



Arresting style: Naomi Pollock (left), with Masako Ban at the designer's Moto Azabu store Acrylic. Pollock is holding up Ban's Acrylic, Honey-Comb Mesh + Bracelet bag (detail below). © MASAKO BAN/ACRYLIC

What it means to be 'Made in Japan'

Architect and writer Naomi Pollock shares her favorite aspects of Japanese design

By ALICE GORDENKER
Special to The Japan Times

"Made in Japan" is a such a simple phrase, yet it instantly evokes an image of exceptional design and high-quality production. Japan today is known for creating some of the most stylish, innovative and whimsical products in the world.

Tokyo-based architect and writer Naomi Pollock spent the last two years immersed in Japanese product design, conducting hundreds of interviews and reviewing countless products. In a

recent interview with The Japan Times, she talks about her new book and what she finds so exciting about product design in Japan.

You're an established architecture critic who has helped bring Japanese architecture to the world through your reports in Architectural Record and other international publications. Why this switch to products?

It's not actually a switch. Writing about product design is a natural extension of reporting on buildings because so many architects also create products — everything from teapots to chairs. After seeing prototypes in their offices, I began to think about writing about product design.

Initially, I had a book on architect-designed objects in mind. But when I realized the bounty of good design out there, and how little information was available in English, I quickly broadened my scope.

Tell us about the book. What will we find inside?

The book begins with a comprehensive introduction that reviews the history of recent Japanese product design and places contemporary work in its broader social, cultural and geographical contexts. This sets the stage for profiles of 100 new products, each of which includes beautiful color photos and a brief essay.

In these texts I explain the development of the products, and talk about the people who make and use them. There are also short biographies of the designers whose work appears in the book, including Naoto Fukasawa, Tokujin Yoshioka and Toyo Ito.





H-Concept Yasuhiro Asano's Splash umbrella stand. © H-CONCEPT CO., LTD.

embodies the craftworkers' ethic of *monozukuri*. This traditional idea is probably the most important influence on contemporary Japanese product design.

Monozukuri? Making things?

Yes, but it means so much more. It is the commitment by the designer and manufacturer to do their best possible work by refining and redesigning repeatedly.

A good example is Splash, an umbrella holder designed by Yasuhiro Asano that resembles a raindrop hitting the pavement. It started as a cast-aluminum container with a tapered shape, but after numerous revisions, it came to market in a completely different material — brightly colored rubber that will cheer up even the darkest of entry foyers.

How does the lack of space in Japan impact design here?

It's a huge influence. Because living space is tight, there is

With so many great products, how did you narrow it down to 100?

I wanted to inform the reader about contemporary Japanese lifestyle through the lens of product design, so the first criterion was whether the product had a story to tell about some aspect of Japan.

I also wanted the personality of each designer to come through in the product profile. This meant that I had to be able to speak directly to each designer.

Finally, I was looking for new work: most of the products in the book were designed within the last five years.

Is there something unique about Japanese product design?

Yes, definitely. In Japan, even the machine-made or mass-produced object often

demand for compact objects and household goods that are easy to store, like Allround Bowls, a set of kitchen accouterments designed by Sotaro Miyagi to nest neatly one inside the other. The lack of space has also yielded miniature versions of everything from cars to kettles.

Any other traits that define Japanese design?

Portability is another area in which Japanese designers excel. Japan has a long history of building homes with multipurpose spaces that can be adapted to the season or function by moving furnishings around. Even today, many Japanese consumers prefer products that are easy to move and store when not in use, whether the product is a humidifier or a dish-drainer.



Pollock's new book "Made in Japan." ALL PRODUCT IMAGES ON THIS PAGE ARE COURTESY OF "MADE IN JAPAN: 100 NEW PRODUCTS" BY NAOMI POLLOCK

Can you relate something special you learned in the course of your research?

One observation that made a deep impression on me was that a wide range of designers coexist amiably in Japan. At one end of the spectrum are large companies with in-house design capability. At the other end are the solo practitioners I call "cottage industrialists." These tiny companies design, produce (or outsource production to the many small manufacturers that still exist in Japan) and often market their goods on their own, either through small shops or online.

A good example is Masako Ban, a designer who creates jewelry and handbags from locally made industrial materials not usually associated with fashion goods, including acrylic and metal mesh.

After writing this book, how would you define "good design"?

There are lots of characteristics of good design. Among them, an object should function well and look good. But many designers in Japan seem to be after something more.

A constant refrain that I heard was their desire to



All-round bowls by Sotaro Miyagi © MIYAGI DESIGN OFFICE / CHERRY TERRACE

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make sustainable goods. For some this means using environmentally friendly materials and manufacturing methods. For others it means making objects that will not be cast aside or, worse yet, discarded.

In Japan, a country with a seemingly insatiable appetite for the new, this goal is particularly challenging since it entails overriding the deeply entrenched habit of replacing something with an updated version even if the old one is still usable. But if someone truly loves an object and enjoys using it, they will keep it for a long time, perhaps even their entire life. This is not only the true meaning of sustainability, it is also an essential quality of good design.

Naomi Pollock will be speaking about the making of her book to the Society of Writers, Editors and Translators at 3 p.m., Sun. Oct. 21. at the Wesley Center, 6-10-7 Minami Aoyama, Minato-ku, Tokyo. For more information, visit www.swet.jp. Her book, "Made in Japan: 100 New Products," was released Sept. 18, and is available from