



In the Japanese village of Hirutani, Masakiyo Ogura poses in front of his family shrine. Ogura-san represents the fifty-eighth generation in a woodturning family.

Fifty-Eight Generations of Woodturners

Terry Martin

Photos by Terry Martin.

In the village of Hirutani

We are sitting on cushions on the tatami-matted floor of a traditional Japanese house in the village of Hirutani. Outside the valley rises, steep-sided, and the wind sighs gently in the trees that crowd around the tiny homes. Masakiyo Ogura pours green tea for my wife Yuriko and me, leans across the table to place them before us, then sits back and smiles broadly. “I am the fifty-eighth generation of a woodturning family,” he says.

For nearly thirty years, I have traveled all over the world and listened to the life stories of many turners, but I had never heard a statement to match this one. Yuriko and I had traveled to meet Ogura-san at his home in search of the “birth-place of Japanese turning” in central Japan. The origins of the Ogura clan are deeply linked to ancient Japanese

history and tradition, and he proudly told us of his own ancestry. He also told us that archives confirm his woodturning family goes back at least 1,170 years. It takes a moment to process such information, almost certainly the oldest confirmed and continuous turning lineage in the world. At my request, Ogura-san knelt proudly for a photo in front of the shrine to his ancestors, while a photograph of his grandfather looked sternly down upon us.

As we had driven into the village of Hirutani earlier in the day, it seemed typical of many mountain villages in Japan—no stores, no post office, not much of anything other than a few picturesque houses. The mountainous countryside of Japan is filled with declining villages like this, as the young people flock to the bright city lights. Ogura-san told us that only three people

live in Hirutani now, but imagine our astonishment when he said that his tiny village was once a community of 23,000 woodturning households. A “turning household” in Japan today can include three or four turners, so I wondered just how many turners had lived in the village. I also thought that if it was true, had there ever been any other place in the world with so many woodturners?

The archives

When we finished our tea, we went to the nearby shrine where the woodturning archives are kept. Behind a screen of trees, we found a typically elegant building with wide swooping eaves and a beautifully tended garden. Near the entrance we saw a monumental moss-covered stone at least six feet wide that looked like it had been there for hundreds of years. Inscribed deeply into the stone



Portrait of Ogura-san's grandfather, who was part of a long lineage of woodturners.

was the word *rokuro*, meaning “lathe.” I was deeply moved by this venerable monument to the craft I love.

Inside the building we found a glass case that contained many fragile scrolls. This was the registry of turning families and the oldest was dated 935. We were amazed that these precious documents had survived so long in a land prone to earthquakes and fires in the ubiquitous wooden buildings. Our host explained that 1,300 years ago, turning was first officially given imperial approval. He then showed us some examples of wooden tablets with the imperial crest and family names that turning households were able to display at their door.

Considering how much wood the 23,000 turning households in Hirutani alone must have used, it was necessary to find new forests to cut. That is why woodturners led an itinerant lifestyle, moving to new forests and working onsite. They needed official permission to travel across local borders and to cut trees, and this explains why the records were created. It is fortunate that the documentation survived because without them the Ogura lineage would



The entrance to this Hirutani shrine containing the woodturning archives is marked by a stone monument with the word *rokuro*, or “lathe,” inscribed.

never have been confirmed. The itinerant nature of this work is also how woodturning spread to many other regions of Japan and explains why today all Japanese turners acknowledge this region as the birthplace of their craft.

Turning romanticized

Hanging on a wall inside the shrine was a scroll depicting a turner working in front of an imposing figure. Yuriko translated the writing on the scroll and at the top is written, “The original god of woodturning, Prince Koretaka.” On each side of this script are two imperial family crests. The writing at the bottom



The ancient registry of turning families on display in the shrine.

left translates, “Made at *tsutsui jinja*.” When I asked Ogura-san where this was and who Prince Koretaka was, he smiled and said, “You will see.”

The turner and his assistant in the scroll are very idealized, both wearing heavy silk *kimono* more suited to court life than the messy business of turning wood. But the rest of the image is close to reality: the female assistant does the hard work, the turner has his tools lined up, a set of small cups is already made, and he is turning another cup, which is attached to the end of the shaft. The wood was probably hammered onto pins set in the shaft, a mounting method you can still see Japanese turners using today. The only thing missing is the toolrest, possibly because the artist didn't understand its function.

