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THE RECYCLE ARTIST



Hotel New Otani, and over the next 10 years – during Japan’s economic bubble – he was headhunted by the owners of a number of different restaurants, who wanted something – someone – different to attract customers. “I made lots of money during that time,” Sakurai recalls. “We all did. But at a certain point I asked myself, ‘Am I happy?’ And I quit my job and moved to California.”

On his own in California, the 29-year-old Sakurai immersed himself in American culture and made a living exporting antiques – reading obituaries in the newspaper, buying unwanted home furnishings from surviving relatives, and hauling them back to Japan.

“I moved to the United States because I didn’t like Japan and wanted to live the American dream,” he says. “Then I lived there and I saw that there were negatives to life in America and began to see some of the good aspects of Japan. My friends in America would ask me about Japan, and I realized I knew nothing. So I started to learn, and at that point I started to appreciate the work my father did, that he was an extraordinary craftsman.”

Not long after moving back to Japan to help care for his sick mother, Sakurai met the American girl he had promised his family as a fifth grader he would marry. Colleen Whaley was a jazz singer who performed often in Japan, and on a day off she had come to the club Sakurai was managing in Ebisu, Piga Piga. They started dating, and were married 10 months later.

Shoichi Sakurai’s life as an artist began on the couple’s honeymoon, when

BY ROBERTO DE VIDO

Shoichi Sakurai is the Tokyo-born son of a *tategu-shokunin*, a craftsman of *kumiko-shoji* screens, but grew up loving American culture, and as a fifth grader, announced to his family that he would

“marry an American woman and live in the United States.”

“I didn’t like it,” he says of his traditional upbringing. “I thought all my relatives were square.”

Escaping his “square” surroundings in Edogawaku, at 15 Sakurai co-founded the Ducktails, the greaser rockabilly dance group that hung out and performed on

Sundays at “Hoko-ten” in Harajuku. “That was 36 years ago,” he marvels.

At 18 he won a 1950s-style dance contest at Korakuen Hall, and says, “At that time, my dream was to own an American-style drive-in restaurant, like in *American Graffiti*.”

To prepare for that, Sakurai worked for three years in a restaurant in the



Clockwise from top right: "Kobiki", "Sunbeam", "Sakura Fubiki", "Treasure Box", "Entrance", various pieces of jewelry, "Go-Ka-Ku" and "Cocoon".

on a three-month “¥1,000 a day” backpack tour of Asia, he and Colleen began to seek learning experiences, picking up the rudiments of traditional paper making in Thailand, and bamboo weaving and batik in Indonesia.

“Wherever we went, we tried to learn something,” he says. “Then we came back to Japan, and thought, ‘Why don’t we make the same trip here in Japan?’ So we toured the country, and saw that the level of craftsmanship was so high here. I gained even more respect for my father and his work.

“By that time, my father was retired, but he gave me his tools, and he offered me his guidance. Colleen and I began to make things, just to decorate

our place, but some of our friends started to ask if they could buy them, and then we got a break.

“An artist friend suggested we show some of our work at a big art show in Tokyo, but when I tried to reserve a booth, they were full. Then, just before the show opened, there was a cancellation, and the organizers called us. We brought our own *tatami* and *shoji*, and made a tiny room out of our booth space, and we won first prize! We were interviewed on TV, and we started getting phone calls.”

Those calls included requests to decorate a house for a party being thrown by Richard Branson, and to decorate Seibu heir Yoshiaki

Tsutsumi’s residence in Tokyo. Sakurai says, “We’ve been lucky time and time again. So many times, someone has introduced me to someone else ... and it goes from there.”

In post-bubble Japan, Sakurai quickly found his style as an artist. “People throw away things too easily,” he says. “Old things have the patina of age, which you can’t buy. And so I evolved into a ‘recycle artist’. Recycling and ‘redefining’ things from the past is a way to connect us to the next generation and I’m giving everything I use a second or even a third life.”

Sakurai’s art includes illuminated sculpture incorporating a burst truck tire, a broken Edo-period

armor breastplate, and a farmer’s wooden grain sifter. He was commissioned by the Italian home appliance company De’Longhi to create two large chandeliers for their Tokyo showroom/restaurant, using recycled appliances, and with around 50 discarded De’Longhi power blenders, created a sleek line of aluminum jewelry.

He makes his own clothes, from vintage fabric, and he and Colleen live with their teenage son in a 100-year-old temple house in Zushi jammed with art and antiques. He points out a giant rusted potbelly stove in the *tokonoma* that washed up on the beach and is missing most of one side, the side that has been oriented to face the room. “The things I use are abandoned, broken and scarred. But the worst part can be the best part. It depends on your perspective.”

The Japanese appreciation of *wabi-sabi* – the beauty of things that are imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete – is well known. But Shoichi Sakurai’s art has found its way into homes around the world, demonstrating that the *wabi-sabi* aesthetic has universal appeal.

“I just follow what I want to do, what I feel ... and people seem to like it,” he says. “And I feel that if we show respect and appreciation for things, they will pay us back in a fulfilling way.” 🍵

For more information about Shoichi Sakurai’s background and work, see:

<http://www.shoichi-sakurai.com/>.

A selection of his artwork can be found here: <http://www.artslant.com/global/artists/show/130846-shoichi-sakurai>. Work can be seen at the Sakurais’ Temple House Gallery in Zushi. To make an appointment, contact the artist via <http://www.shoichi-sakurai.com/>.