



Packaging Create: "All of Life In A Box" By Maggie Kinser Saiki • Since WWII, the Japanese have had a passion for package design, often for the sake of design alone. Today, in a sinking economy, retailers have tried to teach designers how to attract consumers. But Akio Okumura, principal at Osaka's Packaging Create, remains wiser than the wisest of marketers. He constantly educates himself—about the product, about the world and about the people who make it go round with their money.



In Japan, and especially in Osaka, the proud southwestern city of merchants where he is based, Akio Okumura is perceived as nearly mutinous—and not only because he refuses to work all night like the rest of workaholic Japan. He is also wildly successful in his field

of package design, working with and teaching to both Japanese and non-Japanese designers, to produce a hundred unique designs a year.

For the past 15 years of his 35-year career, Akio Okumura, the principal of Packaging Create, Inc., has left the office at 6 pm on weekdays, taken the weekends off and enjoyed a full week of vacation both summer and winter. No one likes to hear how easy it is for him to live a life full of friends, family, travel and reflection. He easily reads 20 books a month and spends his holidays visiting foreign countries, getting an education that can't be repeated or imitated. In other words, he's a true designer, a liberally experienced individual whose views are shaped and whose work is informed by an awareness, perception and comprehension of the world.

Designers in Japan refer to their work as "sakuhin," which literally translates as "created things," but because it also refers to works of art, it carries overtones of the self-consciousness of the more-creative-than-thou members of the art world. Even Okumura's more elegant packages, which he agrees are much easier to design because the consumer is ready to be seduced, neither shout out in defense of their concepts nor dissolve into infantile styling. And much of his work is the most vital and exciting form of visual communication: everyday products you see in the 7/Eleven, recognize, feel good about, buy, buy, and then buy again.

Okumura often comes up with his solutions in a matter of minutes, while talking on the phone with the client and sketching on his ever-present pad, but he attributes his speed and success to the ability to make a decision, rather than to confidence or some other emotional state. "If you hold onto an idea for too long," Okumura says, "it rots." Unlike his contemporaries—most of whom have been trained in fine art—Okumura has refined a natural sensibility towards visual information, a talent for three-dimensional construction and a gift for typography. His last stint of formal education ended in 1962 when he graduated from Kyoto's Horikawa High School, where he studied commerce. His ideas are based on a logical analysis of the product, but the zip that makes his work successful comes from Okumura's careful and unique perception of the audience and its motivations. "The first question," he says, "is what do you want to communicate and to whom?"

One of Okumura's most familiar pieces is a styrofoam bowl of instant ramen called "Suki ya nen." The phrase means "I like it," and is a slight phonetic pun on the word ramen, but it is used only in the southwestern Kansai region, in which Osaka is the largest city. In the years preceding the introduction of the ramen, there had been an explosion of images, television shows and comedy acts from the Kansai region, making the name appropriate to the times, but the visual symbolism is what clinched the market.

The Japanese language, a combination of Chinese characters (kanji) and two phonetic alphabets (hiragana and katakana) demands that Japanese learn from an early age to read with both sides of their brains, to pick up the abundance of information conveyed through their three-tiered visual language. Okumura says his designs are successful because they are fundamentally typographic, but I am convinced that his typography is a blend of Western typography and Japanese ideography. He knows which details in color, shape and texture will elicit the proper response to sell the product. For the "Suki ya nen" logo, Okumura took up a brush and ink and wrote the hiragana in a manner that was, he says, "not too masculine—a little pleasant and soft," which brought to mind not only the banner of a noodle shop, but a distinctly human, almost cloying Kansai touch, rather than the sententious artifice of Tokyo.

The Japanese are notorious for "overpackaging" and generally paying too much attention to form, but whenever one of Okumura's packages is presented to the eye, the dross of overstyled competitors ebbs away, leaving only a reaffirmation of the point of package design:



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to explain what's inside and what it means to acquire it.

When Okumura was growing up in Kyoto, immediately after the end of World War II, the everyday necessities were still acquired during the evening trip through the shopping arcade. Tofu and other necessities were ladled into the housewives' own pots or bowls, brought from home. Only trifling luxuries like candy were presented in brightly colored packages, designed to excite the eye and momentarily relieve the spirits of children and parents exhausted by the monochromatic visual environment of the wartime years. Okumura remembers that Hippo-brand hard candy enticed the primitive market of children with the chance to discover "lucky cards" concealed in certain boxes. The reward for finding one was a book, and Okumura and his friends spent countless hours trying to decipher the difference between the boxes laden with treasure and those empty of possibility.