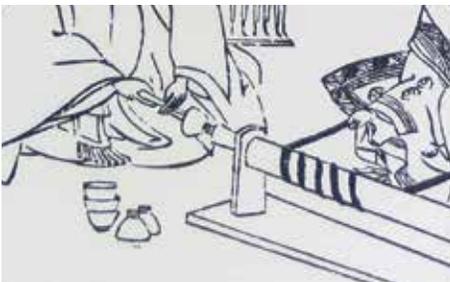
To put this idealized Koretaka scroll into perspective, a few days earlier in the nearby turning center of Yamanaka, we had visited the only woodturning school in Japan, where we found a small display of turning artifacts. There we saw a faded photograph taken last century that gives a more realistic perspective on the Japanese turner's life. The photo is blurry, but it is possible to see that most of what is happening is the same as in the Hirutani scroll. The lathe is identical, a spare tool lies to hand beside the turner, and the positions of the people are the same. The only differences are that the turner is making a large bowl and in the photo the toolrest is very evident. Often the ▶



Wooden tablets with the names of woodturning families who were officially registered.



A scroll depicting Prince Koretaka watching a turner at work. The turner's mounting method, workpiece hammered onto pins in the lathe's spindle shaft, is still used today in Japan.



assistant was the turner's wife and in this case the woman is not young, but she must have been very strong—or very tired! There is of course no sign of expensive silk *kimono*, only loose-fitting work clothes.

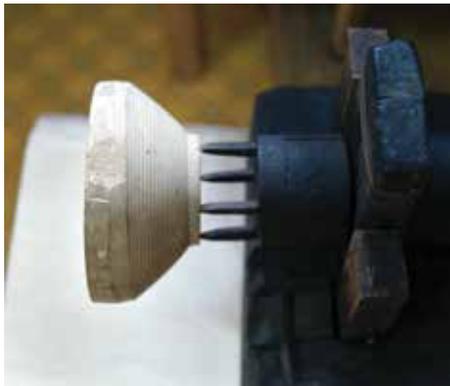
One lathe on display at Yamanaka was in such good condition that it could be used even now. It was identical to the one in the Koretaka scroll, a pull-pull lathe where the turner's assistant sat beside the lathe, feet braced against the frame, and alternatively pulled



A 20th century photo of how Japanese used to turn.



A well-preserved reciprocating lathe on display at the turning center of Yamanaka.



A bowl blank tapped onto pins so the interior could be hollowed.

each handle so the shaft rotated back and forth. As with all types of reciprocating lathes, such as pole lathes, the turner only cut as the wood rotated down towards the tool. Another lathe had a bowl blank set on pins in the shaft, further confirmation of what was probably happening in the scroll we saw in Hirutani. When I first saw such lathes, I wondered why they were so small. Perhaps if you were a traveling turner in mountains where only trails exist, you had to carry your lathe on

your back, so it had to be as light as possible.

The last turner in Hirutani

Because of the dispersion of turning, the Ogura clan has spread to many other regions in Japan, and there are still over 100 turning families with that name. Masakiyo Ogura holds an influential position as the mayor of Higashi Oomi, the region that contains much of this turning history, and although he is not a woodturner, he is the acknowledged head of the family. However, with only three people left in the village, I asked him if that meant there were no turners left in Hirutani. "Not yet," he said, "and now we will visit one."

We left the shrine and followed the narrow valley road until we came to a small workshop beside a stream that tumbled down the valley. There we met Seiji Kitano, the only remaining turner in Hirutani. I thought his life in the declining village must be lonely, but like all Japanese craftspeople, he showed a strong sense of dignity and pride. He was proud to show us his workshop where he was finishing the bases of a set of cups. Kitano-san was one of the very few Japanese turners I have ever seen who work standing up.

Into the deep mountains

After our goodbyes, we drove further up the winding mountain road, which narrowed and twisted as we penetrated the dark forest. It was a reminder that, despite the big city lights, 68% of Japan is still covered in forests. It also felt like a journey into the past—the occasional villages became smaller and smaller as all signs of modern Japan fell behind us. Finally we reached the end of the road at the tiny village of Kimigahatake, with only thirty houses and just eighteen inhabitants. It was a beautiful place but, sadly, many of the houses were falling into ruin. There we met Shoji Tanaka, who, like Kitano-san in Hirutani, is the last turner in his village, where there were once 6,000

turning households. Apparently, there was a centuries-old rivalry between these two villages, so it is ironic that these two men are the last remaining turners. When they are gone, an ancient turning tradition will have ended.

