

SENSU, Folding fans

One of the items to help you to get over the muggy summers in Japan is a *Sensu*, or a folding fan.

Folding fans are Japanese traditional crafts for cooling down. These days, they are celebrated as eco-friendly goods. When it comes to Japanese fans, you might think of an *Uchiwa* which is round and flat, but a *Sensu* is more elegant, more compact.



A *Sensu* is made of a bamboo or wooden frame covered with Japanese paper. Several strips of bamboo are gathered and combined at one place in order for it to work smoothly. It is said that the most important part is called *Kaname*. If it's too tight or too loose, it won't open properly. That's how the Japanese word "*Kanjin Kaname*" was born. This means "the bottom line" in English. The drawings on the folding fans are called "*Ogi-e*," and the most famous "*Ogi-e*" artist in Japanese history is Sotatsu Tawaraya of the early Edo period. One of his "*Ogi-e*" works called "*Fujin Raijin-zu*" or "Deities of Wind and Thunder" is still well-known.



In the *Heian* period (8c~12c), folding fans were used not only for beating the summer heat, but also as ritual or communication tools. Love letters were written on the folding fans, and flowers put on the folding fans were presented to women, described in the "*Tales of Genji*". Don't

you think it's so romantic?

Japanese compact folding fans were very popular in China at that time and exported to Europe through China. As the years passed by, folding fans became one of the items of ritual and everyday use among commoners as well as royalty and aristocrats.

Now, folding fans are used in various events such as weddings, *Kabuki* or Japanese stage drama, Japanese dancing, *Rakugo*, or comic storytelling, and the tea ceremony. The shape of a folding fan is a sector shape which expresses infinity and is regarded as a lucky item. For this reason they are used in Japanese-style weddings. The folding fan is one of the important tools in *Rakugo*. The storyteller uses it in his story as a prop, sometimes as chopsticks, sometimes a fishing pole, and even a telescope. You need some imagination to enjoy *Rakugo*.

When you are invited to a tea ceremony, you bring one with you, as it is an item to show respect to the host. When warriors in the middle of the 16th century practiced tea, they took off their swords and left them in the sword rack before entering the tearoom. In the tea room, they carried a ceremonial fan with them instead. This 16th century custom of bringing folding fans to tea ceremonies can still be seen in modern-day tea ceremony rituals.

Folding fans have a long history and make excellent souvenirs. Hopefully by now, you get a sense of the *Sensu* ! Are you a fan of the fan?!

