

Jungle city "Hot Talk" feature Posted August of 2010

Lighting Designer Yuri Kinoshita



Profile:

- Born in Kyoto.
- Graduated from Osaka Mode Gakuen (Fashion Institute), Department of Interior Design, winning the school's grand prize for graduate project.
- Traveled to Europe as part of prize, and then also went on to visit the east coast of the U.S. and Asia.
- In 1993 joined family-run kimono business Kinoshita Co. and founded "Umbo," a division of the company that specializes in art for the home interior.
- Operated Umbo to import and sell small items from various parts of the world and to make and sell original kimonos and small items made using fabrics from various parts of the world.
- In 2003 established Umbo USA in California and expanded the marketing network to the U.S.
- In 2006 parted from Umbo to focus on being a lighting designer and began holding one-man shows and participating in exhibits in Japan, Germany and the U.S.
- In February of 2008 moved to Seattle and now working passionately to expand activities as a lighting designer.

Child Who Loved to Make Things

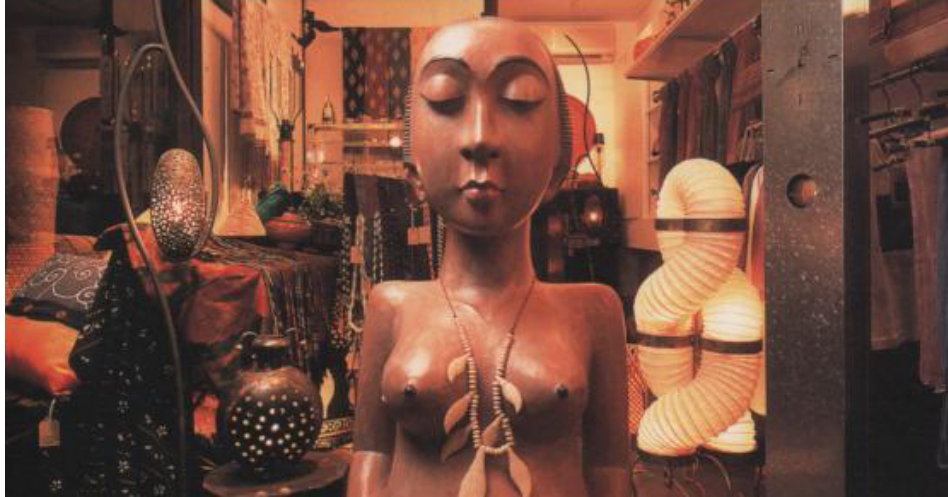
Ever since I was a little kid I loved making things, drawing pictures and redecorating. My family operates a kimono shop in Kyoto, and I used the boxes for storing kimonos to make a table and desk and chairs, which I was forever rearranging in my room. I would even draw pictures of my future home. In middle school I was already telling my teachers that I wanted to study interior design, but their response was always that I should focus on getting through high school first, and my parents too said it should wait until after high school. So I went through high school and took the standard escalator toward college, but failed the interview for college, which is really unheard of but shows how much I wanted to study interior design. During the interview I was asked about my dreams for the future, and I said I wanted to do this and do that, and they said that college was clearly not the place I wanted to go. In failing to pass the interview, my parents finally asked what it was I wanted to do, and that was the first real chance for me to convey to them what I felt, which was that I wanted to study interior design at Osaka Mode Gakuen. It was a round-about way of getting there, but I am really happy that's how things turned out.

Osaka Mode Gakuen

I was like a fish in water at Osaka Mode Gakuen. Everything was fun and I never missed a day. Some students thought it was hard, but for me the projects were everything and I became so absorbed in making things that I sometimes forgot to sleep. The lighting class was the most fun of all, and I won a lighting contest that helped send me down the path to becoming a lighting designer. The other big push came from the wonderful experience of actually selling a creation. An acquaintance working at a coffee shop liked one of my creations that I liked too and had the idea of placing it in the shop. Two days later I got a phone call that some customer liked the item and bought it. The selling price didn't even cover the material costs, but just the idea that someone wanted to buy it made me really happy. My graduate project at Osaka Mode Gakuen won the school's grand prize, and as part of the prize I got to go on a trip to Europe. Visiting Britain, Germany and France and seeing the museums was a good learning experience.

Joining the Family Business

After graduating I spent a while in short-term language schools in Singapore, Washington DC and New York, but then I went back to Kyoto to join the family business, which is Kinoshita Co. But instead of working with kimonos, which is what the store is about, I set up a separate division called "Umbo" to specialize in art for the home interior.



