Interview of JapanCraft21 founder, Steve Beimel, by journalist Richard Varner.

VARNER: Well, **BEIMEL**-san, we go back almost fifty years to those days in Japanese language school at Nichibei Kaiwagakuin in Tokyo, from where I remember you as the intense student of *nihongo*.

Now, you're bringing this passion to JapanCraft21 for revitalizing vulnerable but still viable traditional Japanese crafts. You and your colleagues are taking action by planning and producing a series of contests. You've told me the last eight months have been a "whirlwind." So, what's been happening?
chart
BEIMEL: We first had to decide a contest theme, criteria for judging, and a timeline. We originally thought that we would announce the winner in March and ended up extending the date about 5 or 6 times.



VARNER: Why was this?

BEIMEL: We had to design an application form, find professional, experienced contest judges, design flyers and put together a website.

VARNER: Sounds like a load of work. What were the specific challenges?

BEIMEL: Well, unlike other contests where contestants submit artistic works to be judged, the challenge of our contest was to find the best idea that would really make a difference in Japan's rapidly shrinking craft world. Although offering a prize of 5

million yen ($50,000) and a team of mentors for one year, it took a long time to get people to apply. Some said that it was too good to be true. Others said that they couldn't understand what we wanted from our applicants.

VARNER: So, what was the initial response?

BEIMEL: For the first few weeks, we got very few applications, so we expended a lot of energy reaching out to everyone we knew to spread the word. About two weeks before the deadline, we still had only about 20 applications, but felt relieved that we at least had enough contestants to proceed with the contest.

VARNER: How did things work out in the end?

BEIMEL: Fortunately, during the last 2 weeks, the applications started to pour in. We ended up with 154 applications, many more than the 50 we had originally hoped to receive.

VARNER: That was a relief, I'm sure, but then the real work started, right?



Contest qualifying judges © 2021 Taishi Yokotsuka for Asia Society Japan Center & JapanCraft21

BEIMEL: Right! Our fantastic team of volunteer qualifying judges read through the applications and we ended up with 50 semi-finalists, who were asked to resubmit a much longer, more detailed application. All told, the process of evaluating applications took many hours. Through that process, our selection criteria became

much more refined, which eventually assisted us in selecting 10 people out of a field of many truly excellent applications.

VARNER: So what happened next in your whirlwind?

BEIMEL: We next had to prepare our 10 finalists for their 30-minute interviews with our panel of 6 professional judges. Our contest coordinator Keiko Kamei and I did this by holding a 30-minute rehearsal for each of the finalists. Our intention was that all finalists would present their concepts in the clearest and most concise ways.

VARNER: This still left a herculean task for the judges.



Contest panel of finalist judges, (l to r) **Yuji AKIMOTO** Art critic, museum director; **Masamitsu SAITO** Bamboo art authority, **Eriko HORIKI** Director of Eriko Horiki & Associates; **Shihoko FUKUMOTO** Textile artist; **Reiko SUDO** Director of NUNO Corporation; **Tsutomu HORIUCHI** University professor.
© 2021 Taishi Yokotsuka for Asia Society Japan Center & JapanCraft21

BEIMEL. Yes, it did. Although our six judges spent considerable time preparing for the interviews, reading all of the applications and viewing all of the images presented, we decided to create a Power Point presentation for them about each finalist. Though each was only about 2 minutes long, the presentations gave the judges a very quick and clear review so that each finalist was clearly present in their thoughts at the beginning of each interview. The Power Point included the essence of the long form application -- respective project titles, a concise statement of the project concept, supporting images, a list of their own personal strengths that would prepare

them for carrying out their projects and, finally, how they would use the prize funding and what kind of mentoring they wanted.

VARNER: And this left the final event ...

BEIMEL: ... a 90 minute-award ceremony for guests as well as an on-line audience. Because we sponsored the contest in collaboration with the Asia Society Japan Center, we were able to benefit from their highly professional director and staff. However, despite the fact that the Asia Society knew how to put together such a major event, we still had to put in countless hours of work -- creating a printed program, official banners for the room, a word by word script with stage directions for all participants, gifts for guests, press releases, invitations for both in person and on-line, covid-related considerations, and on and on.

