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*As movable
as butterflies*

**The chōchin
of Japan**

**January 31
May 19
2019**

Guide booklet

As movable as butterflies
The chōchin of Japan
31 January – 19 May 2019

Glowing *chōchin* lanterns made from paper and bamboo still line the narrow streets of Japan and adorn the façades of restaurants. Although they are no longer used to light people's way at night, they play a major role in Japanese culture and arts and crafts and represent a clichéd postcard image of Japan in the West. In 1870, upon his return from Japan, Aimé Humbert expressed his fascination for these luminous objects: "Brightly-coloured paper lanterns light up the towns. They come in all shapes and sizes - the most gigantic cylindrical ones glow among the columns in front of temples; the smaller, globe-like ones are hung up in the doorways of inns and the galleries of brothels". Nowadays, it is difficult to imagine the effect produced by the thousands of lanterns that lit up the towns.

When electricity relegated lanterns to objects used in festivities and rituals and they became advertising accessories, the Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988) transformed our perception of them. He turned them into an archetypal example of modernity, both revolutionising and magnifying centuries of know-how. As movable as butterflies: these are the words he used to describe the hundred or so lights he started designing in 1951, with the manufacturer Ozeki in Gifu. His *Akari* (a word meaning light and lightness in Japanese) were a huge commercial success in the United States and Europe, especially in France thanks to Steph Simon's gallery. As from the 1970s, this success led to many furniture and home decoration stores selling low-cost paper spheres that were produced in countries where labour was cheap.

Lighting in Japan in the Edo period (1603-1868)

Paper lanterns were the ultimate stage of development of oil lamps and candles, the two main sources of artificial light in ancient Japan. Developed during the Edo period (1603-1868), lanterns ushered in a new era in the history of lighting. There were two types of paper lanterns: *chōchin* for outside use and *andon* for inside use, lit by oil lamps.

Chōchin

In Japan, the *chōchin*, as we know them today, date back to the late 16th century. *Chōchin* means "lamp" (J. *Chin*) "that you can carry in your hand" (J. *chō*). It allowed candles to be used outdoors because it sheltered them from wind and rain. Increased trading and the need for greater mobility encouraged their use. The progress made in the production of flexible and strong paper allowed functional and resistant objects to be produced. Several types of *chōchin*, varying in shape, size, hanging and grasping methods, were produced, depending on requirements and purposes: *hako.chōchin*, *burabura.chōchin*, *odawara.chōchin*, *gogintō.chōchin*, *bon.chōchin*, *kanban.chōchin* etc.

Often represented in prints made in the Edo era (1603-1868), *chōchin* are emblematic of this period. Associated with the figure of the geisha and serving as decorative accessories in *Kabuki* theatre, they were used as a marker of social status and a sign of distinction. Indeed, the high cost of Japanese candles (made from vegetable fat) meant that they were reserved for the wealthiest classes, at least up until the Meiji period (1868-1912) when paraffin wax candles became available.

The candles were stored in wooden boxes bearing the family's *kamon* in the entrance of dwellings and were on hand for those going out at night.

In another house, just within the vestibule, I noticed a shelf-rack above the fusuma, designed for holding the family lanterns. It may as well be stated here [...] that the Japanese almost invariably carry lighted lanterns when they walk out at night. Upon the outside of these lanterns is painted the crest, or mon, of the family, or the name of the house: a man with an eye to business may advertise it on his lantern by some quaint design. So persistent is this habit of carrying lanterns, that on bright moonlight nights the lantern is brought into requisition.

Edward S. Morse, *Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings*, 1886

Andon

The *andon* appeared earlier than the *chōchin*, in the middle of the 15th century. The word “andon” is a generic term that means “a lamp to move about with” and embraces various forms. They had one thing in common, i.e. they were made of a wooden or metal frame placed on a base or on legs and the oil lamp was hung on the frame. The frame was partially or fully covered with white paper called *washi*. As well as protecting the flame from draughts, the paper provided a reflective surface that intensified the light of the flame. *Andon* were both decorative and functional. The shape of each *andon* was specific and closely related to its function.

