



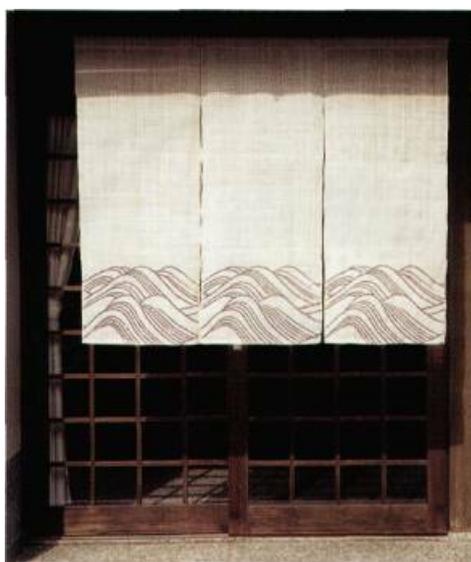
Great on paper

Nearly 400 years after setting up shop, a Japanese dynasty is still making hand-printed paper the traditional way



Nineteenth century travellers to Kyoto knew they'd found something special when they came across Karacho, a shop producing hand-printed paper for clients all over the city. Karacho's paper appeared on the walls of the old capital's most elegant buildings, from imperial villas and ancient temples to private houses and tea-ceremony rooms. And, charmed by the printed papers' dynamic patterns, including waves, peonies, birds, delicate ferns and cherry blossom, visitors returned to Europe with samples and, so the story goes, inspired the fashion for sprucing up dowdy Victorian parlours with vibrant wallpapers.

Karacho's owners, the Senda family, have been hand-printing paper since 1624. An unbroken line of artisans who have survived fires, wars and economic ups and downs, they have always looked after their most precious asset: more than 650 designs, all carved into wood blocks. Their speciality is *karakami*, Japanese hand-printed paper for decorating *fusuma*, the sliding doors that partition traditional Japanese buildings. At one time there were 13 *karakami* workshops in Kyoto alone; today Karacho is the only one left in Japan. Imperial connections helped, of course, as did the continued patronage of the Kyoto establishment,



PAPER TIGER

Top, inside the main Karacho shop in Shugakuin
Above, the entrance to the original store

but there were times when the fashion for all things Western looked set to obliterate the craft for good.

Having outlived the competition, Karacho now finds itself newly fashionable. Its design pedigree and handmade quality have caught the interest of a new generation of architects and interior designers. And its most recent public workshop had customers queuing up to have a go at hand-printing themselves.

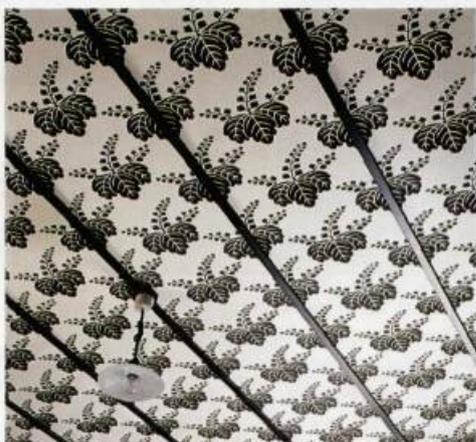
It has been a busy few years for owner Kenkichi Senda, the nth-generation printer, and his family. He and his wife Ikuko have opened up an interiors showroom in a contemporary Kyoto space, proving that his designs can work in a modern setting. Their daughter Aiko has started another shop, called Kira Karacho, which sells smaller, less expensive products, such as hand-printed postcards, lamps and stationery. Meanwhile, Kenkichi's son Seiji, a *karakami* printer himself, is perfecting his carpentry skills so that he can carve soft magnolia-wood printing blocks; some of the blocks in use are now hundreds of years old and, with the decline of traditional artisanship, are becoming increasingly difficult to replace.

Kenkichi initially ignored his calling, working for a number of years at a chemical company before »



PRINTS CHARMING

Clockwise from left, Aiko at Kira Karacho; rows of soft fur brushes; a Karacho print; washi paper on blocks; the ceiling in the second studio



returning to his roots. At Karacho, he is the aesthetic decision-maker, choosing to stick to natural pigments, like gofun white (ground from mother-of-pearl), and using melted seaweed as glue. Seiji, now 36, had no such doubts about joining the family business; he has been making karakami since he was 18.

The karakami technique, which came to Japan from China, looks straightforward enough: paint is brushed onto a gauze-covered sieve, which is then pressed over a carved wood block; a sheet of Japanese washi paper is placed over the block and pressed by hand to reproduce the pattern. However, at Karacho, this seemingly simple process is considered an unteachable skill, acquired only through years of experimentation with varying qualities of paint, wood and paper in Kyoto's dramatically changing climate.

The two small studios at Karacho are works of art themselves, decorated with pots of pigment, rows of

soft fur brushes and rolls of Japanese paper. Koh Kado, one of five apprentices training at Karacho to be a karakami printer, was working as a graphic designer in San Francisco until he returned to his home town of Kyoto, discovered Karacho and made a career shift. 'A friend brought me here and I was amazed; he says. 'I couldn't believe I didn't know about it before.' Today he is helping the small team produce a set of karakami for one of Kyoto's most famous ryokan, and an order from architect Kengo Kuma has just been fulfilled.

For all its concrete buildings and busy streets, Kyoto is still very much a traditional city, and Karacho plays an important part in its formidable artistic heritage. Its artisans continue to repaper the fusuma at Katsura Rikyu, the 17th-century proto-modernist royal villa that seems to be every architect's favourite Japanese building, as well as countless other historic buildings. Karakami is the core of the business and,

as the only remaining practitioner, Karacho is not short of work. But the family recognises that the designs have the potential to adorn more than just paper. Recently, the Sendas contributed to one of Kyoto's newest buildings: Cocon Karasuma, a smart shopping centre whose three-storey facade is covered with a bold Karacho cloud design, an idea the family suggested to the architect. And next year, Aiko, a deft small-scale printer, and her husband Akihiko, a restaurateur, will open a new store selling textiles, furniture and tableware with Karacho designs. 'We want to do so much more with Karacho,' she says. 'But we know how special it is and we will always be careful to keep the same atmosphere.'

Karacho, 36-9 Mizukawaracho, Shugakuin, Sakyo-ku, Kyoto, tel: 81.75 7214422, www.karacho.co.jp; Kira Karacho, Cocon Karasuma. 1F Karasuma-dori, Shijo-sagaru, Suigin-yacho, tel: 81.75 353 5885