

## turning japanese

IT'S RARE WEARABLE ART WITH AN EXOTIC TWIST – ACCESSORIES CREATED FROM AUTHENTIC JAPANESE SILK WEDDING KIMONOS.

BY MARIE-CHRISTINE SOURRIS

**WHILE IT** may seem strange that these beautiful gowns (often laced with real gold threading) should even be touched let alone cut up, creator Donna Webster is merely trying to give the kimonos new life. Her solution? To recreate them into handbags with her label Kimono Collections.

After living in Asia for many years (across Japan, Borneo and Singapore), Melbourne-born Donna returned to Australia and launched her business from her new homebase of Noosa – after setting up a touring company, heading up HR for international hotel chains and teaching performing arts along the way.

"My first and most impressionable visit to Asia was to Japan when I was 18," says the former dancer of her introduction to the country. Donna loved Japan so much that she moved to Ikeda-cho in the Gifu region and lived there for two years.

"When I left Japan, I wanted to find one beautiful uchikake kimono to hang on my wall," says Donna. It proved nearly impossible to find, despite her extensive contacts. Then some years later, she stumbled across one gorgeous wedding kimono on a marketing trip. "From there I began my treasure hunt," she says. That was 10 years ago, and she's been collecting ever since.

Donna experimented with different ways to display the gowns as art pieces (such as through wall hangings) until she hit on the idea to "honour their beauty" by turning them into bags. Each kimono can be used to create seven or eight unique bags. Priced around the \$2000 mark, no two ever look the same. Even the fabric scraps get put to good use, recycled

into mini accessories such as toys and handbag hooks.

"I wanted to combine truly Australian elements into the Kimono Bag, so I spent more than a year trying to find the right craftsman who would put the time and energy into creating one-of-a-kind wooden handles," Donna says. What she eventually found was Queensland timber craftsman Jamie Bell, who makes every handle from sustainable timber.

She then came across traditional artisan Tone-San, based in Japan, to blend the fine silk and embroidery of the kimonos with the leather trimming used in the handbags and purses. Tone-San has crafted leather goods for many of the most famous Japanese labels.

"It requires an artistic sensibility and a flexible approach to enable two contradictory fabrics to work seamlessly together to create a beautiful piece of art," says Donna.

Clearly, despite the complicated production process involved, Donna's found a winning formula – her creations generate much interest, from casual passersby to overseas buyers. After exhibiting at Australian Fashion Week in Sydney earlier this year, she has recently returned from a European stint that saw her present Kimono Collections at specialty gallery showings during Milan Fashion Week. Next stop? Dubai next month, for a trade show to selected United Arab Emirates buyers.

Visit the website (soon to feature an online shop) to view all the different styles of bag available.

[www.kimonocollections.com.au](http://www.kimonocollections.com.au)



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