But we, Orientals, [...] create a kind of beauty of the shadows we have made in out-of-the-way places. [...] Such is our way of thinking—we find beauty not in the thing itself but in the patterns of shadows, the light and the darkness, that one thing against another creates.

Junichirō Tanizaki, *In praise of shadows*, 1933, translated by Thomas J. Harper and Edward G. Seidensticker, 1977

Depicting everyday scenes with light

As Westerners saw a certain exoticism in Japanese traditions and customs and in the specific nature of their arts and crafts, a large number of photographs and postcards for tourists and foreigners were published and distributed at the end of the 19th century. This phenomenon was encouraged by the gradual re-opening of Japan to the international trade in 1858. These new pictures of Japan gave rise to depictions of Japanese men and women wearing traditional dress, going about their everyday activities, equipped with typical objects and accessories like *andon* lamps for indoor scenes and *chōchin* lamps for outdoor scenes.

There are many photographs of *chōchin* makers and this shows us just how widespread this craft was up until the end of the Meiji era (1868-1912). Bamboo and paper were used to make fans and parasols, other typical Japanese hand-crafted objects, and this required the skills of lantern makers also. They had to master the art of calligraphy. What appeared on the lantern was visible to everyone and provided information on its user. Therefore, as they were designed to be used outdoors, *chōchin* had a social value as well as a utilitarian value. Before gas was commonly used in portable lighting devices, government officials, religious institutions, policemen and even firemen had specific lanterns that corresponded to their functions. On the body of the lantern, there may have been a family crest called a *kamon*, a stylised heraldic insignia that was originally used by the different Samurai clans - and which was therefore useful on the battlefields - which the most prominent families used at the beginning of the Meiji era. More than four thousand existing *kamon* were listed in specialised books intended for lantern makers, allowing them to reproduce them faithfully.

The manufacture of *chōchin*

Little has changed in the manufacture of *chōchin* over the centuries. Over the past thirty years, the industrialisation process has been facilitated by the arrival of steel moulds, the use of vinyl instead of paper and plastic materials for the frame, but despite this *chōchin* are still mainly produced in numerous workshops all over the country, according to traditional techniques, passed down from one generation to the next. They are made from bamboo strips cut lengthwise along the fibre and *washi* paper made from mulberry bark. Other tools are used for the assembly (matrix, cotton thread, glue, razor blade, bender) but the success of the production depends on the association of these two main components.

The craftsmen have a repository of forms for the *chōchin*, each one having a corresponding different wooden matrix made up of wings fitted together at one end by two moveable discs. At regular intervals on the edge of these wings, there are small notches into which the bamboo strips are placed. This bamboo strip, that will form the frame of the lantern, can be placed as a spiral, continuously or in independent circles. The circles or spirals are connected with knotted cotton threads, covering the structure vertically, at regular intervals and reinforcing the structure.

The whole structure is then covered with glue made from wheat flour, using a large brush. The glue is applied evenly over the whole structure. The paper is then immediately laid: strips of paper that have been previously cut to the right size and moistened with a spray are laid one after another. The craftsman has a razor blade that he must handle carefully so as not to damage the strips that have already been placed. Once the lantern has been covered with paper, it is left to dry in the open air or in a suitable drying oven. Then the matrix upon which the bamboo structure is still placed must be removed: by removing the upper disc, the different wings can be easily extracted through the upper opening. The *chōchin* is then folded and, depending on the model, black lacquered wooden pieces are added at each end.

The museum would like to thank Shun and Ryo Kojima for making the enormous lantern in the centre of the room on the first two days of the exhibition.

The Kojima brothers' workshop in Kyōto

The Kojima brothers' workshop is a lively place where different generations of the family come together, in the midst of bamboo strips, *washi* paper, matrices, brushes and production tools, old lanterns and *chōchin* ready to be delivered. On the wall is an old photograph of Shun and Ryo Kojima's ancestors on rickety scaffolding, making a lantern measuring several metres in height.