"When I thought about the production line," Okumura explains, "I figured that the most efficient way would be to put a distinguishing mark on the lucky card boxes. To do it, they'd have to print those boxes on a different press." He was right. The two presses produced slightly different shades of red, and the clever, young Okumura was rewarded for his perspicacity over the years with a shelf full of free "Hippo Edition" paperbacks, memoirs of important men and other educational works. He is still using logic to generate the most reasonable solutions, in the process banishing chance and ensuring success.

Okumura has designed packages for more best-selling products than any other individual designer in Japan, but not one bears his "mark." He knows that Seventeen Ice Cream, a mass-market product retailed from vending machines, will not sell on the basis of his name. "The most important part of the job is to allow the people who buy Seventeen Ice Cream to feel good about it. Design is a series of singular solutions."

Were he content to rest on his laurels, Akio Okumura might have been the last of his breed; design is an established subject in far too many educational institutions and the artist-designer is too much of



an icon for youth to ignore. But the legacy of the self-educated, life-loving designer will continue because Okumura shares his education, his work habits, his viewpoints and his inspiration as liberally as he has acquired them. In 1982, in typical Okumura fashion, he initiated an internship for exchange students from Xi'an Union University. The following year, he began travelling to China to lecture at the University and exhibit his work. This internship has enriched Packaging Create with dozens of graduate students and designers from China, and since 1999 several from Stanford University as well.

As an instructor at Osaka's Inter Medium Institute (IMI) Graduate School, Okumura reaches a wider range of students than is to be found at any other design facility. One-tenth have graduated from universities outside of Japan, and 70 percent come from non-arts backgrounds. They study to become designers, artists, curators and archivists. The faculty is equally diverse, comprised of art critics, photographers, architects and other creative professionals. With a Bauhaus-like approach, IMI has made the workshop its conceptual focal point, where students combine commercial work with study. This year they are completing a second volume in a series on ethnology published by the Institute's neighbor, the peerless National Museum of Ethnology. Okumura believes that a designer's intellect is shaped mainly through personal experience, not formal study, so he advises staff, interns and students to "find out what you like to do and spend as much time as possible doing it."

Okumura's package for the herbal stimulant Nanpao (see page 154.) epitomizes this idiosyncratic approach to design. The Chinese name, "Man's Treasure," was too masculine for the Japanese market. Okumura closed his eyes and retrieved from his own memory the ideal image of friendly vitality: old Hong Kong. "The English-Chinese atmosphere, the masses of people, languages commingling in the air." The package is bright red, with powerful black typography in Roman, Chinese and Japanese characters running every which way. Okumura's packaging lesson is simple: convince the consumer that he's receiving the benefits of the product even before opening the box. ■

Credits & Comments

(Opening spread, left) *Envelop Wind* (1990). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Packaging Create Inc. A package which enraps the air in a shrink film.

(Opening spread, right) *Calligraphy* (trans. "Life in a box") by Karun Malhotra
Pg.38 *Portrait of Akio Okumura* by Saki Mizutani

Pg.39 *P.C.I. (Packaging Create Inc.) envelope* (1975). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura Hot-stamp letters—a processing technology that uses printing heat—on patterned, indented paper, making the strength of the letters felt.

Pg.40 *Yumai sake pack* (1995). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Emi Kajihara, Client: Gekkeikan A sake package designed with a combination of stripes that resembles Japanese architecture.

Pg.41 *Soap packaging* (1994). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Katsuji Minami, Client: Cow Brand Soap Kyoshinsha Co., Ltd. A renewal of a long-running product's package, modernized to look lighter.

Pg.42 *Kahala gift package* (1997). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Restaurant Kahala A simple gift package made with a low cost paper.

Pg.43 *Studio NOB photo case* (1987). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Studio NOB Photo package made of tin plates to withstand transportation.

Pg.44 *Pin Brooch display & package* (2000). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Naomi Hibata, Client: DAS (designer association) A pin brooch can be displayed on the bottom of the tube. It becomes a package if you turn it upside down and close the upper part of the tube.

