

Castle Craftsmanship

Himeji Castle as we see it today was built by Ikeda Terumasa (1565–1613). In a major overhaul between 1601 and 1609, he replaced, repaired, and expanded the existing fortifications on the site. Since then, Ikeda's castle has survived many crises, including the end of feudalism in the nineteenth century and the air raids of World War II. Many of its wooden structures, including the main keep and three subsidiary keeps, have remained largely unchanged since their construction more than four centuries ago.

To secure the castle's future, the city of Himeji is working to train craftsmen by promoting the development and transmission of the traditional construction techniques needed to maintain White Heron Castle for generations to come.

Wooden Frames

The keep and other buildings at Himeji Castle are timber-frame buildings. Carpenters used joinery techniques developed over centuries to construct the complex framework of posts and beams that support the towering main keep.

Pillar and beam construction

Wooden frame of the main keep

Stone Walls

Japanese castle buildings are made of wood, but they sit atop foundations of earth and stone. Stone retaining walls of the kind used at Himeji were pioneered in the sixteenth century by the warlord Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) and soon became an essential feature of castles throughout Japan.

A simple wall of unfinished stones

A more complex *uchikomi-hagi* wall. Masons shaped the stones, to fit together securely while leaving enough space for drainage.

Plaster

Made from natural materials, the plaster on Himeji Castle's walls provides a degree of fire resistance as well as humidity control. Plaster is well suited to Japan's seasonally wide variations in temperature and moisture.

Roof-joint plaster

Wall surface of the main keep

Roofing Tiles

Japanese castle builders needed vast quantities of high-quality ceramic roofing tiles. Ceramic was the best but most costly roofing option during the Edo period (1603–1867). Many traditional roofing techniques, from tile-making to thatching, are still used in Japan today.

Roof of the Main Keep

Shachi, mythical fish-like creatures that adorn the roofs of Japanese castles, were believed to guard against fire. The *shachi* are typically arranged across from each other in male–female pairs, with the male on the north or east side, and the female on the south or west side.