Asia Boom Spark

When I began operating Umbo I made one-of-a-kind lighting fixtures. But a company needs to make money, and I took everyone's advice to heart and realized that instead of making "things I liked" I needed to make "things that could sell." But any kind of process is expensive to do in Japan, which means that items have to be priced high. That made me remember how everything was so inexpensive in other Asian countries, so I traveled to places like Indonesia to set up bases where goods could be made cheaply. That is also when I began importing items that were unknown in Japan. This was in 1994, before the "Asia boom" and the "relaxation/healing boom," back during the bubble-economy years when people liked things loud and bright, where everything was flooded in cold fluorescent lights and little in the way of warm incandescent lighting. But the bamboo baskets and chopsticks and coasters and lunch mats and other little things I imported from Southeast Asia sold well, so the next time I went back I filled a container of items from Asia to import and sell in Japan.

Visiting Textiles of the World

That is also the time when I began to grow interested in the textiles of Asia. Having grown up in a kimono store, I naturally rebelled against kimonos and as a kid had no interest in textiles. But the handmade textiles of Asia had a certain incompleteness that gave them a warm feeling, unlike Japanese kimonos which at the time I felt had a beauty that was too finished. My interest in textiles took me to various countries. Every country has its own textiles and dyed fabrics. For me the most interesting were in India. They say that India is the birthplace of textiles, and the tradition there really runs deep. Uzbekistan is also interesting, with its combination of design influences from Russia and the Middle East and the Far East. The combinations of colors are so novel, yet they work. In Southeast Asia I found interesting textiles in Myanmar, Laos and Thailand. In fact, I placed an order for a precious textile in Myanmar which is made using lotus stems and imported it to sell as a kimono fabric. Also unique are the batik fabrics from the Ivory Coast of West Africa. The designs include pictures of everything you see in daily life like electric fans and telephones and radios and faces and TVs. The yukata robes I made from these fabrics sold well. But whereas the fabrics made in Japan for kimono are tightly woven, the fabrics from elsewhere did not have that application in mind, so they were thin and weak and ripped easy. Few people in Japan still make the traditional Japanese textiles like kurumegasuri, and the prices are high, so I tried having that kind of patterned cloth made in India. That proved hard at first -- they could not make the same thing, and what they made was different from what we talked about -- but I managed to boost the quality by letting the makers know that their names and faces would be on the labels for the finished goods.

Patenting a Simple Kimono Obi

It was around that same time that I got the idea for a simple obi (sash) to wear with the kimono. As a child I hated kimonos, but as I grew to be an adult I also grew to like them. The idea for the simple obi came about because I wanted to be able to quickly don a kimono by myself on business trips overseas. I happened to be in Morocco purchasing glass lampshades and decorative items, but as a former colony of France there were many craftspeople there making ethnic-clothing belts and curtain tassels and goods of that nature, so I ordered some sample textiles there and used them to fashion finished obi. Well, my family company has pretty good business sense and we felt right away that this was something we could sell. The irony is that the main buyers were exactly opposite of who we expected. We thought they would sell to women who do not know how to put on kimono by themselves. But these women thought the ready-made obi were weird and they wanted to wear the traditional garments. Instead, it was the people who wear kimono daily like dancers and tea practitioners who found the simple obi a delight. That success led to the idea of also selling Japanese sundries to Americans, so I set up a subsidiary in California and went there to manage the store myself.



Independence

Unlike in the U.S., the turnover of trends is extremely fast in Japan and the one new thing quickly gives way to the next new thing. Especially for an import business you need to be forever looking for items to sell. I was able to continue that kind of job for 11 years because I like to travel and I like to discover new products, but even so I began to tire a bit. I kind of had the business down to a science, but in thinking how I could make things that would sell I felt I was losing my creativity. I began to feel that I did not want to do this forever. I was in my early thirties, and I realized that it was now or never if I wanted to make things that came from the heart. I recognized the security that working for the company gave me and that if I became independent I would have to start from scratch, but I made the decision to leave the nest, so to speak. My father and business colleagues were surprised when I said I would be quitting the company, but my father is quick to adjust and he gave his blessing to my decision. It was hard leaving something I spent 11 years building and I felt bad for the company as well, but I stuck to my decision, certain that if I did not leave now, I never would.

