HIGHLIGHTING
Japan

VOL.
213
MARCH
2026

EXPLORING JAPANESE POTTERY

CONTENTS

VOL. 213, MARCH 2026

9

11

23

16

FEATURES

6 **Japan's Pottery Culture: Thriving in Everyday Life for Over 10,000 Years**
Interview with Professor ARAKAWA Masaaki of Gakushuin University

10 **Japan's Six Ancient Kilns: Preserving the Nation's Ceramic Heritage**
Introducing Japan's Six Ancient Kilns, a collective term for six representative ceramic production regions where pottery has been continuously made from around the 12th century to the present day

12 **Kutani-yaki: A Canvas of Five Vibrant Colors**
Introducing *Kutani-yaki*, a form of porcelain renowned for its bold, painterly designs and deep, vivid colors, produced in an area of Ishikawa Prefecture spanning Kaga City, Komatsu City, Nomi City, and Kanazawa City

14 **Japanese Good Luck Charm Culture: Shigaraki-yaki Tanuki**
Introducing *Shigaraki-yaki tanuki* (raccoon dog) statues produced in Shigaraki Town, Koka City, Shiga Prefecture, which have long been popular as auspicious items in Japan

16 **Tohaku Program: Allowing Guests to Stay in the Home Village of Tamba-yaki and Experience Local Pottery-Making Firsthand**
Introducing the Tohaku program, where guests stay overnight at a potter's workshop in Tambasasayama City, Hyogo Prefecture and take part in hands-on experiences involving the potter's way of life and the local pottery-making culture

18 **Hagi-yaki: Enjoying the Subtle Changes That Emerge in Daily Use**
Introducing traditional *Hagi-yaki*, a pottery form highly valued in the world of the tea ceremony, which has been passed down for over 400 years in Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture

20 **Hasami-yaki: A Pottery That Has Flourished as Everyday Tableware**
Introducing *Hasami-yaki*, a type of porcelain ware widely used for everyday tableware, which has been produced for over 400 years in Hasami Town in Nagasaki Prefecture

22 **Yachimun: A Treasure Born of Okinawa's Unique Climate and Culture**
Introducing Okinawa Prefecture's *Yachimun*, a pottery form characterized by plump, thick forms and the simple beauty of its vessels, jars, and other items, which is popular as souvenirs.

28

24 **Nihongawara: Preserving and Passing on Tradition**
Introducing *nihongawara*, Japanese roof tiles that have been used as a building material for historical cultural properties and venerable historical structures, and have long protected the wooden houses of Japan.

ALSO

26 **POLICY-RELATED NEWS**
Using Elevators and Escalators Safely in Japan

28 **DISCOVERING JAPAN THROUGH THE EYES OF JAPANESE INFLUENCERS**
Contemporary Ikebana: An Evolved Form of Ikebana

30 **INTRODUCING PRECIOUS TRADITIONAL JAPANESE CULTURE TO THE WORLD**
Forging Beauty and Soul: A Non-Japanese Swordsmith's Path of Determination

BACK COVER

NATIVE CREATURES OF JAPAN
Izu Thrush

THEME FOR MARCH:

Exploring Japanese Pottery

Japan's pottery has a long and rich history, encompassing a wide variety of techniques, usage, and aesthetic perspectives, resulting in a diverse range of distinctive wares. The most distinctive aspect of Japan's pottery is that it has developed over an exceptionally long period while remaining closely intertwined with daily life. In this issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, we feature an interview with Professor ARAKAWA Masaaki about the historical background of Japanese pottery culture, its connection to food culture, and how best to enjoy it. We also introduce Japanese potteries from a range of different perspectives, such as types of pottery produced in different places across Japan, the pottery stay program which immerses visitors in the local lifestyle, culture and pottery-making processes of the region, allowing them to enjoy and learn about Japanese pottery culture, and ceramics used as roofing materials for traditional Japanese houses.

Photo:ITO Akihiro
Photography cooperation:KABURAKI Shoho

On the cover: *Kutani-yaki* is distinguished by its bold, vivid use of five colors: red, cobalt blue, green, purple, and yellow.

COPYRIGHT © 2026 CABINET OFFICE OF JAPAN
The views expressed in this magazine by the interviewees and contributors do not necessarily represent the views of the Cabinet Office or the Government of Japan. No article or any part thereof may be reproduced without the express permission of the Cabinet Office. Copyright inquiries should be made through a form available at:
www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/mailform/inquiry.html

WHERE TO FIND US
Tokyo Narita Airport terminals 1 ●JR East Travel Service Center (Tokyo Narita Airport) ●JR Tokyo Station Tourist Information Center ●Tokyo Tourist Information Center (Haneda Airport, Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building, Keisei Ueno Station) ●Niigata Airport ●Kansai Tourist Information Center (Kansai Int'l Airport) ●Fukuoka Airport Tourist Information ●Prefectural Central Libraries

PRODUCTION
FBI Communications, Inc.

MANAGING EDITOR
FUKUDA Yasuhiro

EDITORS
IMAMURA Keiko, KATO Naruho, KIMURA Tetsuro, KUROSAWA Akane, HARA Erika

CONTRIBUTORS
OZONO Saihou, Johan Leutwiler, TANAKA Nozomi, MOROHASHI Kumiko

DESIGN
AZUMA Terutaka, SAWATARI Rumi

EDITORS' NOTE
Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.

Exploring Japanese Pottery

Above left: The Shigaraki Touen Tanuki Village is full of *tanuki* (raccoon dog) statues, from tiny items to the largest one in Japan.
Above right: *Nihongawara* take numerous different shapes for different uses. (Round *marugawara* tiles pictured here.)
Below left: A tea bowl with characteristic *kan-nyu* (glaze crazing) patterns of fine cracks on its surface.
Below right: *Hasami-yaki* pottery displays a richly varied range of colors and designs adapted to the times.

Japan's pottery has a long and rich history, encompassing a wide variety of techniques, usage, and aesthetic perspectives, resulting in a diverse range of distinctive wares. The most distinctive aspect of Japan's pottery is that it has developed over an exceptionally long period while remaining closely intertwined with daily life. In this issue of *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, we feature an interview with Professor ARAKAWA Masaaki about the historical background of Japanese pottery culture, its connection to food culture, and how best to enjoy it. We also introduce Japanese potteries from a range of different perspectives, such as types of pottery produced in different places across Japan, the pottery stay program which immerses visitors in the local lifestyle, culture and pottery-making processes of the region, allowing them to enjoy and learn about Japanese pottery culture, and ceramics used as roofing materials for traditional Japanese houses.

Japan's Pottery Culture: Thriving in Everyday Life for Over 10,000 Years

Japan's pottery[1] has a long and rich history, encompassing a wide variety of techniques, usage, and aesthetic perspectives, resulting in a diverse range of distinctive wares. We spoke with Professor ARAKAWA Masaaki about the historical background of Japan's pottery culture from ancient times to the present, its connection with Japanese food culture, and the ways it can be appreciated today.

ARAKAWA Masaaki

Professor, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Letters, Gakushuin University, specializing in Japanese art history. After serving as chief curator at the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, he assumed his current position in 2008. His research focuses on crafts within Japanese art history, with a particular emphasis on Japanese pottery. His publications include *Nihon Yakimono-shi* ("A History of Japanese Pottery"), *Karatsu Yakimono Renaissance* ("The Karatsu Pottery Renaissance"), and *Yakimono no Mikata* ("How to Appreciate Pottery").

What are the defining features of Japan's pottery culture?

The most distinctive aspect of Japanese pottery is that it has developed over an exceptionally long period while remaining closely intertwined with daily life. Unlike in many other countries, where crafts often evolved primarily for appreciation or decorative purposes, Japan's ancient ceramic traditions grew out of a long-standing earthenware culture deeply connected to food. Vessels used for storing water or grains, as well as for ritual purposes, were central to daily life, and the textures and changes that emerge from continued use have themselves been valued as part of the vessel's appeal. The warmth and tactile quality of the clay, and the subtle transformations that occur over time with repeated use, are key elements that define the unique character of Japan's pottery culture.

What is the origin and history of Japanese pottery?

Broadly speaking, the history of Japanese pottery can be divided into five periods.

The first period known as the "era of earthenware," dates back to the Jomon period around 13,000 years ago, when hunting and gathering were the primary means of subsistence. It started with *Jomon* pottery, followed by the Yayoi[2] period, when agriculture began and *Yayoi* pottery was produced, and then progressed to more functional earthenware such as *haji-ki*.[3]

The second period began around the 5th century, when kiln-firing techniques capable of reaching temperatures above 1,000°C were introduced from the Korean Peninsula. Pottery produced in these kilns, called *sueki*[4] (*sue* ware), became the foundation of modern Japanese ceramics.

In 741, Emperor Shomu issued the edict[5] to establish provincial temples (*kokubunji*), resulting in the construction of pagodas and temples throughout Japan. Roof tiles (*kawara*) used in these buildings (See "Nihongawara: Preserving and Passing on Tradition," in *HIGHLIGHTING Japan* March 2026 issue) represent one example of the new ceramic technologies brought by immigrant craftsmen. Highly skilled potters also produced vessels for ritual and ceremonial use and were dispatched to temples across the country, helping to spread pottery production

Photo: Colbase

Flame-style earthenware vessel, Jomon period (Middle phase), 3000–2000 BC, Tokyo National Museum (*Kaen-gata doki* ["Vessel with a Flame-Like Rim"]).

Sueki jar, Kofun period, 6th century, Tokyo National Museum (*soshoku-tsuki kyaku-tsuki tsubo* ["Footed Jar with Vessels and Ornaments"]).

techniques throughout Japan.

During the Heian period (late 8th to around the 12th century), central authority had weakened, and the system in which local government offices oversaw pottery production declined. In its place, privately run pottery workshops began to emerge and operate independently across the country. Through this process, production centers suited to the local climate and soil were established, and each region developed its own distinctive character. From the Heian period onward, entering what is commonly considered the medieval era, large-scale kilns representing different regions began to appear.

In particular, the kiln sites collectively known as Japan's Six Ancient Kilns (*Rokkoyo*)—comprising Echizen, Seto, Tokoname, Shigaraki, Tamba, and Bizen (See "Japan's Six Ancient Kilns: Preserving the Nation's Ceramic Heritage," in *HIGHLIGHTING Japan* March 2026 issue)—have preserved their traditions to the present day and played a central role in the development of Japanese pottery. Vessels produced at these kilns were often large jars and storage pots (*kame*), practical wares deeply rooted in daily life. They were used for storing water and grains, as well as containers for fertilizer essential to agriculture.

The third period of Japanese pottery began in the 16th century, when the culture of the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*[6]) became widely established. Sen no Rikyu,[7] regarded as the preeminent tea master of his time, rose to prominence and inspired the production of highly original ceramics, particularly vessels used in tea practice. Tea bowls recognized by Sen no Rikyu and other masters came to be valued not only as functional tools but also as symbols of status and authority. In Kyoto, tea bowls known as *Raku-yaki*[8] (Raku ware) were produced, while in Mino, Gifu Prefecture, tea utensils such as *Shino-yaki*[9] (Shino ware) and *Oribe-yaki*[10] (Oribe ware) were created.