Although he lives alone, Tanaka-san also seemed perfectly content with his solitary turning life. He specializes in platters made from beautifully figured wood and proudly showed us how he works. His technique reflected the ancient end-on seating position, although he sat on a stool. His long toolrest sits between widely spaced supports because he often turns very larger platters. I also admired his heavy tool handles, which might seem overdone but serve to counterbalance the long overhang of the tool common in all Japanese turning.

When Tanaka-san showed us his store of turning blanks stacked for controlled drying (*see front cover*), he told us that he makes thousands of platters every year. Most Western turners today can barely imagine such output, but it is something Japanese turners take for granted. In his small gallery, Tanaka-san served us tea and we admired his range of work. I couldn't resist buying a platter made of the best figured maple I had ever seen.

A short walk from the village led us to a patch of forest where a small stone tablet in the ground told us 1,000 turning households once stood. The trees were still relatively small and it will be many hundreds of years before they reach maturity. It was a solemn sight.

A little further up the path, on a stone plinth beyond a ceremonial gate, we found a statue of a seated figure. This was Prince Koretaka, and it was time to learn why he is considered the god of woodturning. In 858, Prince Koretaka was one of the potential heirs to the imperial throne, but his brother became emperor instead. In fear for his life, Koretaka fled the capital Kyoto and moved into the mountains. It is recorded that he finally settled in the region we were visiting.



Seiji Kitano, the only remaining woodturner in the village of Hirutani.

In an era before the introduction of porcelain to Japan, turned and lacquered wooden vessels had been highly valued in the imperial capital, and reportedly Prince Koretaka saw the economic potential of the local forest resources. His principal advisor, Fujiwara Sanehide, set about promoting woodturning and he decided to change his family name to Ogura, after the name of a local valley. This was the beginning of the family that still exists today. The two communities we had visited, Hirutani and Kimigahatake, were the result of this imperial sponsorship.

Journey's end

We followed the path upwards. It narrowed and wound through increasingly ancient trees, and the silence deepened. Finally, the path opened onto a grove of gigantic trees with a scattering of beautiful temples and shrines among them. It



Shoji Tanaka, the last remaining turner in the ancient village of Kimigahatake, specializes in platters.



was the most peaceful and serene place I have ever visited in Japan and we stood in awe. This temple complex, *tsutsui jinja*, is venerated as the heart of the birthplace of Japanese woodturning.

Here and there, ornate signs were discreetly placed and Yuriko translated what they said. One of them particularly impressed me. Erected by an association of metal turners in the Tokyo region in 1975, it acknowledged the debt of all turners to this region. It is the first time I have ever seen such recognition of the woodturning origins of the industrial mainstay, the metal lathe.

Reflections on our journey

It was hard to leave that peaceful grove, but as we drove back to Hirutani, I reflected on all that we had learned. It would be easy to tell this story just as it was presented to us—a neatly packaged explanation of a unique history. ▶





A statue of Prince Koretaka, considered in Japanese tradition to be the god of woodturning.



Tsutsui jinja, a small complex outside the village of Kimigahatake, is considered the birthplace of Japanese woodturning.



A dedication and acknowledgement of origin, from the metal turners of Tokyo.

But legends often blur the truth and, particularly for a foreigner, the truth in Japan can be obscure. For example, what I had taken for an ancient monument at the shrine in Hirutani, with the word for “lathe” inscribed on it, was not what I had thought. The word carved below *rokuro* was *mannenhitsu*, which means “fountain pen,” so obviously the stone was not as ancient as it looked. Yuriko later established that it was erected in 1973 by a famous Japanese fountain pen company. From the early 20th century, their pens were made out of turned wood and to acknowledge this history, they commissioned the monument. I thought of the thousands of turners in the West who devote their time to turning pens. Perhaps many of them think it is a relatively new idea, but the Japanese were doing it a hundred years ago. And why not? Traditional brushes

I am sure there are more professional turners in Japan than in any other country.

used for writing have had turned handles for over a thousand years.

