

【Households of the Cormorant Masters】

The Bonfire Tunnel corridor that leads to the exhibit hall is lined with six life-size figures depicted in dramatic silhouette: the current Nagara River cormorant masters (*ushō*) of the city of Gifu. These men occupy the hereditary posts of Cormorant Fishing Master of the Imperial Household Agency Board of Ceremonies, a position that is considered part of the Imperial Household Agency. Eight times a year, they supply the imperial family with *ayu* (sweetfish) taken from a specially designated section of the river. The cormorant masters of these six households, along with masters from three households in the neighboring city of Seki, are the only fishermen with this title in all of Japan. The title was granted to their forefathers in 1890 by Emperor Meiji (1852–1912), and it has been passed from father to son ever since. The role of cormorant master is even older still, and the six *ushō* depicted here represent a tradition that has continued for 17 generations.

Dressed in traditional fishing garb, each cormorant master is shown standing behind the symbol of his household. From left to right, the household names are Maruwa (a circle enclosing a character like a broken shield), Maruyama (a circle enclosing a character like the prongs of a trident), Yamajō (a three-line character under a roof), Maruyo (a circle enclosing a character like a backwards “E”), Maruichi (a circle above a horizontal line), and Wachigai (two overlapping circles). The masters of the Maruyama and Maruichi households share the surname Yamashita, and the other four masters all have the surname Sugiyama. The masters usually address one another by their respective household names rather than their actual surnames, and each master’s boatmen wear the symbol of his household on their fishing attire.

There can only be one *ushō* per household, and a new *ushō* is appointed only when one retires. Generally, the new master must be a son of the previous master’s household. Often, the masters train their heirs by bringing them aboard their boats in the position of *nakauzukai*. The *nakauzukai* assists the cormorant master and often manages the lines of two or three cormorants.

The households of the six cormorant masters of the city of Gifu are grouped together in the Nagarabashi Kitazume district on the north bank of the Nagara River. The cormorants are kept in enclosures at or near the masters’ residences, and visitors to the neighborhood may hear their calls and the sounds of flapping wings.