During this period, those who practiced the tea ceremony also drew inspiration from ceramics from the Korean Peninsula and Southeast Asia, including Thailand and Vietnam. While sometimes imitating these foreign wares, they added a sense of playfulness and developed a distinctly Japanese mode of expression. Unlike ceramics in other countries, which valued perfect symmetry, Japanese artisans intentionally embraced irregular shapes or even cracks, finding beauty in naturalness and imperfection. Similarly, when arranging flowers, they placed them in bamboo or simple ceramic vessels in a way that suggested the plants were alive in nature, emphasizing harmony with the natural world.

Shino tea bowl, Mino ware, Azuchi–Momoyama to Edo period, 16th–17th century, ceramic, Tokyo National Museum. (*Shino chawan, Furisode* ["Tea Bowl, Named 'Swinging Sleeves'"]). Its appearance changes depending on the viewing angle, with small air holes and irregular shapes created during firing.

Imari-yaki, Edo period, 17th century, Tokyo National Museum (*Iroe Kachomon Ofukabachi* ["Large Deep Bowl with Birds and Flowers"], Imari ware, *Kakiemon* style, Important Cultural Property). The vessel features a white surface adorned with vibrant painted designs.

Satsuma (Tateno) ware tea bowl, Edo period, second half of the 19th century, Tokyo National Museum (*Iroe Awa Uzura-zu Chawan* ["Tea Bowl with Quails and Millet"], stoneware with overglaze enamel). The vessel is decorated with brilliant overglaze enamels and gold.

As time progressed, the fourth period, spanning the Edo to Meiji periods (early 17th to 19th century), saw the development of porcelain production and *Kyo-yaki*[11] (Kyo ware). In the 1610s, porcelain production began in Arita (Saga Prefecture), and vessels with vibrant painted designs on white surfaces quickly became popular. In Kyoto as well, elaborately decorated ceramics also flourished, and production techniques became increasingly sophisticated.

The fifth period, from the 19th century to the present, marks the modern era. Influenced by Western art, Japanese ceramic artists emerged whose works were exported abroad, establishing ceramics not only as practical vessels but also as recognized works of art. In this way, the history of Japanese ceramics stretches from the earthenware of 13,000 years ago to the diverse expressions of the present day.

How does Japanese pottery culture differ from that of other countries?

When living in the United States, I noticed that many artists in Europe and North America create ceramics primarily for appreciation. While ceramics overseas tend to be made mainly for viewing, in Japan, vessels intended for meals and daily use have historically formed the heart of pottery culture. Practical, rooted in everyday life, and designed to enrich people's daily experiences, this focus on utility is a defining characteristic of Japanese pottery.

Which production regions and sites are recommended for enjoying Japanese pottery?

If you visit Tokyo, it's worth exploring nearby production centers such as Kasama in Ibaraki Prefecture and Mashiko in Tochigi Prefecture, where many contemporary ceramic artists work while preserving traditional techniques. Other historically significant pottery regions, including Seto in Aichi Prefecture, Kyoto, and Arita, are also highly recommended. In particular, Arita is the birthplace of *Arita-yaki*[12] (Arita ware), which held the world's top market share in porcelain production during the 17th century. At that time, when China—the largest exporter of

Historic streetscape of Arita, Saga Prefecture. Throughout the town, walls embedded with refractory bricks called *tonbai*, used in kiln construction, can be seen.

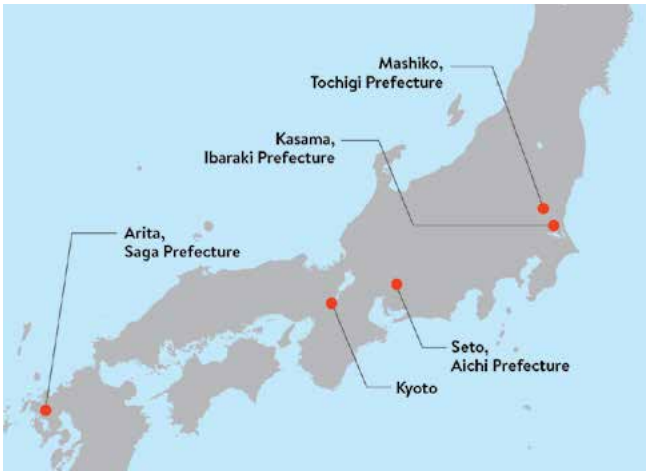


Photo: PIXTA

In kaiseki cuisine, a variety of ceramic and porcelain vessels are used to complement each dish.

porcelain—was engulfed in civil unrest and supply was interrupted, the Dutch commissioned porcelain from Japan as a substitute. As a result, from the 1650s onward, Japanese pottery became popular among European royalty and nobility, and exported from the port of Imari, it spread around the world under the name "IMARI." In the modern period, *Arita-yaki*, alongside raw silk and tea, came to be regarded as one of Japan's three major export products. Owing to this history, the entire town of Arita is considered an industrial heritage site, and visitors today can experience its rich past while strolling through the streets.

How can visitors enjoy Japanese ceramics?

One of the best ways to experience them while traveling is to dine at high-quality restaurants, many of which can be found in Tokyo, Kyoto, and other major cities, where delicious cuisine is served on beautiful vessels. Skilled chefs often pay as much attention to the choice of tableware as to the food itself. Asking a chef where the dishware is from can spark a conversation and serve as an entry point into Japanese culture. Ceramics are meant not just to be displayed, but to be used—serving and presenting food, and enjoying it with all the senses. The weight in your hand, the texture to the touch, and the feel at your lips, all of these are part of the experience. Through such encounters, visitors can appreciate *Yo no bi*,[13] the Japanese aesthetic of "beauty in utility," which has long been cherished as a way to enrich daily life.

Photo: Colbase

Mukozuke, Edo period, 18th century, Tokyo National Museum (*Iroe-yuri-zu tetsuki mukozuke* ["Mukōzuke Bowl with Handle, Named 'Lilies in overglaze enamels'"], designated cultural property, attributed to Den Kenzan). This tall vessel, placed at the back of a traditional Japanese meal tray, was used for serving appetizers or fish dishes.

1. A general term for both pottery and porcelain. Pottery is made from clay called *todo* and fired at temperatures between 1,100°C and 1,300°C, retaining the texture of the clay and offering a warm, tactile quality. Porcelain is made from crushed white stone called *toseki* (porcelain stone) and fired at higher temperatures, approximately 1,300°C to 1,400°C, producing a hard, white, and translucent surface.
2. This marks the period when rice cultivation was fully introduced from mainland Asia, and the use of metal objects such as bronze and iron tools began.
3. Earthenware widely used in Japan, particularly during the Kofun period (late 3rd to 7th century). Hand-shaped without the use of a potter's wheel and fired at low temperatures, these vessels are characterized by their simple, functional forms.
4. High-fired pottery introduced from the Korean Peninsula around the 5th century. Shaped on a potter's wheel and fired in a kiln, it becomes hard and durable and is regarded as the origin of Japanese ceramics.
5. In times of social instability caused by epidemics or disasters, the emperor ordered the construction of pagodas and temples as a means of stabilizing the nation through Buddhism.
6. The Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), focused on enjoying powdered green tea (*matcha*).
7. Born in 1522, died in 1591. A tea master of the Azuchi–Momoyama period who perfected the practice of *chanoyu* and established the aesthetic of *wabi-cha*.
8. *Raku-yaki*: tea ceremony ceramics originating in Kyoto, characterized by hand-molded forms (without a potter's wheel) and low-temperature firing, which produce soft, warm textures.
9. *Shino-yaki*: pottery that emerged in Mino (present-day Gifu Prefecture) in the late 16th century, distinguished by white feldspathic glaze and gentle, rounded forms.
10. *Oribe-yaki*: pottery that emerged in Mino (present-day Gifu Prefecture) during the Momoyama period (16th to early 17th century), distinguished by innovative designs such as green glazes and intentionally irregular shapes.
11. *Kyo-yaki*: a collective term for ceramics developed primarily in Kyoto, often featuring elaborate and brightly painted designs.
12. *Imari-yaki*: porcelain produced mainly in Arita, Saga Prefecture. Said to have been first made in the early 17th century by Korean potters who came to Japan. Characterized by hard, white porcelain decorated with brightly colored painting.
13. *Yo no bi*: the beauty found in everyday objects. A Japanese aesthetic that values natural beauty inherent in practicality and functionality.

Japan's Six Ancient Kilns: Preserving the Nation's Ceramic Heritage

Six kiln regions that exemplify Japan's pottery culture have shaped the nation's ceramic heritage over centuries. We spoke with a representative of the Six Ancient Kilns Japan Heritage Promotion Council, an organization established primarily by the local governments of these six regions, to learn more about their history and distinctive characteristics. (Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

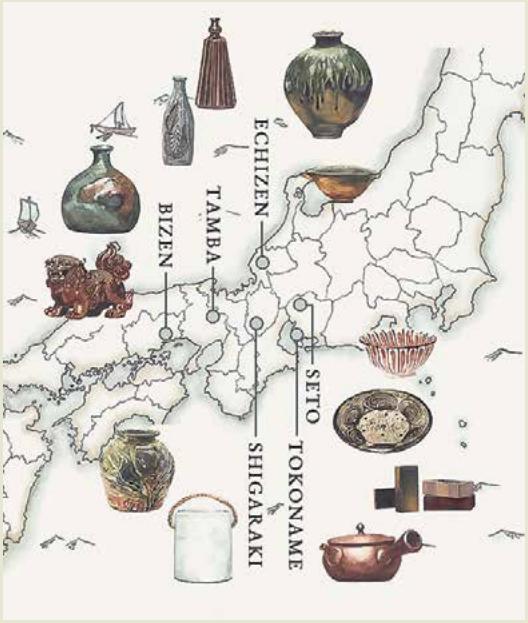


Photo: Six Ancient Kilns Japan Heritage Promotion Council

Map showing the locations of Japan's Six Ancient Kilns. These six production centers are scattered across the country, each nurturing Japan's pottery culture for over a thousand years.

The term "Japan's Six Ancient Kilns" (*Rokkoyo*) refers to six representative ceramic production regions where pottery has been continuously made from around the 12th century to the present day: Echizen (Fukui Prefecture), Seto and Tokoname (Aichi Prefecture), Shigaraki (Koka City, Shiga Prefecture), Tamba (Tambasasayama City, Hyogo Prefecture), and Bizen (Okayama Prefecture).

The name Six Ancient Kilns was coined around 1948 by ceramic historian KOYAMA Fujio.[1] Until then, each kiln region had been discussed individually, but KOYAMA positioned them as a single lineage representing the history of Japanese ceramics, organizing the six regions collectively as the Six Ancient Kilns. In 2017, the six regions were recognized as Japan Heritage[2] sites by the Agency for Cultural Affairs. Taking this opportunity, the Six Ancient Kilns Japan Heritage Promotion Council was established to promote their appeal both domestically and internationally through wide-ranging regional collaboration.

