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KAWAII CULTURE FROM JAPAN

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## Kawaii Culture from Japan

The Japanese word *kawaii* (an expression for something endearing or adorable) is now recognized all over the world, and the spread of the Internet and social media has helped *kawaii* culture become a transcultural phenomenon spreading beyond national and cultural boundaries. In this issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, we feature an interview with KOMA Kyoko, who researches *kawaii* culture in France and Japan, about *kawaii* culture's history and its globalization. We also introduce artists, fashions, and characters that symbolize Japanese *kawaii* culture, along with various other aspects related to it.



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On the cover: Illustration by MIZUMORI Ado depicting a girl with large, expressive eyes, soft, flowing hair, and charming hair accessories.

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## FEATURES

# Kawaii Culture from Japan



Monchhichi, a stuffed animal released in 1974 by a company in Nishi Shinkoiwa, Katsushika City, is a cute character that is still loved around the world nearly 50 years later. It now appears on manhole covers installed at 10 locations around JR Shinkoiwa Station.

**T**he Japanese word *kawaii* (an expression for something endearing or adorable) is now recognized all over the world, and the spread of the Internet and social media has helped *kawaii* culture become a transcultural phenomenon spreading beyond national and cultural boundaries. In this issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, we feature an interview with KOMA Kyoko, who researches *kawaii* culture in France and Japan, about *kawaii* culture's history and its globalization. We also introduce artists, fashions, and characters that symbolize Japanese *kawaii* culture, along with various other aspects related to it.

Above left: The latest feature allows photos with frames.

Above center: The manga *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* is loved by fans around the world. Manhole covers featuring the main character, Usagi Tsukino (Sailor Moon), and her friends, who live in Minato City, Tokyo, have been installed at five locations in the city, including the entrance to Azabu Juban Shopping Street and around Tokyo Tower.

Above right: Examples of casual, playful nail art from the 2010s.



Photo: SEGA CORPORATION

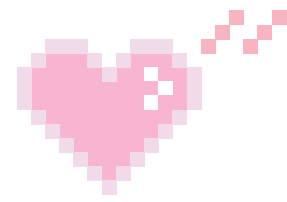


Photo: Japan Nail Art Association (JNAA)

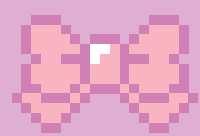


Photo: SEGA CORPORATION

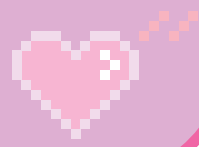


Photo: Courtesy of AOKI Misako



Photo: Courtesy of Akiyoshi



Photo: KITAN CLUB Co., Ltd. ©nagano / Chiikawa Committee



Below left: Illustration by MIZUMORI ADO, whose work has been loved across generations.

Below center: An example of capsule toys featuring the popular character *Chiikawa*.

Below right: AOKI Misako, known as a pioneer of Lolita fashion



Photo: Courtesy of Warner Music Japan Inc.

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, icon of *kawaii* culture (photo from her 2012 album *Pamyu Pamyu Revolution*).

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# The Evolving Kawaii Culture that Transcends Borders

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**T**he Japanese word *kawaii* is now recognized worldwide in its original form. We spoke with Professor KOMA Kyoko of Meiji University, who researches *kawaii* culture in France and Japan.

**The word *kawaii* is generally understood as an expression for something endearing or adorable. Does the English spelling *kawaii* carry the same meaning? How would you define *kawaii*?**

That is actually a very difficult question. Contemporary Japanese *kawaii* exists as a complex culture, expressed in different scripts such as *hiragana*, *katakana*, and the Roman alphabet, and shaped by time, region, media, and individual sensibilities. One of its defining characteristics is that it has become a transcultural phenomenon, spreading beyond national and cultural boundaries. Unlike traditional top-down international cultures disseminated by governments or major media, *kawaii* culture is a bottom-up form of new cultural creation: anyone can freely share information and participate in shaping it. In this way, *kawaii* culture serves as a remarkable example of contemporary international culture, where everyday people actively help shape and drive cultural trends.

**So, was *kawaii* culture born from constantly shifting, fluid values?**

Yes, exactly. A major factor that has made this transcultural phenomenon possible is the spread of the Internet and social media. Digital technology allows individuals to freely share information and connect with people around the world. As a result, *kawaii* culture is no longer confined to a specific region or community—it has become a dynamic phenomenon that continually evolves within a global network.



**KOMA Kyoko**

Professor, School of Information and Communication, Meiji University. Her fields of expertise include transdisciplinary culture, fashion studies, discourse analysis and cultural studies. She has served as Director of the Asian Centre at Mykolas Romeris University in Lithuania and as a Visiting Research Scholar at the International Research Center for Japanese Studies, among other positions. Her major works include *Nihon to Furansu no Kawaii Bunkaron: Naze watasitachi ha kawaiku nakereba naranakattanoka* (*Kawaii Culture in Japan and France: Why We Had to Be Cute*), the co-edited volume *Transboundary Fashion Studies*, and the article *Kawaii Fashion Discourse in the 21st century: Transnationalizing actors in Rethinking Fashion Globalization*, (edited by S. Cheang, E. Greef and TAKAGI.Y).

**Could you tell us about the historical context in which *kawaii* culture first emerged in Japan?**

The foundations of contemporary *kawaii* culture were actually formed between the late 1960s and early 1970s. This was a period when youth culture was rising globally and second-wave feminism was unfolding.<sup>1</sup> In Japan, young women were challenging conventional values and exploring new forms of expression. In 1969, the special edition of *Heibon Punch*—which later became the women's magazine *an an*—introduced the provocative expression *kawaii ojisan* (“cute old men”) for the first time. Young women began to reclaim the word *kawaii*, which had previously been directed at them, and apply it to all sorts of things. Even sexy fashion and adult men could be described as *kawaii*. This was a revolutionary shift in how the term was used, far more than mere wordplay, it reflected a transformation in the con-

sciousness of young people at the time. By taking ownership of the word *kawaii*, they subtly resisted established values and power structures. The spirit of this era laid the groundwork for the diversity and creativity that would later define *kawaii* culture.

**So, the way young people used *kawaii* was a new form of Japanese expression. Then, when did the pop-infused, colorful world evoking *kawaii* begin to globalize?**

In the early 2000s. A particularly symbolic moment came on January 1, 2006, when the *Asahi Shimbun* featured a major front-page article titled *Kawaii Sekai ni Kaze* (“*Kawaii* Takes the World by Storm”), signaling that *kawaii* had gained broad social recognition. The article highlighted Japan's *kawaii* culture, featuring internationally renowned artists dressed in the vibrant fashion then popular in Harajuku (Shibuya



Photo: ©2004 Shimotsuma Monogatari Production Committee ©Takemoto Nobara / Shogakukan

*Shimotsuma Monogatari* (2004) premiered at the Cannes Film Festival and received a standing ovation.

City, Tokyo), and detailed how it was capturing attention overseas.

Several factors contributed to the explosive global spread of *kawaii* culture at this time. In France, the comprehensive Japanese cultural festival Japan Expo,<sup>2</sup> which began in 2000, played a particularly significant role. Since this was a period when a generation that had grown up with anime and manga in the 1980s had reached adulthood, and renewed interest in Japanese culture was emerging alongside the rise of the Internet, Japan Expo attracted enormous attention and participation.

Another important turning point in France was the overseas release of the 2004 film *Shimotsuma Monogatari* (“Kamikaze<sup>3</sup> Girls”), which focuses on Lolita fashion. Starring FUKADA Kyoko, the film drew significant attention abroad as a vivid embodiment of the aspects of Japanese culture connected to *kawaii*.

In the early 2010s, *kawaii* culture gained a new icon in Kyary Pamyu Pamyu. A combination of factors—including the accumulated influence of reader-model culture,<sup>4</sup> street-snap magazines,<sup>5</sup> and the development of Harajuku-style fashion—set the stage for her rise. Kyary Pamyu Pamyu became a symbolic figure

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embodying Japanese pop culture, helping to further spread the popularity of *kawaii* culture around the world.

**Why do you think *kawaii* culture, which originated in Japan, has been embraced overseas?**

In France, the word *kawaii* was officially added to the dictionary *Le Petit Robert* in 2018, defined as “originating from Japanese aesthetics, evoking a childlike worldview (such as pastel colors and depictions of imaginary characters).” However, the way *kawaii* is

interpreted abroad sometimes differs subtly from this definition. One influential concept is *mignonisme* (“the phenomenon of cute”), proposed by French artist Philippe Katerine. In this framework, *mignon*—the French word for “cute”—is understood positively, representing brightness, fun, and creativity. This concept helped create a cultural foundation receptive to *kawaii*.

In European societies such as France, Western values tend to emphasize maturity and beauty, whereas *kawaii* culture values innocence and childlike qualities. These new perspectives likely appealed with



Photo: Courtesy of Warner Music Japan Inc.

Kyary Pamyu Pamyu, icon of *kawaii* culture (photo from her 2012 album *Pamyu Pamyu Revolution*).



Photo: Japan Expo Paris 2025 © Christopher KIBALI

A scene from Japan Expo 2023, one of Europe's largest Japanese cultural festivals, attracting over 250,000 visitors.



become a deeply rooted, universal aesthetic in Japanese society.

At the same time, the widespread use of *kawaii* presents certain challenges. Its prevalence can create subtle social pressure to conform, sometimes limiting the expression of individuality. Moreover, the mindset of “anything is acceptable as long as it’s cute” carries the risk of discouraging

young generations, who are more open to diverse forms of individuality and expression.

