

THE STRAITS TIMES

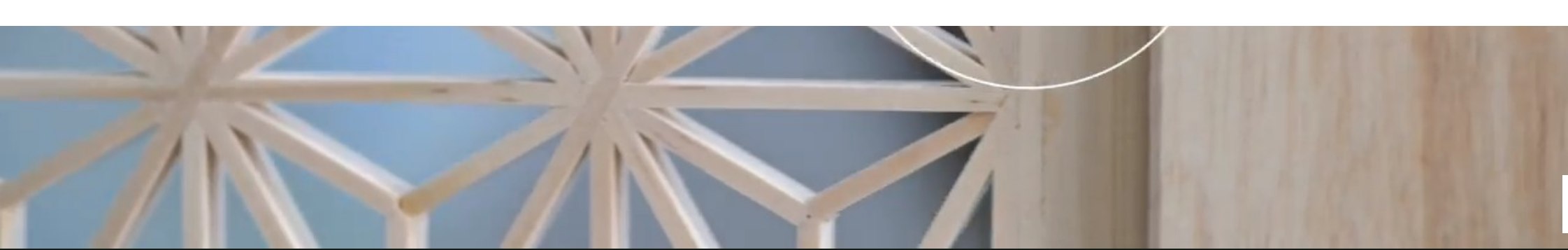
FOR SUBSCRIBERS

Made In Singapore: Bespoke carpenter brings Japanese craftsman spirit home



THE STRAITS TIMES

MADE IN
SINGAPORE
SEASON 2



Alvan Koh, 41, is the only Japanese-style woodcrafter in Singapore who produces handmade heirloom furniture.



Jan Lee

PUBLISHED DEC 26, 2020, 12:00 PM SGT

SINGAPORE - When Mr Alvan Koh began tinkering with the hand tools and spare wood lying around the house about six years ago, he wanted to make a wooden box for his wife.

It was meant for her to keep her elven necklace, a piece inspired by the fantasy novel and film series *The Lord Of The Rings*.

Little did he know it would spark an enduring passion for carpentry and he would end up starting a handmade furniture label.

The 41-year-old says: "It turned into a hobby that I found myself putting more and more hours into. One day, I thought, 'If I'm having so much fun doing this, why not make it my profession?'"

So, he started his Mokko Wood Studio in 2018. It was not easy going pro, says Mr Koh, whose previous jobs include working at a bank and being an English teacher. He was a private-hire driver when he ventured into carpentry full time.

He recalls: "Any YouTube video on carpentry, I had probably seen it a few times. Whatever I watched at night, I would put into practice the next day, so I improved very quickly in the beginning. But I plateaued in my self-learning journey after a few years and realised I needed someone to teach me."

But there were no suitable lessons for carpentry here, let alone Japanese woodworking, which interested Mr Koh.

Despite not speaking Japanese, he sourced for apprenticeships in Japan by sending e-mail messages to carpenters there, but he had little luck initially. Then, one of the Japanese carpenters he approached started a one-month course conducted in English in Kyoto.

With his wife's support, the father of two children, aged eight and nine, moved to Kyoto for a month in 2018 to hone his skills under a temple builder.



Mr Alvan Koh started Mokko Wood Studio in 2018. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

He says of making the jump to becoming a professional carpenter: "I had doubts, like 'Am I good enough?' or 'Is this even viable?'.

"Going to Japan gave me confidence as my master encouraged me. By then, I also had friends and family members asking me to make small pieces of furniture for them, such as cabinets, shelves and boxes. If people were asking for my work, then I must be good enough."

Mr Koh says he used a five-figure sum from his savings for his trip to Japan and to buy tools for his carpentry venture.



A variety of traditional Japanese hand-tools are used for the artisanal crafting. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

He runs his studio out of a rented space in Tampines, where the bulk of his time is spent crafting bespoke furniture pieces. He often uses expensive European wood such as walnut, oak and maple.

As all his pieces are handcrafted, he can take on only a maximum of three commissions a month. Prices for his sideboards start at \$4,000, while tables start at \$3,500 and coffee tables start at \$1,500.

The self-confessed perfectionist has never made a piece of furniture for himself, though.

"After I make something, I always think what I could have done better," he says. "I want the perfect piece for myself, but no piece is perfect to me yet."



As all his pieces are handcrafted, he can take on only a maximum of three commissions a month. PHOTO: MOKKO WOOD STUDIO

He also runs a monthly woodworking course and one-off coaster-making sessions using the Japanese kumiko woodworking technique.

"This was a promise I made to myself in Japan. When I wanted to learn from someone here, I could not find anyone. But there must be people out there with similar interests, so I wanted to provide a platform to teach others," he says.

Learning is a journey that will not end for Mr Koh, whose expertise is in cabinetry. Last year, he took a short course taught by a fellow carpenter who specialises in making chairs.



Mr Alvan Koh checks the finishing of his kumiko door panel. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

Before the Covid-19 pandemic, he had plans this year to return to Japan to visit his master and hone his planing skill - to take the thinnest possible shaving from a block of wood - for a carpentry competition there.

He adds: "The learning never stops. I think that's a philosophy tied to the shokunin (Japanese for craftsman) spirit - we are never a finished product."

MORE ON THIS TOPIC

Made in Singapore: Droolworthy handmade rubber stamps

Watch: More videos in Made in Singapore series

• The video is part of Made In Singapore, the last in a series of videos produced by Singapore Press Holdings in partnership with the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), as part of IMDA's Public Service Broadcast initiative. The second season of Made In Singapore celebrates the entrepreneurial spirit of Singaporeans who design and handcraft goods, making a business out of what they love.

Join ST's Telegram channel here and get the latest breaking news delivered to you.

RECOMMENDED

Veteran Hong Kong actor Ng Man Tat, who worked with Stephen Chow, dies at 70

Feb 27, 2021

S. Korean actress Ham So-won, married to a man 18 years younger, reacts to divorce rumours

Feb 26, 2021

askST: How to avoid mental health discrimination when hiring

Branded Content

SMU's interdisciplinary curriculum equips students for a post-COVID world

Branded Content



Subscribe today

Get unlimited access to exclusive stories and analyses by the ST newsroom

Choose your plan

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Data Protection Policy](#)

[Need help? Reach us here.](#)

[Advertise with us](#)


[Sign up for our daily newsletter](#)

Enter your e-mail

[More newsletters](#)

By registering, you agree to our [T&C](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).

- SINGAPORE
- ASIA
- WORLD
- OPINION
- LIFE
- BUSINESS
- TECH
- SPORT
- VIDEOS
- PODCASTS
- MULTIMEDIA

 [E-paper](#)

 [Podcasts](#)


 [Facebook](#)

 [RSS Feed](#)

 [Instagram](#)

 [Telegram](#)

 [Twitter](#)

 [Youtube](#)

