

GLASS



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Sugahara for the Masses

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The market for glass in Japan is very different from the market for glass in the United States and Europe. In Japan, glassware is generally given as a gift to confirm friendship and other relationships on seasonal occasions and life events such as *Ochugen* (good wishes for the summer), *Oseibo* (year end), a wedding, a birthday or a graduation. The Japanese consumer is generally more interested in the price, quality, form and appearance of the glassware because these things influence how the gift will be received. If the glassware is appreciated and used it reflects well on the giver and will confirm the giver's sensibilities and taste. If the gift is put away and never used it will reflect badly on the giver and can cause problems in the relationship between the giver and the recipient. In the United States and Europe, glass is also given as a gift (think of all of the Waterford Crystal that is bought for weddings), but is more often considered a highly subjective object that is measured in terms of its aesthetics, collectibility and potential monetary value.

Therefore, the Japanese glassware manufacturers have to be very conscious of their consumer's needs to be successful.

Competitive pricing is important because the average Japanese consumer is not in the market for expensive glass. Currently, drinking and wine glasses are the most saleable items. The price for these items is usually in the range of \$8 - \$20 per glass. Often the manufacturer will sell sets of five to ten glasses in a fancy box or special packaging for the gift market. During *Ochugen*, plates, salad and rice bowls and condiment trays, priced at \$6 - \$50, are heavily marketed as gift items because the Japanese feel that it is better to serve food on glass during the hot times of the year. There has also been a growing trend among the well-heeled Japanese to buy deluxe glass objects. These objects are considered the ultimate gift because their brand name and quality craftsmanship are apt to impress those who receive them. In the past, the criteria used to pick an appropriate deluxe piece were size, brand name and ornamentation. Today in Japan it seems as though the smaller, well-designed objects with clean lines are selling better than highly ornamented cut crystal.

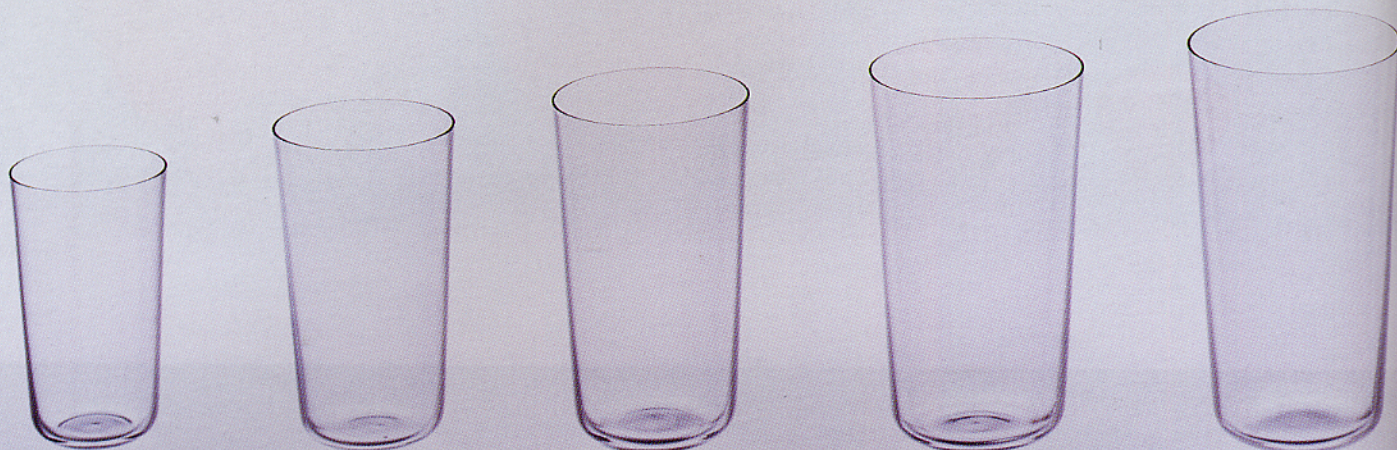
The design and production of glass in Japan is thus highly regulated by these unique cultural factors forcing glasshouses-

es to produce only tabletop objects specifically geared to the Japanese market. These include small trays for pickled foods, wasabi and other Japanese spices and condiments, sake glasses, chopstick holders and incense stands. The problem is that many of these objects, although extremely well made and designed, do not have much practical use on the average American table. I can just imagine someone putting ketchup or mustard in these glass trays and trying to serve guests during a football game. Moreover, if you have ever eaten in Japan, you know that food is not served in large portions. Therefore, glass plates, serving platters and bowls are often smaller in scale than their American or European counterparts. These practical considerations have made it difficult for many of the Japanese glass companies to break into the worldwide arena. There are, however, several companies that have excelled at making glass objects that have appeal not only in Japan but in America as well.