#### How has *kawaii* culture evolved in the 2020s?

Since 2018, *kawaii* culture has become increasingly fragmented and diverse. Even within Japan, new variations have emerged that combine descriptive terms, such as *yume-kawaii* (“dreamy cute”) and *retro-kawaii*, creating a complex phenomenon that can no longer be captured by a single definition. This reflects how *kawaii* has moved beyond a temporary trend to

ing critical thinking.

Looking ahead, the key to the future of *kawaii* culture lies in its core traits: diversity and creativity. Japanese culture has the power to absorb foreign influences and reinterpret them to create new value, and *kawaii* culture continues this tradition of inventive cultural production.

By continuing to embrace diverse forms of expression, this culture is likely to grow as a significant phenomenon in the 21st century and achieve even further new developments. ▮

1. Second-wave feminism (late 1960s–1980s) was a movement advocating women’s liberation, focusing on issues such as household roles, bodily autonomy, sexual freedom, and the advancement of women’s status within society.
2. One of Europe’s largest Japanese cultural events, held in Paris, France. Launched in 2000, it showcases a wide range of Japanese culture, including anime, manga, fashion, music, and video games.
3. *Kamikaze* (“divine wind”) was believed to be a wind sent by the gods. In storm-prone Japan, people historically feared the wind, believing that those who did not respect divine authority could be punished by the *kamikaze*.

4. Reader-model culture was a fashion magazine phenomenon in which ordinary readers appear in magazines to showcase their personal styles. Unlike professional models, these “real-life” styles resonated with young readers and had a major influence on Japanese teen culture from the 1990s onward.
5. Street-snap magazines are a Japanese magazine format that developed from the 1990s through the 2000s, featuring photos of young people’s street styles captured in urban areas. Many snapshots were taken, especially in Harajuku, often including details on clothing items and age, making these magazines a key platform for spreading *kawaii* culture and influencing street fashion trends.

# MIZUMORI Ado: A Pioneer of Kawaii Culture Beloved Across Generations

MIZUMORI Ado has long created illustrations that adorably stylize girls, cats, and other animals, with a soft yet captivating charm. Since the 1960s, her cute and whimsical world has been captivating audiences, particularly women. This article explores the personality and works of an artist who continues to lead and inspire *kawaii* culture today. (Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

In the 2020s, the term *retro-kawaii* has become popular in Japan. *Kawaii* is a Japanese word meaning “cute” or “charming,” and in this context it refers to nostalgic, charming designs and fashions—particularly those from the 1960s to the 1980s—that are being reevaluated for their warm, analog feel and distinctive aesthetics. Among the items leading this trend are *Ado-chan* goods, adorned with illustrations by MIZUMORI Ado, who has built a multifaceted career as an illustrator, painter, singer, and stage actress.

MIZUMORI’s illustrations range from cheerful, colorful depictions of girls to romantic portrayals of women with large,

expressive eyes and soft, fluffy hair, rendered in a variety of styles. Since the 1960s, her work has attracted fans across generations. *Ado-chan* goods featuring her illustrations—handkerchiefs, stationery, music boxes, and fancy cases—became popular in department stores and stationery shops nationwide, capturing the hearts of young girls of the time. In recent years, items that appeal to contemporary tastes, such as mascot keychains, embroidered art, and mobile accessories, have also emerged. What is it about her work that continues to connect with and be loved across generations?

MIZUMORI Ado was born in Nihonbashi, Chuo City, Tokyo. According to her 2020 essay collection,<sup>1</sup> her mother—an accomplished artist, *ikebana* (Japanese flower arranging) teacher, and *nihonga* (traditional Japanese



Photo: Courtesy of Ado Studio



Photo: Courtesy of Kawade Shobo Shinsha, Ltd.

Left: Handkerchiefs released in the 1970s can be considered the origin of *Ado-chan* goods, with MIZUMORI herself actively involved in their production.

Center: Illustration by MIZUMORI Ado, whose work has been loved across generations.

Right: Items featuring MIZUMORI’s illustrations currently on sale. Modern items such as smartphone cases and mobile batteries take on a retro charm.



Photo: Courtesy of Gourmandise Co., Ltd.

painting) painter—always kept a sketchbook and colored pencils in Ado's bag, encouraging Ado to draw from an early age. Surrounded by the arts, she spent her childhood enjoying jazz music and tap dance, growing up as a curious and adventurous girl.

After graduating from high school, she undertook a rare study-abroad experience on the lush Hawaiian island of Molokai. Reflecting on the trip, she recalls, "Living on an island so rich in nature completely changed my outlook on life." True to her promise to her mother, the illustrations she created daily in her sketchbook while in Hawaii were later recognized after her return to Japan, providing the launchpad for her career as an illustrator. Around the same time, she made her debut as a jazz singer and stage actress, establishing herself as a versatile, multi-talented artist.

MIZUMORI became known nationwide through her performances on the educational television program *Tanoshii Kyōshitsu* ("Fun Classroom"). Using both hands to draw on a transparent acrylic board, she amazed viewers across Japan. The idea for this unique performance arose during the program's audition, when she was asked about her special skills and replied, "I can draw with both hands."<sup>2</sup>

The short segment, called the *Ado-tan Corner*, showcased her ability to produce vivid, charming illustrations in a brief amount of time. Combined with her bright and endearing personality, the segment quickly gained popularity. From the 1970s onward, MIZUMORI's illustrations appeared on a wide variety of products, helping her establish a beloved, nationwide presence.


While establishing her reputation as an illustrator—serving, for example, as the cover artist for the once-popular manga magazine *Bessatsu Shōjo Friend*<sup>3</sup>—MIZUMORI also pursued a wide range of artistic



Illustration by MIZUMORI Ado depicting a girl with large, expressive eyes, soft, flowing hair, and charming hair accessories.

endeavors, including stage acting, jazz singing, and oil painting.

Reflecting on her work, she confesses, "If I had to choose what I love most... I guess it would be drawing. I don't create my art with the goal of showing it to the world... Unlike singing or acting, drawing is something I can only do alone. It's about solitude and silence."<sup>2</sup>

The girls MIZUMORI depicts are romantic and charming, yet if one looks closely, a subtle sense of sadness and longing emerges, as if her own creative spirit has been infused into the illustrations. It is precisely her rich expressiveness, honed through jazz and theater, that gives her work a depth beyond mere cuteness. This sensibility embodying the freedom at the heart of the later-developing and diversified *kawaii* culture, while also connecting with women's forms of self-expression such as Lolita fashion<sup>4</sup> and *yume-kawaii* ("dreamy cute").<sup>5</sup> Even today, her work continues to be loved by many. 



A portrait of MIZUMORI Ado.

1. Translated from *Migi Muke Hidar!! Hito to Onaji de Nakutte Ii ja Nai. Jibun Rashiku Ikou!* (Right Turn~Left!! It's Okay Not to Be Like Everyone Else. Let's Be Ourselves!), Kawade Shobo Shinsha.
2. Translated from UCHIDA Shizue, *MIZUMORI Ado* (Kawade Shobo Shinsha, 2010).
3. A Japanese *manga* magazine for girls, published by Kodansha. Launched in 1965 as *Bessatsu Shōjo Friend* and renamed *Bessatsu Friend* in 1984.
4. See "The Diversification of Lolita Fashion," HIGHLIGHTING Japan October 2025 issue
5. See "The Evolving Kawaii Culture that Transcends Borders," HIGHLIGHTING Japan October 2025 issue

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# The Diversification of Lolita Fashion

Lolita fashion is a distinctive fashion culture that originated in Japan. Its elegant and delicate style is now beloved in over 25 countries around the world, with its popularity spreading especially rapidly in Asia—sometimes even surpassing that in Japan. (Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

**A**OKI Misako is a leading icon in the Lolita fashion world. Since being appointed as a Trend Communicator of Japanese Pop Culture in the Field of Fashion (widely known as “KAWAII Ambassador”) by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan in 2009, she has been active internationally, visiting more than 25 countries to promote and further develop Lolita fashion. This article shares her thoughts on the appeal and global spread of this unique fashion culture.

“Born in Japan and inspired by the French Rococo style, Lolita fashion has evolved into a unique form of fashion culture.”

Rococo is a delicate and gracefully refined style of art and design that flourished in 18th-century France. Drawing inspiration from this aesthetic, Lolita fashion evokes the elegance of French court clothing and Western-style dolls. It is characterized by lavish decoration with frills, lace, and ribbons, voluminous skirts layered over multiple petticoats,<sup>1</sup> and distinctive accessories such as headdresses. Lolita fashion first emerged in the early 1990s as a form of street fashion in the Harajuku district of Shibuya City, Tokyo.

“At that time, social media did not exist, and street snap magazines<sup>2</sup> were the main source of information on Lolita fashion. I began wearing Lolita fashion

inspired by my experience as a model for the magazine KERA,<sup>3</sup> and gradually found myself captivated by its charm.”



AOKI Misako, known as a pioneer of Lolita fashion

Photo: Courtesy of AOKI Misako

Looking back, AOKI recalls that a major turning point for Lolita fashion was the Japanese film *Shimotsuma Monogatari* (“Kamikaze Girls”)<sup>4</sup> released in 2004. Until then, Lolita fashion was a trend enjoyed by a limited circle of fans, but the success of the film brought it into the spotlight for the wider public. However, Lolita fashion’s mainstreaming was not necessarily welcomed. According to AOKI, as interest in the style increased, biases toward the look and social restrictions also intensified.

“At that time, I was a student and would occasionally face harsh criticism for going to school in Lolita fashion. Back then, opportunities to wear the style in public were quite limited.”