Pg.45 *The Cup* (1995). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Mitsuo Ueno, Client: Gekkeikan A design to make the package look taller by extending the space of the letters and closing up the line space.

Pg.46 *Kazuki* (1990). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Masumi Takemura, Client: Gekkeikan Designed to convey the image of a very exclusive sake, using a cloth label and a cloth-covered box.

Pg.47 *Carry package* (1998). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Yasuyo Fukumoto, Client: Packaging Create Inc. A carry bag designed to wrap the bottle in only a sheet of paper that is cut to follow the shape of the bottle.

Pg.48 *Ooze* (2000). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Sae Nagaoka, Client:

Ooze Cafe & Restaurant Silk printed letters on translucent paper to express simple strength.

Pg.49 *Books package* (1990). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Client: Hiromi Saito (flower designer) A book package made with reversible paper designed to make a person happy when opening it.

Pg.50 *Taizo package* (1987). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Illustrator: Zenji Funabashi, Client: Taizo (artist) A pottery package with very soft touches, made with a combination of low cost papers.

Pg.51 *Taizo package* (1987). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Seibu (department store) A package made with a combination of stainless steel and Japanese paper—when you open the lid, it spreads out exteriorly.

Pg.52 *Oppo shopping bag* (1995). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Katsuji Minami, Client: Oji Paper Co., Ltd. A design with the letters, "op" and "go," resembling a human face so that familiarity and strength may be expressed.

Pg.53 *131+ Paper Land shopping bag* (1998). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Musa A shopping bag that simply has 131 colored lines using 131 kinds of colored paper.

Pg.54 *Heiwa Paper Fair* (1990). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Heiwa Paper A space made by connecting many pieces of papers—both light and shadow can enter inside the space.

Pg.55 *The 360th Anniversary of Gekkeikan Memorial Sake shopping bag/wrapping paper* (1997). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Kouichi Hishida, Client: Gekkeikan Indicates 36 era names from 360 years ago to the current year to express the length of its history.

Pg.56 *Musa Paper Land shopping bag* (1998). Art Director: Akio Okumura, Designer: Zhao Hui, Client: Musa (paper seller)

A slender poster package in which a rolled paper of 728mm x 1030mm can be enclosed.

Pg.57 *Paraffin Paper* (1989). Art Director & Designer: Akio Okumura, Client: Sekaibunka Publishing, Inc. Wraps space with a sheet of paper—in it, you can put anything you like: flowers or a bottle of wine.



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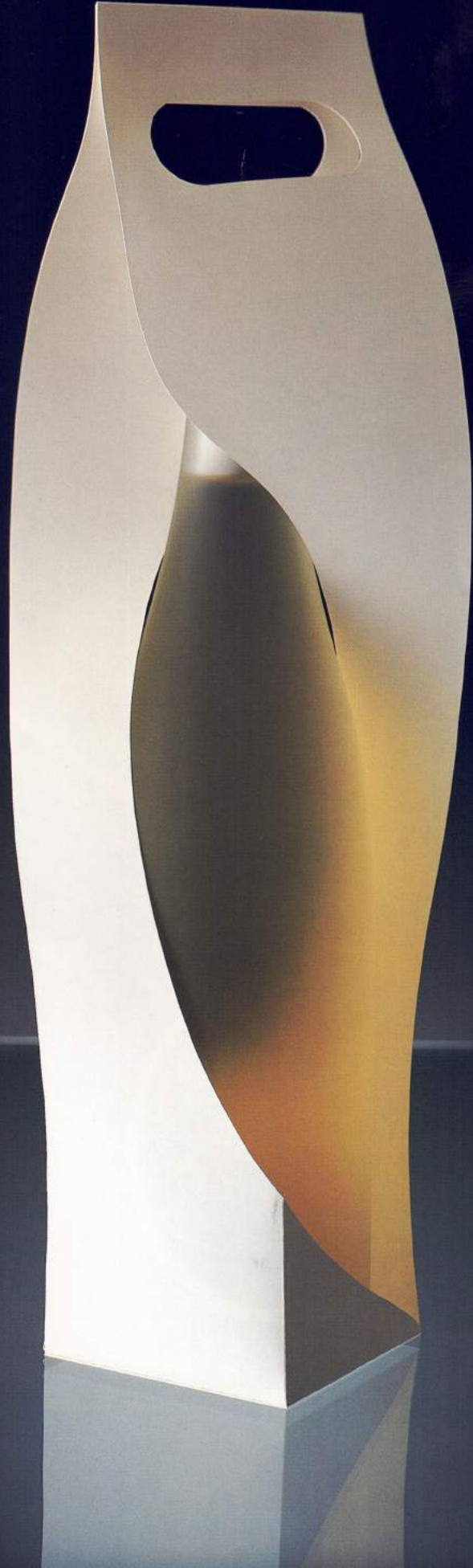






