

sustainable japan

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Chie Duncan's Vivat Veritas upcycles old kimonos

Roundtable

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About 500 tons of kimonos are tragically discarded every year — beautiful and expensive garments wasted, their stories and histories lost. Chie Duncan, founder of the clothing line Vivat Veritas in 2008, is a highly talented designer who upcycles kimonos that would otherwise be discarded or sit endlessly in the back of a thrift store. By transforming kimonos into completely new garments, she simultaneously honors the integrity and history of the original while creating something fresh and new. She sat down with Ross Rowbury in the latest Roundtable to discuss her work.

Duncan's journey to owning and operating a clothing line began as a child crafting with her mother. She always admired how her mother could take one thing and transform it into something new. As she got older, Duncan slowly lost touch with the crafty side of herself, as many do with childhood passions. After graduating from university and working as a young professional in the U.S., she reconnected with her creative roots when a friend lent her a sewing machine.

Duncan taught herself to make clothes from scratch, and reminisces about how "the first try was horrible, because I could not wear my clothes! I forgot that it needed an opening, whether it's buttons or zippers... I spent three whole days trying to make it. I was sure that if I repeated the process over and over again I'd be better at it, and I kept doing it." Although her first attempt wasn't perfect, a great passion was born, and she continued to hone her skills.

Later, while working as a seamstress making wedding dresses, she received an assignment to use material from a kimono. She fell in love with the beautiful traditional fabric and texture, but didn't love the design given to her. Still, the innovative approach of using kimono materials and repurposing them into new garments inspired her greatly. She decided to create some designs herself and began scouring used kimono shops (*tansu-ya*) for materials. Unsure of how her design would be received, she sold her first handmade dress for merely ¥7,000 (\$50). Over time, with hard work, repetition and that special creative spark, she grew into the talented designer and business owner we are able to see today.

When asked to elaborate about sourcing kimono material, Duncan smiled and



Chie Duncan, founder of Vivat Veritas THE JAPAN TIMES

said she wouldn't be sharing the names of the antique shops she frequents because she is able to get such great deals. She did say that if a client requests a specific color or pattern, she will usually check online, getting access to materials from all over Japan. A great number of the kimonos she works with have been donated. Just a few days prior, an older lady was about to throw out two huge boxes of kimonos, but after hearing about Duncan's shop through some friends, she brought them to Vivat Veritas instead.

The care, respect and passion Duncan has for each kimono that comes into her shop was evident in her voice as she

described the highly technical and difficult process she undergoes to dismantle the original garments to utilize their raw materials. First, she must pick apart the seams, then iron and wash the fabric, with the process varying slightly depending on what type of garment the client wants. Then she creates the patterns, which is much easier said than done. Anyone who has touched or worn a kimono knows that the material does not stretch at all and is completely inflexible. That is ideal for the perfectly straight silhouette of a traditional kimono, but when it comes to reinventing it into a modern style, creating comfortable garments is a challenge.

She found that "if you cut it on the bias, it has a little bit of stretch, and you can create a more comfortable garment." This helps to make the fabric more versatile, resulting in finished clothing that has curves, drapes beautifully and is comfortable to wear. It also requires great ingenuity to effectively utilize the limited amount of material, Duncan says she spends a great deal of time to "figure out how to place the patterns, because the patterns could be continuing throughout the fabric. You have to connect these narrow panels in order to put it back into the (correct) shape and see the whole picture."

In addition to taking client requests and creating garments for her shop, Duncan also works with a number of artists to create collaborative exhibitions. She is currently curating a showcase with a woodblock print artist, creating garments that are visually cohesive with and inspired by the prints. She loves working with artists, mentioning other past projects such as live painting models and working with musicians. It is clearly a joyful process for her to work with other creatives, and Duncan shows a deep appreciation for creating things with her own two hands. With a smile, she said, "Using your hands is good for you."

Duncan has many different influences for her designs, both from traditional Japanese artists and textile techniques as well as European artists and designers. In a follow-up, she shared some of her inspirations and references when creating her garments. She mentioned the yearslong process of creating Oshima *tsumugi*, a type of pongee fabric: "I was amazed to find out how they dye the threads and weave the patterns; apparently it takes 40 people to complete one kimono." Handmade techniques such as *shibori* tie-dyeing and other traditional textiles are very exciting to her. There is also Western influence on some of her designs, with refer-

ences to upscale contemporary French and Southern California streetwear in her garments.

When asked how she deals with creative blocks, she shared her secret for keeping her mind fresh and preventing burnout: She keeps her hands moving by sewing, knitting, embroidering or sketching. She will set small attainable goals like allocating 10 minutes to using her hands, and usually finds that 10 minutes leads to several hours. "When you move and use your body, magic happens and the brain starts working. It makes me want to try new things and continue creating," she said.

Looking to the next chapters, Duncan imagines potentially opening her own physical shop. She currently sells online and in pop-up shops, and would want the direction of her business to flow organically. If this flow leads to a physical space, she imagines selling her garments in a neighborhood filled with other artisans and craftspeople, whether in Japan or somewhere overseas. Her vision for retirement would be to have a beautiful museum where she could showcase her garments and host workshops.

Wherever the future takes her, Duncan will continue to make an impact by creating innovative garments out of precious kimono material that would otherwise be wasted. Her business perfectly blends creativity with sustainability, and the result is beautiful artwork that can be worn and enjoyed for many years to come. The deep respect Duncan has for her craft and the artwork of others is a refreshing voice in this world filled with fast fashion and overconsumption.