YAMADA Tomomi, an officer of Echizen Town, explains: "These kiln regions have historically developed while sharing techniques and culture with one another. For example, during the period when kilns were first established in the 12th century, techniques from Tokoname—a leading production center at the time—spread to Echizen, Tamba, and Shigaraki. Each region then evolved these techniques in ways suited to their own soil and climate conditions."

From the 12th to the 16th century, each kiln region primarily produced practical vessels such as storage jars (*kame*[3]) and mortars (*suribachi*[3]) used for storage and food preparation. From the 16th century onward, with the rise of the Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*[4]), production of tea bowls and other utensils surged, gradually shaping Japan's distinctive pottery culture.

One of the defining features of pottery from Japan's Six Ancient Kilns is its close relationship with the natural environment. In most of the regions, except Seto, high-fired unglazed pottery (*yakishime*[5]) that does not use glaze (*yuyaku*[6]) is the standard. During firing in wood-burning kilns, the action of flames and ash creates natural patterns on the surface of the vessels, known as "natural ash glazes," which give each piece a unique texture shaped by chance.

The appreciation for natural forces such as clay, fire, and ash, and the valuing of individuality and irregularity over uniformity, is a key aesthetic shared across Japan's pottery culture. "What makes Japan's Six Ancient Kilns unique is that they reflect a pottery culture and way of life that cannot be captured by any single region alone," says YAMADA.

"For roughly a thousand years, each kiln region has nurtured techniques and traditions that, while preserved, have evolved over time to shape Japan's pottery culture. We hope to continue sharing the appeal of the Six Ancient Kilns for years to come."

In addition to sharing information about events

held in each region, the council has worked to promote tours of all six kiln areas, organize exhibitions, and hold clay workshops at Expo 2025 Osaka, Kansai, Japan (See "EXPO 2025 OSAKA, KANSAI, JAPAN: THE CHARM OF KANSAI" in *HIGHLIGHTING JAPAN* July 2025 issue). Going forward, the historic asset of Japan's Six Ancient Kilns will continue to convey the unique charms of these regions to audiences across the country.

1. Born in 1900, died in 1975. A leading authority on the history of Japanese ceramics and a ceramic artist, he conducted academic surveys of kilns that had previously been considered only on a regional basis and grouped them together as Japan's Six Ancient Kilns (*Rokkoyo*).
2. A system in which the Agency for Cultural Affairs recognizes the historical and cultural significance of a region.
3. *Kame*: jars for storing water or grain; *suribachi*: bowls with grooved interiors for grinding or crushing food ingredients.
4. The Japanese tea ceremony (*chanoyu*), focused on enjoying powdered green tea (*matcha*).
5. A firing method in which pottery is baked at relatively high temperatures for long periods, resulting in dense clay with low water absorption. The longer and hotter the firing (*yakishime*), the harder the vessel and the less water it absorbs.
6. A glass-like coating applied to the surface of pottery.

CHARACTERISTICS OF JAPAN'S SIX ANCIENT KILNS

Echizen-yaki

Echizen ware; Echizen, Fukui Prefecture

Known for its simple, sturdy construction and the warm textures created by clay and natural ash glazes, *Echizen-yaki* uses clay with a high iron content and strong heat resistance, producing dense, durable vessels. Traditional forming techniques have been preserved, making it well suited for creating large jars and pots.

Photo: Echizen Town

Shigaraki-yaki

Shigaraki ware; Koka, Shiga Prefecture

Shigaraki-yaki is known for its coarse texture, containing sand particles, and the striking visual effects that emerge as the clay changes during firing, produced without the use of glaze. The region's highly refractory clay allows for a wide range of expressions, from everyday functional vessels to sculptural works.

Photo: Koka City

(See "Japanese Good Luck Charm Culture: Shigaraki-yaki Tanuki," in *HIGHLIGHTING Japan* March 2026 issue)

Seto-yaki

Seto ware; Seto, Aichi Prefecture

Photo: Seto Hongyo Kiln

Seto clay is highly refractory and highly plastic, and contains very little iron, which allows it to fire to a white color. Making use of these properties, Seto has produced a wide variety of pottery with many types of glazes. From the late Heian period (late 12th century) to the Muromachi period (late 14th to late 16th century), it was the only one of the Six Ancient Kilns to produce glazed ceramics. In the late Edo period (late 18th to mid-19th century), Seto also began producing porcelain. The term *setomono*, used generally for ceramics in Japanese, originates from this region.

Tamba-yaki

Tamba ware; Tambasasayama, Hyogo Prefecture

Photo: Tamba-Tachikui Ceramics Cooperative

Tamba-yaki is distinguished by the bright natural ash glazes that form during firing and the diverse effects created using wood-ash and other ash glazes. Since the introduction of climbing kilns, local potters have applied unique techniques, such as the foot-powered kick wheel, to create simple yet robust vessels for everyday use, a tradition that has been passed down through generations.

(See "Tohaku Program: Allowing Guests to Stay in the Home Village of Tamba-yaki and Experience Local Pottery-Making Firsthand," in *HIGHLIGHTING Japan* March 2026 issue)

Tokoname-yaki

Tokoname ware; Tokoname, Aichi Prefecture

Tokoname-yaki is characterized by high-fired unglazed pottery. Its clay, rich in iron, vitrifies even at relatively low temperatures, making it well suited for producing large jars and pots. Today, the region is renowned both domestically and internationally for teapots, which have been produced since the 19th century, as well as for bonsai pots and other items.

Photo: Maekawa Seito Kiln

Bizen-yaki

Bizen ware; Bizen, Okayama Prefecture

Bizen-yaki is characterized by its robust natural clay flavor and the varied kiln effects that emerge from high-temperature, long-duration firing without the use of painting or glaze. During firing in climbing kilns, each piece is shaped by the action of flames and ash, resulting in vessels with unique appearances, each one distinct.

Photo: Bizen City

Kutani-yaki: A Canvas of Five Vibrant Colors

Kutani-yaki (Kutani ware) is a type of porcelain produced in the southern part of Ishikawa Prefecture, along the Sea of Japan coast in central Honshu, encompassing the cities of Kaga, Komatsu, Nomi, and Kanazawa. Renowned for its bold, painterly designs and deep, vivid colors, _Kutani-yaki_ is often called 'Japan's oil painting.' This article explores the enduring appeal of this distinctive ceramic art.

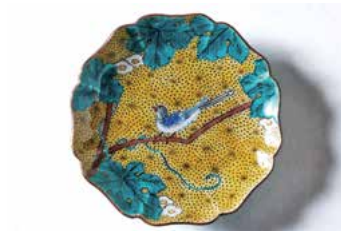
(Text: IMAMURA Keiko Photography cooperation: KABURAKI Shoho)

Photo: ITO Akihiro

Kutani-yaki is distinguished by its bold, vivid use of five colors: red, cobalt blue, green, purple, and yellow.

Kutani-yaki is said to have originated in the early Edo period (17th century) as a project of the Daishoji Domain, a branch of the Kaga Domain that governed this region. Around 1655, porcelain stone, the raw material for porcelain, was discovered in Kutani Village, which was under the domain's jurisdiction. The Maeda family, lords of the Kaga Domain, had color-painted porcelain made using this material. This early form of _Kutani-yaki_, known as _Ko-Kutani_ (Old Kutani), was characterized by a bold and sumptuous style with vibrant colors of red, cobalt blue, green, purple, and yellow, befitting presentation to the feudal lord. However, the _Ko-Kutani_ kiln operations ended after about 50 years due to the domain's financial difficulties, and porcelain production in the Kaga Domain did not resume until roughly a century later.

"In the early 19th century, as political stability and the domain's finances improved, the Kaga Domain invited master craftsman AOKI Mokubei from Kyoto, and color-painted porcelain production was resumed as a domain project. These works are known as _Saiko Kutani_ (Revived Kutani), in contrast to _Ko-Kutani_," says KABURAKI Motoyoshi, chairman of the Ishikawa Kutani Porcelain Cooperative Union, who has devoted himself to the promotion and development of _Kutani-yaki_. "Furthermore, in an effort to revive the traditional techniques of _Ko-Kutani_, contemporary merchant YOSHIDAYA Den-emon established a kiln and developed a painting style called



Photos: ITO Akihiro

Left: An example of a work created in the *Ko-Kutani* style, characterized by its ornate and vibrant use of color.

Right: An example of a work created using the *Aote* technique developed at the Yoshidaya kiln.

Photo: ITO Akihiro

A decorative plate featuring *Yuri-kinsai*, a technique that combines gold leaf or gold powder with glaze.

Left: An example of an *Eiraku* style sake cup, decorated exclusively in gold over a red undercoat.

Right: An example of a *Mokubei* style work, created by AOKI Mokubei and distinguished by its striking red ground.

Photos: ITO Akihiro

Aote, characterized by designs centered on yellow and green. Historically in Japan, green was considered a shade of blue, which gave rise to the name *Aote*, meaning 'blue style.'"

"*Aote* is also known as the *Yoshidaya* style, named after the Yoshidaya kiln, and is one of the techniques most representative of *Kutani-yaki*. In addition, *Mokubei*, mentioned earlier, is known for a decorative technique called the *Mokubei* style, in which figures are depicted using red line drawings overlaid with the five Kutani colors. In *Kutani-yaki*, the process of decoration is described not as 'drawing pictures' or 'applying color,' but as 'laying on color,' reflecting the generous use of pigments. This is because the porcelain body was not originally pure white, requiring pigments to be applied thickly so that the base would not show through. This overglaze enamel technique lies at the very heart of *Kutani-yaki*, giving rise to porcelain distinguished by its rich coloration and dignified presence—often referred to as 'Japan's oil painting.'"

Further decorative techniques were developed, including the *Iidaya* style, which features intricate red-line painting accented with gold, and the *Eiraku* style, in which designs are rendered solely in gold over a red undercoat. At the same time, production expanded beyond luxury decorative items for the affluent, such as jars and incense burners,[1] to include everyday wares for ordinary households, including flower vases and plates.

In the years that followed, new techniques continued to emerge and evolve, including methods using Western pigments as well as techniques combining gold leaf or gold powder with glaze.[2] In particular, KUTANI Shoza, who was active in the mid to late 19th century, was proactive in exporting his work overseas. As he exhibited numerous pieces at domestic and international expositions, these works gained popularity in Europe and the United States under the name 'Japan Kutani.'

In 2025, Kaga cuisine,[3] a traditional local food culture of Ishikawa Prefecture, was registered as a National Intangible Cultural Property. Together with *Wajima-nuri* lacquerware,[4] *Kutani-yaki* vessels have also drawn attention as an essential element that enhances the presentation of these dishes and expresses the spirit of Japanese hospitality.

"As its history shows, *Kutani-yaki* has evolved through the ingenuity of artisans of each era, who developed new techniques and passed them down to the present day. While cherishing tradition, craftsmen have continued to express their individuality in pursuit of ever greater beauty and quality, producing a wide variety of works even today. In recent years, many female artisans have also been active in the field, and their decoration, marked by a sense of warmth and gentleness within its beauty, has gained popularity," says KABURAKI.

Among the many distinctive works available, visitors are encouraged to seek out a piece that resonates with them personally.

An artisan decorating *Kutani-yaki*.