One of those companies is Sugahara Glassworks Inc. They have been producing functional glassware and artistic glass objects in Japan since 1932. Kazuma



**Cannes,
blown glass
(clear cups and
bowls)
variable dimensions**



**Previous page,
Top, left:
Black & White,
blown glass, vari-
able dimensions**

**Top, right;
Tsubo, blown glass,
80cm x 80cm, 98cm
x 100cm, 185 cm x
186cm, 214cm x
215cm**

**Middle:
Rovente, blown
glass, (bowls only)
150cm x 55cm,
210cm x 78cm,
130cm x 60cm,
180cm x 90cm,
240cm x 120cm**

**Bottom, left & right:
Sukiya, kiln formed
glass (black and
clear platters)
dimensions from
smallest to largest
9cm, 12cm, 15cm,
18cm, 21cm, 24cm,
27cm**

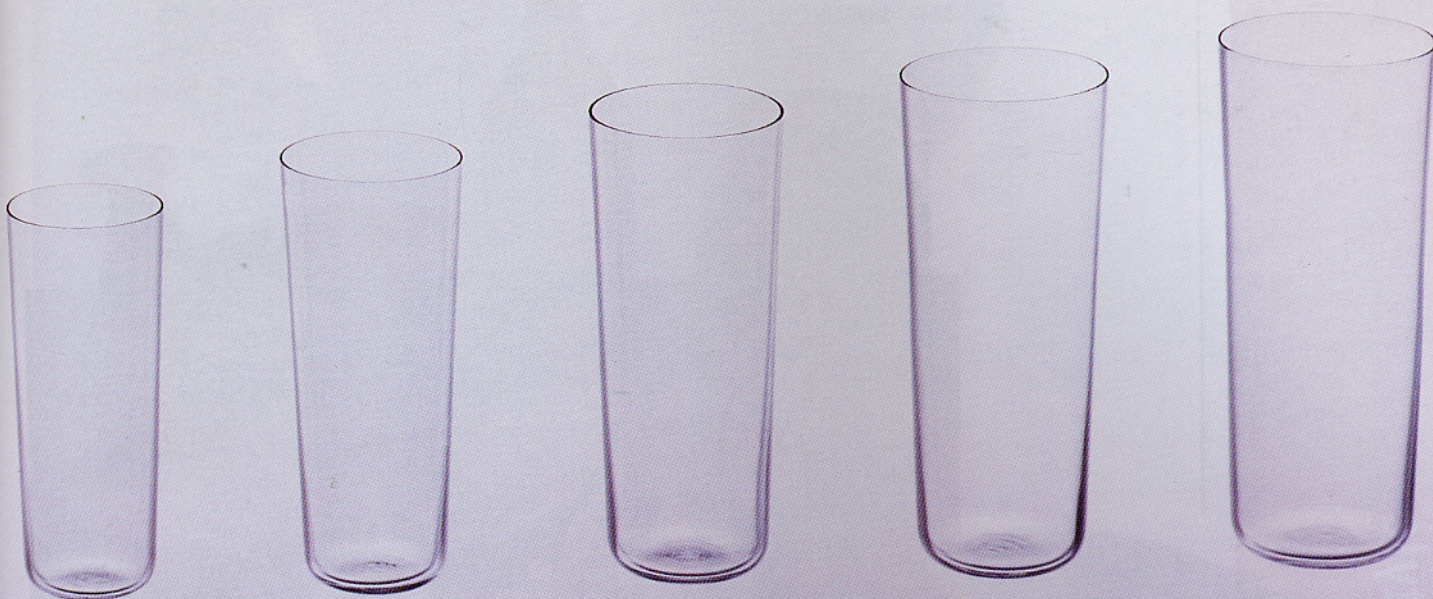
Sugahara founded the company and set up its first glassblowing studio in Tokyo. At that time, there were only a few glasshouses such as Iwata Art Glass, Sasaki and Awashima Glass Company that had the designers, the gaffers and the technology to produce handcrafted and affordable glassware. At first, Sugahara Glassworks produced only a small line of handcrafted glassware by special order. In 1961, a manufacturing plant was built in Chiba near the Tokyo/Narita airport and Sugahara began to produce its own line of originally-designed glassware. Today, the company has a large showroom in downtown Tokyo and offers more than 3,000 designed glass objects in its production line.