Despite these challenges, Lolita fashion continues to captivate a large base of fans who remain steadfastly loyal to the style. AOKI attributes the enduring appeal of Lolita fashion to the distinctive mindset it embodies. The gorgeous outfits are not just fashion; they are attire to empower oneself—so to speak, a kind of “Fighting Outfit.”

“At first glance, the feminine dresses appear delicate and vulnerable, but they actually provide the



Photo: Courtesy of AOKI Misako

wearer with strength and confidence, serving as a source of support. By concealing personal insecurities and projecting the image of their ideal self, the wearer gains the power to face everyday challenges.”

In terms of mindset, AOKI also highlights similarities between Lolita fashion and the traditional Japanese kimono. She explains that wearing either style naturally encourages good posture and graceful manners. The mental shift of consciously adjusting one’s behavior to match the elegance of a Lolita fashion outfit is said to reflect a sensibility that has long been a part of the culture of traditional Japanese clothing.

In recent years, Lolita fashion has been becoming popular in China. The number of domestic Lolita fashion brands there has risen to more than ten times that in Japan. Recognized as the “ultimate social media-worthy fashion,” it continues to attract significant attention across China’s unique social media platforms.

“Recently, new styles have emerged that blend traditional cultures from various countries with Lolita fashion. Among them are “Wa-Loli” (Japanese-style Lolita fashion), which incorporates kimono elements, and “Hana-Loli” (Chinese-style Lolita fashion) inspired by *hanfu*, a Chinese traditional clothing. These interpretations of Lolita fashion, mixed with each country’s cultural identity, are now capturing the spotlight.”

Far from just a passing clothing fad, Lolita fashion will likely continue to captivate the hearts of enthusiasts around the world in the years to come, serving as a form of self-expression, a marker of cultural identity, and a style that nurtures personal growth. **7**



Photo: Courtesy of AOKI Misako

Left: AOKI wearing Lolita fashion mixed with Japanese kimono elements during a fashion event in Paris, France  
Right: In China, a Lolita style incorporating elements of traditional *hanfu* has emerged and is gaining popularity (center-right).

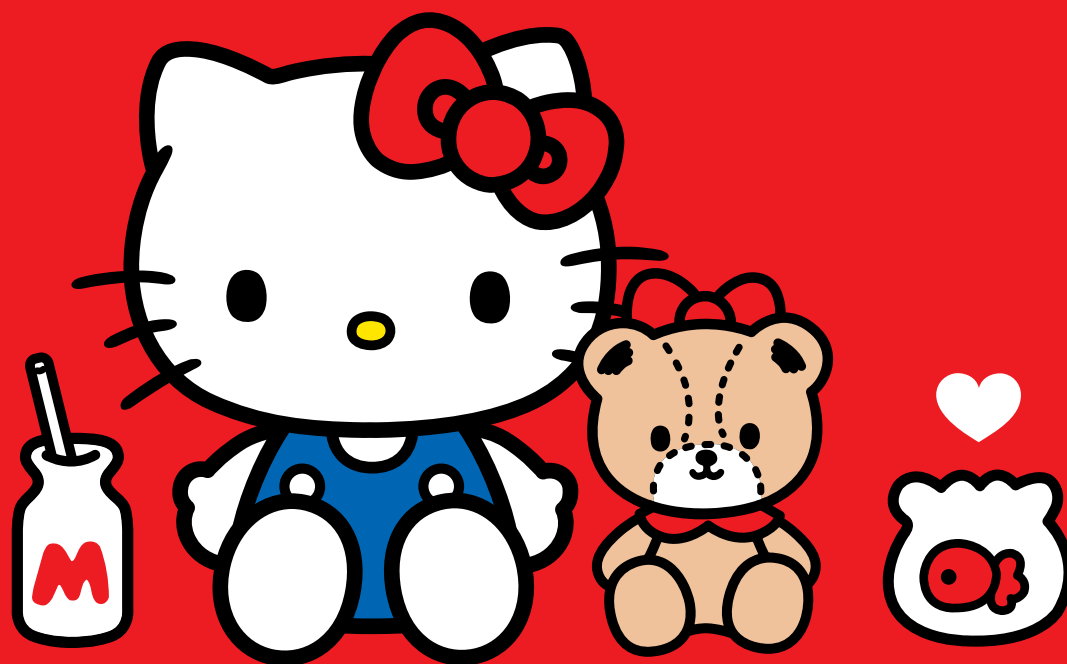
1. A type of undergarment made of wire and fabric, worn to add volume and shape to skirts. Originates from 18th-century European court clothing.  
2. A magazine format that developed in Japan from the 1990s to the 2000s, showcasing young people’s casual styles photographed on urban streets. Many of the snapshots were taken in Harajuku, and they were accompanied by detailed descriptions of the outfits, accessories, and the age of those photographed. These magazines became a key platform for promoting *kawaii* culture and street fashion.

3. A Japanese fashion magazine launched in 1998 and known for popularizing a variety of styles, including Lolita and Goth.  
4. A film that depicts the unlikely friendship between two completely different girls. It helped popularize both rebellious youth culture and Lolita fashion as part of Japan’s pop culture among audiences in Japan and overseas. (See “The Evolving Kawaii Culture that Transcends Borders”, *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, October 2025.)

# Hello Kitty: Leading the Kawaii Culture

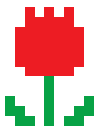
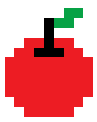
Hello Kitty, one of the most iconic representatives of *kawaii* culture, is a character born in Japan who has become a global icon, loved in 130 countries and regions. This article takes a closer look at the journey and enduring appeal of Hello Kitty, the most emblematic character created by Sanrio Co., Ltd. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

# HELLO KITTY



Hello Kitty continues to be loved around the world.





Hello Kitty appears in around 50,000 products annually across 130 countries and regions, taking on a wide variety of designs and forms. She has also been featured in numerous collaborations with global companies and artists, becoming a character so universally recognized that there is hardly anyone in the world who doesn't know her.

She embodies Sanrio's corporate vision, 'One World, Connecting Smiles,' by linking people and spreading joy through *kawaii* culture as a global icon. As a symbol of Japan's *kawaii* culture, Hello Kitty continues to be loved across generations and borders.

The Hello Kitty global icon had humble beginnings: she first appeared in 1975 as a small vinyl coin purse. Initially, the character had no name and was just one of many designs for Sanrio products. However, the coin purse proved so popular that the company decided to give her a name. The inspiration came from a cat named "Kitty" in Lewis Carroll's children's story *Through the Looking-Glass*.<sup>1</sup> By adding "Hello," the character was named Hello Kitty.

Hello Kitty, originally created for gift items, expanded into household electronics in the 1980s, gradually emerging as an icon that brightened everyday life. Since the same decade, she has appeared in a wide variety of products that reflected contemporary fashion trends. In 1996, reflecting the popularity of *gyaru*<sup>2</sup> fashion—which featured sun-kissed, beach-evocative skin, bleached hair adorned with large flowers, and bold, eye-enhancing makeup—Hello Kitty goods were redesigned with a hibiscus flower replacing her usual ribbon, sparking a craze among high school girls and giving rise to the so-called *Kittylers*<sup>3</sup> phenomenon. In the 2000s, collaborations with international jewelry brands and appearances of Hello Kitty merchandise on Western celebrities

further cemented her global recognition. The decade also saw milestones such as the launch of Taiwan's EVA Air "Hello Kitty Jet" in 2005, marking a period of heightened awareness and popularity overseas.

Hello Kitty has continued to be loved around the world for more than half a century, embodying Sanrio's corporate philosophy of *Minna Nakayoku* (Getting Along Together) while remaining at the forefront of *kawaii* culture. **1**

1. A children's story published in 1871. The sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by British author and mathematician Lewis Carroll.
2. Refers to the values, culture, and mindset of young Japanese women at the time.
3. Hello Kitty enthusiasts who collect and own everything featuring the character, often wearing or carrying only Hello Kitty items.

## FUN FACTS ABOUT HELLO KITTY

Even a globally beloved character like Hello Kitty has some surprising secrets. Her face has no mouth, allowing people to imagine her expression freely—feeling that she shares in their joy when they are happy and offers comfort when they are sad. Hello Kitty is designed to be a character symbolizing friendship who is always in tune with everyone's feelings. Her simple yet charming design, combined with a rich and imaginative world, may explain why she continues to capture hearts across generations and cultures.

**Name:** Kitty White

**Birthday:** November 1

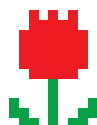
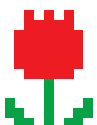
**Height:** About the height of five apples

**Weight:** About the weight of three apples

**Favorite food:** Apple pie made by her mom

**Hobbies:** Baking cookies and playing the piano

**Dream for the future:** To become a pianist or a poet



# Capture Kawaii Memories with Purikura®



The latest feature allows photos with frames.



Photo: SEGA CORPORATION

Left: The first photo sticker booth, released in 1995.  
Right: An example of an early photo sticker.

