

## LIFESTYLE

# Finding a slice of creativity during a global pandemic

Many people have picked up new hobbies during the pandemic, it's not too late to start yours

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As we all deal with disruptions to our daily routines thanks to COVID-19, people have been looking for other ways to fill their time by picking up paintbrushes, sewing kits or cameras, and getting creative in quarantine.

Under instruction to stay at home, there has been space to remember and relearn ways of creating that were left behind as life got too busy. Ingenuity has come from boredom and social media has been colored with crafty reimaginings of the protective *yōkai* (monster) Amabie, ingenious homemade face masks and endless sourdough recipes.

The call of inspiration during a time of uncertainty is not a new phenomena. It's thought that William Shakespeare might have written "King Lear" during an epidemic in 1564. Back in 1665, during his time in isolation due to the Great Plague, Sir Isaac Newton asked himself "How does the universe work?" and ended up proposing the theory of gravity, and Edvard Munch got his creative juices flowing and painted a series of artworks during the Spanish Flu outbreak of 1918.

Now, as we move into what Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has called "*aratana nichijō*" (a new normal) of living alongside the novel coronavirus, there's an opportunity to take what you learned during your time at home and put it into practice.

Tokyo-based artist Manami Sasaki has been making the most of isolation during the state of emergency by getting creative with an unconventional medium: bread. From a surprisingly accurate Zen garden (complete with sour cream-raked pebbles) to elegant cranes and reproductions of famous artworks, Sasaki has made bread her new canvas. She then posts designs on [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/sasamana1204/) under the caption "STAY HOMEのあさごはん" (stay home *no asagohan*, stay home breakfast).

But these aren't unattainable — or inedible. Sasaki shows before and after shots of the toast pre- and post-cooking, and lists the ingredients used for each theme.

She says she came up with the idea of using toast as art after having more time to spend making breakfast at home rather than grabbing something quick at a convenience store, or skipping the meal altogether.

"I was living a busy life, but in this situation I have learned to value the rhythm of the day," says Sasaki. "I get up early in the morning and stick to my breakfast. My mind feels at ease with the richness that comes from taking the time to do this."

Creating artwork during a global pandemic may seem trivial, but taking care of mental health and general well-being is an important key to happiness — especially in such an extended period of uncertainty.

“If your mind is restless day after day and your mood is unstable, you will be more and more unhappy over the next few months,” Sasaki explains. “You have to take care of your own moods. For me, who I am is to express myself. So I’m keeping my mind on creating.”

Sasaki isn’t the only one who sees the value of creativity during a time of uncertainty. Amber Imai, a psychology student at Temple University Japan, paints in her free time.

“It is important to get creative during this pandemic, to suppress boredom, express those hours of late-night rumination and generally be used as an outlet for frustration,” she says.

But for Imai, who lives alone in her Tokyo apartment, the isolation has been a challenge.

“Part of the creative process is meeting like-minded people and getting to critique each other’s work or bounce off ideas,” she explains. “Isolation makes you face yourself — the good, bad and the ugly. So while I can’t say I’ve enjoyed this time, I can certainly say I grew a lot from it.”

Riko Monma, an artist and illustrator for The Japan Times, sees it another way.

“Being in lockdown for me isn’t all negative, it means that I have all this time without distraction,” she says. “I’ve always been burdened by time and I don’t have to worry about that now!”

Finding the time to spend on yourself isn’t always easy, though, even when the option of entertaining yourself elsewhere isn’t on the table. Daily chores, video calls and internet browsing (don’t forget Netflix binging) all find a way of taking up all or most of our day. Creativity can have a sizable impact on our emotions and mindset, there are ways to better cultivate your creativity — even if for just a small time.

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A moment of Zen: Artist Manami Sasaki created a Zen garden on her bread complete with sour cream-raked pebbles, walnuts, macadamia nuts and matcha powder. | MANAMI SASAKI

It's also important to remember that as Japan gradually reopens after the end of its state of emergency, most events have been canceled this summer. What may have taken up your attention in the years past isn't necessarily going to be around this time, so you don't have to feel like you missed your shot at trying something new in these past couple of months. Here are a few tips on how to start creating:

**Keep it simple:** The most daunting part of any creative process is the blank page. Not knowing where to start, what stroke to color the canvas or simply even what project to work on.

“The output should be simple,” advises Sasaki. “Try writing a journal, cooking with different ingredients than usual, tying your hair in a different way, stretching, singing. With a little ingenuity, you can take care of yourself.”

**Embrace the ennui:** You might be thinking that you're bored already, that you've been unable to do much to entertain yourself for months. But are you really *letting* yourself be bored?

Studies have shown that actually being bored, or leaving some space in your mind to daydream rather than filling the time scrolling social media feeds on the internet, can actually allow you to be more creative. Stop thinking about what you want to create, spend some downtime not doing much and then see what you produce.

**Don't pile on pressure:** Yes, Shakespeare may have gotten his writing flowing during a lockdown, but you don't need to pressure yourself. Take the time to enjoy being creative and avoid setting yourself deadlines and the need to complete huge projects. This is not a normal time, and nobody truly knows what the outcome is going to be, so be kind to yourself and take the pressure off.

"A blank mind, just have at it and be honest," says Imai. "If nothing comes to mind, make a scribble and put a smiley face on it."

"Be yourself and be free," Sasaki adds. "If you can be yourself, it's beautiful."

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