

# Ayako Hattori

## and the Art of Tonbo-Dama

Top center: Botan/Tori, Peony & Bird

Top right: Baikakaramatsu, Rue Anemone

Top left: Sakura/Kingyo, Cherry Blossom & Goldfish

By Angie Rodgers

Photos by Ayako Hattori

Japanese art in every medium is precise, meaningful, impeccable, and immediately available to the viewer. The creation and placement of every element is intentional, aligning with Japanese standards of beauty and tradition. This attention to detail is especially apparent in the art of tonbo-dama, the relatively young Japanese craft of intricate glass beadmaking. Plain beads have existed as ornamentation in Japan for millenia, used for trade, worship, and minor decorations on clothing and hairstyles, and artistic expansion during the Edo period (1603–1867) gave rise to the tonbo-dama as a work of art in its own right.

Accomplished glass artist Ayako Hattori is known internationally for her extraordinary tonbo-dama. She produces breathtaking little worlds in glass, miniature gardens and ponds representing a slice of Japanese nature. She creates tiny murrine of traditional Japanese flowers and wildlife, placing them with care in smooth beads alive with texture and movement beneath their surfaces. Her beads are little wonderlands, so realistic in their tiny worlds that you could almost hear the water trickling through the stream and feel the breeze on your face. Sometimes elements from the air, the earth, and the water are combined in images so striking, your imagination wanders beyond what your eye initially saw. In *Sakura/Kingyo*, the cherry blossom is the first to stand out... but wait, are those fish swimming among the blossoms? Suddenly your mind is turned around, and you realize you aren't looking up to the sky, but down in the water, the reflection of the spring blossoms combining with the fish to make a lovely scene.

Tonbo-dama directly translates to “dragonfly eyes,” and Ayako explains further: “Glass beads are called tonbo-dama in Japanese. Tonbo means dragonfly. Dama is a sequential voicing of Tama. Tama means something round. It is said the reason (for the name) is that dragonfly has large, beautiful eyes.” Her favorite murrine she has made is, in fact, a dragonfly, so detailed it even has webbing on its tiny wings. See *Matsumushiso/Tonbo* to the left.

Although tonbo-dama has existed for centuries, the practice of glass beadmaking was limited to a small population of artists. Most people had no access to the tools, materials, or knowledge required to experiment with the craft on their own. In the late 1990s, developments in torch technologies and manufactured glass made the art form accessible to a wider group of artists, but finding those supplies was a hurdle. Like most lampworkers in those early days of the craft, Ayako struggled to find tools and resources; the internet consisted mainly of newsgroups and special-interest forums but wasn't widely used for sales, promotion, or connection with others. And like most lampworkers, she made do with what she could find.

Upper left top: Shidare-Zakura/Cho, Weeping Cherry Blossom & Butterfly

Upper left center: Odamaki/Aogara, Columbine Flower & Blue Tit

Upper left bottom: Matsumushiso/Tonbo, Pincushion Flower & Dragonfly





Top left: Gaku-Ajisai/Ito-Tonbo,  
Lacecap Hydrangea & Damselfly  
Bottom left: Hama-Hirugao,  
Beach Morning Glory

Top right: Kusa-Ichigo,  
Japanese Bush Raspberry  
Bottom right: Momiji/Magamo,  
Colored Maple Leaf & Mallard

Top center: Umi-Game/Umi No Ikimono,  
Sea Turtle & Sea Creatures  
Bottom center: Isogiku, Chrysanthemum Pacificum

"I have made glass beads since 1997. But at that time, lampwork was not popular. I could find only a very small torch, like a Bunsen burner for scientific experiments. I could make only very small beads." As the industry grew and better tools were developed, Ayako could expand her studio setup in the early 2000s. She bought two dual-fuel torches, each with a different sort of flame; flames are not as adjustable on Japanese burners as they are on American and Canadian ones, so artists sometimes find themselves requiring multiples to fill their needs. "My JP Torch (models) are B8 and B10. B8 has a soft and wide flame. B10 has a narrow and sharp flame. I make beads with the B8. The B10 flame is stronger than the B8. I use both of them when I make murrine. I melt the surface of the murrine with the B10, then I make the whole murrine the same temperature with the B8."

Like most Japanese lampwork artists, she uses Satake and Kinari glass; the viscosity and low melting point of Satake glass allows flexibility when setting murrine, while the clarity of Kinari provides better optics. "I usually use Japanese lead glass, mostly Satake glass. It has a low melting point and much viscosity. It is very good for my flower murrine work. I can rake, spread, and plunge-cut murrine on my bead. It makes my flower realistic. Kinari is a new maker of Japanese glass. New artists use the glass. You can't use both glasses together."