“The birthplace of Japanese turning” sounds impressive, but what does it mean? I already knew that woodturning had come to Japan from China during the years from 400 to 600, so obviously it had a strong presence long before Prince Koretaka. One probable reason for this version of turning history was the rising sense of national pride in the 19th century. So much of Japanese material culture came from China that it was felt necessary to “nationalize” it, so an idealized narrative of simple village life and hard-working Japanese artisans was linked to crafts such as woodturning. The story of Prince Koretaka fit well with this narrative, so he was enshrined as the originator of Japanese turning. In many ways, this is not very different from the contemporary dialog surrounding turning in the United States, where it is very rare to hear any discussion of the fact that American turning is a craft with 100% European origins.

Back in Hirutani

While Ogura-san prepared tea for us again in his house, I thought about the

declining state of woodturning across Japan. Because each turning region operates independently, I have never been able to determine how many turners are active in Japan today, but it must be in the tens of thousands. It is still an important industry and I am sure there are more professional turners in Japan than in any other country. But turning is increasingly dependent on an aging population of men with no younger generation to replace them. In this quick-fix era, a traditional seven-year apprenticeship is not an attractive prospect.

Tradition and history are very important, but I was starting to feel they may be failing the once-thriving industry of woodturning in Japan. I asked Ogura-san how he felt about the state of woodturning in his region, and he told us that he had organized a Festival of Craftspeople in 2017 to try to arrest the decline. But as he described the event, it was clear that it only emphasized the past. I wondered if they were open to new ideas to stimulate interest, so I asked him if they had ever thought of encouraging amateurs to take up turning. “Amateurs?” he said with surprise. “Never!”

One of many utilitarian turned items in Japan, this wooden saucer was made by the Living National Treasure, Ryozo Kawakita.



There is a fundamental appreciation of aesthetics in Japan that extends to all things, so in almost every Japanese household you will find many beautifully turned objects.

Taken aback, I paused to pick up my cup of steaming tea. I felt it was time to change the subject, so when I looked down at the wooden saucer that the cup was presented on, I asked Ogura-san who made it. “They were made by Ryozo Kawakita, the Living National Treasure of woodturning,” he said. I was impressed that we were using saucers made by the revered national keeper of woodturning mastery, and I respectfully replaced my cup. I needed to remember that it is this very reverence for tradition and skill that has maintained the Japanese craft of woodturning for so long.

The future

In the West, one of the most common topics of discussion among turners is how sales are declining, so you might ask yourself who is buying the production of so many thousands of turners in Japan. In discount stores in Japan it is possible to buy cheap imported wooden bowls, but many Japanese still choose

to buy well-made Japanese bowls that will cost them many times more. This is because there is a fundamental appreciation of aesthetics in Japan that extends to all things, so in almost every Japanese household you will find many beautifully turned objects. This will not change any time soon, so I believe the decline of professional turning in Japan will be slower than it was in the West.

There is a small number of younger Japanese turners who are willing to take their work to the world, and they may have some of the answers. I found an example of this in the gallery where I sell most of my work in Australia, Bungendore Wood Works. When I was last there, I noticed some unmistakably Japanese bowls. I picked one up and looked underneath, and there was the name: *Ogura!* Sometimes a story does have a perfect ending. ■

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An Unexpected Family History

I communicate well enough in Japanese, but I can't always overcome the reluctance of Japanese craftsmen to open up to outsiders. That takes a deeper understanding of Japanese culture, and on this trip I was helped by my wife, Yuriko Nagata. When we met in Japan in 1978, neither of us knew that I would spend most of my life as a woodturner. Even more unlikely, only a few years ago Yuriko discovered that her own family had a forgotten history of woodturning.

The town of Yamanaka on the main island of Honshu is a famous center of woodturning, and in the town center there is a large granite statue of a distinguished man wearing a kimono. His name was Kumakichi Araya, and Yuriko discovered that he was her great-grandfather.

Yuriko's ancestor is famous because he was the first in Japan to make bicycle wheels. First he turned them out of wood, but later he made them from metal and this is how he founded the Araya bicycle company, still a world leader in bicycle technology.

When we visited Ogura-san, Yuriko quietly mentioned that she had a family connection with woodturning. She told him about her great-grandfather, and Ogura-san suddenly lowered his head and gently took her hand in his. It was a rare Japanese gesture of profound respect that reflected how important the weight of history is in Japanese turning.



The author's wife, Yuriko Nagata, in front of the statue of her great-grandfather, Kumakichi Araya.