Photo: ITO Akihiro

1. A vessel used for burning aromatic materials. Originally a Buddhist ritual implement, it is also used in the practice of *kodo* (the Japanese art of incense appreciation) and as an ornamental object in a *tokonoma* alcove.
2. A glassy liquid applied to the surface of ceramics.
3. A local cuisine that brings together the rich bounty of the sea and mountains of Ishikawa Prefecture (the former Kaga Domain area) with regional culture. It is regarded as a comprehensive art form that encompasses not only the cuisine itself, but also the setting in which it is presented—featuring traditional Ishikawa crafts such as *Wajima-nuri* lacquerware and *Kutani-yaki* vessels, along with seasonal flowers and hanging scrolls.
4. Lacquerware produced in Wajima City, Ishikawa Prefecture. It is distinguished by its exceptional durability, achieved using high-quality diatomaceous earth, available only in the area, as an undercoating material. (See "A Life Captivated by Wajima Nuri, Japan's Traditional Lacquerware," in *HIGHLIGHTING Japan* March 2025 issue)

Japanese Good Luck Charm Culture: Shigaraki-yaki Tanuki

One may come across pottery in the shape of a *tanuki* (raccoon dog) in front of the restaurants and shops in Japan. *Tanuki* statues have long been popular as auspicious items. We spoke with a *kamamoto*[1] in Shiga Prefecture that produces *tanuki* statues about their origins and the meanings infused in them.

(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)

Shiga Prefecture, located almost in the center of Japan, is home to Lake Biwa, Japan's largest lake. Shigaraki Town, Koka City, in southeastern Shiga Prefecture is known as the production area of *Shigaraki-yaki*[2] (Shigaraki ware) and the home of one of Japanese Six Ancient Kilns (See "Japan's Six Ancient Kilns: Preserving the Nation's Ceramic Heritage," *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, March 2026 issue). Many kilns are still producing potteries in this area, where pottery has been made mainly for daily necessities since ancient times, and pottery culture is a vibrant backdrop to daily life.

Tanuki statues can be seen all over Shigaraki Town as a symbol of the community. *Tanuki* statues, standing on two legs with a *kasa* bamboo hat on the head as well as a *tokkuri*[3] sake bottle in the hand, have somewhat humorous and friendly expressions. They are not only ornaments, but also popular good luck charms in Japanese culture.

At Shigaraki Touen Tanuki Village, a complex of facilities operated by the *kamamoto*, there are many *Shigaraki-yaki tanuki* items on display, including those

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

The Shigaraki Touen Tanuki Village is full of *tanuki* (raccoon dog) statues, from tiny items to the largest one in Japan.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

'Tanuki Village Otorii gate' in Shigaraki Touen Tanuki Village is a popular photo spot.

Photo: ISHIZAWA Yoji

Tanuki statues on the platform of Shigaraki Station

considered the largest in Japan. OKUMA Reina, the managing director of the complex, shared her insights about *tanuki* statues.

"*Tanuki* statues started to be created in Shigaraki Town from around 1900. In those days, Shigaraki pottery consisted of practical items such as teapots, storage pots, and flowerpots. Then, the first *tanuki* statues were said to be made for fun by one of the *kamamoto*."

The clay used in *Shigaraki-yaki* is fine, sticky, and suitable for fine modeling. This quality allows artisans to carefully render the facial expressions and other details of *tanuki* figures, which is one of the reasons their production became widespread. OKUMA says that the selection of the *tanuki* as a subject has cultural connotations in Japan.

"*Tanuki* have been considered auspicious animals since ancient times, and they have been popular as a symbol of good luck in competitions and business from the wordplay on the sound of "*tanuki*," which can be read as "pulling ahead of others" (*ta o nuku = tanuki*)."

Tanuki statues are believed to contain the eight auspicious symbols known in Japanese as *Hasso Engi*,[4] and each of its items has a meaning, such as the *kasa* for self-protection from misfortune and the *tokkuri* to express human virtue.

One way *tanuki* statues ware became known nationwide was the 1951 visit to Shigaraki by Emperor Hirohito, posthumously known as Emperor Showa, the 124th emperor of Japan.

"It was reported that Emperor Showa, after seeing the *tanuki* statues lined up along the road, composed a poem about the scene, and the *tanuki* statues subsequently came to be widely known as auspicious objects," says OKUMA. Since then, they have established their presence as items placed at the front doors of restaurants, inns, and shops.

Shigaraki-yaki is known not only for its *tanuki* statues but also for its advanced ceramic techniques. *Shigaraki-yaki* tiles were used for part of the Black Sun on the back of the Tower of the Sun, the symbol of the Expo 1970 Osaka.

These days at Shigaraki Touen Tanuki Village, *tanuki* statues of various sizes are created and displayed, and visitors can also enjoy pottery painting and other hands-on ceramic experiences.

"We have many visitors from overseas, with about 10,000 people visiting in 2024. Painting unglazed *tanuki* statues is a very popular activity, offering both a memorable experience and a unique souvenir of their trip," says OKUMA.

Tanuki statues, which reflect Japan's unique culture of good fortune and its philosophy of craftsmanship, and have been nurtured through the region's history and the lives of its people, continue to be produced today as one of the representative *Shigaraki-yaki* pottery items.

Photos: ISHIZAWA Yoji

Above: The Tanuki Making Course: A *tanuki* statue just after being removed from its mold

Below: Applying color to a completed unglazed *tanuki* statue

1. Refers to a workshop where pottery is produced, or to the potters themselves.
2. Traditional pottery produced in and around Shigaraki, Koka City, Shiga Prefecture. It is characterized by its natural fire colors and deep, rich scorched colors that are created during the firing process in the kiln. It is widely known for daily necessities and vases, as well as *tanuki* statues and other offerings and ornaments.
3. A *tokkuri* (right) is a vessel with a narrow neck and a bulging body, used for pouring sake into *ochoko* (left), *sakazuki*, or other cups.

Photo: PIXTA

4. The eight auspicious features of the *Shigaraki-yaki tanuki* statues. The "*kasa* (bamboo hat)" symbolizes protection from misfortune; the "smile" a comforting behavior; the "large eyes" keen observation of one's surroundings; the "belly" calmness and strong decisiveness; the "*tokkuri* (sake bottle)" acquiring virtue and never lacking food or drink; the "bankbook" trustworthiness; the "tail" valuing the end of things and the idea that all's well that ends well; and the "money pouch" financial good fortune.

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

Guests experience the *kama-ire*, kiln loading process, where pieces of shaped pottery are lined up inside the kiln for firing

Tohaku Program: Allowing Guests to Stay in the Home Village of Tamba-yaki and Experience Local Pottery-Making Firsthand

Tambasasayama City in Hyogo Prefecture,[1] the Tohaku (pottery stay) program allows visitors to stay overnight in a local potter's workshop and take part in hands-on experiences that put them in touch with the potter's lifestyle and the local pottery-making culture. We interviewed an organizer of the program to find out more. **(Text: TANAKA Nozomi)**

The Tachikui district in Tambasasayama City, is known as the home village of *Tamba-yaki*[2] (Tamba ware), which is counted as one of Japan's Six Ancient Kilns (*Rokkoyo*) (See "Japan's Six Ancient Kilns" Passing Down Japanese Ceramic Culture," *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, March 2026 issue). *Tamba-yaki* is a traditional pottery with a history of around 850 years. About 60 *kamamoto*[3] are scattered within a roughly 2- kilometer radius in the mountainous region, where pottery production continues today. In Tachikui district, the Tohaku program providing hands-on experiences to guests has been offered since 2024, cooperatively managed by the Tamba-Tachikui Pottery Cooperative Association and other local businesses and organizations.

The Tohaku is a program limited to just one group per month. Guests not only take in experiences of the pottery-making process but also stay overnight for a two-day program at a *kamamoto*, where they can spend time alongside the potter and gain an intimate sense of their everyday life. On the first day, young potters guide guests to other *kamamoto* and also take them to the historic *nobori-gama*,[4] climbing kiln. Afterward, they make their way to the *kamamoto* where they will stay overnight. Dinners feature local cuisine served on *Tamba-yaki*, providing opportunities for interaction with potters and local residents. On the following day, guests get to experience hands-on pottery-making and also have enjoyable time to explore the area, shop for potteries, and so on, finishing off the two-day, one-night program. The pieces created by guests will be fired by the *kamamoto* and delivered to their homes later.

Objectives of the program include preserving the pottery-making heritage of the region and promoting it as a cultural tourism destination. TABAYASHI Shinya of the *Tamba-yaki* Tohaku Secretariat administering the Tohaku program explains:

"We realized that simply viewing finished pottery products could not fully convey the charms of the area. Believing that interaction with potters would help visitors gain a deeper understanding of *Tamba-yaki* and convey to them more about the region's historical background, we accepted proposals from art directors

Photo: PIXTA

The *nobori-gama*, climbing kiln

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

The pottery made in the program is sent to the guest later

active in Hyogo Prefecture and professionals individuals involved in developing new projects for traditional industries to launch the Tohaku program."

Today, about ten young potters serve as guides, working to connect travelers with the region. Through these activities, exchanges among local potters are also beginning to emerge.

The initiative has been well received, with Tohaku and *Tamba-yaki* being recognized as the World's Best Creative Journey in the Creative Tourism Awards 2025[5] in February 2025. TABAYASHI relates, "We have heard that *Tamba-yaki* was recognized for its unique character, along with the opportunities the program gives guests to experience the daily life and traditions of local potters, as well as the ways it has fostered connections and human resource development in the area."

The Tohaku program offers a new form of travel that immerses visitors in the local lifestyle, culture and pottery-making processes of the region, providing a deeper, more multidimensional understanding of Japanese pottery culture. TABAYASHI tells, "I hope the practices developed with this program in conjunction with *Tamba-yaki* will be adopted in other regions as well with initiatives helping to pass on both crafting traditions and local cultures."

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

The landscape surrounding a *kamamoto* where program guests stay

1. A city located in the central-eastern part of Hyogo Prefecture. It is about an hour by train or car from Osaka City and Kobe City, the prefectural capital. The area is known for its specialty agricultural products, historic townscape, and traditional industries.
2. A traditional pottery form produced mainly in the Tachikui district of Tambasasayama City, Hyogo Prefecture. Characterized by the rustic simplicity of its appearance, achieved through natural glazes formed during the firing process, the form produces many items of pottery for use in everyday life, including jars and pots.
3. Refers to a workshop where pottery is produced, or to the potters themselves.
4. A kiln built on a sloped surface like a hill, with a succession of firing chambers arranged in a stair-step pattern. With firing performed progressively from the bottom upward, flames and ashes flow through the chambers, yielding diverse firing results.
5. An international award recognizing tourism initiatives that highlight notable aspects of local cultures, hosted by the Creative Tourism Network. Established with EU support, the international organization aims to develop experience-based tourism through co-creation between travelers and local residents.

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

A *kamamoto* where program guests stay, the 2nd floor serving as the lodging space.

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

Program guests take part in hands-on pottery-making

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

Guests take out fired pieces from the kiln in the apprenticeship, a part of the program.

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

Guests enjoy dinner together with potters and local residents.

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

At the dinner, dishes including barbecued local vegetables are served on *Tamba-yaki* dishware.