One of the icons of Japan's *kawaii* culture is the photo sticker booth, or *purikura*. Its novelty—allowing photos to be printed as stickers on the spot—made it a hit, spreading among high school girls in the 1990s. We spoke with a representative from a *purikura* manufacturer to learn more. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

In 1995, SEGA<sup>1</sup> and ATLUS<sup>2</sup> jointly developed and released Print Club®, which quickly became a social phenomenon among high school girls, who called it Purikura® (abbreviated as *Puri*). FUJIKI Toshiyuki of SEGA CORPORATION's Public Relations Department recalls the early days of development:

“The idea originated with an employee who found it inconvenient that photos taken with the popular disposable cameras with lenses couldn't be seen immediately. They were inspired by a video printer that could print photos from images, which led to the initial concept. The concept of printing photos on the spot as stickers quickly gained attention within the company,

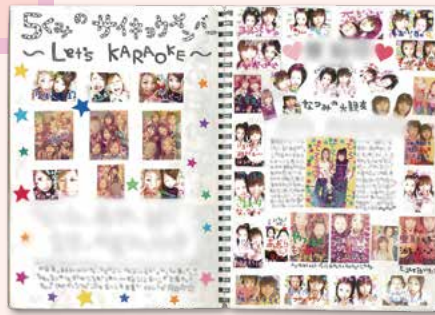


Photo: FUJIKU CORPORATION

leading to the product's launch. By deliberately keeping the resolution low, the resulting images made skin look smooth and black hair appear soft—an effect that captured the hearts of high school girls who love all things *kawaii*.”

Installed mainly in amusement facilities in entertainment districts and shopping streets, *purikura* booths were easy to enjoy, which helped them gain popularity among young people. By 1997, cumulative shipments had reached around 22,000 units. In 1998, a version that could capture full-body shots was introduced, followed by models aligned with the *bihaku*<sup>3</sup> (skin-whitening) trend in 1999. With features evolving alongside trends—and the buzz around *moreeru* (a popular term meaning photos make you look cuter than in real life)—*purikura* became a major hit.

“*Purikura* booths have offered a variety of values—making photos look *kawaii*, providing fun, creating lasting memories, and strengthening friendships—and have earned widespread support,” says FUJIKI. “They have become more than just a way to take pictures; they have established themselves as a space for expressing each person's sense of *kawaii*.”

New features continued to be developed year after year. By the early 2000s, with the advent of camera-equipped mobile phones, the doodle function—which allows users to decorate photos with colorful pens and stamps—became a standard feature, adding even more playful elements to the experience.

“The emergence of a way to collect and display *purikura* stickers in notebooks or planners—known as *puricho*—helped boost their popularity. Exchanging stickers and sharing them became a part of everyday communication among high school girls, cementing *purikura* as a key social item.”

Over the years, *purikura* has continued to evolve in both the way photos look and its features to match the trends of each generation of teens. With the spread of mobile phones and social media, *purikura* photos can now be digitized, customized by individual facial features, color-adjusted, and even retouched<sup>4</sup> to make not just the face but the whole body appear slimmer. These enhancements have greatly diversified the

functionality of *purikura* booths.

“In recent years, *purikura* booths have moved beyond simply making photos look *kawaii* and *moreeru* to focus on the overall photo-taking experience itself.

For example, some booths now display pose guides on the screen, allow friends to add doodles or stamps after shooting, and incorporate features that make the waiting time for photo processing more enjoyable. While the way photos look and the ways people enjoy them have changed over time, their purpose has remained largely the same even in 2025,” says FUJIKI.

*Purikura* booths exist overseas as well, but there, decorating the printed sheets or collaborations with popular characters is more common.

“Many travelers visiting Japan from abroad tend to prefer booths that dramatically distort the face in photos,” FUJIKI explains. “While Japanese users mainly react with comments like ‘It looks cute’ or ‘That was fun,’ overseas visitors seem to enjoy watching their faces dramatically distorted and having fun with each other during the photo session. *Purikura* is recognized as a part of Japan's *kawaii* culture, and completed stickers are often taken home as souvenirs.”

In 2025, Purikura® celebrates its 30th anniversary, yet its original appeal—capturing memories while enjoying the novelty and fun of the experience—remains just as popular today. ■

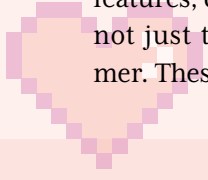


Photo: FUJIKU CORPORATION

An example of a *purikura* sticker from the period when *moreeru* features—such as enlarging the eyes or slimming the face—began to be standard.

1. A company that develops and sells consumer and social games. Development of the latest Purikura® machines is currently handled by SEGA's wholly owned subsidiary, SEGA FAVE CORPORATION.
2. A game developer responsible for planning and developing games and other content. It is currently a wholly owned subsidiary of SEGA.
3. A beauty concept aiming for clear, even-toned, bright white skin.
4. The process of editing photos after shooting using image-editing software to adjust them to one's preferred appearance.

\* Print Club® and Purikura® are registered trademarks of SEGA CORPORATION.



# Capsule Toys Also Popular with Adults and International Visitors

Capsule toys—small toys dispensed randomly in a capsule—are enjoyed by people of all ages, from children to adults. Thanks to their intricate craftsmanship, these toys are distinctly *kawaii* and have become popular souvenirs among international visitors to Japan. We spoke with a representative director of the Japan Capsule Toy Association about the history and enduring appeal of these collectible toys. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)



Photo: Japan Capsule Toy Association



Photo: PIXTA



Photo: PIXTA

Above: Rows of capsule toy vending machines.  
 Below left: An example of a gumball machine, considered the prototype of capsule toys.  
 Below right: Small toys are enclosed in plastic capsules about 6 cm in diameter, with larger types measuring up to 9 cm.



Photo: KITAN CLUB Co., Ltd. ©nagano / chiikawa committee



Photo: KITAN CLUB Co., Ltd. ©NISSIN FOOD PRODUCTS CO., LTD.

Left: An example of capsule toys featuring the popular character *Chiikawa*<sup>1</sup>.

Right: Capsule toys featuring Cup Noodle ingredients as rings.

Capsule toys are small toys enclosed in a capsule, dispensed from compact, dedicated vending machines when a coin is inserted and a lever is turned. Their appeal lies in their palm-sized dimensions, affordable price, the thrill of not knowing what you will get, their collectible nature, and the fun of sharing them on social media—what is often called “popular *kawaii*.” In addition, unique hit projects, such as collaborations with popular characters and companies, continue to emerge, making capsule toys a driving force in Japan’s *kawaii* culture.

Capsule toys, which trace their origins to gumball machines that appeared in the United States in the late 19th century, were introduced to Japan in 1965, giving them a history of around 60 years. From the late 1970s through the 1980s, capsule toys featuring anime character erasers became a nationwide craze. By the 2010s, a wide variety of capsule toys, including detailed miniatures of food and everyday items, began to be produced. TSUZUKI Yusuke, a representative director of the Japan Capsule Toy Association, spoke about the development of capsule toys that has continued to this day.

“Capsule toys used to cost around ¥100 each, but prices have gradually risen, with the current standard around ¥400 and some high-end items exceeding ¥1,000. While children still enjoy them, today’s main audience is adults. They are drawn to capsule toys not only for the nostalgia of their childhood, but also for the intricate craftsmanship of the toys, their collectible appeal, and the ease of sharing them on social media. The market has been expanding year by year, and one factor behind this growth was the rise of specialty capsule toy shops during the COVID-19 pandemic, which installed hundreds of vending machines in vacant retail spaces left by stores forced to close.”

Another factor contributing to the market’s growth

was the boom in capsule toys as souvenirs for international visitors to Japan, which began around 2016, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Rows of capsule toy vending machines in shopping centers have drawn so much attention that foreign tourists often stop to take photos, and they have now become one of the iconic sights of Japan.

“Capsule toys are small and easy to take home. Japanese miniatures—such as food, everyday items, and traditional goods—along with anime characters, are popular overseas, making them ideal as uniquely Japanese souvenirs. Their intricate craftsmanship is also appreciated as a reflection of Japan’s distinctive quality.”

New capsule toys number more than 700 different types each month. “Series featuring popular characters continue to enjoy strong demand, attracting fans across a wide range of ages, from children to adults.”

It has long been common for popular characters of the time to serve as motifs for capsule toys, but in recent years the range of products has become more diverse. “Increasingly, companies are turning their own products into capsule toys. When consumers share them on social media, they spread organically, serving as a marketing tool that naturally raises the company’s profile,” says TSUZUKI.

Capsule toys unique to Japan continue to evolve, serving as a nostalgic reminder of childhood for adults while being enjoyed across generations. Found throughout the country, these toys offer international visitors a tangible way to experience Japanese culture, and their wide variety of miniature designs and character goods have become beloved *kawaii* souvenirs. 7

1. The popular manga *Chiikawa: Nanka Chiisakute Kawaii Yatsu* (“Chiikawa: Something Small and Cute”) by Japanese illustrator Nagano. It was first posted on X (then Twitter) in 2020 and has since been adapted into books and an anime series.



A design featuring rhinestones and clear 3D art.

Photo: Japan Nailist Association (NPO)

# Kawaii Culture at Your Fingertips: Nail Art

Japanese nail art has developed its own unique style, building on techniques originating in the West while reflecting Japanese aesthetics and craftsmanship. Some Japanese nail artists have gained international recognition, even working with Western celebrities. We spoke with a nail artist who has been active since the 1990s, when Japan’s nail art scene truly began to flourish.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

**N**ail art, the practice of decorating and designing nails, represents a miniature form of artistic expression within *kawaii* culture. Its origins date back to around 3000 B.C. in ancient Egypt, where nails were painted red as part of body decoration. In Japan, the tradition of coloring nails can be traced from the Heian period (794 to late 12th century) through the Edo period (early 17th to mid-late 19th century), when people used *tsumabeni* (impatiens)<sup>1</sup> and *benibana* (safflower)<sup>2</sup> dyes on their nails.