VARNER: So, walk us through what happened on the day ...



Emcee **Shinya MAEZAKI,** assistant professor at Kyoto Womens University
© 2021 Taishi Yokotsuka for Asia Society Japan Center & JapanCraft21

BEIMEL: The day began with a rehearsal for the award ceremony. We then held a 3-hour "advice session" so each of the 10 finalists could meet privately with the panel of 6 judges to get their professional advice and feedback about how they could proceed in their projects. Finally on the same day, we organized a time for each of the finalists to be professionally interviewed and recorded on video, to be used to support and promote each of them.

VARNER- Who won the first place Ronnie Prize?



(l to r) Sculptor of Ronnie Prize trophy, **Kan YASUDA,** JapanCraft21 **Steve BEIMEL** and Ronnie Prize Winner, **Takuya TSUTSUMI**

BEIMEL: Takuya TSUTSUMI and his project partner Sachiko MATSUYAMA won the Ronnie Prize. In addition, we awarded each of the 10 finalists the JapanCraft21 Award of Excellence and announced the creation of a special fund of 5 million yen ($50,000 U.S.D.) aimed at joining them into a powerful group of mutual support. The First Prize winner is also included as part of this group of 10.



Awards of Excellence Recipients: (l to r) **Kohei MURATA, Masakuni SEKI, Takuya TSUTSUMI, Ryuta FUKUDA, Sachi KITAGAWA, Asako TAKEMI, Tohru TSUJI, Katsumi KAKO, Tomoya HYODO, Kenta HIRAI.**

© 2021 Taishi Yokotsuka for Asia Society Japan Center & JapanCraft21

VARNER: Seems as if you are tightly focused on group building.

BEIMEL: Yes, in addition to quarterly symposia with various experts, group branding and a professional bilingual webpage for each winner, additional benefits will be announced as the group dynamic evolves.

VARNER: Where do we go now?

BEIMEL: For the next month, we will be working closely with Tsutsumi-san and Matsuyama-san to create a support plan going forward and choose a mentors group for them. We hope to begin the mentors group in mid September, at which time we can also begin to release funds for the winners' project.

VARNER: Describe the winning project.

BEIMEL: Tsutsumi-san's winning project idea is to reconstruct Wood and Lacquer culture via a multi-focused plan including reforestation, craft community development, inter-craft support and employing professional wood working crafts people. The theme of our contest was to revitalize a craft for the 21st century, and this inspiring duo is approaching that task from multiple angles. In addition to planting a variety of trees that are used for crafts in Japan such as Paulownina trees

used for fine sashimono woodworking, rural revitalization and producing beautiful lacquer ware for food serving, Tsutsumi-san has successfully launched some new products, including a Japanese lacquered surfboard, which is not only beautiful, but the lacquer actually enhances the speed of the board, while incorporating visually beautiful craft techniques.

Our next step is to meet with all of the Awards of Excellence recipients and clarify how we can also support them over the next year.



Ronnie Prize Winner, **Takuya TSUTSUMI**

VARNER: What about future contests?

BEIMEL: We are planning to begin our next context early in 2022. The first contest took a lot of time and effort to pull off, but we believe that we can simply reuse many of the materials for the now completed contest. It should be considerably easier the second time.

VARNER: So, a well-earned rest is next?

BEIMEL Not really. There is much that needs to be done going forward. We need to re-create our website so it is user friendly, incorporate as a non-profit organization in Japan and continue to build our membership base. Also, even though we held a successful contest we are still almost entirely unknown here in Japan, so we need to

focus on PR. Finally, we need to continue to support our school of traditional building skills, aiming to raise the skill level of young carpenters, plasterers, gardeners, etc. to the level of mastership.

There was much trial and error and roads that led to nowhere for a long time after we started JapanCraft21 in January of 2018. Then in November, 2020 after seeing six young working carpenters graduate from our school and then after the awards ceremony for our contest on July 6th, I finally came to feel that we are beginning to make a difference. Thank you to all our supporting members, volunteers and cheerleaders and welcome to the beginning of a Golden Age of Japanese Traditional Crafts!