Photo: Tamba-yaki Tohaku Secretariat

Local sake is served in a *Tamba-yaki*.

Hagi-yaki: Enjoying the Subtle Changes That Emerge in Daily Use

Hagi-yaki (Hagi ware) is a representative traditional Japanese pottery that has been passed down for over 400 years in Hagi City, Yamaguchi Prefecture. This article explores _Hagi-yaki_, which is characterized by its soft and unassuming appearance, as well as a texture that conveys the warmth of the clay.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

Photo: Hagiyaki Cooperative Association

A *Hagi-yaki ido chawan*,[1] tea bowl made for use in the tea ceremony

Hagi City is a castle town where the town layout (*machi-wari*)[2] from the Edo period (early 17th century to mid-late 19th century) has been preserved to the present day. The area offers opportunities to experience the local history and culture, which includes samurai residences and sites of Japan's Meiji Industrial Revolution[3] registered as UNESCO World Cultural Heritage sites in 2015. Against this backdrop, *Hagi-yaki* has been passed down as a traditional craft. Its origins date back to the late 16th century, during the period of conflict between Japan and the Korean Peninsula, according to YOKOMI Hiroshi of the Hagiyaki Cooperative Association.

"Advanced techniques brought by Korean *toko*, pottery artisans who came to Japan at the time of invasions to the Korean Peninsula by the ruler of Japan, Toyotomi Hideyoshi,[4] eventually laid the foundations of *Hagi-yaki*."

Later, in 1604, when Mori Terumoto[5] built a castle in Hagi, potters were invited to established kiln in the area known as Matsumoto-ichi, which is located east of the castle town, and began producing pottery there.

"Since the Mori family favored the traditional tea ceremony, known as *chanoyu*,[6] there was a demand for pottery to be used as *chaki*, tea utensils, which led to the flourishing of *Hagi-yaki*. During the Edo period, under the patronage of the Choshu Domain, which governed present-day Yamaguchi Prefecture, *Hagi-yaki* continued to be produced as *goyo-yaki* —pottery made as official wares for the domain."

In this way, *Hagi-yaki* was greatly appreciated for its utility as *chato*, tea ceramics for the tea ceremony and came to be known throughout Japan.

A unique blend of clay is used to make *Hagi-yaki*, combining multiple clays sourced within Yamaguchi Prefecture, including Daido-tsuchi, Mishima-tsuchi, and Mitake-tsuchi. The clay is shaped with different techniques including use of a potter's wheel (*rokuro*) and hand-forming (*tebineri*),[7] then fired at low temperature in an initial *su-yaki*, bisque firing. Next, the pottery is fired at temperatures above 1,200 °C after a glassy coating called a glaze made with materials such as feldspar (a mineral) and ash from wood or straw is applied to the surface. In *noborigama*,[8] climbing kilns, the effects of flames and ash create colors and patterns by chance known as *yohen*, resulting in a one-of-a-kind look for each piece.

"Another essential characteristic of *Hagi-yaki* is *kan-nyu* (glaze crazing). This refers to the crackle

Above: Edoya Yokocho, a district retaining the atmosphere of an Edo-period castle town

Below: Hagi is home to eight existing *kamamoto*[9] with 200-year histories

Photos: Hagiyaki Cooperative Association

Photo: Hagiyaki Cooperative Association

A flower vase clearly displays a unique *yohen* color pattern created by the effects of flames and ash in the kiln

patterns that form on the glaze surface as the piece cools after being fired at high temperatures. This *kan-nyu* can allow tea or alcohol to slowly seep into the vessel, resulting in subtle changes in color and appearance over time. *Hagi-yaki* is characterized by gentle firing, rather than strong *yakishime*,[10] hardening, which gives the ware a high level of liquid absorbency. As the piece is used over time, its *kan-nyu* gradually shapes its texture and aesthetic appeal, making this another important defining element of *Hagi-yaki*."

YOKOMI describes *Hagi-yaki* as pottery that gradually evolves and matures, changing its appearance as it is used in daily life.

"These changes are referred to as *'Hagi no nana-bake,'* lit. 'the seven transformations of *Hagi-yaki*'. While the phrase includes 'seven,' it is not really meant to specify such an exact number; rather it symbolizes the way the pottery changes its appearance in multiple ways over many years of use. *Hagi-yaki* is not fully completed when it is first made; it gradually evolves and matures through use in owners' daily lives. One of its greatest charms lies in this process of change. It also offers ways of appreciating the Japanese concept of *wabi-sabi*."[11]

YOKOMI hopes owners will enjoy these "phases of evolving and maturing" as their pieces evolve in color and appearance through long-term use.

"When using *Hagi-yaki*, it is important to understand its high absorbency. Before first use, soak it in water; after use, wash it promptly and allow it to dry thoroughly. The essential way to appreciate *Hagi-yaki* is to see slight discoloration or changes in the pottery not as flaws, but as part of the piece's process of evolving."

These characteristics of *Hagi-yaki* have been highly valued in the world of *cha no yu*. An expression used by masters of the tea ceremony to rank masterpiece pottery forms — *"Ichi Raku, ni Hagi, san Karatsu"*[12] ("Number one: *Raku-yaki*; two, *Hagi-yaki*; three, *Karatsu-yaki*") — illustrates how greatly it has been appreciated.

Today, *Hagi-yaki* is enjoyed not only as tea ware for tea ceremony, but as pottery that naturally blends into daily life and dining, in both Japanese and Western settings. Its greatest charm lies in the way it preserves cultural tradition while resonating with contemporary sensibilities.

Photo: Hagiyaki Cooperative Association

A tea bowl with characteristic *kan-nyu* (glaze crazing) patterns of fine cracks on its surface

1. A type of tea bowl fired on the Korean Peninsula around the 15th to 16th centuries. The bowls were highly valued for their simple forms and well-worn appearances.
2. A planned urban structure that established separate residential areas for samurai and commoners.
3. Sites where Western technologies, machinery, and so on were introduced and developed from the middle of the 19th to the early 20th century. Located in 11 Japanese cities in 8 prefectures, the 23 sites are connected to industries including iron and steel manufacturing, shipbuilding, and coal mining.
4. Born in 1536 or 1537, died in 1598. Hideyoshi was a military leader who achieved the unification of Japan during the Warring States period (late 15th to late 16th century), a time of civil war and regional division.
5. Born in 1553, died in 1625. A military commander of the Sengoku (late 15th to late 16th century) and Edo (early 17th to the middle of the late 19th century) periods, he built Hiroshima Castle in Hiroshima City, Hiroshima Prefecture. (See "Hiroshima Castle: A Symbol of the City," *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, April 2023 issue)
6. *Chanoyu* (*Matcha-do*) is a tea ceremony in which powdered tea is enjoyed.
7. A potter's wheel (*rokuro*) is a mechanical device used to create circular vessels using its rotational movement. Hand-forming (*tebineri*) involves kneading and shaping the clay by hand without the use of a *rokuro* or mold.
8. A kiln built on a sloped surface like a hill, with a succession of firing chambers arranged in a stair-step pattern. With firing performed progressively from the bottom upward, flames and ashes flow through the chambers, yielding diverse firing results.
9. Refers to a workshop where pottery is produced, or to the potters themselves.
10. A firing state achieved by firing pottery at relatively high temperatures for extended periods, causing the clay to become firmer and less absorbent. The stronger the *yakishime*, the harder the pottery becomes and the more resistant it is to absorbing liquids.
11. A term expressing a unique Japanese aesthetic ideal, finding beauty in imperfection, serenity, and simplicity. The concept developed alongside the tea ceremony, representing Japanese aesthetic sensibilities.
12. An expression used in the world of the tea ceremony ranking masterpiece forms of tea bowls. The three forms specified as ranking particularly highly are the *Raku-yaki* from Kyoto, *Hagi-yaki* from Yamaguchi Prefecture, and *Karatsu-yaki* from Saga Prefecture (See "Pursuing 'Beauty in Utility': The Art and Skill of Karatsu-yaki, a 400-Year Tradition," *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, October 2025 issue). These forms are greatly valued for their distinctive textures and aesthetic characteristics.

Hasami-yaki: A Pottery That Has Flourished as Everyday Tableware

Hasami-yaki (Hasami ware), a type of porcelain[1] ware that has been produced for over 400 years in Hasami Town, Nagasaki Prefecture, has been widely used as everyday tableware. In this article, we explore the historical background and defining characteristics of _Hasami-yaki_, which has been attracting attention both in Japan and overseas in recent years.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

Hasami-yaki pottery displays a richly varied range of colors and designs adapted to the times

Hasami Town, home to _Hasami-yaki_, is a border town neighboring Arita Town where _Arita-yaki_[2] (Arita ware) is produced. The town's central area is on a flat plain, surrounded by small hills and mountains forming a basin-like terrain. Particularly from the mountains in the southeastern part of the area, porcelain stone — a key material for making porcelain — is mined, with around 20 to 30 percent of the town's approximately 15,000 residents engaged in work related to pottery production. According to NOGUCHI Masahiko of the Hasami Town Tourism Association, pottery production in Hasami began in the late 16th century.

As NOGUCHI explains, "Both Hasami and Arita are places where full-scale porcelain production was first established in Japan, forming an integrated production area sharing technologies, raw materials, and the movement of craftsmen."

As the industry developed further, differences in the two towns' roles gradually became apparent.

"Geographically suited for large-scale kiln operations and blessed with raw materials for porcelain-making as well as fuel, Hasami developed as a center for producing porcelain for practical use. Meanwhile, spurred by the discovery of Izumiyama porcelain stone,[3] Arita came to produce porcelain for tribute offerings and export under the protection of the Saga Domain that ruled the area at the time. Consequently, _Hasami-yaki_ took on the role of everyday tableware, while _Arita-yaki_ established itself as a production center known for its distinctive styles and designs."

From around 1690, demand for pottery used as everyday necessities, as bowls and plates rose sharply among commoners. In response to this demand, a _Hasami-yaki_ mass production based on division of labor system was established.

"Artisans specializing in individual stages of the production process, such as mold making, mold-based forming, painting, and firing,[4] handled each of the stages. This enabled stable quality and mass production, and the concept of 'producing what the market demands' took root. This rational framework

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

A _nobori-gama_,[5] climbing kiln remaining in Hasami Town

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

A *kataya* (mold-maker) produces the molds that serve as the basis for shaping vessels.

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

A *kijiya* (claymaker) is responsible for clay preparation and forming, handling processes up to the drying stage.

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

A *kamamoto* (potter) handles processes such as initial bisque firing, painting designs, and firing the pottery.

is still carried on in *Hasami-yaki* production today."

The pottery itself also reflects its emphasis on practicality. *Hasami-yaki* is rarely made excessively thin. Giving an additional thickness to vulnerable parts, such as the rim (*koen*: the upper edge of the vessel) and the "foot" (*kodai*) at the base, helps the vessel withstand daily use, including washing and stacking. Making the foot low and wide gives the vessel stability and balance, making it resistant to tipping and easy to handle, another distinctive characteristic of *Hasami-yaki*. Also, porcelain fired at high temperatures has low liquid absorbency, making it resistant to taking on stains and odors. Decorations primarily based on white porcelain (*hakuji*)[6] and underglaze blue (*sometsuke*)[7] have also been passed down as designs emphasizing durability and usability.