Techniques such as adding color with nail polish, extending nail length, or decorating nails with sculptured designs<sup>3</sup> have been part of global beauty culture and became popular primarily in the United States from the first half of the 20th century. These methods reached Japan in the 1970s. OKI Rika, a nail artist and certified instructor at the headquarters of the Japan Nailist Association (NPO), who also serves as an examiner for nail care and nail art skill certification tests, reflects on the rise of nail art culture in Japan.

“In Japan, techniques and products from the United States began arriving in the late 1970s. By the early 1980s, nail salons and manicurists—now called nailists—emerged, and from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, nail culture truly flourished. The rise of *gyaru* culture<sup>4</sup> and Harajuku-style fashion<sup>5</sup> spurred nail art



Photo: OKI Rika

An example of a simple French manicure.<sup>6</sup>

to become an integral part of fashion, with increasingly flashy and *kawaii* designs using materials beyond traditional nail polish. While French manicures<sup>6</sup> and single-color nails dominated in the United States, Japan saw the spread of diverse design styles, including rhinestones,<sup>7</sup> 3D art,<sup>8</sup> and hand-painted designs,” explains OKI.

In the 2010s, the popularity of gel nails<sup>9</sup> extended the longevity of manicures, making delicate floral motifs and subtle, nuanced designs—so-called “adult *kawaii*” styles with a feminine touch—particularly popular. “Japanese nail art, I believe, has always evolved in connection with the fashion trends and popular subcultures<sup>10</sup> of each era,” OKI reflects on its history.

Many eye-catching designs feature motifs such as characters, seasonal themes, or food, and the playful creativity expressed on tiny fingertips has become one of the defining elements that reflect *kawaii* culture in Japan.

Japanese nail artists have adopted techniques introduced from overseas and refined them, striving for ever more delicate artistry and ultimately creating a distinctive cultural expression. The term “*nailist*”—a Japanese-made word meaning “an artist who works on nails”—was coined by the Japan Nailist

Association (NPO), established in 1985 to promote nail culture and develop the industry. The term gained wider recognition in the 1990s through specialized nail art magazines and the introduction of skill certification exams.

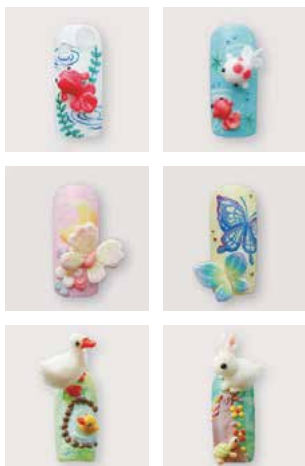
As OKI observes, “Japanese nail artists express the beauty of Japan’s *kawaii* all the way to the fingertips through their dexterity and attention to detail. This is evident in the uniformity of nail shapes and cut styles, the overall balance of designs across the hand, and the delicate hand-painted lines. Their work is highly regarded worldwide, often compared to paintings or jewelry.”

This careful attention to detail reflects a broader Japanese sense of *kawaii*, seen in miniatures and decorative items, as well as a pursuit of originality. Visitors to Japan can experience nail art firsthand, gaining an appreciation for both its exquisite techniques and its playful, *kawaii* sensibility—making it a memorable part of any trip. 📌



Nail designs from the 1990s to early 2000s, featuring delicate hand-painted flowers.

Photo: JVA TECHNICAL SYSTEM BASIC (Published by Japan Nailist Association, NPO)



Examples of 3D nail art, featuring sculpted designs that can take the shape of animals or other motifs.

Photo: JVA TECHNICAL SYSTEM ADVANCE (Published by Japan Nailist Association, NPO)



Examples of casual, playful nail art from the 2010s.

Photo: Japan Nailist Association (NPO)

1. Another name for impatiens (*Impatiens balsamina*), derived from its use in dyeing nails red with its flowers.  
 2. A plant of the chrysanthemum family. Pigments extracted from its petals have long been used for dyeing, cosmetics, nail coloring, and food coloring.  
 3. A technique in which acrylic liquid and acrylic powder are mixed and applied to natural nails for reinforcement, then shaped into the desired form.  
 4. Refers to the values, culture, and mindset of young Japanese women.  
 5. A fashion style originating in Harajuku, Tokyo, encompassing individualistic looks that defy conventional norms.  
 6. A classic nail design featuring white tips.  
 7. Imitation gemstones made of crystal, glass, or acrylic resin, or metal pieces used as accents on clothing, shoes, accessories, or nail art.  
 8. Three-dimensional nail designs created using a mixture of acrylic liquid and acrylic powder.  
 9. Nails enhanced with gel, a synthetic resin cured under UV or LED light.  
 10. In Japan, it refers to youth-oriented pop culture—including trends, anime and manga, idols, and other forms of mass entertainment—contrasted with traditional culture.

# Kawaii Manhole Covers Across Japan: A Simple Guide in English



@R.S.H/RUNE

Manhole covers on streets have become popular with tourists from overseas. According to OISHI Naohide of the Japan Ground Manhole Association, uniquely designed manhole covers first appeared in the mid-1980s. “They started spreading because local governments began putting their own designs on manhole covers to improve the image of the sewer system and appeal to residents,” he says. Today, about 16 million manhole covers are installed across Japan, and including past designs, there are around 12,000 different types.



@Sekiguchi

At first, most designs featured local symbols, such as flowers or famous sightseeing spots. In recent years, however, *kawaii* manhole covers created in collaboration with manga, anime, and video games have appeared and are getting a lot of attention.

Representative examples include Minato City in Tokyo, which features *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon*; Katsushika City in Tokyo, with *Monchhichi*; Shizuoka City in Shizuoka Prefecture, with *Chibi Maruko-chan*; various areas of Japan, with *Pokémon*; and Okazaki City in Aichi Prefecture, with the pop and charming illustrations of NAITO Rune. Across Japan, projects are also underway that involve students, from elementary to high school, in designing manhole covers.



@SP

In addition, Manhole Cards, which introduce beautifully designed manhole covers from across Japan, are also very popular. By collecting the cards distributed locally while walking around, people can enjoy a journey discovering the small artworks under their feet.

Through manhole covers, we hope readers will once again take a moment to appreciate the value of Japan’s sewer systems, which support our daily lives and the economy.

Examples of a Manhole Card. It shows the location coordinates and the story behind the design.

# Spot kawaii manhole covers!

Walk around different areas and try to spot manhole covers with adorable character designs, or collect Manhole Cards while you explore!

The beloved manga and anime *Chibi Maruko-chan* has captured the hearts of people across Japan. In Shizuoka City, Shizuoka Prefecture—the hometown of the creator, SAKURA Momoko—four manhole covers have been installed in Aoi Ward, three in Suruga Ward, and four in Shimizu Ward, spreading the world of Chibi Maruko-chan throughout the streets.



Pokémon utility hole covers, called *Poké Lids* have been installed across Japan. In Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture, a cover at the promenade of Aizu General Sports Park features the “Fukushima Support Pokémon,” *Chansey*, and Blade Pokémon, *Gallade*, along with a background that evokes the city’s landmark, Tsuruga Castle (Aizuwakamatsu Castle).



NAITO Rune, an artist from Okazaki City in Aichi Prefecture, created the foundation of Japan’s *kawaii* culture with his unique sensibility and wide-ranging talents. Manhole covers featuring his iconic characters, *Rune Girl* and *Rune Panda*, have been installed in seven locations around the city.



*Monchhichi*, a stuffed animal released in 1974 by a company in Nishi Shinkoiwa, Katsushika City, is a cute character that is still loved around the world nearly 50 years later. It now appears on manhole covers installed at 10 locations around JR Shinkoiwa Station.



The manga *Pretty Guardian Sailor Moon* is loved by fans around the world. Manhole covers featuring the main character, Usagi Tsukino (Sailor Moon), and her friends, who live in Minato City, Tokyo, have been installed at five locations in the city, including the entrance to Azabu Juban Shopping Street and around Tokyo Tower.

1. A series of role-playing adventure games in which players can catch and train mysterious creatures called *Pokémon* and battle with them. First released in 1996, it has expanded into a wide range of media, including trading card games, TV anime, movies, and merchandise, gaining global popularity.



# Saving Precious Food from Going to Waste: Japan's Initiatives to Reduce Food Loss and Waste

Food Loss and Waste refers to the discarding of food that is still edible, most often in the form of non-standard produce deemed unsuitable for store shelves, unsold products, and leftovers. Considering the environmental burden caused by incinerating Wasted Food and the fact that food is a limited resource, reducing Food Loss and Waste is a crucial challenge we must tackle. This article presents Japan's initiatives to reduce Food Loss and Waste.

Photo: Consumer Affairs Agency

## Current status of Food Loss and Waste and promotion of reduction efforts

Food Loss and Waste is classified into business-related, generated by the food service industry, retail businesses, etc., and household-related, resulting from over-preparation and uneaten leftovers in ordinary households. According to the FY2023 Estimates announced in June 2025 by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries and the Ministry of the Environment, the estimated total amount of Food Loss and Waste in Japan was approximately 4.64 million tons (2.31 million tons from businesses and 2.33 million tons from households). This corresponds to roughly 37 kilograms per capita per year, or the equivalent of throwing away one rice ball (approximately 102 grams) each day. Moreover, given that the amount of food assistance by WFP (World Food Programme) provided to people suffering from hunger worldwide is 3.7 million tons (as of 2023), it is extremely regrettable

that approximately 1.3 times more food is being discarded in Japan. Considering that even in Japan there are people who do not have enough to eat due to poverty, it is imperative to use food ingredients efficiently and with care, and to work to reduce Food Loss and Waste. Furthermore, incinerating Wasted Food generates

CO<sub>2</sub>, which negatively impacts the environment. Against this backdrop, the Act on Promotion of Food Loss and Waste Reduction came into effect in October 2019, and the Japanese government, working in a unified manner and in collaboration with national authorities and local governments as well as businesses, is promoting Food Loss and Waste reduction efforts. These efforts align with the SDG targets set by the Japanese government to reduce Food Loss and Waste from businesses by 60% and from households by 50% by FY2030, compared to FY2000 levels. Furthermore, under the Act, every October is designated as the Promotion Month for Reducing Food Loss and Waste, with October 30 observed annually as Food Loss and Waste Reduction Day.