It didn't take her long to develop her skills to the point where her beads were marketable, and by 2004 Ayako was selling her beads in Japan. She brought her art to the world in 2006 by offering her beads through Etsy and eBay, and by 2008 the world brought its art to her in the form of online lampworking communities. "I found a large community and market for lampwork in the USA. It was wonderful to share art works with each other internationally. (I like to see) how artists express the beauty of nature in various cultures." Ayako had been a fixture in online glass groups for a few years, showcasing her beads in the Gallery/Show and Tell sections of online forums like LampworkEtc. Most of us were still struggling with even dot placement and puckered holes, while Ayako shared photos of tiny beads filled with perfect, vibrant, complex flowers.

Ayako draws inspiration from nature and from different art forms, her bead imagery enhanced by Japanese traditions surrounding nature and the changing of the seasons. Holidays are rooted in both religious and secular belief systems, and many of them share a sense of celebration of the gifts of nature. "I want to present seasonal scenery from gardens and traditional paintings in my bead. I want to capture atmosphere of the seasons. The sense of changing seasons is good tradition. We have also very good art traditions presenting seasonal sense. Japanese traditional crafts like pottery, lacquering art, kimono with embroidery and painting, Ukiyo-e, etc. are still loved."



Near right: Nettarei-Suiren, Tropical Waterlily  
Far right: Ran, Orchid



Precision is a cornerstone of Japanese art; artists strive to express ideas and feelings in compact ways. "I think my works are something like Haiku, Japanese short poetry with a fixed form." Her beads are exactly that; each bead will focus on one flower and one simple color scheme, but the variations present in each flower and in the subtle background elements add a depth that tells a whole story to the viewer.

Tradition restricted the display of Japanese art to the season it represented until recently: "Traditionally, when people wear kimono, the painted flowers must be the ones blooming in the season. Plum blossom is for early spring. Morning glory is for summer. And colored maple leaf is for autumn. People display traditional hanging scrolls of seasonal flowers. But now people are more free. The cherry blossom is very popular, and you can wear it in all seasons. If you like a particular flower, you can wear it whenever you want to wear it. But I think flowers still remind Japanese people the season they bloom in."

Some of her happiest glass memories involve her customers and the work they've done with her beads. "I make obidome, square beads with large, long holes for kimono ornaments. A Russian artist made my obidome into a beautiful bangle. It was just breathtaking. Another American artist made beautiful knotting jewelry of my obidome. A Japanese customer made a jewelry of kimono fabric and my round bead. I really enjoy their talented art works."

Ayako has also enjoyed the hospitality of other glass artists when she has traveled to teach her skills, and what better way to entertain a nature-loving artist than to show her the natural beauty of your own country? "When I visited Australia to teach a private class, my student took me to a natural park. Many Australian cockatoo birds were there. They were so beautiful. When I visited Russia for my class, the ladies of the studio took me to beautiful palace garden with a greenhouse and to a famous botanical garden. It was early spring in Moscow. Many flowers bloomed there. I sometimes travel abroad and visit museums and palaces, but it was the first time to visit botanical gardens. After that, I enjoy visiting botanical gardens, when I make a trip abroad. It is interesting for me to see different flower cultures in other countries."

When asked to list some of her favorite glass bead artists, a few came to mind: "You must know Akihiro Ohkama, Yuuka Kawakita, Akiko Isono. I also like Anastasia, Kerri Fuhr, John Kobuki, etc." In fact, I hadn't heard of Yuuka or Akiko, but both artists have extraordinary work and are worth searching online.

Ayako has shown her work in exhibitions and galleries in the United States and Japan, including the 7th Annual Bead Invitational at Pismo Fine Art Glass gallery in Denver and several solo exhibitions at Bubbles gallery in Tokyo. The current world situation has slowed her work down considerably; travel outside of Japan has been difficult since 2020, and mail services can require extra steps. Message her before you buy her incredible work, so she can arrange the best delivery solution. Still, Ayako's torches are running, and her beads invite *hanami*, the Japanese tradition of admiring flowers and contemplating their fleeting existence, while giving us a means to enjoy those flowers permanently.

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Left: Obidome Bead, Suisen, Daffodil  
Center: Taniutsugi/Yamame, Wild Weigela Flower  
& Mountain Seema Fish  
Right: Bara, Rose

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