"In the late Edo period (late 18th to early 19th century), a practical porcelain bowl known as the *kurawanka-wan* used as dishware by commoners gained popularity. The bowls were used by peddlers who sold rice and sake from boats traveling along the rivers, and the name is said to originate from their calls of '*Kurawan ka*?' ('Won't you take something to eat?') Designed for easy handling aboard swaying boats, they featured forms with thickness offering stability and resistance to breaking, with patterns primarily consisting of simple underglaze blue *sometsuke* decoration. Offering the production efficiency and practicality needed for stable supply of mass-produced everyday tableware, today the bowl is considered one of the symbolic forms representative of *Hasami-yaki*," NOGUCHI explains.

Hasami-yaki is also currently being used for school lunch (See "The Significance and Evolution of Japan's School Lunch Program," *HIGHLIGHTING Japan*, December 2025 issue) in Hasami Town. While school lunch is commonly served on hard-to-break dishes, such as plastic or aluminum elsewhere, Hasami Town uses locally produced *Hasami-yaki*, helping foster an appreciation for local culture.

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

Gaining widespread popularity in the late Edo period, practical *kurawanka-wan* bowls were used by peddlers traveling on boats, whose calls of "*Kurawan ka*?" ("Won't you take something to eat?") gave the bowls their name

"For serving school lunch in Hasami Town, a special strengthened form of porcelain called Warenikka, featuring a name that comes from the local dialect word for *warenikui* ('break-resistant'). This practice stems from a desire to naturally incorporate *Hasami-yaki* into children's daily lives, in the context of the town's deep history of pottery production."

Reinforced porcelain, a form given greater strength than ordinary porcelain, to be made for school lunch, is characterized by light weight and resistance to breaking—truly an approach demonstrating *Hasami-yaki*'s focus on practicality.

Photo: Hasami-yaki Shinkoukai

Reinforced Warenikka porcelain used for school lunch in Hasami Town

In recent years, tourists from outside Japan have been showing interest in *Hasami-yaki* as well, drawn by its simple, functional design and deep roots in everyday life. Many visitors now research the region's pottery history in advance and travel specifically for hands-on pottery experiences or production facility tours.

"*Hasami-yaki* is a type of pottery that can be used repeatedly in daily life and it really sets off dishes served on it. I believe these are key factors behind the appreciation it has received both in Japan and abroad. I would be delighted if more people could experience the charm of *Hasami-yaki*."

1. Ceramics made from a type of rock known as porcelain stone and fired at high temperatures to achieve a white, hard finish. Featuring low water absorption, they are widely used as everyday tableware.
2. Porcelain produced mainly in Arita Town, Saga Prefecture. It is said to have been first made in the early 17th century by potters from the Korean Peninsula who came to Japan. It is characterized by its hard, white porcelain, often decorated with vivid colored paints.
3. Porcelain stone, a raw ingredient for making porcelain, discovered at Izumiyama in Arita Town, Saga Prefecture. The discovery is said to have prompted the beginning of full-scale porcelain production in Japan.
4. A process of heating shaped pottery clay at high temperatures in a kiln to harden it.
5. A type of pottery-firing kiln built on hill slopes, enabling large amounts of pottery to be fired at high temperatures all at once.
6. A type of porcelain given a white finish by applying a glassy solution called glaze to the surface of the pottery. Highly decorative, it is used as tableware that brings out the color of dishes served on it.
7. A decorative technique where patterns are drawn on the base clay using a pigment called *gosu*, then covered with a glossy, transparent, colorless glaze before firing.

Yachimun: A Treasure Born of Okinawa's Unique Climate and Culture

Yachimun is the Okinawan dialect for pottery. Characterized by its rounded, thick forms and the simple beauty of its vessels and jars, _yachimun_ is popular as souvenirs. In this article, we focus on _Tsuboya-yaki_ (Tsuboya ware), the origin of _yachimun_ culture, and explore its history and appeal.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

Tsuboya ware is a pottery that has been cultivated amid Okinawa's natural setting, history, and the lives of people. According to the Tsuboya Ware Cooperative Association, its history dates back to the Ryukyu Kingdom[1] era. During the 14th to 16th centuries, a period of flourishing trade, much pottery was brought from China and Southeast Asia. Such exchanges then led to the development of a diverse ceramic culture in Okinawa.

"As overseas trade gradually declined, the Satsuma Domain[2] brought Ryukyu under its control in 1609. Subsequently, King Sho Nei[3] and Prince Sashiki (later

Photo: PIXTA

Shisa guardian lion ornaments are displayed in Okinawan homes as decorative charms against evil.

Photo: PIXTA

The simple, warm colors of *joyachi* ware catch the eye.

Sho Ho),[4] seeking to promote industry, invited potters from the Korean Peninsula via Satsuma, concentrating efforts on introducing and developing pottery-making techniques."

In 1682, workshops that had been scattered across various locations, including the Chibana Kiln in Okinawa City, the Takaraguchi Kiln in Shuri, and the Wakuta Kiln in Naha City, were brought together in Tsuboya district of Naha City, and a framework for Tsuboya ware production was established under the royal administration. Potters were generously provided with land and kilns and placed under strong protection. As a result, many master craftsmen emerged, and some were reportedly even honored for their achievements and elevated to official's status. Eventually Tsuboya developed into the Ryukyu Kingdom's leading pottery production area.

"Tsuboya ware is characterized by a softness and unique character achieved by skipping the bisque firing[5] stage. It can be broadly categorized into two types: *joyachi*, where glaze[6] is applied directly to the clay and fired at approximately 1,200°C, and *arayachi*, which is fired at relatively low temperatures with no glaze. *Joyachi* primarily produces everyday tableware like bowls, plates, and jars. This is the main type of modern Tsuboya ware. *Arayachi*, meanwhile, has been used for large vessels such as sake jugs and water jugs. Both types utilize the properties of high-quality clays found throughout Okinawa, particularly red clay, to create pottery that takes advantage of the powerful strength and warmth inherent to the local clay."

During Naha City's post–World War II reconstruction, smoke pollution from wood-fired kilns became a serious problem, and the use of such kilns in Tsuboya was prohibited. This prompted many potters, including Living National Treasure KINJO Jiro,[7] to relocate to Yomitan Village, an area that eventually came to be known as Yachimun no Sato (the home or village of *yachimun*). From Yomitan Village, a fertile ground for traditional crafts blessed with high-quality clay, the techniques and spirit of Tsuboya ware spread throughout the main island of Okinawa and its surrounding islands.

Photos: PIXTA

Above: A *dachibin* with a unique crescent shape
Below: A stable *kara-kara* alcohol-pouring vessel and *ochoko* small sake cup

"In addition to everyday vessels such as jars and bowls, Tsuboya ware includes many other types of pottery closely connected to life in Okinawa. These include *shisa* guardian lions placed on roofs as charms against evil; *dachibin*, originally portable bottles for sake that are now used as vases for a single flower; and *kara-kara*, alcohol-pouring vessels designed with a stable structure that keep them from tipping over. These items continue to be used in Okinawan daily life and remain a familiar and important part of the culture and lifestyle today."

Nurtured in a production environment drawing on a diverse range of decorative techniques and natural island materials, Tsuboya ware continues to be inherited today as pottery reflecting the Okinawan climate and culture as well as everyday lives of its people.

"The annual Tsuboya Pottery Festival, held in late November, is a large pottery market where local kilns offer their wares at affordable prices. Various events are also held at the festival, including pottery competitions by artisans and pottery wheel experiences. All are invited to come visit and experience the world of *yachimun*."

1. A kingdom established in 1429 when Sho Hashi unified the main island of Okinawa. It flourished as a sea-based kingdom for approximately 450 years, trading with China, Japan, and Southeast Asian nations, until the current Okinawa Prefecture was established by the Japanese government in 1879.
2. The name of an old Japanese province. It corresponds to the western part of present-day Kagoshima Prefecture.
3. The 7th king of the Ryukyu Kingdom's Second Sho dynasty. Reign: 1589 to 1620.
4. The 8th king of the Ryukyu Kingdom's Second Sho dynasty. Reign: 1621 to 1640.
5. A process of heating shaped pottery clay at high temperatures in a kiln to harden it.
6. A glassy solution applied to the surface of pottery.
7. One of the leading artisans associated with Tsuboya ware who lived from 1912 to 2004. Designated a Living National Treasure (Preserver of Important Intangible Cultural Property) in connection with Ryukyuan pottery in 1985.

Nihongawara: Preserving and Passing on Tradition

Used as a building material for historical cultural properties and venerable historical structures, *nihongawara*, roof tiles have long protected the wooden houses of Japan. We spoke with TAKEMURA Masao, chairman of the Japan Association for Inheritance Skills of Traditional Kawara-tile Roofing about the history and development of *nihongawara*.

(Text: MOROHASHI Kumiko)

The magnificent tiled roof on Myoho-in temple, a designated National Treasure of Japan

Photo: Adobe Stock

Nihongawara, a type of ceramic made of clay, are used as roofing material for traditional Japanese architecture. Fired at high temperatures, these tiles are extremely strong and durable, and as they are not painted, they do not require repainting to maintain. These traditional Japanese tiles come in different shapes for various applications: *marugawara* (round tiles),[1] *hiragawara* (concave tiles),[2] *nokigawara* (eave tiles),[3] *onigawara* (demon mask tiles),[4] *toribusuma* (bird-shaped ridge tiles),[5] and more. The tiles not only protect the roof but also serve as a key element in forming the building's appearance. According to TAKEMURA, the origins of *nihongawara* are said to date back approximately 3,000 years to China.

Photo: PIXTA

Nihongawara take numerous different shapes for different uses. (Round *marugawara* tiles pictured here.)

"Records in *Nihon Shoki* ("The Chronicles of Japan"), the oldest Japanese historical text said to have been completed in 720, indicate that roof tiling was introduced to Japan by *kawara-hakase*, master tilers who arrived from the Korean Peninsula in 558. *Nihongawara* were first used in the construction of Asukadera, Japan's oldest Buddhist temple, before spreading to the palaces and temples of Fujiwara-kyo, Heijo-kyo, and Heian-kyo, which served as imperial capitals."

From around the mid-16th century, demand for *nihongawara* had risen as castle architecture evolved, and this demand brought advances in *shosei*,[6] firing techniques. TAKEMURA explains, "It was during that period that the silver-colored *ibushigawara*,[7] smoked roof tiles that a type of *nihongawara*, came to be crafted." Around the same time, gold leaf began to be applied to the *nokigawara*. Initially used only for the

Gold leaf still remains on *nokigawara* (eave tiles) of Okayama-jo Castle

Photo: PIXTA

roofs of special structures, *nihongawara* become common on ordinary homes by the Edo period (early 17th to mid-late 19th century).

"In Edo (present-day Tokyo), where fires were frequent, tile roofing was encouraged to prevent the spread of fire and came to be adopted even for ordinary houses."

One of the main characteristics of *nihongawara* is their weight. *Hiragawara* weigh about 3kg and *marugawara* about 2.8kg apiece, with Japanese houses bearing a load of some 104kg per square meter of tile roof.

