

Menlo Park's Almanac

Vol. 75, No. 9 February 26, 1997

3525 Alameda de las Pulgas, Menlo Park, CA 94025

Phone: 854-2626 50c

Japanese paper dolls:

Building on tradition

Masako Ishida gives energy
and action to classic Edo-style
Japanese paper dolls ✻ See Page 14



Japanese paper dolls get life



A courtesan, dressed in elegant shades of orange paper, reads a letter from her lover. Masako Ishida lovingly reproduced her hairstyle, kimono and the black-and-gold striped obi with the big bow in front.

Photos By CAROL IVIE



Masako Ishida of Menlo Park transforms classic art form into dramatic action stories

By MARION SOFTKY

Dressed in an elegant orange kimono, a prostitute brandishes a sword at her cowering pimp ☼ Two street performers in baggy checkerboard pants beat their drums while an acrobat does a flip ☼ Two samurai duel fiercely, an extra-long sword versus a paddle ☼ A courtesan, clothed lavishly in red, reads a long, dangling letter from her lover ☼ Children dance in a circle around another child in a Japanese version of Ring around the Rosie.

These dramatic tales are told, not by video or books or paintings, but by Japanese paper dolls, lovingly crafted by Masako Ishida, a new resident of Menlo Park. Each doll or tableau — and there are dozens of them lining the basement shelves of the Ishidas' new home — tells a story of life and people in the classic Edo period of Japan, before Commodore Matthew Perry opened the isolated country to the West in 1854.

Mrs. Ishida, who learned how to make traditional paper dolls from her grandmother, has built on ancient ways to create a new kind of Japanese paper doll.

Classic "Edo Anesama" dolls are beautiful, but also flat and static. They are made of elegant chiyogami paper and have no arms, legs or faces.

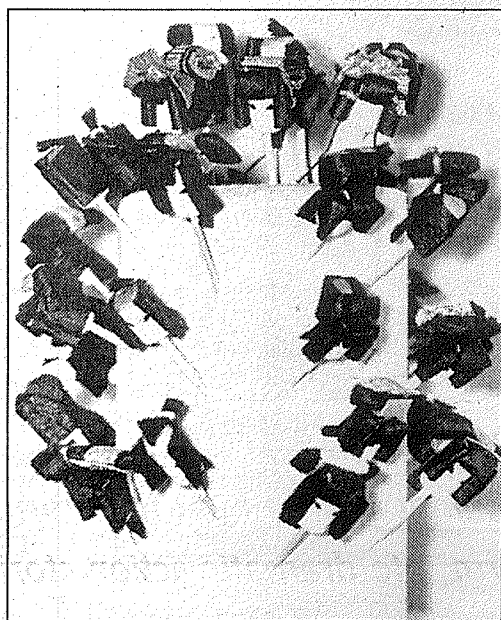
By contrast, Mrs. Ishida's paper dolls come to life. They have arms and legs and are built in three dimensions. They tell a story; they dance, fight, lurk, kneel, fall; they act out legends from the olden days.

"After I grew up, I was not satisfied. I wanted to make action paper dolls," explains Mrs. Ishida in careful English during an interview to demonstrate her techniques.

Developing new ways to make the dolls was not easy. But after working



This dramatic tableau of ninja bodyguards defending their samurai is Mrs. Ishida's favorite of her paper dolls.



Doll heads with different faces and hairdos are stuck on a foam block waiting to be attached to the right paper doll.



A mother, left, carries her child on her shoulders, while a group of street performers, above, entertain with drums and acrobatics.

with different kinds of recycled paper and wire, she finally perfected her technique. "It's 27 years ago," she wrote in an explanation. "My paper doll-making technique is very suitable for using wire, so I can express many kinds of actions easily."

Since then, her action dolls have struck a chord in Japan. She has presented exhibitions, been written up in magazines and newspapers, and appeared on Japanese public television. Her dolls have sold in big department stores, and up to 70 people attended workshops she gave on making her dolls.

Her dolls have also helped Mrs. Ishida bridge the language gap between cultures. When she went to London with her husband, Junichi Ishida, she knew no English at all. But a display of her dolls made instant friends. Later she had successful doll shows in Norway, Holland and Germany.

"If I hadn't had my paper doll-making technique, I wouldn't have had happy days in London," she wrote. "But English people gave me great applause."

Now Mrs. Ishida is in Menlo Park with her husband, who is chairman and CEO of Sumitomo Sitix Silicon Inc., a company based in Fremont with five U.S. plants that make the silicon wafers that such companies as Intel and IBM turn into computer chips.

After three years in London, Mrs. Ishida's English has improved, and she is looking forward to showing her dolls to Americans here. "I want to teach American people how to make my paper dolls," she says.

But not yet, because she is still settling into her new home. Stay tuned.

Traditional beginnings

When Mrs. Ishida was a child in the town of Nishinomiya,

between Osaka and Kyoto, the older children and women still wore kimonos. Her grandmother, who knew many traditional crafts, taught little Masako to make the classic paper dolls called "Edo Anesama" — "Anesama" means sister or older girl friend, she says.

These dolls were far more than just girls' toys; they were used to train them in the intricacies of Japanese dress. Kimonos and obis — the elaborate, wide belts — and hair styles were rigidly decreed, depending on age, marital status, occupation and class. "We learned hair styles and obi styles and how to wear a kimono," she says.

Mrs. Ishida shows two elegant dolls in her collection: the geisha, a high-class waitress and entertainer, wears the big bow on the obi in back; the courtesan, a high-class prostitute, wears it in front.

While Masako loved her traditional paper dolls, she always wanted them to be more active, dynamic and solid. During high school she studied drawing and sketching, and during college she began to make very large paintings.

But after graduating she came down with a serious liver disease, almost died, and had to give up painting. During a long hospital stay, friends brought her many presents in beautiful wrappings. "Then I remembered my childhood making paper dolls," she says.

Building a new tradition

Because wire tends to tear paper, it took Masako a long time to work out a technique that produced dolls but didn't shred the paper. "I improved my paper doll-making technique again and again, little by little," she wrote. "At last I found my original own technique."

Now it looks so easy. Seated on the rug in front of a low table, Mrs. Ishida deftly wraps a blue-print kimono around a paper core, slips pre-cut kimono sleeves over a wire, and attaches the two in a cross. After adding a carefully coiffed head, she quickly bends the wire arms, and — voila — the doll takes on life and expression.

Mrs. Ishida's dolls are made in seven parts attached to two wires. A dozen or more doll heads, complete with tiny faces and many different headdresses, are stuck on toothpicks into a block of styrofoam. The body is often a rolled-up piece of paper. The kimonos and obis are each made in two pieces, and the painted base has a spike on which the doll can stand. One wire holds the kimono-arms; the other, bent like a hairpin, holds the body and legs, which can be twisted into dynamic poses.

What is her favorite? A group of nine athletic figures about 10 inches high shows two high-class samurai brandishing their swords, and surrounded by a bodyguard of seven ninjas. The ninjas, either gray or black, are in fighting position, except for one, who is doing a flip. "They always guard their master from all attack," says Mrs. Ishida.

It might be difficult for viewers of her artwork to pick a favorite from her collection of colorful characters that peopled old Japan. Would it be two women, one holding a baby, the other with a child on her shoulders? Or the policeman catching a pickpocket? Or the outlaw in the big hat, muffled secretively in his robe, slinking who knows where?

Everyone is drawn to a particular tableau. A ghost is rising from a well under a willow tree, as a peasant figure cowers on the ground, his legs waving, panicked, in the air. "Probably he was praying for forgiveness," says Mrs. Ishida. "And probably he drank too much."