

TOKYO TALES

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Furoshiki

Overflowing paper recycling bin? With Christmas imminent, you know it will get even worse after all the wrapping paper has been added to it! So try an ancient Japanese alternative Beautiful, adaptable and reusable, *furoshiki* are traditional Japanese wrapping or carrying cloths that will last for years and are making a comeback here.

Carrying cloths have been used in all cultures and countries for thousands of years. Picture Dick Whittington with his cloth bundle tied to a stick! But only the Japanese have turned carrying items in a "handkerchief" into an art form.

A *furoshiki* is a square piece of cloth made of any fabric in various sizes and beautiful colours and prints. It has been used to transport every imaginable object, from gifts to lunches, vegetables, books or even babies! We recognise the baby sling used in almost every country in the world, and the *furoshiki* is just an extension of that.

These wrapping cloths have a long history in Japan. A cloth dating from about the 8th century which was used to wrap Imperial treasures is said to be the oldest of its kind still in existence. In daily life, *furoshiki* were most commonly used to carry towels and bathing items to and from the public baths. These cloths were then used to wrap outdoor clothes in while bathing and after the *furoshiki* was spread on the wet floor to stand on while redressing. After that, the bathing articles would be rewrapped and carried home.

As travel became more common, there was an increasing need to carry things around, and so the *furoshiki* became an everyday essential.

However, during the 20th century Japan went through a period of rapid economic growth, entered the worldwide arena of mass consumption and plastic bags quickly became commonplace. *Furoshiki* faded from everyday life and became a special item to be used for on occasions full of etiquette such as weddings and funerals.

Recently though, along with increased environmental awareness, *furoshiki* has been rediscovered and re-marketed.

One can attend courses that raise awareness about Japan's traditional culture and how to use these cloths to fit into the modern lifestyle, learning how to tie your *furoshiki* to create a laptop bag or a general shopping tote. The material is soft and pliable enabling the square to be folded and tied into all kinds of elegant shapes and styles. As well as carrying items in this cloth, it's most commonly used as a tidy and artistic way of gift-wrapping. Objects of all shapes and sizes are easily accommodated in this piece of cloth and no sticky tape is required.

If you are like me and make a complete hash of neatly wrapping awkwardly shaped gifts in paper, why not try folding and tying them in material instead? Make Christmas easy for yourself and for the planet by starting a new trend for reusable packaging.

For detailed instructions on how to fold and tie a *furoshiki* have a look at <http://www.env.go.jp/en/focus/attach/060403-5.html>