Initiative for raising awareness of Food Loss and Waste reduction at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan

Photo: Consumer Affairs Agency

## Initiatives during the October Promotion Month for Reducing Food Loss and Waste

Led by the Consumer Affairs Agency, various relevant ministries and agencies collaborate with businesses, schools, organizations, and local governments to make Food Loss and Waste reduction a national movement. To this end, the agency is enhancing initiatives by raising awareness through posters, flyers, and brochures, as well as disseminating information via its official website and



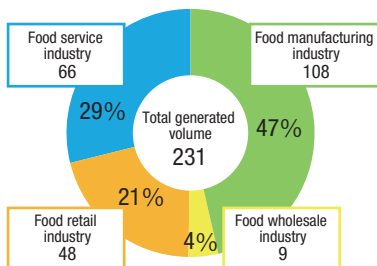
Award ceremony for the Food Loss and Waste Reduction Promotion Award at National Convention on Reducing Food Loss and Waste

Photo: Consumer Affairs Agency

## ● Breakdown of Food Loss and Waste (FLW) in Japan

### Breakdown of business-related FLW (edible) by business type

FY2023



#### Manufacturers, wholesalers, retailers

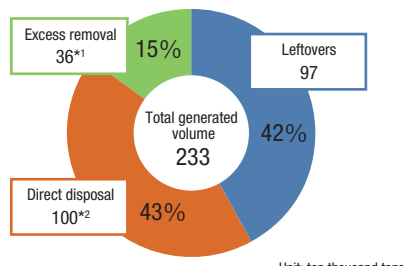
FLW includes non-standard products, returns, and unsold items, etc., generated in the manufacturing, distribution, and preparation processes.

#### Food service businesses

FLW includes over-preparation and uneaten leftovers.

### Breakdown of household-related FLW

FY2023



Unit: ten thousand tons

\*1. Refers to edible parts that are discarded, such as vegetable peels removed in excess.

\*2. Refers to food that is thrown away unopened.

Source: Document of Ministry of the Environment / Document of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries

The percentages listed have been rounded to the nearest whole number, so the totals may not match exactly.

social media.

Further, every year on October 30, the agency holds a National Convention on Reducing Food Loss and Waste in cooperation with the host local government and the National Deliciously ‘Tabekiri (no leftovers)’ Movement Committee<sup>1</sup> in order to raise awareness and foster momentum for Food Loss and Waste reduction. At one of the programs at the convention, a ceremony is held to award business and organizations etc. that have conducted outstanding initiatives.

In addition, the agency organizes the “Aim for Zero Food Loss!” Senryu Poetry Contest. By creating image posters based on award-winning entries, the initiative encourages consumers to change their behavior in order to reduce Food Loss and Waste.



Image posters featuring award-winning entries from the “Aim for Zero Food Loss!” Senryu Poetry Contest

Photo: Consumer Affairs Agency



Consumer Affairs Agency’s educational booklet *Shokuhin Loss Sakugen Guidebook* (‘Guidebook for Food Loss and Waste Reduction’), available for viewing and download on the agency’s special website [<https://www.no-foodloss.caa.go.jp/loss-zero.html>] (available in Japanese only)

Photo: Consumer Affairs Agency

Through such initiatives, various actions for Food Loss and Waste

reduction are gradually gaining awareness. These include providing practical tips and creative strategies to avoid wasting food at home and to shop efficiently, promoting proper understanding of best-by dates, practicing *temae-dori*<sup>2</sup> (selecting items from the front of the shelf), eating all the food up when dining out, or popularizing the *mottECO*<sup>3</sup> initiative, which encourages taking home leftovers from restaurants.

With regard to initiatives to encourage diners to finish their meals, on-site restaurants at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan (running until October 13) are using stickers and POP displays to raise awareness among visitors.

Furthermore, over the past few years, food drive initiatives<sup>4</sup> have gained momentum at retail stores, local governments, schools, and other entities, as a way to efficiently utilize unused surplus food in households. Food donation activities are also advancing from the perspective of reducing Food Loss and Waste.

Driven by the recognition that small, mindful actions by individuals can help reduce Food Loss and Waste, the Consumer Affairs Agency, in cooperation with relevant ministries, agencies, and other implementing entities, will continue to carry out awareness-raising initiatives for Food Loss and Waste reduction.

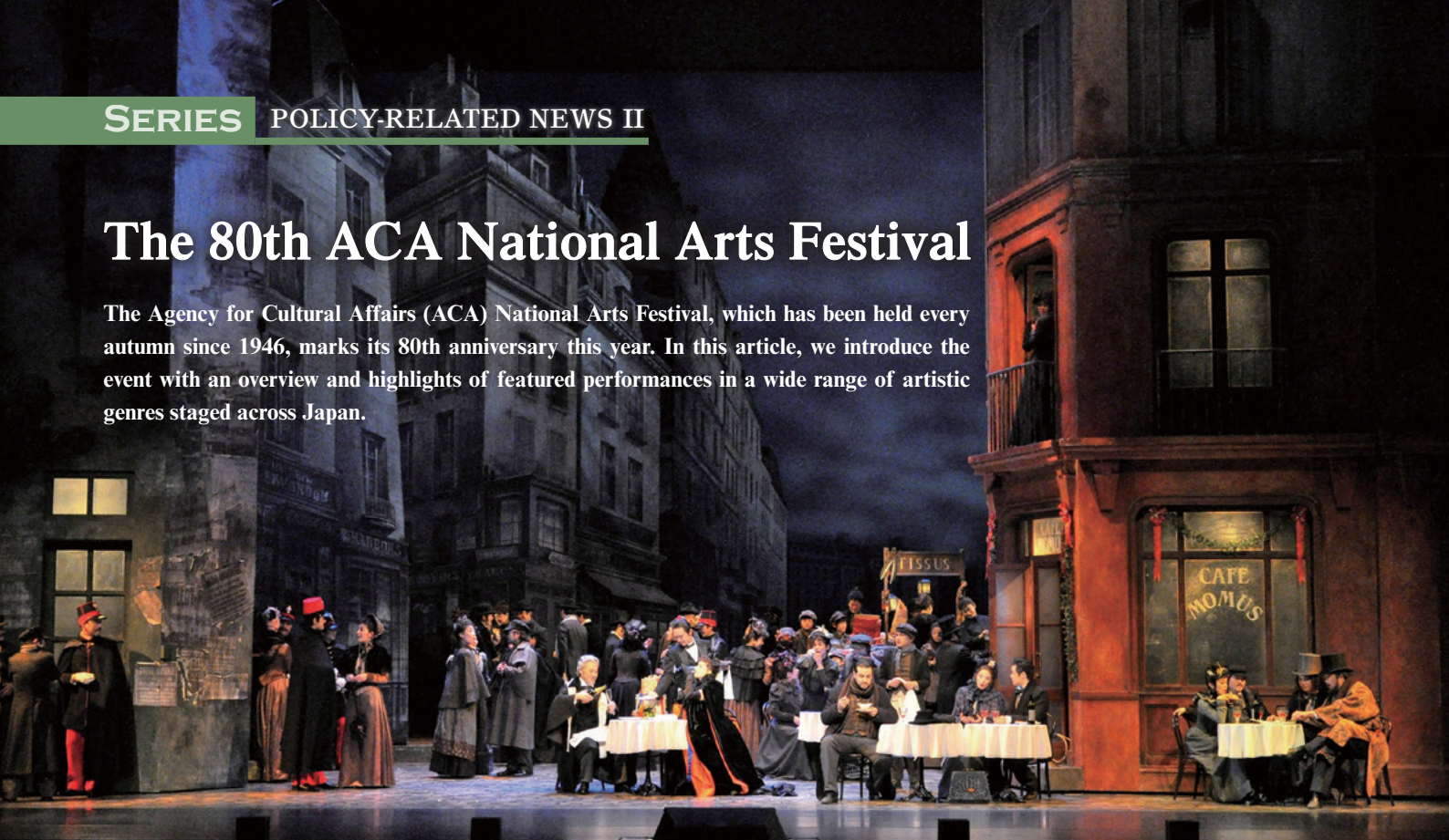
For more information on Food Loss and Waste reduction initiatives, visit the Consumer Affairs Agency’s website “Consumer Education.”

[[https://www.caa.go.jp/en/policy/consumer\\_education/#ce02](https://www.caa.go.jp/en/policy/consumer_education/#ce02)]

1. A network of local governments that endorse and actively promote the ‘Tabekiri (no leftovers)’ movement to encourage eating appropriate portions and finishing all food without leaving leftovers.
2. The practice of proactively selecting products that are near their sell-by date, such as items placed at the front of the shelf, particularly when purchasing food to be consumed immediately. (Some Japanese take food items placed at the back of the shelf. Such action causes Food Loss and Waste as the front items are unsold.)
3. A user-friendly name for the practice of taking leftovers home that was coined to promote Food Loss and Waste reduction at restaurants.
4. Initiatives in which household surplus food is brought to schools or workplaces and collected for bulk donation to local social organizations, facilities, food banks, or other entities.

# The 80th ACA National Arts Festival

The Agency for Cultural Affairs (ACA) National Arts Festival, which has been held every autumn since 1946, marks its 80th anniversary this year. In this article, we introduce the event with an overview and highlights of featured performances in a wide range of artistic genres staged across Japan.



A scene from a past performance of the opera *La Bohème*, this year's opening performance.

From *La Bohème* at the New National Theatre, Tokyo  
Photo by SAEGUSA Chikashi

## About the ACA National Arts Festival

The ACA National Arts Festival was first held by the then-Ministry of Education in 1946 with the aims of enabling a wide segment of the public to enjoy outstanding works of art from Japan and abroad, encouraging artistic creativity, and advancing the Japanese arts and culture. Since the establishment of the ACA in 1968, that agency has hosted the festival. To date, the roughly two-month long festival has featured performances that span a diversity of genres from the traditional Japanese performing arts such as *noh*,<sup>1</sup> *bunraku*<sup>2</sup> to theater, opera, ballet, and dance.

## This Year's Highlights

In addition to the main performances scheduled for this year's 80th festival, to be held from October 1 through November 30, there are commemorative performances by young creators and artists with international potential. The main performances will focus on domestically produced contemporary performing arts (including opera, ballet, contemporary theater, and orchestral music, etc.) and traditional Japanese performing arts (including *kabuki*,<sup>3</sup> *noh*, *bunraku*, traditional Japanese music, Japanese dance, folk performing arts, and popular entertainment). The opera *La Bohème* at the Opera Palace of the New National Theatre, Tokyo in Shibuya City, Tokyo, will be the first of 11 diverse performances to be held across Japan through the end of November.

There are also six commemorative performances in Tokyo, Aichi Prefecture, and Kyoto Prefecture by young artists supported by the Japan Creator Support Fund,<sup>4</sup> which was launched as an ACA initiative in FY2024. The colorful program of commemorative performances include the stage production incorporating circus elements titled *HINOTORI PHOENIX OF MOUNTAIN /*

*PHOENIX OF SEA*, as well as rich lineup of chamber music and dance performances, and more.

The ACA National Arts Festival is a celebration that symbolizes the rich continuum of Japanese arts and culture that flows from the past to the present and into the future.

We hope you will take this opportunity to once again fully appreciate and enjoy the power of culture in person.

You can find performance schedules, ticket information, and other details on the ACA National Arts Festival website. [[https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/arts\\_culture/art\\_festival/](https://www.bunka.go.jp/english/policy/arts_culture/art_festival/)] and the brochure on the ACA website [<https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/geijutsubunka/jutenshien/geijutsusai/r07/index.html>] (available in Japanese only).



The Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra performs at Asia Orchestra Week 2025, held in Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture, and Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture.

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●List of Performances Sponsored by the ACA National Arts Festival

Title	Date and Venue
Opening Performance Opera <i>La Bohème</i>	October 1, 4, 7, 9, 11, 2025 (New National Theatre, Tokyo, Shibuya City, Tokyo)
National Bunraku Theatre Autumn Bunraku performance Commemorating Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan	September 6 - October 14, 2025 (There are no performances on September 12 and 24, and October 6) (National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture)
Asia Orchestra Week 2025 Hyogo Performing Arts Center Orchestra	October 4, 2025 (Hyogo Performing Arts Center, Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture)
A Production commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Normalization of Diplomatic Relations between Japan and South Korea Play <i>Yakiniku Dragon</i>	October 7–27, 2025 (New National Theatre, Tokyo, Shibuya City, Tokyo)
Asia Orchestra Week 2025 Symposium <i>The Expanding Asian Orchestra Market</i>	October 12, 2025 (Hyogo Performing Arts Center, Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture)
Asia Orchestra Week 2025 Hong Kong Philharmonic Orchestra	October 13, 2025 (Hyogo Performing Arts Center, Nishinomiya City, Hyogo Prefecture)  October 14, 2025 (MUZA Kawasaki Symphony Hall, Kawasaki City, Kanagawa Prefecture)
Ballet <i>Cinderella</i>	October 17–19, 21–26, 2025 (New National Theatre, Tokyo, Shibuya City, Tokyo)
National Bunraku Theatre October Dance Performance <i>Nihonbuyo (Traditional Japanese Dance) performance</i>	October 18, 2025 (National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture)
Opera <i>Wozzeck</i>	November 15, 18, 20, 22, 24, 2025 (New National Theatre, Tokyo, Shibuya City, Tokyo)
<i>Performing Arts of Hateruma Island</i>	November 23, 2025 (National Theatre Okinawa, Urasoe City, Okinawa Prefecture)
National Bunraku Theatre November Special program: <i>The Supreme Artistry of Living National Treasures</i>	November 28, 2025 (National Bunraku Theatre, Osaka City, Osaka Prefecture)
National Noh Theatre November Special Program of Noh Performance <i>Meiji period and Noh: The 200th Anniversary of Iwakura Tomomi's Birth</i> (Kyogen “ <i>Kakushi-Danuki</i> (Hiding the Badger)”, Noh “ <i>Shakkyo</i> (The Stone Bridge)” etc.)	November 29, 2025 (National Noh Theatre, Shibuya City, Tokyo)
National Theatre November Dance Performance <i>Nihonbuyo (Traditional Japanese Dance) performance</i>	November 29, 2025 (Yomiuri Otemachi Hall, Chiyoda City, Tokyo)



The “Scene at Kitanoshinchi Kawasho” from *Shinjū Ten no Amijima* (“The Love Suicides at Amijima”) performed at the National Bunraku Theatre’s Autumn Bunraku performance Commemorating Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan, held in Osaka Prefecture.

Photo: Japan Arts Council



A scene from the *noh* play *Shakkyo* (“The Stone Bridge”), which will be performed at the National Noh Theatre’s November Special Program of Noh Performance, “Meiji period and Noh: The 200th Anniversary of Iwakura Tomomi’s Birth,” held in Tokyo.

Photo: Japan Arts Council



A scene from *HINOTORI PHOENIX OF MOUNTAIN / PHOENIX OF SEA*, a commemorative performance took place in Tokyo.

Photo by INOUE Yoshikazu

1. A classical form of musical drama that developed in the 14th century. Performers wear masks and advance the narrative through dance, chanting, and musical accompaniment. Registered Inscribed on Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.
2. A form of *Ningyo joruri*. A classical performing art presented by storytellers called *tayu*, *shamisen* players, and puppeteers. Inscribed on Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.
3. A popular form of comprehensive theatre combining song, dance, and acting. Since its beginnings in the 17th century, it has remained one of Japan’s most representative traditional performing arts. Inscribed on Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO.
4. A fund established to provide flexible, multi-year support to foster the growth and development of the next generation of creators and artists, while strengthening the functions of cultural institutions that serve as platforms for their work and international outreach. It was established within the Japan Arts Council, an independent administrative agency that presents various cultural and artistic performances and helps develop artists.

# Shodo Performance — A World of Vibrant Brushstrokes

AOYAGI Bisen is a calligrapher and performing artist. In this month's issue, she speaks of the appeal of *shodo* performance.



The winners of the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Award at the 18th (2025) Shodo Performance Koshien

Photo: Shikokuchuo City

## AOYAGI Bisen

**S**hodo (Japanese calligraphy) performance is a comprehensive art form where the performer writes characters on the large sheets of paper, in sync with music. Unlike traditional *shodo*, which is completed in quiet concentration, the major appeal of this art form is its “live” nature – the emotional experience shared with the audience.

The culture of *kigo*<sup>1</sup> has existed since ancient times. According to the legend in China, the 7th-century calligrapher Zhang Xu would write characters with his hair while drunk. Meanwhile, in Japan, historical records show that Kukai<sup>2</sup> also performed calligraphy in public. However, this cultural form has only recently gained widespread recogni-

tion as *shodo* performance. In 2008, the *shodo* club of Ehime Prefectural Mishima High School gained nationwide attention through a performance at a local event they joined with the aim of revitalizing their “Paper Town.” (Shikokuchuo City, where Mishima High School is located, is home to one of Japan’s largest paper mills).

Later, the Shodo Performance Koshien was founded in Shikokuchuo City, Ehime Prefecture, establishing itself as Japan’s largest official *shodo* performance competition. Under the rules, contestants must complete a work on a large 4m-tall, 6m-wide sheet of paper in six minutes or less. Each year, over 100 high schools nationwide enter, and the winning school receives the Minister of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Award. The audience attendance exceeded

5,000 people, and one of its features is that anyone can watch for free.

High school students performing on stage choose a theme word together with their peers, and they repeatedly refine the emotions and composition they put into their work. These great and powerful creations, combining calligraphy and performance to radiate the very brilliance of youth, deeply move for the audience. The true appeal lies in how even those who have never studied *shodo* are deeply moved by the sheer power and dynamic energy of the performances.

In recent years, *shodo* performance workshops and demonstrations have been carried out all over Japan, and they are now popular cultural experiences for visitors from overseas. Taking a brush in hand and drawing lines with the scent of ink



## AOYAGI Bisen

Calligrapher and artist. Began calligraphy study at the age of four. AOYAGI has presented *shodo* performances in more than 10 countries worldwide. She was the opening act at the Final of the Emperor's Cup JFA 99th Japan Football Championship at Japan National Stadium in 2020, performing in front of 58,000 spectators. In addition to *kigo*<sup>1</sup> at the UNESCO World Heritage Site Mount Koya, she has created numerous calligraphy works and calligraphy titles for artistic works, including CAPCOM's *Monster Hunter Rise*; *Dororo*, a TV anime series based on TEZUKA Osamu's manga; World Athletics Championships Tokyo 2025; as well as works for the VIP room at Japan National Stadium. AOYAGI has also appeared on media programs such as TBS's *Jounetsu-Tairiku* ("A Continent of Passion") and NHK E-TV's *Nihongo de Asobo* ("Play with Japanese.")

