomita said.

Such craftsmanship is now being put to good use creating original Tokyo Somekomon *furoshiki* wrapping cloths officially released by the Tokyo Organising Committee of the Olympic and Paralympic Games. The cloths feature the Tokyo 2020 Games Emblems. Designed by Japanese artist Asao Tokolo, the unique *Kumi-ichimatsu-mon* checkerboard patterns are

composed of 45 parts: nine square pieces and two kinds of rectangle (18 pieces for each). The same pieces can be arranged in two different formations for the Olympics and Paralympics.

The traditional techniques of Tokyo Somekomon allowed the glossy silk fabric to be dyed deep indigo blue, while preventing any bleeding in the irregular checkerboard patterns and the tiny Tokyo 2020 Games Emblems. “To produce the deep blue color, I used the best-quality Japanese silk from Tokyo’s Hachioji area, traditionally known for its silk textile industry. It also took a long time of trial and error to hand mix the deep blue color,” Tomita said, recounting the production process. “By combining wonderful Japanese silk fabrics with our excellent dyeing technique, I wanted to create something that demonstrates Japanese traditional craftsmanship.”

Tomita Dye Craft has gone through difficult times during its long history, and was facing both a downturn in demand and a shortage of new staff willing to take on the work—challenges that many traditional craft industries face. “I even thought of closing our studio,” Tomita said. “But, to my surprise, 13 years ago my son decided to take over our family business.” Also, in recent years, the studio has been approached by motivated young women eager to learn dyeing techniques, gradually bringing change to the traditionally male-dominated craft industry.

Tomita is working hard to revive and promote the beautiful kimono culture of Japan, while also creating new products—such as umbrellas and cravats with Tokyo Somekomon fabric. The Tokyo 2020 officially licensed *furoshiki* wrapping cloth could be a symbol of their attempts using time-honored traditional techniques. Such an approach ensures that the centuries-old craftsmanship of the Shinjuku dyeing industry will remain an important part of Japan’s cultural landscape.

The Tokyo Somekomon dyeing process requires a number of steps by highly skilled craftsmen.

