

# The KOUBA principle

The fundamentals of Japanese design  
in the Tsubame-Sanjo region



reddot design museum



## Japanese Design at the Red Dot Design Museum

This special exhibition focuses on knives, tools and other metal products crafted in workshops (in Japanese: KOUBA) in Tsubame-Sanjo, an industrial region steeped in tradition, situated almost 300 kilometres northwest of Tokyo. These everyday objects that take shape in the hands of the industrial craftsmen in the KOUBA have all of the features of good design: simplicity, functionality, appropriate use of materials as well as durability. As a result, the products set standards for functional and aesthetic quality, both in Japan and far beyond its borders.

The exhibition is being organised and curated by KOUBA, the special committee of the Tsubame-Sanjo Regional Industries Promotion Center, while the graphics for the exhibition title stem from Tokyo-based agency SPREAD, which has already been the winner of many Red Dots.

## The metal industry in the Tsubame-Sanjo region

The metal-working industry in the Tsubame-Sanjo region dates back more than 400 years to the Edo period (1603–1868). At the time, the residents of what was then a region heavily dependent on agriculture started to make metal nails when the harvest failed in order to have an additional source of income. Nowadays the region has around 3,300 "KOUBA", or workshops, ranging in size from blacksmiths with a single craftsman to factories with roughly 300 employees.

Below: The process of forging an axe blade at Mizuno Industries, Sanjo  
Right: Chiuchiro Sone is sharpening a knife blade at Tadafusa, Sanjo







Above: Stainless steel kettle designed by Sōri Yanagi in 1974, manufactured by Nihon Yoshokki, Tsubame

Below: Double-wall titanium tumbler collection and the cross section model by SUS, Tsubame

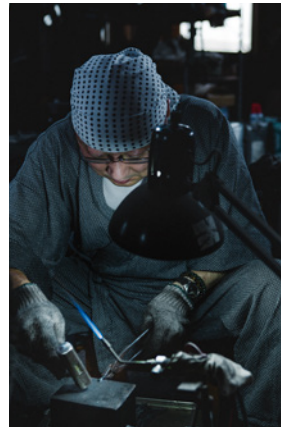


## The KOUBA principle – top manufacturing quality through collaboration

When experts in different fields come together and contribute their knowledge and expertise to master a challenge, the process can result in something entirely new. The master smiths and small metal-working businesses in the Tsubame-Sanjo region recognised this and are successfully exploiting the competitive edge that stems from the fact that specialists for each work process can be found in this centre of Japan's forging industry. Again and again, they join forces to form new ad hoc work groups to work through larger orders or solve problems together in an innovative way. In this way, the metallurgy technologies have adapted and evolved to meet the needs of a changing society.

Below left: Making of a knife blade by Hinoura Cutlery Studio, Sanjo

Below right: Tsukasa Hinoura is forging a billhook at Hinoura Hamono Koubou, Sanjo



## Design classics from the Tsubame-Sanjo region

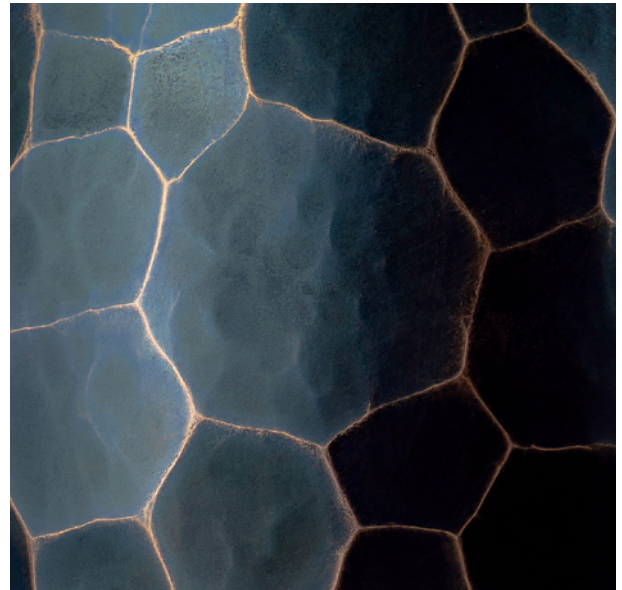
Everyday products are created in the Tsubame-Sanjo region that remain current across the decades thanks to their simplicity and manufacturing quality. One example is the kettle (see previous double page) by the famous Japanese designer Sōri Yanagi (1915–2011, Yanagi designed e. g. the Butterfly stool), which has been produced in the same KOUBA workshop for more than half a century and is still a best-selling product today. The exhibition will show all of the kettle process models outside of the factory setting for the first time.

Flowerball, Tsuiki Copperware - Gyokusendo, Tsubame



Some other classics manufactured in Tsubame-Sanjo and on display in Essen will include cutlery by the well-known Danish designers Kay Bojesen and Ole Palsby, who worked closely with the workshops in Tsubame-Sanjo, hand-forged Japanese knives from Tadafusa, special cutting tools for bonsai tree care from the Suwada forge and the legendary copper kettles by Gyokusendo, which have been hand-hammered for more than 200 years and are considered an intangible Japanese cultural heritage.

Detail of Tsuiki hammer mark mosaic



When Steve Jobs set out in 2001 to manufacture the first iPod, designed by Jonathan Ive, he couldn't find any high-tech forges that were able to create the mirrored metallic back cover of the device. Eventually, in Japan's Tsubame-Sanjo region, he came across craftsmen with the skills to polish the metal surface to the desired high-gloss finish.

First generation iPod with mirrored metal back, Apple, USA



### Exhibition

20.10.2023–21.01.2024

### Red Dot Design Museum

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www.red-dot-design-museum.org

### Opening hours

Tue – Sun: 11 a.m. – 6 p.m.  
Fridays: Pay what you want

### Subject to change, current information at

[www.red-dot-design-museum.org](http://www.red-dot-design-museum.org)

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