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Visual Arts

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Meet the diplomat in Seattle who's become a social media star by folding origami cranes

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Hisao Inagaki, Japan's consul general in Seattle, displays a crane he folded Wednesday, Aug. 2, in Seattle. He's been folding an origami crane and recording a daily video sending best wishes to Seattle residents... (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times) [More](#) ▾

By [Aviva Bechky](#) *Seattle Times staff reporter*

The origami cranes pour out of Whole Foods and Metropolitan Market bags, a Hammermill crate and a Häagen-Dazs box.

More than 1,000 pile up on the table: hot pink cranes. Orange and yellow and green cranes. Cranes with stylized waves crashing along their wings, cranes patterned with wisteria and gold fans, cranes with constellations, cranes with chrysanthemums, cranes made from paper commemorating the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo.



Inagaki has folded over 1,000 origami cranes during his time in the city. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

Hisao Inagaki, the consul general of Japan in Seattle, sits down next to the heap of paper birds dumped onto the table. The soft-spoken diplomat has folded a crane every day since he arrived in Seattle on Aug. 21, 2020, posing with each one in a video on his [Instagram](#). He recently surpassed 1,000 cranes — a significant number in Japanese legend. Now, Inagaki is fast approaching the three-year mark as his online popularity continues to build.

As the consul general, Inagaki supervises the office in charge of supporting Japanese citizens in the Seattle area, issuing visas to Japan and facilitating cultural connection between Seattle and Japan. A former coordinator for information systems, he wants to promote recognition in Japan of Seattle's importance as a tech hub. It's Inagaki's responsibility to help organize events such as the Japan Fair, work with federal and local lawmakers, and make himself available to the public.

Inagaki hadn't used the internet much in his prior posting at the Consulate-General of Japan in Chicago. But when he landed in the Northwest in 2020, COVID-19 prevented Inagaki from interacting with local residents in person. He knew he'd need to introduce himself to the community digitally — and thought of orizuru, or the origami crane.



Inagaki shows off his first origami crane. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

“While everyone was having a hard time due to the pandemic, I wanted to use my social media to send a message to everyone expressing my sympathies by folding paper cranes every day,” Inagaki said. Cranes symbolize longevity, so they seemed appropriate.

His first few videos show slight variation — different backgrounds, different shirts — but he’s long since ironed out his look. In almost every post now, Inagaki dresses in a simple button-down and sits in front of a white wall. He speaks directly into the camera.

“Hi, today is my 1,075th day in Seattle,” he might say, holding up a paper crane. “I have folded a 1,075th crane while praying for everyone’s health and peace.”

The next day, it’s the 1,076th. Then the 1,077th. And so on.

Commenters reply eagerly: “Thank you!! Hope you’re having a great day! Can’t wait for crane 1,076.” ... “Your good vibes every day make me feel a little better about the state of the world.”

Though he stores most of the cranes in bags and boxes at the Consulate-General, Inagaki typically folds the birds at home — often after spending a long day lecturing about Japanese culture or international affairs, participating in festival planning committees or talking with Japanese and American officials and academics. Most days, he folds the cranes at 1 or 2 or 3 a.m. “My job is terribly busy,” he laughed.

Each night, Inagaki takes the next piece of origami paper off the top of the stack. He folds the paper into a triangle, then does so again, adding precise crease after precise crease. The process lasts about four minutes and feels calming, like a meditation, he said.



1 of 2 | Though he stores most of the cranes in bags and boxes at the Consulate-General, Inagaki typically folds the birds at home — often after spending a long day lecturing about Japanese culture or international... (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times) **More** ✓

Then he records a video — reading off a script he writes out every day to ensure he doesn't get the crane number wrong — and posts it for an ever-increasing audience. (He had over 19,500 followers as of Monday.)

“For the first year or so, there was only a very small reaction,” Inagaki said. “Then about one year after I started, momentum started to build ... It amaze(s) me how far and how quickly information can spread in our modern world.”

The online popularity translated into in-person recognition, too. Just a month after he moved to Seattle, he was taken aback when someone who'd seen his Instagram greeted him at the post office. That's happened more often ever since, Inagaki said.

Before the Japan Fair this year, emcee Tomo Hoku Angie gave him a white tie and pocket square patterned with mini hearts and illustrations of pink origami cranes. Inagaki wore a suit with the tie and square when he recorded his [1,000th video](#), which he posted May 17 with the same wish as always.

The tradition of folding 1,000 origami cranes to make a wish comes from an ancient legend but became more popular thanks to Sadako Sasaki, a Japanese girl who developed leukemia after the bombing of Hiroshima. In the hospital, Sasaki folded over 1,000 cranes and wished to become healthy. She died soon after. Her story became a symbol of the effects of war.

That story is part of the legacy Inagaki aims to share through his art. He said the publicity from his videos lets him share a piece of Japanese culture with a global audience, and fellow diplomats have praised the videos as an astute way to build connections.

“There are people all over the world who sympathize with my message of praying for health and peace,” Inagaki said. “I have felt that the result of this project coincidentally matched my diplomatic purpose of connecting people from different cultures and societies.”



1 of 3 | Paper cranes in the window of Japan's consulate in Seattle. (Luke Johnson / The Seattle Times)

Tyrah Majors, an adjunct professor of social media and branding at Seattle University, said she hasn't seen other diplomats take such a creative approach to gain a social media following before. These videos make Inagaki more relatable to the public, she says.

“Followers are attracted to positive messages. They're attracted to authenticity. And in his videos, he comes across very peaceful, very humble,” Majors said. “It's all likable, and that can be valuable to him in his profession as a diplomat.”

Inagaki said he doesn't know how long he'll stay in Seattle or where he'll go next: That's up to the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan. Like many diplomats, Inagaki has moved between Japan and the U.S. several times throughout his decades-long career.

But regardless of where he ends up, as long as people reply to his videos — and as long as he doesn't move somewhere without an internet connection — Inagaki said he'll keep appearing on Instagram feeds with his cranes, praying for health and peace for all.

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