

Skill, Refinement, and Tradition: The Crafts of Ishikawa

Ishikawa's rich history of crafts and fine art dates to the Edo period (1603–1867), when the area prospered under the rule of the wealthy Maeda family. The shogun was wary that the local lords' riches could present a threat to his authority over all of Japan. To put the shogun at ease, the Maedas chose not to hoard their resources, and instead spent prolifically on the arts.

The Maedas established workshops where expert craftspeople from around Japan could come to hone their skills. They created a special administrative agency to sponsor talented artisans, some of whom received financial support and studio space in the grounds of Kanazawa Castle.

Noh theater and the tea ceremony flourished, and many specialized crafts, such as gold leaf, Ohi ware, Kutani porcelain, and *Kaga-yuzen* silk dyeing, developed out of these traditions. Today, there are countless opportunities to experience Ishikawa's thriving artistic culture firsthand.

Gold leaf

Over 99 percent of Japan's gold leaf is produced in Kanazawa.

Gold leaf production begins with the multi-month process of making a special paper to mount it on. Then, artisans smelt silver and copper with gold to form a gold alloy which is placed between sheets of the paper, bundled, and pounded repeatedly. The resulting foil is one ten-thousandth of a millimeter thick.

Learn about gold leaf at the Yasue Gold Leaf Museum and try embellishing a jewelry box, postcard, or chopsticks at one of the many shops offering this service.

According to legend, gold leaf production began in Kanazawa when the first Maeda lord, Toshiie (1537–1599), ordered gold-tipped spears for his warriors. Historically, gold leaf was used in luxury residences and temples, and on Buddhist altars, another Ishikawa craft. Today, gold leaf is found in a wide range of products, from decorative lacquerware to cosmetics. Gold leaf is edible (albeit flavorless), and soft-serve ice cream topped with a glittering sheet is popular with visitors.

Ohi ware

Ohi ware has been made by members of the Ohi family for about 350 years. Developed for use in the tea ceremony, it is noted for its simplicity and amber glazes. Bowls are shaped by hand, without the use of a wheel.

Ohi ware is made in the same way as it was by Ohi Chozaemon I (1630–1712): hand-sculpted and fired individually at low temperatures. The technique, the handmade tools, and even the name Ohi Chozaemon are passed from one generation to the next, down to the current master, Ohi Chozaemon XI.

The Ohi Museum and Ohi Gallery were built adjacent to the family residence, an old samurai house. The museum displays works from all 11 generations of Ohi heirs

alongside their art collection. Visitors to the Ohi Gallery tearoom can order matcha tea served in Ohi tea bowls.

In 1666, the fifth Maeda lord, Tsunanori (1643–1724), invited the head of the Urasenke family of tea masters, Senso Soshitsu (1622–1697), to promote tea ceremony in Kanazawa. Senso brought along a craftsman named Chozemon, who had trained at the influential Raku workshop in Kyoto. In Kanazawa, Chozemon crafted tea bowls from clay found in the nearby village of Ohi, the name that came to be used for both his descendants and the items they produce.

Kutani porcelain ware

Kutani ware is Ishikawa's local porcelain, first made in the mid-1600s when kilns were established in what is now the city of Kaga.

Although known for vivid colors and bold designs, Kutani ware is not identifiable by one particular style. The original style, produced from the mid-1600s to 1730, features nature motifs in two distinct color palettes: *aote* (deep green, yellow, dark blue, and purple) and *iroe* (red, green, purple, dark blue, and yellow). In the 1800s, Kutani was made in a new style called *akae*, with detailed patterns painted in red glaze. Later, with the growing importance of the export market, gold was added to *akae* to help Kutani ware stand out overseas. Much of today's Kutani ware features striking modern designs.

The Kutani-yaki Art Museum introduces the history of the craft and displays notable works. Famous pieces are also displayed at the Kutani Ceramic Art Village. The Kutani-yaki Kiln Exhibition Hall exhibits the 1824 kiln that was instrumental in reviving the art after it had been dormant for nearly 100 years. Visitors can paint a ceramic piece using Kutani ware methods and then have it fired at the hall's own kiln.

Kaga-yuzen silk dyeing

Kaga-yuzen, the local technique of hand-dyeing silk, has been practiced in Kanazawa for about 500 years. Kimono dyed this way command extremely high prices.

Kaga-yuzen uses a palette of five colors—indigo, crimson, ocher, dark green, and royal purple—to create vivid, hand-drawn patterns featuring realistic natural motifs, including flowers with leaves nibbled by insects. Recently the same dyeing technique is being used in other products, such as jewelry boxes and men's shirts.

See notable examples of *Kaga-yuzen*, try the dyeing process, or rent an authentic *Kaga-yuzen* kimono at the Kaga-Yuzen Kimono Center or the Nagamachi Yuzen-Kan. The Kaga-Yuzen Kimono Center has a studio where visitors can observe a master at work.

Wajima lacquerware

Wajima lacquerware has been produced in Wajima on the Noto Peninsula for over five centuries, and is highly regarded for its durability and refined appearance. Today, there are around 500 lacquerware workshops in the small city.

Lacquerware bowls, plates, chopsticks, and cutlery used to be common, daily tableware,

and continue to be treasured for their traditional style, all-natural materials, and extraordinary durability. Wajima lacquerware is especially strong because the base layer of lacquer is mixed with locally occurring silica-dominant soil and reinforced with cloth. Pieces can last for hundreds of years; some ancient lacquerware has been discovered in excellent condition.

A single Wajima lacquerware item can take from six months to several years to complete. Each piece starts with a wooden base that is covered with lacquer undercoating, polished, lacquered several more times, and often decorated with carved patterns inlaid with gold and silver.

The Wajima Lacquerware Museum displays Wajima lacquerware pieces and tools collected by a local craftsman. Get an even closer look at Wajima lacquerware at Wajima Kobo Nagaya, where visitors can meet artisans, observe the process, and decorate their own piece to take home.

Yamanaka lacquerware

The specialty of Yamanaka Onsen is lacquerware made with advanced lathing and drying techniques that prevent warping. This local style shows the wood grain through the layers of lacquer. Many more pieces are lathed here than lacquered, so bowls and cups are often sent to other places such as Wajima for different styles of lacquering. The creation of each piece involves many steps performed by specialized artisans; a single item can take four months or more to complete.

The craft began nearly five hundred years ago when artisans seeking an abundant wood supply settled near Yamanaka Onsen. They began to develop new techniques for lathing wood tableware and tea ceremony utensils. As the hot spring resort flourished in the Edo period (1603–1867), Yamanaka lacquerware became a popular souvenir.

At Yamanaka Urushi-za, visitors can watch artisans working at the lathe, see a display of Yamanaka lacquerware, and purchase bowls, cups, and other goods. Some workshops in Yamanaka Onsen allow visitors to lathe or lacquer their own pieces.