

Tradition in Every Tooth: Yonoya's Handcrafted Boxwood Combs

Gentle on hair and steeped in history, Yonoya Comb Shop's handcrafted boxwood combs reveal how timeless tradition continues to shape modern self-care in Tokyo.



A display of handcrafted boxwood combs, each polished and finished with camellia oil at Yonoya Comb Shop in Asakusa.

Founded in 1717 during the Edo period (1603–1868), Yonoya began as a small craft shop in what is now Tokyo's Bunkyo City. By the early 1900s, the family had relocated to Denboin Dori street in Asakusa and adopted the name Yonoya Kushiho (Yonoya Comb Shop).

In the beginning, combs were not everyday items but tools for professional hairdressers and stylists. That changed when Japan entered the Meiji era (1868–1912) and Western hairstyles replaced samurai top-knots. People began styling their own hair, and Yonoya's combs shifted from wholesale goods for barbers to everyday tools for ordinary households.

The Art of Boxwood

At the heart of Yonoya's craft lies Satsuma boxwood, sourced from

Kagoshima Prefecture in Southern Japan. Hard yet flexible, the wood resists snapping under pressure—ideal for comb teeth that must glide through hair without breaking strands.

Each comb requires years of preparation. The wood is dried and smoked repeatedly before being



Owner-craftsman Saito Yutaka shares Yonoya's 300-year legacy from inside the Asakusa workshop.

shaped, honed, and polished by hand in the Asakusa workshop. The finishing touch: a soak in nourishing camellia oil, which both moisturizes the hair and gives the comb a natural amber glow as it ages.

Care and Beauty Benefits

Yonoya's combs are not only heirloom objects but also practical tools with measurable benefits. Because wood resists static, the combs prevent the hair damage, dryness, and tangles common with plastic. Each tooth is carefully finished to be soft against the scalp, providing a gentle massaging effect that stimulates circulation.

The combs are built to last. With proper care, they can easily serve a lifetime and even be passed down for two or three generations. Regular cleaning with camellia oil preserves both the wood and the hair's gloss.

Passing Down a Name and a Craft

Saito's own path to Yonoya was unexpected. Originally trained as a chef, he entered the family business after the passing of his uncle, who had no heirs. "I was meant to inherit our restaurant," he remembers. "But there was only one comb shop left in Asakusa at the time. Letting it disappear didn't seem right, so I became its successor."

The Yonoya name itself dates to the early 20th century, when Saito's great-grandfather opened the Asakusa storefront and chose the name from his birthplace in Saitama Prefecture's Kumagaya City, north of Tokyo, once part of Yono Province. Since then, the shop has been carried through four generations, with Saito now continuing the legacy as both owner and artisan. Like the combs themselves, the family's story is resilient, flexible, and refined by time.

Old Meets New

While combs were once symbols of elegance in Edo society—the city that later became modern Tokyo—and even tokens of affection exchanged during proposals, they continue to resonate with new generations. "Our customers used to be mostly grandmothers," Saito notes. "Now we see more women in their 20s and 30s, even men. They find us through social media, and they want tools that last."

This shift has been encouraged by the Edo Tokyo Kirari Project, a Tokyo Metropolitan Government

initiative. The goal of this project is to refine the "treasures of Tokyo," including long-established Edo-Tokyo-period craft shops and their traditional skills, and to convey an appreciation of them to the world. Being selected gave Yonoya wider visibility, particularly overseas. "We've welcomed many visitors from Europe," Saito says. "They understand craftsmanship, whether in wine, instruments, or leather. They also share a culture of treasuring wood, so they connect with our work deeply."



Yonoya's small but inviting Asakusa storefront.

Continuity and Creation

For Saito, maintaining Yonoya's reputation means balancing reverence for the past with openness to change. The shop also makes hair accessories in casual styles and accessible price points to appeal to younger customers, without compromising quality. "Preserving tradition isn't passive," he reflects. "It's like creation. Every step—carving, lacquering, finishing—changes subtly with each generation of artisans. My job is to make sure those changes don't blemish the Yonoya name."

Above all, he sees his work as part of a longer conversation across time. "When I polish a comb, I think of my grandfather," he says. "Would he approve, or tell me to do it again? Even now, I feel like he's still teaching me."

Edo Tokyo Kirari Project

The Edo Tokyo Kirari Project introduces representative Tokyo brands, based on the concept of "Old meets New." We have selected enterprises that possess evident quality and beautiful design, and that represent a wellspring of new, inspired approaches to fulfilling contemporary lifestyle needs.



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