

"Candy girl" breathes new life into ancient Japanese art form

By Anne Atlas Obscura, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.25.18

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Image 1. For 17 years, Miyuki awed her audiences with her candy craftsmanship. Photo: Flickr/Jeff Christiansen

Amezaiku is the traditional Japanese art of making candy sculptures. A long time ago, Japanese craftsmen performed this feat in front of a crowd. It was close to dying out. However, amezaiku has been given a second life by social media and new stores.

Until recently, an amezaiku artist named Candy Miyuki made candy figures at Disney World's Epcot in Florida. She worked at the Japan Pavilion for 17 years. Miyuki left Disney in 2013, but still makes her sweet treats. In the summer, she made amezaiku for an art exhibition at the Tampa Museum of Art in Florida. The museum was showing the work of Yayoi Kusama. She is a famous Japanese artist who uses bright colors and covers her artwork in dots.

Miyuki makes her amezaiku out of starch syrup. She heats it to 200 degrees Fahrenheit and then pulls it like taffy. Each piece starts with a golf ball-sized lump of hot candy on a stick. She can produce anything from a purple pig to a glittering dragon.

"This Is My New Job"

The road to sugar stardom was bumpy. Miyuki says she is the first female amezaiku artist to receive formal training. About 25 years ago, she picked up a newspaper in Japan and came across an interview with an amezaiku artist. "This is my new job," she remembers thinking.

Miyuki set out to find a candy-making teacher in Tokyo. She ended up calling her local police station to ask if they knew about any candy artists. One policeman said that amezaiku was old-fashioned and that it would be impossible to find a teacher. Another officer pointed her in the right direction, and she got the phone number of Takeo Kimura, an amezaiku artist.

Miyuki's first meeting with her teacher-to-be was not ideal. During their first conversation, he told her he didn't want to teach a woman. Miyuki says that was a typical attitude. Craftsmen usually wanted to pass their arts down to male heirs, while women were encouraged to be housewives. Still, she became his student.

He taught her the most important forms of amezaiku, the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac. The Chinese zodiac is based on a 12-year cycle. Each year is symbolized by an animal. Miyuki was Kimura's last student; he died one year after they met.

Miyuki Took Her Talents To Disney World

Miyuki practiced making her sugar sculptures, and soon Disney came calling. Disney officials wanted an amezaiku artist at Epcot. Miyuki got the job, and in 1996, she moved to Florida with her young daughter for the job.

At her booth in the Japan Pavilion, Miyuki made her sugar sculptures in front of awed guests. One lucky spectator got to take the final piece home. People asked for dragons and unicorns most often, which she is able to whip up in two minutes. Miyuki's favorite is elaborate candy faces, which can take up to half an hour each.

The traditional art form does have its challenges. While Florida is known for its balmy weather, the cooler winters meant that her candy would harden faster. In the summer, she could take three minutes per piece. But in the winter, the candy would be soft enough to work for just one minute. Plus, there were cultural differences. Sometimes guests, especially children, pointed out that her candy sculptures didn't taste sweet. Miyuki says Japanese candy contains less sugar than American sweets. "There's too much sugar in America," she says.

"Candy art is very rare Japanese culture," she says. Mikuki hopes it will become even more popular. While there's no more Candy Miyuki at Epcot, her influence continues in a different way. Miyuki's daughter now works for Disney World as a dancer.



Quiz

1 Read the following paragraph from the section "Miyuki Took Her Talents To Disney World."

The traditional art form does have its challenges. While Florida is known for its balmy weather, the cooler winters meant that her candy would harden faster. In the summer, she could take three minutes per piece. But in the winter, the candy would be soft enough to work for just one minute. Plus, there were cultural differences. Sometimes guests, especially children, pointed out that her candy sculptures didn't taste sweet. Miyuki says Japanese candy contains less sugar than American sweets. "There's too much sugar in America," she says.

Which of the following is an accurate explanation of what this paragraph means?

- (A) It is easier to make amezaiku in the cooler weather of Japan than in sunny Florida.
- (B) Differences between the United States and Japan affect Miyuki's candy sculptures.
- (C) Children eat less candy in Japan than in the United States because it is seen as a special treat.
- (D) American and Japanese cultures have very different ideas about raising children.

2 Read the introduction [paragraphs 1-3]. Which sentence from the introduction shows WHY amezaiku is gaining popularity?

- (A) A long time ago, Japanese craftsman performed this feat in front of a crowd.
- (B) However, amezaiku been given a second life by social media and new stores.
- (C) Until recently, an amezaiku artist named Candy Miyuki made candy figures at Disney World's Epcot in Florida.
- (D) Miyuki left Disney in 2013, but still makes her sweet treats.

3 Which two statements are MAIN ideas from the article?

1. *Miyuki overcame a traditional attitude about women in Japan.*
2. *Miyuki has been making amezaiku in the United States since 1996.*
3. *Amezaiku artists create figures based on the Chinese zodiac.*
4. *Amezaiku is gaining popularity among American tourists.*

- (A) 1 and 3
- (B) 2 and 4
- (C) 1 and 2
- (D) 3 and 4

4 Select the answer choice that summarizes the article.

- (A) Amezaiku is gaining popularity as Miyuki carries on the tradition of making candy sculptures.
- (B) Amezaiku is one of the most popular destinations for people visiting Epcot in Disney World.
- (C) Amezaiku created by Miyuki is currently on display at the Tampa Museum of Art in Florida.
- (D) Amezaiku often incorporates figures based around the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac.