



workbench. Using the pointed end, Sanemori teases out any hair that is arranged in the wrong direction before cutting the base of the hair using a measuring plate called a *sungi*.

The hair selected for the core of the brush is then covered in *funori*, a natural glue made from seaweed extract, before an extremely fine-toothed comb is applied in order to extract any remaining bent or backwards-facing hairs. Hair is arranged in a small bunch, then placed inside a ring to make sure that the volume of hair is correct. The core, now complete, is wrapped in a layer of softer, longer hair, set aside earlier. “This [layer] keeps the bristles of the core from poking out and ruining a calligraphy stroke,” explains Sanemori.

After drying, the brush tips are tied at the base, which is then seared with a hot iron, melting together the hair. “When the weather is good we would do

this step outside,” says Sanemori with a smile, as the acrid smoke from burning hair fills his workshop. Once fitted into the brush handle, the hair is dipped into seaweed glue, helping to remove any remaining dirt and rice husk ash from the body of the brush. A final once-over with a fine-toothed comb removes any loose hairs before excess glue is squeezed out using a cotton string.

Although there are a few other brush-making areas in Japan, Sanemori is confident that Kumano brushes will stand the test of time. “After the war, calligraphy was banned and the demand for brushes dropped to basically zero,” he explains. “Rather than go under, the entire town shifted its focus to producing cosmetic brushes and managed to survive until the ban was lifted. The artisans of Kumano are skilled. I’m sure they will find a way to adapt no matter what happens in the future.”

○



A master brush artisan is a master of all types of animal hair. The job is to know the characteristics of each type in order to be able to arrange the different hairs in layers and make the optimal brush. The tips of the brushes themselves are never cut or shaved—the hairs are cut at the base only, in order to be fitted into the handle.