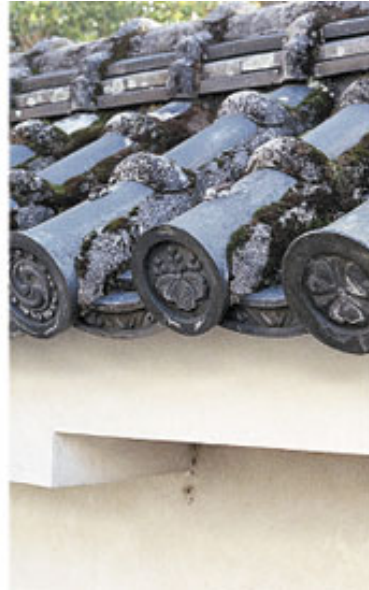




## BY DESIGN



Don't be fooled by the beautiful calligraphy—that's unfiltered (nigori) local-brew saké. Beware of rice chunks.



Himeji Castle: Ancient logos abound.



Cookie Monster is a hero in Japan and was narrowly beaten in the gubernatorial race in his home prefecture.

Coming back from Japan is always a little freaky. The colors in your country don't look as bright, everything's filthy, and you realize that "presentation" for your native cuisine means cilantro and a cloth napkin for your club sandwich. Even the people look out of focus in comparison. Sure, the head is better at home and full-grown women don't act like moony-eyed stuffed animals, but Japan really is heaven for design nerds.

It's not that the Japanese all know how to design. It's that, unlike the rest of the world, design jobs don't seem to get relegated to anyone with eyes and a Mac. You wouldn't let your brother represent you in court because he's got the endearing charisma of Matlock, and in Japan, you get the sense that people wouldn't trust their public image to their brother Phil who likes to paint and "knows Corel Draw." Design in Japan is appreciated as a profession best left to professionals. Unfortunately, decent design is also a service most businesses aren't willing to pay for. At home, it's certainly better than that, but because the history and high standards for graphic and ergonomic design aren't what they are in Japan, you still get a lot of this:

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Sure, if a business occupies more than a cubic inch of real estate anywhere in Tokyo, they probably have thought long and hard about what their logo's going to be. And hey, if the great-grandkids are already paying for your crepe stand, why not have a good-looking menu? This seems to be the going philosophy. Turn any corner in Japan and you'll see enough great use of type or product design that even the most accomplished of designers will end up feeling so shitty it's like they were responsible for Paper magazine. On more than one occasion I found myself

staring at the incredible ingenuity that went into the "no tools required" butter-and-jam package/dispenser or my never-get-soggy rice-and-nori snack.

The attention given to design trickles into the technology, too. Press printing is so fine, it would put a Goya etching to shame, and it hurts me like you can't believe to have to come home to North American printing standards. Somehow, it's universally known that you should put a professional pianist in front of a Steinway or Bösendorfer, but on this side of the Pacific, print designers are stuck playing on toy pianos.

Of course, design and the importance of appearances get a bit fanatical in the land of silk and genki. Buildings under construction are wrapped Christo-style, so as to save your eyes the trauma of seeing gyprock and unfinished tiling. And while the joy of Japanese wrapping is a wonder to behold, things are generally overpackaged. The salted peas you bought in the store come braced in a giant plastic grate to keep them from looking sad and saggy all at the bottom of the package. Your little mochi snack is wrapped like you just bought a diamond necklace.

This isn't just culture worship—they are still xenophobic. I just wish this hemisphere could make designers' lives as easy. My New York expat friend told me that despite similarly ridiculous rent prices in Japan and the widespread practice of landlords extorting five months rent before you can move into an apartment, you can make a living as a freelancer there, whereas you would have to fit in a rub-and-tug between business cards to make a living freelancing in the Big Apple. In Japan, the massage is free.

### 3EIGE

*Send your portfolios, zines, show catalogues, and tormented left ears to Dave Girard, 4200 St. Laurent Blvd. Suite 1005 Montreal, QC, H2W 2R2, or email me at [3eige@3eige.com](mailto:3eige@3eige.com)*