

# How the Japanese Paper Lantern Became a Modern Design Staple

A new exhibition traces the *chôchin*, from 11th-century Japan to Isamu Noguchi and IKEA

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An image of paper lanterns in Yokohama, Japan, in the early 20th century is part of an exhibition on their history at the musée des Arts décoratifs et du Design in Bordeaux.

Photo: Courtesy musée des Arts décoratifs et du Design in Bordeaux

As iconic design objects go, perhaps none is more simple—and to universally beloved—as the paper lantern. This month, an inspired and beautiful exhibition at the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design in Bordeaux, France, will explore the legacy of the *chôchin*. Beginning January 31, the museum's original 18th-century building will play host to *As movable as Butterflies, The Chôchin of Japan*, which explores the history and influence of the traditional Japanese paper lantern throughout the centuries. The story of the simple paper lantern is told through objects, prints, photographs, and films, with loans from across the globe.

"The starting point was my personal fascination with these objects," explains Etienne Tornier, the curator responsible for the show, on how it came about. "The *chôchin* are objects which articulate material culture from one civilization to a global history of design."

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Another image, on loan from the New York Public Library, shows paper lantern motifs in the early 20th century.

Photo: New York Public Library archive

Indeed, the first references to these traditional paper lanterns appear as early as the 11th century, and the earliest identified illustrations hail from the 16th century. The Japanese word *chôchin* refers to the traditional lanterns with a frame of split bamboo covered with paper, which can collapse flat into itself, and are usually designed to hang from a hook or a pole.

*Chôchin* have served as creative inspiration to designers since the 1920s, when Japanese-American artist and designer Isamu Noguchi created his first light based on them. He called his collection "Akari," which means *light* in Japanese, with Noguchi referring to the two meanings of the word—"light" as in both illumination and weightlessness. Noguchi designed approximately 100 different models, each hand-crafted with bamboo to create the shape and with *washi* paper from the bark of the mulberry tree.



Akari by Isamu Noguchi.

Photo: François Durzi

Noguchi expanded on the traditional hanging lantern and innovated with designs for floor and table lamps. These models, in turn, have served as inspiration for innumerable mass-produced lights, with versions surfacing everywhere from IKEA to Wayfair. Given their widespread recognition, telling the story of these simple paper lanterns has been a long time coming. As to whether it is the story of traditional materials in the hands of modern design that made their way into households around the world.



Designer Jaime Hayon's Fornikami pendant, another take on the traditional design, shown here paired with graphic designs.

Photo: Courtesy of Jaime Hayon

"I hope the public will realize that these objects which surround us are full of history," Tornier tells AD PRO. "But before anything," he qualifies, "I would like for people to be dazzled by these lights."

Curiously enough, at the same time, there are two complementary shows on right now at the Isamu Noguchi Museum in Long Island City, Queens. "Akari: Sculpture by Other Means" is devoted entirely to the Akari lamps of Noguchi. Concurrently, the invitational show "Akari Unfolded: A Collection by Yusei & Maki" features 24 lamps produced by the dynamic French design studio featuring six designers, all inspired by Noguchi's Akari. Both shows are on view until May 5. You will never look at the simple paper lantern the same again.

"As movable as Butterflies, The Chôchin of Japan" runs January 31 through May 19 at the Museum of Decorative Arts and Design Bordeaux: [mdd.bordeaux.fr](http://mdd.bordeaux.fr)