Photo: ColBase (https://colbase.nich.go.jp/?locale=en)

Houses with tiled roofs appear in *Meisho Edo Hyakkei* ("One Hundred Famous Views of Edo"), a series of woodblock prints by *ukiyo-e*[8] master Utagawa Hiroshige.[9]

"In a structurally solid building, the weight of the tiles lowers the center of gravity, which increases the structure's resistance to earthquakes, typhoons and other natural disasters. These tiles are also exceptionally durable and long-lasting roofing materials, as demonstrated by the fact that the tiles from the time Asukadera temple was originally founded remain still functional today. As a general guideline for maintenance, partial repairs are said to be sufficient about once every 100 years, with a full re-roofing only every 200 years. The fact that only the damaged tiles need to be replaced is a major advantage."

TAKEMURA has himself been involved in the restoration of the roofs of Kiyomizudera,[10] Myoho-in,[11] and other National Treasures[12] and Important Cultural Properties.

"In restoring Important Cultural Properties, we emphasize on respecting the intent behind the original design and setting aside personal opinions to faithfully preserve and restore the original roof. We carefully sort and clean old tiles, striving to reuse them whenever possible. *Onigawara* and other ornamental tiles, too, are repaired and reused as long as there is no structural issue."

In addition, the Japan Association for Inheritance Skills of Traditional Kawara-tile Roofing carries out a variety of activities designed to pass on traditional tile manufacturing and roofing techniques to future generations. "Through training programs in roof tiling of *nihongawara* based on full-scale drawings of Japanese tiles from each historical period, the association works to preserve traditional techniques and foster the next generation of skilled craftsmen."

Japanese roof tiling, which has been carefully preserved by craftspeople in this way, now faces a serious crisis to its survival.

"The properties of the clay used in making *nihongawara* are considered paramount, followed by the kiln in which the tiles are fired and lastly the techniques employed in their production. Mikawa clay from Aichi Prefecture,[13] used for the roof tiles across Japan, including those of Important Cultural Properties was produced by seven factories blending multiple raw materials in 1974. By 2025, however, only one of these factories was still operating."

Photo: PIXTA

TAKEMURA was involved in the roof tile restoration of Kiyomizudera temple, a World Heritage site and Japanese National Treasure.

TAKEMURA continues to advocate for the preservation of National Treasures and Important Cultural Properties, as well as for an environment that ensures the continuation of traditional *nihongawara* techniques. When you visit Japan's most revered temples, take a moment to look up and consider the ambitions and passions of the tilers.

1. Semi-cylindrical tiles. The roof is constructed with a combination of round and concave tiles.
2. Concave rectangular slab tiles
3. Roof tiles used for the eaves
4. Decorative tile attached to the end of the roof ridge. The well-known demon mask motif is believed to ward off misfortune.
5. Circular roof tile protruding high above an *onigawara* at the roof's peak
6. Process of firing and hardening molded clay in a kiln
7. Refers to tiles formed from clay, fired in a kiln, then sealed in an air-tight space and steamed
8. In *ukiyo-e*, literally "floating-world pictures," the "floating world" refers to everyday life, as these woodblock prints portrayed everyday scenes in ordinary people's lives.
9. Born in 1797, died in 1858. A Japanese painter known for landscape prints such as *Tokaido Gojusan-tsugi* ("Fifty-three Stages of the Tokaido Highway"). He specialized in scenic views of various provinces and famous places in Edo.
10. Temple founded in 778 in Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture. The Kiyomizu stage extending outward from the main hall is the most famous of all the Kiyomizudera structures. It is a designated National Treasure of Japan and, as part of the Historic Monuments of Ancient Kyoto, a registered UNESCO World Heritage site.
11. Temple said to have been founded in the 9th century in Kyoto City, Kyoto Prefecture. The temple's kitchen quarters, known as the *kuri*, date to around 1595 and are designated as a National Treasure.
12. Tangible cultural assets such as buildings, crafts, sculpture, and historical materials are designated Important Tangible Cultural Properties. Items of particularly high value in terms of world culture are designated as National Treasures and are protected accordingly.
13. *Sanshugawara* from Aichi Prefecture, *sekishugawara* from Shimane Prefecture, and *awajigawara* from Hyogo Prefecture are dubbed the Three Great Nihongawara, together boasting 80% of the share of roof tiles across Japan.

Photo: PIXTA

Photo: PIXTA

Above: Example of *hiragawara*
Below: The ogre-shaped tiles are called *onigawara*, and the cylindrical tiles that curve and protrude from above them are called *toribusuma*.

Using Elevators and Escalators Safely in Japan

Elevators and escalators are essential means of vertical transportation that are familiar to all of us, yet using them incorrectly can lead to serious accidents. This article introduces initiatives by the government and installers to ensure the safe operation and use of elevators and escalators, drawing on lessons from past accidents, along with key points for users.

Photo: PIXTA

What users should know to avoid elevator accidents

In 2006, a fatal accident occurred in an elevator in a residential building located in Minato City, Tokyo. In this tragic incident, a high school student exiting an elevator with a bicycle was trapped and fatally injured when the car began to move upward while the doors remained open. In the subsequent investigation, the cause of the accident was found to be worn-out brake pads in the elevator's braking system. In response to this incident, Order for Enforcement of the Building Standards Act was amended in 2009, mandating the installation of Unintended Car Movement Protection (UCMP) devices[1] in all newly installed elevators. However, these new standards are not applied to elevators installed before 2009 until they undergo a full renovation, meaning that most these older elevators continue to be operated without these devices.

Therefore, in 2012, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (MLIT) introduced a subsidy program to cover part of the cost of UCMP devices and promoted their wider adoption. In 2016, MLIT set out concrete standards for regular elevator inspections and announced operation and maintenance guidelines. These efforts were part of a broader initiative to ensure appropriate operation and maintenance of elevators, including educational outreach to installers and operators about safety measures. Partly as a result of these initiatives, the percentage of all elevators installed with the new safety devices — found to stand at only 17.4% by the survey of 2017 — has risen year on year, reaching 39.5% of the 780,000 or so elevators installed across Japan by the survey of 2025. However, with this figure still not reaching the 40% mark, further efforts are needed to promote safe operation and implement additional safety measures. In addition, efforts are being made to promote the widespread adoption of seismic emergency operation systems, which ensure that the elevator automatically stops at the nearest floor (enabling users to get out) when an earthquake occurs; it is recommended that symbols (see Fig. 1) be displayed to indicate that these safety devices are installed, to ensure peace of mind for passengers, and that information about safety be provided to those using elevators.

The elevator hall of Central Government Building No. 3, where MLIT headquarters is located (left); and an elevator with signage indicating that it is equipped with an Unintended Car Movement Protection (UCMP) device (right)

Photos: Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism

What users should know to avoid escalator accidents

MLIT promotes a "Stand on Both Sides" policy for escalators, encouraging passengers to remain standing and not walk while on the escalator. However, it is still common to see people standing on one side of the escalator, leaving the other side open for those in a hurry to walk. Some passengers can only stand on one side of the escalator for physical reasons; others could be accompanying small children and may prefer to stand side by side for safety.

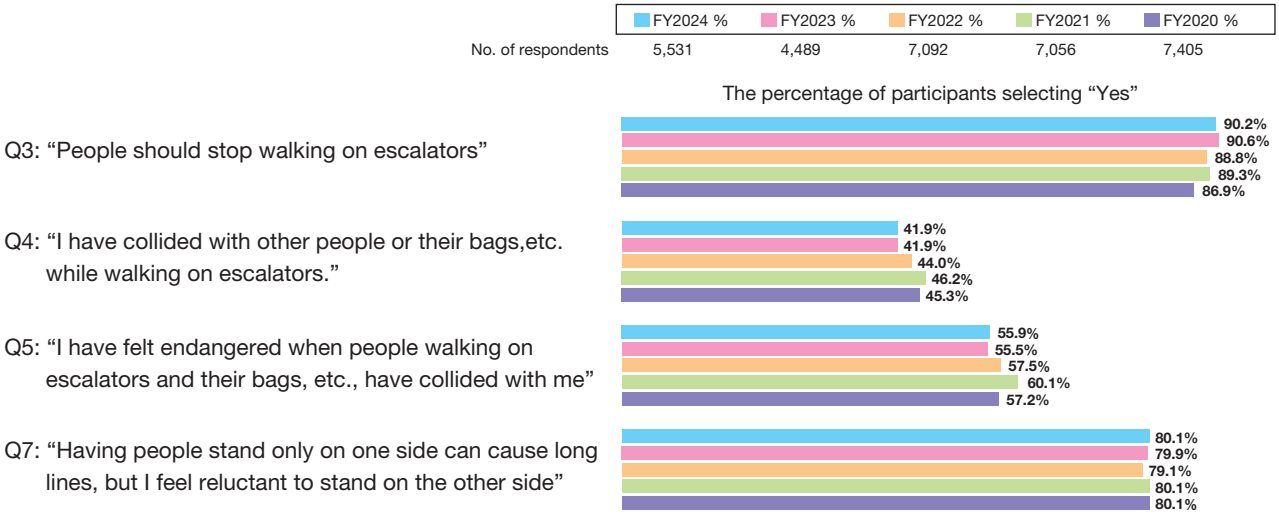
Ensuring that escalators can be used comfortably by people in a variety of circumstances is a key challenge for today's Japanese society. In a questionnaire carried out by the Japan Elevator Association in FY 2024, 90.2% of respondents agreed that "People should stop walking on escalators," while 55.9% agreed with the statement "I have felt endangered when people walking on escalators and their bags, etc., have collided with me." Walking on escalators can pose serious dangers, as it may lead to unexpected accidents. Falls can cause clothing or limbs to become caught in the machinery; and secondary accidents can also occur when falling passengers become entangled with other people and bring them down as well. Furthermore, a study undertaken in the United Kingdom (London) in 2015 confirmed that transportation efficiency is around 30% higher when passengers stand on both sides of the escalator, compared to leaving one side open for walkers. To encourage awareness, installers now place signs urging appropriate escalator use, while recorded announcements are played and security staff and conductors are stationed nearby; visitors are urged to follow these rules when using escalators.

●Fig. 1: Symbols indicating that elevators are equipped with various safety devices

The symbol on the left indicates a UCMP; that on the right, a seismic emergency operation system. These symbols are often displayed around the buttons on the control panel in the elevator car, near stickers indicating proof of regular inspection reports, or around the doors where users get in and out.

Photos: Building Performance Standardization Association

●Results of the Association's questionnaire on elevator usage



Source: Excerpts from the 2024 Questionnaire, part of the Japan Elevator Association's "Elevator Day" campaign for safe escalator usage

An example of how to ride an escalator safely. The MLIT recommends standing in two rows instead of walking on escalators.

Photo: The Japan Elevator Association

A poster created as a joint effort among 60 railway companies across Japan: "Safety Campaign: Don't Walk; Stand Still on Escalators"

Photo: Courtesy of JR East

Sticker prohibiting walking on escalators, created by the Japan Elevator Association

1. A device which automatically stops the elevator car if it starts to move while the doors are still open.

Contemporary Ikebana: An Evolved Form of Ikebana

OZONO Saihou is a Contemporary Ikebana Artist. In this issue, he speaks about the fundamentals of ikebana or *kado*, and the evolution of ikebana into a contemporary art form.

