

Traditional Artisanry and Modern Style

A Renowned Designer Links Japan and the World from His Hometown

Industrial designer Ken Okuyama is globally famous as the first non-Italian to design a Ferrari. He spent his teens in Yamagata in northern Japan, an area rich in nature. After studying car design at Art Center College of Design in the United States, he started his career as a designer at General Motors. But after four years there, having revealed his talent, Okuyama was hired by Porsche, which was then at a historical turning point. There he took part in creating a new lineup of products that became the mainstay of the German automaker's success in the years that followed. His ongoing quest took him next to Italy, where he found a job with the famous design firm Pininfarina in 1995, when he was in his mid-thirties. His entry drew attention as the firm's first hiring of a foreign designer. Several years into his career there, he supervised the production of the Enzo Ferrari, a model built to mark the 55th anniversary of the founding of Ferrari. With this accomplishment he gained international renown.

Over the course of his 12 years living in Italy, Okuyama says he became aware of the "modern, simple, and timeless" Italian design philosophy—a philosophy that has commonality with Japan's traditional culture. "In Italy, they treasure what's old and enhance its value. Conversely, when they make something anew, it has to be modern, different from what came before. Also, simplicity strengthens beauty more than heavy decoration, giving products lasting appeal. What is modern and simple gains a timeless existence."

In 2006, Okuyama left Pininfarina. Returning to Japan, he founded his own studio, Ken Okuyama Design, in Yamagata. The decision to set up headquarters in his hometown, he says, was derived from what he saw in Italy: "I was struck by the fact that skilled artisans working in various local industries are conducting the world's best manufacturing." Yamagata has its own world-class artisans in fields like woodworking and iron casting. Okuyama believed that combining his designs with this artisanry would make it possible to craft objects that would both preserve tradition and command international appeal. In line with this ambition, the various products now being sold under the Ken Okuyama brand include goods for daily use that are based on local crafts not just in Yamagata but from around Japan.

Okuyama remains broadly active today, working from bases in Japan, the United States, and Britain. He works in a wide range of fields—from cars and trains to tableware and furniture. Based on his own experience, he declares, "Japanese people don't necessarily have the best understanding of Japanese culture. We have much to learn from Germans and Italians, with their skill at distinguishing between traditions to be preserved and elements to be changed." Linking Japan and the world from Yamagata, Okuyama continues to exert international influence transcending cultural borders.



Kiyoyuki “Ken” Okuyama

Born in 1959; raised in Yamagata, Yamagata Prefecture. He has headed his own firm, Ken Okuyama Design, since 2007. In addition to producing and marketing products under his own brand, ranging from original cars to tea utensils and cutlery incorporating artisanal techniques, he provides design consultation services for companies.



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1. A teapot designed by Okuyama fuses tradition with modern style. The painstakingly hand-hammered copperware pot has a form inspired by the shape of an apple and a texture that evokes bare rock. The precise fit of the body and lid of the accompanying tea caddy bespeaks the artisanship with which it is made. 2. Okuyama has also designed many trains, including those for the Hokuriku Shinkansen high-speed rail line inaugurated in March 2015. 3. The Enzo Ferrari by Okuyama: Among the world’s renowned industrial designers, Okuyama has handled designs for Ferraris, Porsches, and Corvettes.