

Shimura printed out 108 black and white images for one of his digital miniature book project



## A World of Paper Creations

Japanese miniature bookmaker and papermaker Asao Shimura has lived in the Philippines for almost three decades and continues to spread the value and art of making handmade books and paper both here and abroad.

Text and Photos by Astra C. Alegre



(top to bottom) Asao Shimura and his traditional spinning wheel; Inside one of Shimura's traditional miniature books; Other handmade books Shimura made

Shimura met Timothy Barrett, an American Fulbright scholar in 1974-1975, who was studying

"You are my third visitor this week. This is a Guinness Book world record for Kapangan," chuckled Asao Shimura when I visited him at his house in Poking, Kapangan, Benguet Province. Poking is located approximately two and half hours away by jeep from Baguio City.

Shimura, who grew up in Tokyo, graduated in 1971 from Tokyo Technical College where he studied Industrial Chemistry majoring in water analysis. After college, he visited several papermakers in Japan, which has an old tradition in papermaking. "One century ago, there were 100,000 papermakers," he relates, "then it started going down, around 700 in 1975."

In 1976, he visited Korea. There were around 200 plus papermakers in Korea at that time. "I made a miniature book in papermaking in Korea," he relates. The number of papermakers is very low now," he says. "Less than 26 in Korea. Last year, only around 300 papermakers in Japan."

papermaking in Japan. When Barrett went back to the United States, Shimura shares, "I accompanied him for two months - traveling, doing workshops, Japanese papermaking. I didn't learn Japanese papermaking technique in Japan; I learned from him."

Shimura started making miniature books in 1977 purely by chance because "materials were around me so I started." He had a letterpress, which was given to him by his brother who worked in a printing company. "I had paper samples and I had a lot of text. All materials ready to make a book."

To be considered a miniature book, it should be less than 3 inches in height, width and thickness. He recalls, "The first book I made was 3.2 x 2 inches, which is not miniature book category; it's small book category. They told me next time to make miniature book. There are miniature book collectors; they don't collect small books. There's a .2-inch difference. So now I'm a miniature

book maker." He has made a total of 35 miniature books. The last letterpress book he made was in 1984. Now, it's more on digital, he says.

He first came to the Philippines in 1989. Duntog Foundation Inc. in Baguio invited him to teach the locals about papermaking. He met his wife, Andrea, an Ibaloi, and they got married in 1991. In 1994 they stayed in Tina, Makato, Aklan to set up papermaking workshops, production, making paper. From 2002 to 2006, he worked for a Japanese company based in Cavite that makes

handmade paper from *piña* (pineapple plant fiber) and *saba* (banana fiber). He now lives, together with his wife and their four children, in Poking, where Andrea is originally from.

Shimura began doing digital books in 2005. His reason for the switch was very practical. At that time, he didn't have a letterpress. "Letterpress can take even very thin sheets," he shares, "But you cannot do photos. Digital printing is good for color photos."

To make one of these digital miniature

books, Shimura would take a digital photo of his subject. He would then make a print of the photo on a piece of paper. After measuring and cutting the paper to size, he would fold it and start assembling the paper for the inside pages. He would then bind them by hand using the *yotsume-tomi* method (four hole binding).

One of his latest projects where he got to use his digital printer is for his series, *108 Miniature Story-Books Without Writing*. 108 is the number for Japanese Buddhism, he explains. Every 31st of December, Buddhist temples all over Japan ring their bells 107 times, and the 108th time is to welcome in the New Year. This is known as the *Joya no Kane* ceremony.

For this particular project, the miniature books were done with black and white photos of people Shimura knows on the cover—50 from the US, 21 Japanese, 19 from the Philippines, 3 Canadians, 3 Koreans, 2 Chileans and 10 from other countries. There is only one photo on each cover and inside are blank pages. Instead of the traditional *Joya no Kane* in Japan his plan last year was to 'ring' a *piña* paper drum one time for one person on each cover of his miniature books.

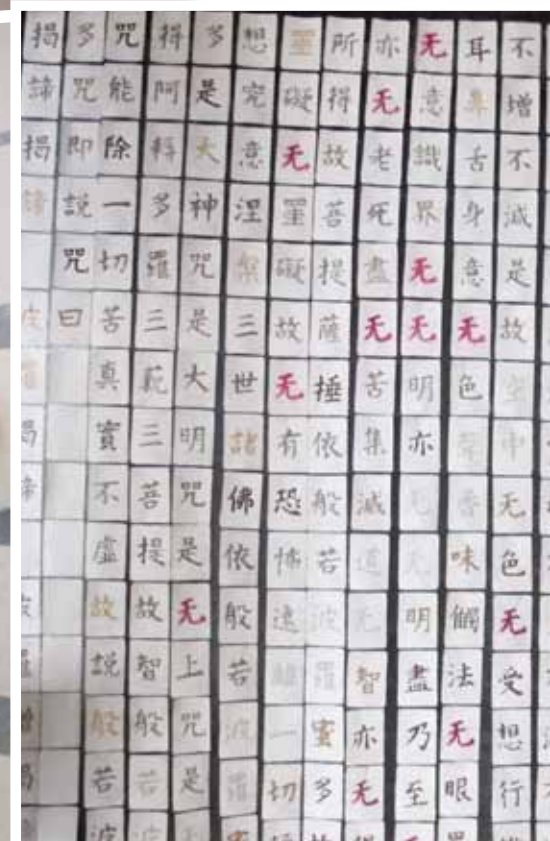
Shimura has also built a small museum in one part of his home. Last November, Shimura organized an exhibit entitled *Mini-Exhibition 2013 on Shifu Art*. Around 24 artists from all over the world took part in the exhibit.

Shifu is hand woven textile from paper thread. Algerian-French philosopher Albert Camus was the sub-theme of the exhibit. The event opened during Camus' 100th birth anniversary. Shimura has published his own version of Camus' *Stranger* as a miniature book. According to the exhibit catalog, Shimura remarked, "I am still a 'stranger' in Poking."

Shimura's knowledge and skill in the world of paper craft is well known abroad and he occasionally gets invited to give lectures. He held a Golden Piña workshop in France in 2002. He has been to South Africa twice, in 2002 and 2010. Last year, Tim Barrett, who was teaching papermaking in University of Iowa, invited him to visit the US to conduct workshops. He has also conducted papermaking workshops in the Philippines. In 2012, he held two workshops in Camarines Norte and one in Davao.

Shimura muses that if he has a traditional letterpress he would love to teach traditional printing to anyone who is interested to learn. He said that nowadays there are smaller letterpresses. He chuckles, "Two or three small letterpress, that's what I want. That's easy to carry."

There are no signs of stopping for Shimura. As long as people like him continue to share their knowledge and expertise, the often unrecognized art of handmade books and handmade paper will one day get the popularity it deserves. ■



(top) A woodblock depicting Albert Camus. (side) Taking the papers off the wall when they are dry. (above) The Color Heart Sutra 2 hanging at Asao Shimura's home