



Chindonya, a unique promoter from Japan

Chindonya is a troupe of street musicians and performers who dress in elaborate costumes and are hired to attract customers to shops. While little is known to the public, chindon is a truly unique subculture of Japan. Its importance in Japanese history lies in its role as the root of popular culture in the advertising industry.

Chindon represents philosopher Tsurumi Shusuke's concept of Marginal Art which is closely related to the definition of popular culture as a daily cultural environment. The success of the first chindon man Amekatsu prompted the owner of a nearby Yose theater to hire him to bring people to his theater, thus giving an impetus to advertising in Japan.

Warmth in Every Line: The World of Pencil Art

In Toyama—often regarded as the spiritual home of chindonya street performers—pencil art that uses only pencils to capture the essence of people is drawing increasing attention. Often described as “more vivid than a picture,” this form of expression conveys a warmth and presence that photography cannot replicate. Despite its simple materials, it leaves a profound impression on the viewer.

Shinichi Furuya, a leading figure in pencil art based in Toyama, explains: “Pencil art does not require special tools. With careful observation and sensitivity, it is possible to create work with remarkable depth. In portraiture, it is important to capture not only a person’s outward appearance, but also their atmosphere and background.”

Also based in Toyama, Kumiko Okazaki teaches pencil art and has been sharing its appeal across the United States. Her workshops are accessible to anyone with just a pencil and paper, yet they offer a comprehensive experience—from fundamental sketching techniques to portrait creation. Participants discover both the joy of careful observation and the satisfaction of expressing themselves by hand as they create their own works.

Looking ahead, Okazaki plans to develop a “mural project” in which multiple individual works are combined into a single large-scale piece. By connecting each work, the project aims to create a broader, more dynamic form of expression.

Combining accessibility with profound expressive potential, pencil art is poised to expand both within Japan and internationally. In the United States as well, opportunities to engage with portraiture through hands-on pencil art experiences may continue to grow.



SHAMISEN | 三味線

Recently, the shamisen has gained attention as a popular musical instrument, especially in modern styles that blend with rock and jazz. It is a traditional string instrument that has symbolized Japanese musical culture since the early modern period.

Origin

Its roots lie in the sanshin of the Ryukyu Kingdom. In the second half of the 16th century, it was introduced to mainland Japan through Sakai (now in Osaka Prefecture).

Structure and Characteristics

The shamisen is composed of a neck, a body, and three strings, and it is played with a plectrum. In addition, it features a unique resonance called sawari, which produces a deep tone distinctive to Japanese music.

The Role of the Shamisen in Japanese Culture

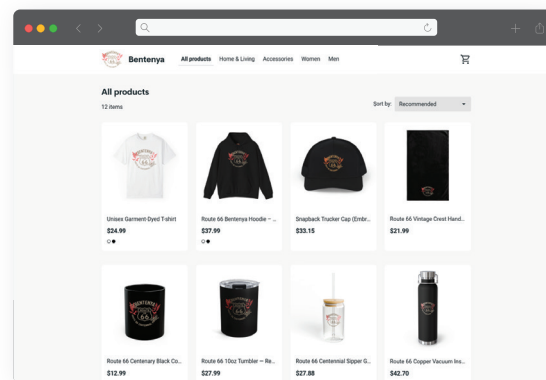
The shamisen is an indispensable part of a wide range of performing arts, including kabuki, bunraku, nagauta, and folk songs. It can be considered an extremely important cultural heritage that conveys the atmosphere of Japan and the spirit of “iki” to the present day.

Written by Rino Aise



born and raised in Japan, is currently based in New York. She performs in theatrical pieces and music performances, particularly for peace. Rino initially studied Minyo (folk songs) with Ryushu Kubota, the highest teacher of the Hokkaido Folk Song Federation, and, then, started playing sanshin, a traditional Okinawa instrument, to pursue her music career, singing folk songs, anime songs, and original songs in the U.S. and Japan.

WE LAUNCHED OUR ONLINESHOP!



We’ve officially launched the Bentenya online shop, a new space where our spirit, stories, and projects come together in tangible form. At the heart of the shop is a collection of merchandise from our Route 66 Centennial Project, celebrating the journey, culture, and energy that inspired us along the way. Alongside this, we may also introduce original Bentenya goods and selected past tour items—stay tuned for what’s next!

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