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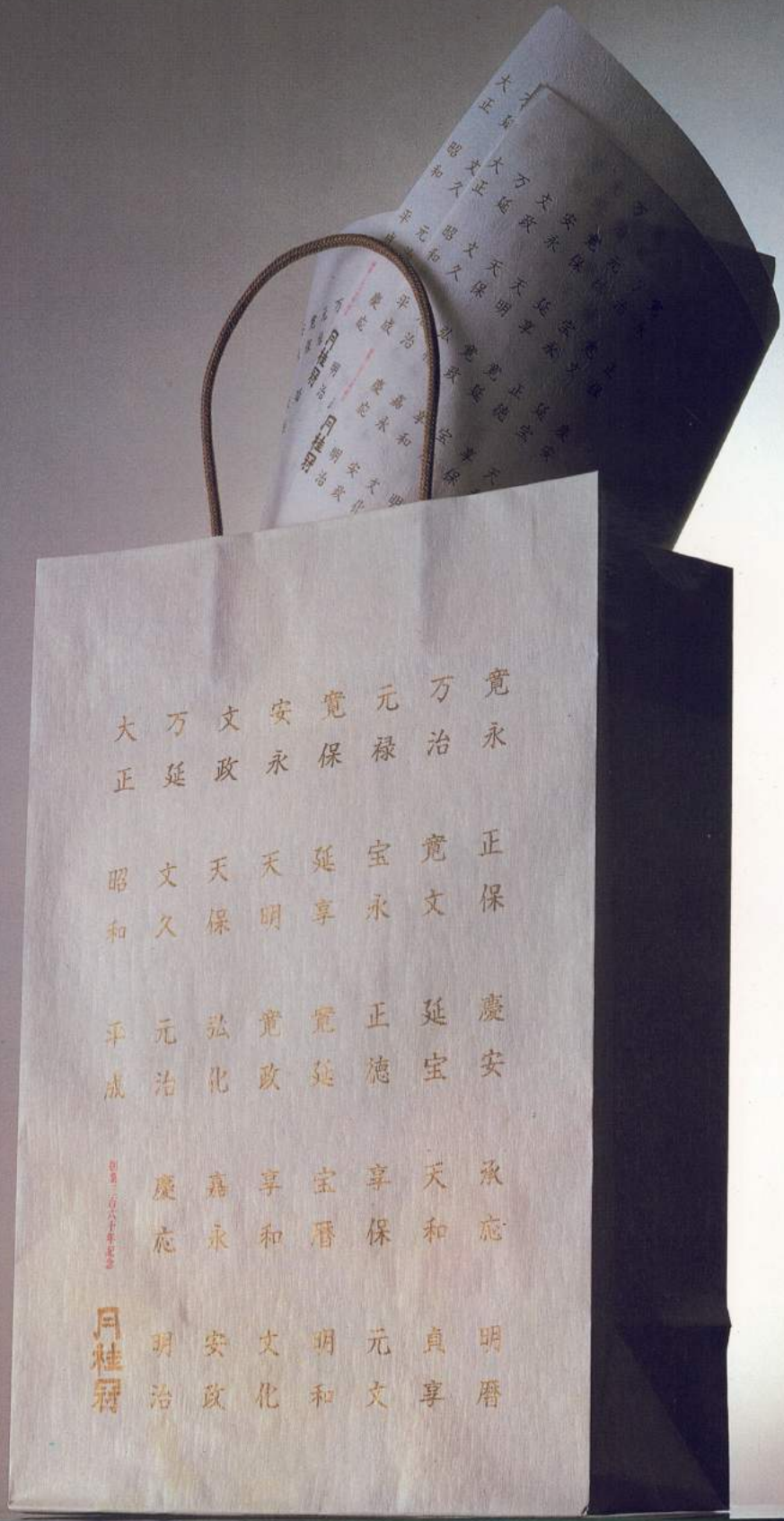
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