OZONO Saihou, *GREEN in my daily life*. An example of his work incorporating everyday items such as empty boxes and tools.

Photo: OZONO Saihou

OZONO Saihou

Many people know ikebana or *kado*, traditional Japanese cultural practices that have been passed down since the Muromachi period (from the late 14th to the late 16th century). What images come to mind when you think of ikebana? Many people may still imagine someone dressed in kimono, kneeling on a tatami, arranging flowers in strictly prescribed forms. Today's ikebana, though, have evolved significantly.

Ikebana or *kado*, in which plants serve as the main element in combination with various other materials to create compositions for appreciation, is one of Japan's proudest artistic expressions. Although ikebana and *kado* are nearly synonymous, *kado* carries a stronger nuance related to spirituality and philosophy. This art, which has even become popular overseas recently, originated and evolved in Japan and has a history of some 550 to 600 years. Ikebana is said to have originated from the *kyoka* practice of offering flowers, introduced to Japan with the arrival of Buddhism. By the Muromachi period, monks arranged flowers before statues of Buddha as acts of devotion and prayer.

Today, there are said to be more than 300 schools of ikebana, each school differing slightly in philosophy and technique. I belong to the Sogetsu School, one of the three major schools.[1] Sogetsu allows greater freedom and places a stronger emphasis on artistic expression than other schools.

In addition to holding the title of *Shihan* (Master) of the Sogetsu School, I am active as a Contemporary Ikebana Artist. I have created numerous innovative works, including arrangements that incorporate everyday items and compositions where human figures themselves serve as the vessel for flowers. Although the definition of contemporary ikebana

OZONO Saihou, 衣化花/*ikebana* ("Worn Flowers/Ikebana"). An example of utilizing people as the vessel for his arrangements.

Photo: ISSHIKI Takumaru

OZONO Saihou

First-class master of the Sogetsu school, one of the three major schools of ikebana, and Contemporary Ikebana Artist. Born in Tokyo in 1987. As a Contemporary Ikebana Artist, OZONO designs and arranges contemporary ikebana works brimming with originality. His works of art are defined by their innovative nature. Striving to create pieces that incorporate materials other than flowers, OZONO infuses contemporary and stylish expression with a meaningful message. He is the winner of numerous awards, including the 103rd Sogetsu Newcomer Award (2022), the 1st Sogetsu Excellence Award (2024), and the Ikebana Grand Prix 2019 Special Jury Award. OZONO's work has been presented internationally, including in countries such as China and Italy, and has been featured in numerous media.

OZONO Saihou

is quite ambiguous, I consider there are three fundamental principles: (1) deconstructing the elements of ikebana, and reconstructing them in a contemporary context based on an understanding of traditional Japanese culture; (2) creating works that can hold their own within the contemporary art scene; and (3) showing respect for all cultures, namely incorporating elements from the West and other cultures, while keeping Japanese culture as the primary focus.

Creating contemporary ikebana works requires, above all, a deep understanding of the foundational elements of Japanese culture. With a complete understanding of the most essential elements required in an ikebana arrangement, I constantly decide whether to remove a traditional element or to leave it in place deliberately. My decision aims to create innovative and contemporary works unlike anything seen before, while ensuring that each can still be clearly understood as an ikebana arrangement.

In today's diverse art world, painting, sculpture, interior design – all forms of expressions – are both rivals and peers of contemporary ikebana. In the realm of art, creating works that catch the eye requires a compelling message. Contemporary ikebana works with titles that convey strong messages are fully on par with other art forms.

I also believe that adherence to the boundaries of Japanese culture may lead to the decline of ikebana culture. Creating works that honor cultures beyond Japan and incorporate Western elements, I believe, is an effective strategy for ensuring the survival of contemporary ikebana.

OZONO Saihou, *Kyukaku* ("Sense of Smell"). Produced in Beijing, China. The use of paper coffee cups evokes the drifting aroma of coffee.

Photo: OZONO Saihou

OZONO *Saihou, Suzaki no Yama/Chikyu no Yamayama* ("Suzaki Mountain, Earth's Mountain"). With all materials sourced from Suzaki City in Kochi Prefecture, this work is inspired by the image of children playfully running around the vast mountainous landscapes of Suzaki.

Photo: OZONO Saihou

1. The three major schools of ikebana are Sogetsuryu, Ikenobo, and Ohararyu.

Forging Beauty and Soul: A Non-Japanese Swordsmith's Path of Determination

Johan Leutwiler, the first *katana-kaji*, or swordsmith from outside Japan. Facing the fire and the sword-making steel day after day, he works to create Japanese swords imbued with beauty and soul, striving each time to create a blade with the power to quietly stir the hearts of those who look upon it. We spoke with Johan about what captivated him about Japanese swords and the passion he pours into his craft.

A Japanese sword blade that Johan worked on; everyone takes weeks or months to craft with great care.

Photo: KUDO Asuka

Johan Leutwiler

The first time I saw a Bizen Fukuoka Ichimonji[1] sword, I was so deeply moved that I was left speechless. Its elegant form, the way the *hamon*[2] (temper pattern) flowed naturally—every element was in harmony. It was not merely an object of beauty; it was a work that powerfully spoke to my heart. At that moment, a clear inspiration surged within me: "I want to make a sword like this myself."

Originally created as sacred offerings to deities, over time Japanese *katana* swords have come to embody the concept of *yo no bi*[3] ("beauty in utility"), a high-level fusion of practicality and aesthetics, even while being used as weapons. I believe that the duty entrusted to modern swordsmiths is always to remember this spiritual concept while forging swords. The sword must never be a mere weapon; it must hold some kind of significance for those who take it in hand or lay eyes on it. I hope Japanese swords can have the power to quietly soothe the hearts and minds of those who see them, precisely because they are primarily appreciated as works of art today.

What captivated me even more than the Japanese swords themselves was the way of life of the *katana-kaji* artisans. Facing the fire and steel day after day, striving to refine their technique with the constant tension of uncertainty concerning whether they might succeed or fail—I felt deep admiration for their determination and sense of spirituality. I was deeply moved by the crafting work and approach of KAWACHI Kunihira, a *tosho*[4] from Nara Prefecture. Encountering his work solidified my resolve to become a swordsmith myself. Even after learning that he had a policy of not taking apprentices, I remained unshaken in my resolve and sought out a place to learn the craft. I then had the opportunity to learn under my current master, KUBO Yoshihiro. Encountering his exceptional technique and philosophy further strengthened my determination to follow the life of the swordsmith myself.

When thinking of Japanese swords, I suppose most might imagine a picture of samurai with them at his waist. The type many contemporary swordsmiths craft, however, is the *tachi*,[5] a form that was in use earlier than the era of samurai, dating back to the Heian period (late 8th to late 12th century). I feel the form of the *tachi* is more gracefully curved

Johan Leutwiler

Born in Switzerland. Seeing Japanese swords at an exhibition at age 17 and being captivated by their beauty inspired his aspiration to become a swordsmith. After coming to Japan in 2017 and training as an apprentice for five years, he became the first foreigner to obtain national certification as a *katana-kaji* in 2024. After becoming an independent swordsmith, he established a workshop in Hiroshima Prefecture and received the Achievement Award (First Place) and New Face Award in the *Sakuto* (Blade Forging) division at the 2025 Contemporary Swords and Artworks exhibition. His swordsmith name is Mitsutsuna.

Photo: KUDO Asuka

Johan Leutwiler

Johan faces the fire with the sword-making steel daily in his forging workshop.

Photo: KUDO Asuka

A Japanese sword blade engraved with Johan's swordsmith name, Mitsutsuna

Photo: KUDO Asuka

and most directly expresses Japan's unique aesthetic sensibilities. That is precisely why my own representative work takes a form of *tachi*—the Japanese sword originally made for use on horseback—rather than the *katana* sword of the samurai.

Even after becoming an independent swordsmith, I still face daily challenges and hurdles. Yet I see this as proof that my training—coming face to face both with myself and with the sword-making steel—remains ongoing still to this day. It is not a matter of competing with others but of confronting oneself and striving to go beyond who one was the day before. It is through this accumulation of daily effort, that Japanese swords, cherished and handed down into future generations, come into being created.

The immense time and spirit poured into making a single sword is rarely spoken of. Yet it is precisely this long process that gives the swords such beauty and soul, with the power to quietly stir the hearts of those who take them in hand or lay eyes on them. My hope is that the swords I craft might too have such power.

1. A school of swordsmiths from Fukuoka, Bizen Province (present-day Okayama Prefecture) that flourished from the early to mid-Kamakura period (late 12th to mid-13th century). The Ichimonji school's name is said to derive from their practice of engraving the Japanese *kanji* character "一" (*ichi*, meaning "one") in their signatures, signifying the concept of *tenka-ichi*, meaning "number one under the heavens". Their sword blades feature gorgeous *hamon* blade patterns shaped like rows of cloves.
2. A white wave-like pattern added during hardening, one of the processes of making Japanese swords, in which the steel is hardened by cooling it rapidly from a high-temperature state.
3. A concept expressing the idea that tools are beautiful when they are used.
4. Another word for *katana-kaji*, or swordsmith.
5. A long, large sword hung at the waist with the blade pointing downward, primarily made as a weapon to be used on horseback. In contrast, the *katana* sword of the samurai featured a somewhat smaller and shorter form than the *tachi* and was worn at the waist, placed directly into the *obi* sash with the blade pointing upward.

Izu Thrush

The Izu thrush (Turdus celaenops) is a native bird of Japan measuring around 23 cm in body length. It is found only on the Izu Islands and on some islands in Kyushu, such as the Tokara Islands in southwestern Kagoshima Prefecture. It is distinguished by reddish-brown plumage running from the chest to the abdomen. From the head to the chest, males are black, while females display a lighter shade. Both sexes have a thin yellow ring around the eyes. It lives in forests and along forest paths, feeding on earthworms and insects hidden beneath fallen leaves or under the soil, and on fruit and other items they pick from trees. For many years the Izu thrush lived on islands with few natural predators. However, its numbers have declined sharply as a result of the introduction of the Japanese weasel[1] in the 1970s to reduce rat-related agricultural damage, and the impact of volcanic gases from eruptions.

Photos: PIXTA

1. A species native to Japan that originally inhabited Honshu, Shikoku, Kyushu, and their surrounding islands. However, after it was newly introduced in Hokkaido and other islands with the goal of eliminating rats, it caused impacts on the native species of those regions.

HIGHLIGHTING
Japan

PLEASE VISIT the top page of Highlighting Japan for links to all our past issues including videos.

https://www.gov-online.go.jp/hlj/en/

HIGHLIGHTING JAPAN

https://www.instagram.com/highlightingjapan/

ALL PAST ISSUES available online

PLEASE VISIT the Government of Japan's official English-language website

JAPANGOV
THE GOVERNMENT OF JAPAN
https://www.japan.go.jp/

KIZUNA
The official magazine of the Government of Japan