Roundtable is a monthly series of English-language events organized by The Japan Times Agency. For more information visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/roundtable>



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Times Gallery



Serbian Ambassador Aleksandra Kovac (center) participates in the groundbreaking ceremony for the Serbian pavilion at Expo 2025 in Osaka on Sept. 4. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA



Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi and Environment Minister Shintaro Ito stand with the ambassador of Brazil, Octavio H. Cortes, at Brazil's Independence Day reception on Sept. 6. EMBASSY OF BRAZIL



Finland's minister of defense, Antti Hakkanen, opens the Finland-Japan Defence Industry Seminar, organized by Business Finland, during a visit on Sept. 12. EMBASSY OF FINLAND



Six Indonesian designers showcase their work at the Tokyo Muslim Fashion Festival 2024, held at Shibuya QWS, on Sept. 7. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA



The embassies of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Costa Rica and Nicaragua celebrate 203 years of independence together with a Japanese minister of state and a parliamentary vice minister for foreign affairs. EMBASSY OF NICARAGUA



Kosovo Ambassador Sabri Kicmari, Mayors Ramiz Lladrovci and Ilir Ferati and advisers to the president meet with Hiroshima Mayor Kazumi Matsui, who invited the mayors to join the Mayors Network for Peace. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOSOVO



Representatives of the Maldives Embassy attend the inauguration ceremony of the Japan-Maldives Tourism Promotion Working Group. EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF MALDIVES



Commemorating 110 years of Bolivia-Japan diplomatic relations and 125 years of Japanese immigration to Bolivia, a photography exhibition is held at the Cervantes Institute in Tokyo. EMBASSY OF BOLIVIA

Musubie links kids' cafeterias and connects communities

Sustainable Japan Award: ESG Special Award

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The Japanese phrase *ibasho* means a place where people feel they belong and are secure. The nonprofit corporation Musubie, a nationwide children's cafeteria support center, has made such places its mission, creating a nationwide network to support *kodomo shokudō* (children's cafeterias).

For this, Musubie won the Sustainable Japan ESG Special Award 2023 presented by The Japan Times. In a recent interview its president and CEO, Makoto Yuasa, talked about the role of *kodomo shokudō* and Musubie, and how various stakeholders can better engage in this socially significant effort to make it sustainable.

Kodomo shokudō started to pop up across the country in 2012. As the name suggests, their primary purpose is to provide good places where mainly children can come and have meals at a low price or for free and get to know each other.

"There have been many people who learned about this movement and wanted to participate in different ways but did not have access, which is why we felt the necessity to network these cafeterias across the country and serve as a gateway," said Yuasa, who is also a social activist and specially appointed professor at the Research Center for Advanced Science and Technology at the University of Tokyo.

He said that the number of *kodomo shokudō* has exceeded 9,100 and that they have become widely recognized as places for exchanges not only among children

but also adults. "We feel that it is our role to advocate the position of *kodomo shokudō* as a uniquely Japanese solution for the issue of weakening communities and ties among people due partly to aging and depopulation, and engage those who are like-minded," he said.

For *kodomo shokudō* to continue, various resources are necessary. In addition to individual donations and volunteers, companies can funnel support through Musubie in diverse ways. "For example, Starbucks Japan has been donating money to *kodomo shokudō* through us from its sales of products discounted toward closing time to avoid food loss," he said.

Another example is Lion, one of Japan's leading consumer product companies, which has distributed toothbrush and toothpaste kits and conducted oral health workshops at *kodomo shokudō*, and gathered data about the improvements in the dental habits of children who received the kits and tutorial.

Yuasa said companies like these are starting to support *kodomo shokudō* as part of their efforts toward "creating shared value" to simultaneously achieve business goals and contribute to society — key to making a long-lasting social impact.

Another key would be to show the outcomes of social contributions to help all supporters feel confident that their efforts are bearing fruit and learn what more needs to be done. Yuasa stressed the importance of continuing and enhancing Musubie's efforts in conducting surveys and research projects and said: "Those who witness the spirits of *kodomo shokudō* users being lifted day by day can easily see why it is important to encourage people to build connections, but we need to share the same recognition with other people who have not visited *kodomo shokudō*."

According to one of the surveys Musubie conducted at some *kodomo shokudō*, the number of children who said they could easily make friends with anyone had increased. "We could call it evidence that children's social skills have been developed through interactions with people of various generations at *kodomo shokudō*. We are expanding this survey to the national scale this year," Yuasa said.

Musubie is also trying to prove through its research the hypothesis that people's



Makoto Yuasa, president and CEO of Musubie, a certified nonprofit corporation that supports children's cafeterias nationwide MUSUBIE

well-being increases in areas where social capital, including *kodomo shokudō*, is abundant.

Another piece of data obtained from Musubie's research is that the budgets of all the *kodomo shokudō* in Japan total ¥7.3 billion (\$50 million). "This means that we need ¥20 billion more to establish more *kodomo shokudō* to match the number of elementary schools in the country," Yuasa said. "We also found out that ¥6.3 billion has been raised in the private sector, which gives us hope that most of the ¥20 billion can also be covered by contributions from the private sector."

He added that these figures, obtained through collaboration with a research firm, help each area — be it a prefecture, a city or a small town — understand how much exactly it needs, leading to concrete discussions on how to get it.

Yuasa said the concept of *kodomo shokudō* is beginning to be shared among the international community. "We have started communication with South Korea and Taiwan," he said. "This summer, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy visited a *kodomo shokudō* in Japan and left a post on social media that he had learned a new word, 'i basho.' I hope we can collaborate with various countries to address the rising issue of the preservation of local communities."

The Sustainable Japan Award commends individuals, companies and organizations who have made advances in sustainability efforts. To learn more, visit <https://sustainable.japantimes.com/sjaward2024>



Children interacting at an *ibasho* MUSUBIE