Lighting Designer

In deciding to go independent I had to ask myself what I wanted to do. My conclusion was that I best express myself through lighting and illumination. I remembered making one-of-a-kind lighting and having so much fun at Kinoshita making items to order for places like restaurants. Working with restaurant people to create spaces was extremely satisfying. Unfortunately, I fell into the rut of dealing in small lights and sundries that would sell. In becoming independent it was a chance to once again work with lighting as a way of expressing myself.

In going independent I became aware of how good it is to have the backing of a company. It is a small thing, but getting a paycheck every month is something to be thankful for. When you're on your own you

have to do business for yourself, sell things and make money. You have to make the money; it does not grow on trees. So I could look back at the 11 years at Kinoshita and see how I counted on the company. And as a company, there are things you can do a lot more easily than as an individual. No one made me quit, and I chose the hard road by myself. When I first became independent, I called by products "creations" but in truth I made things from the perspective of what I thought would sell. I had told myself I would create things from the heart, but those first products were intentionally made to be accepted and liked by people, and whenever anything was bought I'd make the same thing again. I guess that comes from spending 11 years chasing after items that will sell. But at the time I was not aware of what I was doing.

Finding Sellers

What I learned from scratch in Japan is how to make sales. When I set up Umbo in the family business, I had to go out and develop sales routes different from the traditional sales routes for kimonos. The business world in Kyoto is a place where people want to know who you got their name from, but I was making cold calls and had to answer that I found their names in the phone book. In Japan, people who go out to sell products are in a position of weakness and need to bow and scrape, but once a buyer manages to sell your product his or her attitude changes completely. You can make cold calls in the U.S. too, but people there are more welcoming. When I first went to the U.S. for business people told me I should make appointments. But I knew with my poor English that I couldn't make phone calls because no one would take me seriously. So I just charged ahead. I went to places and asked to meet the buyer, asked for a minute of their time, and said I had come from Japan to make sales, and then I grabbed their attention by showing them samples. Doing business in the U.S. was fun. People thanked me for visiting and responded with big clear expressions of "Wow." Those products I first sold in 2003 I am still selling now.



Making Seattle a Base

After I set up the subsidiary in California I made frequent trips to Seattle to visit friends. I liked the city, and especially the amazing view from Kerry Park on Queen Anne hill showing the contrast of city and nature. Lots of Americans are interested in interior design. I've had experience going for business to a variety of countries, but in Japan people spend money on electronics and even when they are rich don't spend like Americans on custom-order furniture and lighting and decorate their homes with art, and in Europe they think a great much of the old so it is hard to get in the door. But Americans have a zest to buy things, and they are big consumers, so I decided to make the U.S. my operations base. In 2008 I was scheduled to hold an exhibition at a gallery shop called Kobo at Higo in Seattle's International District, so I obtained an Artist Visa for the U.S. and moved to Seattle.

People told me the winter was long in Seattle, but I couldn't imagine what they meant. The first year past by enjoyably; I figured that if every day had been sunny I probably wouldn't have felt like making things. But in the second year I understood about the long winter. But that is Seattle, and it gave me plenty of time to think, and the fact that you don't see the sun that often in Seattle is how the idea for my "Sunrise" creations was born. I had always wanted to make creations that came from deep down, so the Seattle winter was good for me.

What's Next

After moving to Seattle I conducted business all over the place and began to exhibit and sell my lighting creations. You can now see examples of my work in the Corson Building in Georgetown, in the Boom Noodle restaurant in the University Village, at Sushi Kappo Tamura in Eastlake, at the Seattle Art Museum shop, and down at the Ping Restaurant in Portland, Oregon. The jobs for the Corson Building and the Ping Restaurant overlapped by coincidence, and since it was my dream to place lighting in restaurants, I couldn't have been happier. It is difficult to install the kind of lighting I make in shops after they have opened for business, so I network and explore from all angles to talk with owners before new shops open. I had a show of my creations in a gallery in Ballard in January of 2010, and the responses are just now coming in. In May I participated in the ICFE interior show in New York, promoting myself for business creating lighting for hotel lobbies, reception desks and rooms. It takes time for things to develop, so you have to always keep planting the seeds. In November I'll have a show in Eastern Washington at the Willow gallery in Walla Walla. In addition to lighting for restaurants, homes and hotels, I'd also like to create lighting for outdoors. Since I am here in America, I want to create lighting that expresses a combination of comfortable "wa," Japanese "wa" and playfulness. My hope is to continue to be true to myself as a creator of spaces.