Shun (born in 1984) and Ryo Kojima (born in 1989) represent "Kojima Shōten" and are descendants of a long dynasty of lantern makers dating back to the late 18th century. The Kojima family has supplied lanterns to temples, shrines and the homes of Kyōto's merchants and Samurai for many decades. Their specificity lies in the fact that they use a technique that differs from that of most other *chōchin* makers. To save time and resources, a bamboo strip is usually wound in a spiral around the wooden matrix that forms the structure of the lantern – this is called the *makibone-shiki* method. However, the brothers' method involves making rings with thicker strips of bamboo, placing the rings around the matrix and connecting them together with cotton thread. This technique, called the *jibari-shiki* method takes longer but allows very robust lanterns to be produced.

The museum would like to thank Kojima Shōten and Shinya Takeda for contributing to the reconstruction of this workshop which evokes the Kojima brothers' place of work.

The birth of Isamu Noguchi's *Akari*

When in 1951, the American sculptor Isamu Noguchi was asked by the architect Kenzō Tange to design the railings of the bridges in Hiroshima Peace Memorial Park, he made a detour via Gifu. The mayor of this small town, located to the north of Kyōto, was aware of the sculptor's reputation and suggested he revitalise a declining industry that was specific to Gifu, i.e. the production of lanterns made with mulberry bark paper. Noguchi and Tameshirō Ozeki's meeting was decisive: the family business, established in 1893, adapted to the sculptor's requirements and greatly contributed to the success of what Noguchi would soon call *Akari*, a word meaning both light and lightness in Japanese. By electrifying the lamps, redefining their contours and placing them on fine metal tripods, he designed lights for modern postwar interiors.

Although the sculptor was careful to preserve and pay tribute to Japanese arts and crafts, he did however challenge the technique of making *chōchin*. Noguchi asked Ozeki to reconsider an ancient technique and produce forms, that he, the sculptor, carved out of blocks of polystyrene: they were round, rectangular, triangular, asymmetrical, polygonal and sometimes inhabited by a strange volume. From the 1950s to the 1980s, Noguchi produced more than one hundred and fifty different models which are still produced by the Ozeki Co, with the sculptor's matrices and instructions.

The name *Akari* which I coined, means in Japanese light as illumination. It also suggests lightness as opposed to weight. [...] Looking more fragile that they are *Akari* seem to float, casting their light as in passing. They do not encumber our space as mass or as a possession [...] I believe *Akari* to be a true development of an old tradition.

Isamu Noguchi, *Isamu Noguchi. A Sculptor's World*,
Londres, 1967

The success of *Akari* in France

In the 1950s and 1960s, Isamu Noguchi's *Akari* were often featured in furniture and home decoration magazines, both in the United States and Europe, particularly France where they were immortalised by photographer Pierre Berdoy in his reportages for the magazine *L'Œil*.

The French discovered *Akari* in Steph Simon's gallery in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés quarter of Paris. Charlotte Perriand and Jean Prouvé were helping with the interior design of this gallery which opened in 1956. In the year before it opened, Charlotte Perriand was in Japan in Tōkyō where she was preparing her exhibition *Proposition d'une synthèse des arts*. When she was there, she selected some objects to present at Steph Simon's gallery of which she has been assigned the artistic direction. Among these objects, we could admire the *Butterfly stool* by Sori Yanagi and above all the *Akari*. Steph Simon and Noguchi met each other when the American sculptor was in Paris to create the Unesco Garden of Peace. They were introduced to each other by the architect Bernard Zehruss, who was the gallery owner's friend and a co-designer of the building. Although they were able to start selling the *Akari* in 1956, it was only in 1963 that Steph Simon obtained the exclusive rights for France. It was a huge success - within twelve years, almost 115,000 lanterns were sold, i.e. 40% of sales revenue, with France in second place after the United States. The *Akari* were distributed throughout the country, allowing the gallery to create sales channels in the provinces, in Lyon, Nice, Rouen, Bordeaux and Marseille.

After the gallery was closed in 1974, Henri Machet, a colleague of Steph Simon, kept the company going by continuing to sell the lanterns for a while. In 1991, a new exclusivity contract was negotiated with the Sentou gallery, that has lent objects for the exhibition, and this company became the official distributor of the famous Noguchi lights in France.

