

JFLA LECTURE SERIES 18 KOKESHI - THE TOHOKU ARTISAN SPIRIT BY MANAMI OKAZAKI EVENT REPORT

By [Alex Forbess](#)



Several dolls were lined up formidably in front of the lecture room as spectators entered to be amazed of their simple features. From their shy faces to their colorful stripes and unique designs, everyone wondered how these armless dolls, the *Kokeshi*, could be portrayed as a powerful symbol of the Tohoku region. Featured journalist and author Manami Okazaki, who wore a dark, denim kimono with pink stitching and black converse shoes, not only explained how the *Kokeshi* nurtured victims of 3.11 but also how they were the pioneers of Japan's well-known *Kawaii* culture. During her recent trip to Tohoku in

2012, Okazaki was originally researching Japan's obsession of all that is cute. Her further interest in *Kokeshi* came after interviewing a source who said, "If you want to know *Kawaii*, look at the *Kokeshi*."

Kokeshi, a name made up with no intentional meaning, was first recorded sometime between 1880 and 1850 being sprung near the *onsens* (hot springs) of Tohoku, yet some evidence claims they may have started even years before. From a first impression, the production process looks simple: one master and one apprentice; but Okazaki explained how each step, such as having the wood spin and create friction to mold the body, are essential and the learning steps are equally rigorous. She said that compared to making a kimono, where each section is neatly divided by the designers and tailors with items presented, everything starts from square one to make a *Kokeshi*. "First, everything is made from scratch. Even the tools," Okazaki explains, "They (the master and the apprentice) do everything themselves. To perfect this art, the apprentice would live in the artisan's house and follow a strict system. From molding the perfect wood to gently painting stripes with a brush, Okazaki said it usually takes the apprentice about ten years to perfect this art; however, even doing this for 50 years, seasoned-artisans admit they are still learning to improve. "Artisans believed in two things while making the *Kokeshi*," Okazaki said, "There's the technical aspect, knowing how to perfect it, and the psychological aspect. It's having the right attitude to make something. They believe if you don't have the soul while you make it, you're a fake."

At first, the *Kokeshi* were meant to be children's toys but then adults started to grow fond of their design. Each of the eleven *Kokeshi* at the lecture room had its own personality. From the common *Naruko*, which gives a faint "squeak" whenever a handler turns its head, to the *Hijiori's* large, rectangular head and slender body, more people have felt compelled to have one. While they have unique features, there is one similarity: the face. It is its shy, simple face that attracted people. Okazaki said it was not something that appealed to people first but within time, they cherished them. "What you don't fall in love with instantly is what they liked the most," Okazaki said.



Its popularity, Okazaki further explains, really expanded around 1965 where tourists flourished to the Tohoku *onsens*. Eventually there were phonebooks filled with *Kokeshi* artisans for people to order a specific design. With the influence of the housing bubble, some customers even demanded to purchase *Kokeshi* that were "as big as their house." And within one to three months, the *Kokeshi* would arrive without warning.

While their popularity increased, Okazaki told everyone the artisans' are finding it hard to find more young people to become apprentices and continue with this traditional doll; however, more modern *Kokeshi* are being developed to attract younger audiences one way or another, such as Hello Kitty *Kokeshi*. Okazaki said that some artisans believe young people do not have the patience to learn the process. Regardless, the *Kokeshi* has attracted people abroad and adore these creations made from a remote, thriving section of Japan. *Kokeshi*: a name that means nothing, yet somehow, everyone started to put their own meaning into them, making them charitable and heartwarming for everyone to share.

JFLA LECTURE SERIES 18

KOKESHI: THE TOHOKU ARTISAN SPIRIT

BY MANAMI OKAZAKI

Thursday, April 17th, 7:00PM



Kokeshi are traditional Japanese dolls from Tohoku region that are made of wood. Manami Okazaki, a journalist and author based in Japan will talk about *Kokeshi* and the Tohoku artisan spirit. In her talk she will cover the various types of *Kokeshi*, the production process, as well as the bucolic regions where they are made in Tohoku, how they were affected by 3/11, and how *Kokeshi* relates to contemporary aesthetic sensibilities like *Kawaii* culture. She will be bringing *Kokeshi* dolls and photographic prints for a pop-up exhibit.

Date:
Thursday, April 17, 7:00PM

Venue:
The Japan Foundation, Los Angeles
(5700 Wilshire Blvd. # 100, Los Angeles, CA 90036)

Admission: Free
**RSVP Required*

Street parking is available near JFLA. [Click Here for Parking Info](#)
(NO PARKING VALIDATIONS PROVIDED)

Kokeshi

Kokeshi are traditional dolls that are made of wood and are characterized by their lack of arms or legs. They are produced in the Tohoku region of Japan and were originally a children's toy, although they Privacy - Terms

more often used as a form of decoration nowadays and displayed in the home. Abroad, *Kokeshi* dolls are considered to be an icon of Japan, and reflect Japanese aesthetic sensibilities with their simple, elegant and minimalist designs.

Manami Okazaki



Manami Okazaki is a journalist and author originally from Australia, now based in Japan. Among her best selling titles are the recent books "*Kawaii, Japan's Culture of Cute*," (Prestel) "*Kokeshi, from Tohoku with Love*," (Kingyo) "*Kicks Japan*" (Mark Batty) and "*Wabori, Traditional Japanese Tattoo*" (Kingyo). Her books have been featured in newspapers and magazines such as *the Independent*, *the Japan Times*, *WSJ*, *WSJ Live*, *MTV*, *LA Times*, *O Globo*, *Vogue*, *Mac Design Directory* amongst others.

She has also contributed to over 50 publications worldwide including *the Wall Street Journal's Scene Asia*, *the Japan Times* and transit magazine, and has given talks at the Foreign Correspondents Club Tokyo, and the Japan Expo in Paris (2011, 2013).

In 2012 and 2013, Manami travelled extensively around Tohoku researching *Kokeshi*, a region she feels a strong affinity with, as her grandparents were from the coastal town of Onagawa -- one of the worst hit areas by the tsunami. In 2013, she published the charity book "*Kokeshi, from Tohoku with Love*".

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Annual Report

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