Since 1963, Minoru and Miyumi Sugahara, successors to Mr. Kazuma Sugahara, have been the chief designers for the company. Their forward looking designs and marketing strategies have made Sugahara a leader in the field. They have won several major design awards in Japan and Mr. Sugahara's vibrant red *Tsubo* vases are best sellers at the Museum of Modern Art's Design

Store in New York and in museums in San Francisco and Kyoto. Sugahara Glassworks is also quite progressive in terms of its corporate philosophy. More than 50% of its 70 employees, glassblowers and designers are female and the average age of the worker is 25 years old. This is an uncommon company structure in Japan. Generally, the working hierarchy is based on a patriarchal model and youth is not highly regarded.

In looking at Sugahara's 2000 production line one is immediately struck by the modern look of their products. Their design aesthetic is more in line with Scandinavian glass rather than Japanese, Italian or Bohemian glass. Most of their glassware is not highly ornamented or complicated. Their designers' color palettes and choice of forms allow the glass to exist just as easily in a traditional home setting as well as a more modern one.

The glass objects that Sugahara produces are serial: by that I mean that all of Sugahara's glassware is integrated into larger groups of interrelated objects. The popular *Mini Vase*, designed by Tomoko



Watanabe and Mamoru Tsukamoto, comes in five different styles and is currently produced in blue, green, orange and yellow. This makes it possible to mix and match the different styles and colors to satisfy one's own needs. *Rovente* and *Bowl*, sets of blue, clear and red bowls and plates, are studies in elementary glass forms. They remind one of Sven Palmquist's *Fuga Bowls* made for Orrefors in the 1950s. The new *Cannes* series of clear glass cups and bowls come in 19 shapes and sizes. The bowls, cups and tumblers can be arranged in infinite combinations to create unique and consistent table settings. *Helen*, a series of glasses designed by Mr. Sugahara, have irregular indentations on their bases that allow for one's fingers to comfortably rest in the grooves. These indentations are created by the individual gaffers sucking in air through the blowpipe after the glasses are mold blown. This "accidental" element ensures that each glass will have its own distinctive look and feel. *Black and White*, another series of cups, flutes, *sake* cups and pitchers, ice buckets and bowls, was (ref. to "series")

awarded a "Good Design" label by the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry in 1986. In this group the variation between the simple elegant forms and the black and white colors of the objects makes for interesting visual contrasts. Sugahara's *Flower Vase*, a slim truncated cone, comes in small, medium and large sizes. It is produced in clear, black, matte black, white, matte white, light blue and red. Grouped together, the vases have a clean modern look that almost makes them more like *objets d'art* rather than functional vases. The thirty-three slumped plates and platters that make up the *Sukiya* series can act as a complement to the *Black and White* group. These highly textured rectangles and squares can be used as condiment trays, salad plates and dinner plates. Their beauty resides in their utter simplicity and functionality and their ability to be juxtaposed next to other Sugahara products. The big question is whether or not Sugahara's glassware will ever gain wider acceptance in the United States and Europe. Undoubtedly, their designs and the quality of their craftsmanship equal

or surpass many of the glass companies that have become household names in the US. But for Sugahara really to penetrate the American market the American consumer is going to need to become more sophisticated and cavalier about tabletop design. This can happen if we accept that it is alright to personalize place settings and reject boring prepackaged sets of dishes and matching plates that are all around us in the department stores.

Brett Littman is a New York art critic who writes regularly for the *East Hampton Star*. He is also the Associate Director of UrbanGlass.