Chōchin **nowadays**

There are still workshops that produce *chōchin* in Japan today, their main purpose being to contribute to the annual festivities and traditions and to embellish Buddhist temples. The hundred or so *chōchin* exhibited in this room come from the Tanaka Shōten workshop in Yame (on Kyushu island in the prefecture of Fukuoka) which, like many workshops, mainly produces lanterns for temples and the O-bon festival. During this Buddhist festival, which has been held in August for over five centuries, the Japanese honour their ancestors by visiting and cleaning their tombs. To guide the souls of the dead who return to earth for the three-day festival, lanterns are placed on each side of the household shrine. They are also arranged into gigantic garlands used as decorations during the different dances that are organised.

Paper made from mulberry bark

Developments in the production of *chōchin* are closely linked to developments in the production of paper. Three types of bark can be used in Japan's traditional paper making industry: *kozo* (mulberry family), *gampi* and *mitsumata* (daphne family). During all the stages of paper-making, it is necessary to have a low ambient temperature, dry weather and very pure water. This is why paper production centres are located in mountainous regions, particularly on Japan's Pacific coast. Several types of paper can be used to make *chōchin* but artisans prefer the paper made from mulberry bark because it distributes light over the whole surface area of the paper covering the object. *Kozo* are planted in spring and have to be grown for at least two years before they can provide the necessary fibres. The latter are harvested in February-March or in autumn. Mino, located in the prefecture of Gifu, in the centre of Honshū island, is known as one of the most important mulberry paper production centres. This town's activity reached its peak at the end of the 19th century when there were about 5,000 paper manufacturers but now there are only a few dozen of them. Its location near Gifu, Kyōto and Osaka was ideal because it could supply paper to the numerous lantern makers in these towns.

Contemporary variations of the *chōchin*

Because of their amazing ability to distribute light and the very large number of models designed, *Akari* obviously became part of the visual culture of all designers working in the second half of the 20th century. They created a break, a before and an after, in the world of lantern making. This was experienced and described both by designers and manufacturers in Japan, in Kyōto, Gifu and even in Yame. In the 1970s, their success led to cheap paper spheres being sold in numerous furniture and home decoration chains like Habitat, as soon as its first store was opened in France in 1973. The following year, they were featured in the catalogue of IKEA which produces them in China and Taiwan.

While the number of lantern makers fell year after year in Japan, some designers, encouraged by the success of the *Akari*, used paper to design lights, continuing the reinterpretation of the techniques used in *chōchin* making. Usually, the designers wanted to make the most of the light diffusing qualities of mulberry paper, but just like Isamu Noguchi, they also wanted to conserve a craft and a certain know-how. In 1990, computer-aided design started changing the way in which shapes were created. "This was really revolutionary" said Asano, a leading manufacturer based in Gifu. This revolution encouraged the manufacturer to work with designers like Shigeru Uchida, then Jasper Morrison and the Ronan et Erwan Bouroullec brothers in the 2000s.

The museum would like to thank

Château Haut-Bailly,
mécène d'honneur

Direction des Relations Internationales de
la Ville de Bordeaux
Fondation franco-japonaise Sasakawa
Institut français du Japon
Kojima Shōten, Kyoto
Pâtisserie S. Bordeaux
Restaurants japonais Matsuri
Sentou
Studio Toshiyuki Kita
Villa Kujoyama

The lenders of the exhibition

A1043, Paris
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Lights museum, Nagano
Musée des beaux-arts, Rennes
Musée national des arts asiatiques
- Guimet, Paris
Photovintagefrance
Sentou
The Noguchi Museum, New York
&tradition & Jaime Hayon
Twentytwentyone, Londres

For their fidelity, the museum would also like to thank

Château Nairac
Farrow&Ball
Les Crus Bourgeois du Médoc
Les Galeries Lafayette
Samsung
La Société de négoce DIVA
The Friends and the Circle of the madd

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Published in
January 2019

