

Goldfish Nebuta

Goldfish are considered a symbol of summer throughout Japan, but the people of Aomori have a particular affinity for them. When the Nebuta Festival approaches, paper or plastic lanterns with goldfish motifs (*kingyo nebuta*) can be found everywhere in the city of Aomori, gracing the station building, storefronts, and many other locations. Children can be seen walking around with these dainty lamps during the festival, while souvenir shops sell not only the lanterns themselves but also sweets, keyrings, handheld fans, and other items featuring their likeness. The lanterns were originally used as Nebuta figures, and when this tradition started is unclear. They have, however, appeared in the festival at least since the end of the Edo period (1603–1867).

The goldfish portrayed in the lanterns are of the Tsugaru Nishiki variety, which was developed in the Tsugaru domain (part of present-day Aomori Prefecture) as a result of years of selective breeding during the Edo period. Only local samurai and other high-ranking individuals were allowed to own this type of goldfish, which has a distinctive, long tail fin but no dorsal fin. Its exclusive nature made the species a subject of fascination among commoners of the time, who began recreating its appearance in the form of lanterns. These were initially made from *washi* paper, but plastic versions have become far more common since the early 1980s.