Q AOYAGI Bisen

in the air, is a precious experience that allows one to feel the power of calligraphy, a power that transcends words. Through these opportunities, interests in Japanese culture as a whole continues to grow. I myself have been fortunate to gain more opportunities to share the appeal of *shodo* performance, mostly through activities in over 10 countries, including cultural exchange at embassies and the Japan Foundation, and in educational settings.

*Shodo* performance is a unique art created on a single, one-time only stage. Its power and emotion transcend words to leave an imprint on your heart. On your visit to Japan, I encourage you to experience such a moment for yourself.



A *shodo* performance work on display at the Embassy of the Republic of Peru in Japan for the 10th Convention of the World Federation of Peruvian Institutions (FEMIP) in Tokyo in 2024.

Photo: Atelier BISEN



At Shodo Performance Koshien, performers use a giant brush energetically along with the music.

Photo: Shikokuchuo City



Students participate in the calligraphy culture promotion project, "Experiencing Shodo Performance: Let's Write with a Big Brush on Large Paper," at Mendori Elementary School, Shikokuchuo City.

Photo: Atelier BISEN

1. Writing characters or drawing pictures using a brush. Writing in front of many people is also called *sekijo kigo* ("writing on-the-spot").
2. Kukai (774-835) was a Japanese monk who trained in Tang dynasty China (present-day China) and then founded the Shingon sect of Japanese Buddhism in the early 9th century. He was also renowned for his calligraphy and poetry and is often referred to as Kobo Daishi ("Great Teacher of Buddhist Law").



## Pursuing “Beauty in Utility”: The Art and Skill of Karatsu- yaki, a 400-Year Tradition

Mike Martino runs the Gotanbayashi kiln, a *kamamoto*<sup>1</sup> (workshop where pottery is produced), in Taku City, Saga Prefecture, producing *Karatsu-yaki*<sup>2</sup> (Karatsu Ware). In this article, he talks about the techniques of *Karatsu-yaki*, which combine continental techniques with Japanese aesthetic sensibilities, and the deep appeal of this traditional pottery.

A wooden *keri-rokuro* (center of photo). The clay is shaped while spinning the wheel by kicking it with the foot.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

### MURAKAMI Kayo

What first drew me to *Karatsu-yaki* was seeing the *tataki* technique at the workshop of my master, TSURUTA Yoshihisa, in 2002. The *tataki* technique is unique to *Karatsu-yaki*: clay is rolled into long, rope-like strips, stacked, and then shaped by tapping with tools. I was immediately fascinated, thinking, “I never knew you could make pottery this way!” Inspired by this technique, I decided to pursue a career as a potter.

The history of *Karatsu-yaki* goes back around 400 years. Karatsu City in Saga Prefecture is close to the Korean Peninsula and has long served as a gateway to the Asian mainland. At the end of the 16th century, many potters arrived from the Korean Peninsula, bringing with them techniques such as *noborigama*<sup>3</sup> (climbing kilns) and advanced *seyu*<sup>4</sup> (glazing methods). The rustic yet powerful beauty of *Karatsu-yaki* was also loved by *chajin*<sup>5</sup> (tea masters) earning high praise in the world of the Japanese tea ceremony.

The *tataki* technique that captured my heart perfectly embodies the *Karatsu-yaki* ideal of *yo no bi*<sup>6</sup> (“beauty in utility”). In this method, the inside of the stacked clay is supported with a board called an *ategi* while the outside is tapped and compressed. This process produces surprisingly thin and lightweight vessels. Their lightness makes them easy to use in daily life, and items such as water pitchers made with the *tataki* technique are highly valued.

Among these techniques, the one I am especially focused on is a style called *usuzukuri*<sup>7</sup>, which uses very little water. While some *tataki* methods involve shaping the clay with water, in *usuzukuri*, any contact with water during the thinning process can cause the vessel to crack immediately. It is an extremely challenging technique that requires delicate control, but this tension is essential to achieve the ideal lightness. Occasionally, cracks do appear after firing, but when they are repaired using the *kintsugi*<sup>8</sup> technique, the vessel gains a texture and character that the original piece did not have.

Another important element that supports the *tataki* technique is a set of specialized tools. One of these is the *keri-rokuro*<sup>9</sup> (“foot-powered wheel”). Unlike the heavy stone wheels used in other pottery regions, the *Karatsu-yaki* version is made of wood and is extremely light. It stops spinning immediately if you don’t keep kicking it with your foot, but this also allows for very precise control of the rotation, making it ideal for tapping and compressing the clay.

Another essential tool is the *gyubera*<sup>10</sup> (lit. “cow’s tongue”), a special-



Shaping a vessel using a *gyubera*.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



## Mike Martino

Originally from New Mexico, USA. From a young age, he developed an interest in pottery, exploring ancient sites and collecting ceramic fragments. He came to Japan in 1990, and in 2002 began studying under a master *Karatsu-yaki* potter, creating his own works. In 2005, he established his own kiln, Gotanbayashi Kama. Many of his pieces are used as tea utensils for the tea ceremony, and he also actively produces Japanese and Western tableware, as well as sake vessels.

Note: Visits to his studio require advance reservation. Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



Most of the tools are handmade by Martino. He has devised clever methods, such as using dental resin for the *gyubera* (bottom right).  
Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji



A wood-fired kiln (*makigama*<sup>11</sup>) built with a friend. It is used alongside a gas kiln<sup>12</sup> depending on the purpose.  
Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

ized clay-shaping spatula. The clay used for *Karatsu-yaki* has little stickiness, so if you try to spread it sideways with the edge of a regular spatula, it cracks easily. The *gyubera*, however, shapes the clay while compressing it, allowing even fragile clay to become a vessel. I make my own *gyubera* by taking a mold from a wooden spatula and crafting it with dental resin.

In this way, the techniques and tools of *Karatsu-yaki* are closely connected to the materials of this region. Sometimes I go into the mountains myself to find the clay and stones I

use for my work. Working with the local clay is always a challenge, but I



Even pieces that crack or chip during firing are revived with *kintsugi*, taking on a new beauty in the process.  
Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

continually study how to bring out the unique character of each type of clay.



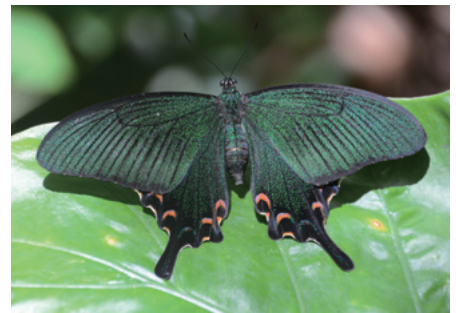
A water pitcher made using the *tataki* technique in the 17th century: *Chosen Karatsu Hitoe-kuchi Mizusashi*  
Photo: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/?locale=en>)

1. *Kamamoto* : Refers to a workshop where pottery is produced, or to the potters themselves.
2. *Karatsu-yaki* : A general term for pottery produced mainly in Karatsu City, Saga Prefecture. While there are several theories, it is said to have begun in the late 16th century, incorporating techniques brought over by potters from the Korean Peninsula, which boosted production. Made with coarse, unrefined clay, its vessels convey a rustic yet powerful impression.
3. *Noborigama* : A type of kiln used to fire pottery. Built on a slope, it can fire many pieces at high temperatures all at once.
4. *Glaze* : A glass-like coating applied to the surface of pottery to prevent leaks and for decorative purposes.
5. *Chajin* : A person skilled in the tea ceremony (*sado*), able to prepare and serve tea to guests.
6. *Yo no bi* : A concept expressing the idea that tools are beautiful when they are used.
7. *Usuzukuri* : Pottery finished thinly to create lightweight vessels with a soft, delicate mouthfeel.
8. *Kintsugi* : A Japanese repair technique in which broken pottery is joined with lacquer and decorated with gold or silver powder, creating an appearance different from the original. (See "Kintsugi : The Healing Power of Pottery Repair," *Highlighting Japan*, August 2020 issue)
9. *Keri-rokuro* : A pottery tool; a foot-powered wheel used to shape clay.
10. *Gyubera* : A tool used to shape clay, named for its resemblance to a cow's tongue.
11. A kiln fueled by firewood.
12. A kiln fired using natural gas or propane.

## Papilio Okinawensis



**T**he *Papilio Okinawensis* is a swallowtail butterfly native to the Amami Islands, an archipelago between Kagoshima Prefecture at the southern tip of mainland Japan and Okinawa Prefecture, as well as to the Okinawa Islands, which encompass Okinawa Prefecture and its surrounding islands. The wingspan of the *Papilio Okinawensis* exceeds 10 cm, and its wings are mainly black but exhibit a blue or green sheen depending on how the light strikes them. The hindwings display a red crescent-shaped pattern, which is more prominent in females. The caterpillar feeds on the leaves of the *Euodia meliifolia* and Japanese Prickly-ash, both deciduous trees of the Rutaceae family. The adult butterfly feeds on flower nectar and absorbs moisture from the ground. The species spends the winter as a chrysalis and produces four generations annually between March and October. However, the *Papilio Okinawensis* observed in spring is said to display the most vibrant colors.



Photos: PIXTA

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