

MONO-logue

"Mono" means "thing," "object," or "product" in Japanese, but it also implies that the thing has quality. In this corner, we introduce "mono" that characterize Japan's spirit of constant quality improvement.

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Tenugui

The Japanese word tenugui is often translated as "hand towel," but this is a bit of a misnomer as it is an object with great versatility. It describes a cotton cloth that can be used practically, as decoration or as part of a ritual. Tenugui gained popularity during the Edo Period (1603-1867), when cotton started being cultivated in various parts of Japan. At this point it became an essential part of the lifestyle, as people would use tenugui when they went to the sento (public bath), to cover things and as a luggage tag while traveling. Tenugui were even said to have been incorporated into proposals, as men would send long tenugui to the women they wanted to marry.

The standard size for tenugui is 30 cm wide by 90 cm long, and their shape is rectangular. The material is 100% cotton and is colored with delicate patterns and rich colors, whose designs mainly come from images of everyday life, nature or other more traditional cultural elements. There are numerous dyeing methods, but two of the most prominent are chusen and tenasen. The former originated during the Meiji Era (1868-1912) and features patterns on both sides. Dye is applied onto the fabric with a special paste and machines then suck in the dye that is applied from below, creating an identical front and back pattern. Tenasen originated around the same time, and employs stencils to make a design on only the front side. Both methods require the delicate, artistic workmanship of tenugui craftsmen who have honed their skills over time.

In the past tenugui would be given out by businesses as a sales promotion tool, but the practice of using them for advertising is less common these days. Indeed, thanks to the efforts of tenugui specialty companies, there has been a revived appreciation for this sym-

bol of Japanese culture. Now they are seen less as something to receive for free, and more as something to purchase and perhaps collect, appealing to people from various walks of life. Sushi chefs swear by them to make their hachimaki (headbands) and kendo practitioners use them as head coverings, with the motif selected often having special meaning to the wearer. They can be given as gifts on their own or can be used to wrap a gift such as a wine bottle, adding an additional layer of meaning to your present.

Recent interpretations of tenugui have included functional uses such as bikini tops and playful uses such as masks where holes are cut out for the eyes. Others have tenugui throughout their homes hanging on walls, in place of lampshades or for wiping. Because the material is all cotton, it can be twisted or tied to your liking, which allows for numerous possibilities. For example, tenugui can be useful in massaging sore neck muscles or doing foot stretches. Another natural application would be incorporating tenugui while practicing yoga. However you choose to make use of your tenugui, know that you are limited only by your imagination!



Tenugui was originally used as bath towels, caps/hoods and even tags for personal belongings. These days their usage is expanded in various ways. Gift wrapping is one of the most popular ones.



You can use tenugui as massage and exercise kits.



Tenugui books are in the new school of tenugui.

Tenugui can be an art. The snowy view of Asakusa Temple is a copy of the famous ukiyo-e by Hiroshige Utagawa. Hand-dyed with the chusen method, it skillfully reproduces the feeling of a traditional woodblock print.

Photo images courtesy of Wuhaio NY

Where to buy tenugui

(Online)
Wuhaio NY www.wuhaionyc.com
Jshoppers www.jshoppers.com

(Retail store)
Kinokuniya Bookstore
1073 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10018
TEL: 212-869-1700 / www.kinokuniya.com

KIMONO HOUSE
131 Thompson St., New York, NY 10012
TEL: 212-505-0232 / kimonohouse.blogspot.com

Kiteya SoHo
464 Broome St., New York, NY 10013
TEL: 212-219-7505 / www.kiteya.com

Makari Japanese Antiques
97 3rd Ave., New York, NY 10003
TEL: 212-995-5888 / www.themakari.com