

Former Toyama House Folk Museum

The Toyama House in the settlement of Miboro, near the southern end of Shirakawa-go, exhibits all the major characteristics of a traditional gassho-style farmhouse. These include a steeply slanted, triangular roof thatched with dried miscanthus grass (susuki), a spacious multi-level attic with windows on the gabled ends, an irori fireplace in the middle of the first floor, and a pit for producing saltpeter (potassium nitrate, an essential ingredient in gunpowder) underneath the floor. The house was built around 1850 for the Toyama family, which was the largest and most influential in Miboro at the time, and was used as a residence until 1967. Up to 48 members of the extended family lived here under the same roof. Such living arrangements were the norm in settlements like Miboro, where farmland was scarce and everyone's labor was needed for home industries such as sericulture.

Designated an Important Cultural Property, the Toyama House has been converted into a folk museum, where visitors can learn what life was like in this remote, mountainous region from the late Edo period (1603–1867) through the Meiji era (1868–1912). Beside the entrance is the saltpeter pit, which was filled with materials including straw, soil, mugwort, and silkworm excrement and left to ferment. Urine from a nearby latrine was led into the pit to facilitate the fermentation process, which took several years. The first floor, where the residents of the house lived, has several bedrooms, a dining room, and a Buddhist altar, as well as rooms used to entertain guests. A corridor separates the living quarters from a kitchen, bathroom, and workroom. Tableware, utensils, tools for farming, fishing, and hunting, and other items are displayed throughout the residence to illustrate how the family lived and earned its sustenance. The attic was mainly used for silkworm cultivation and equipment for this and reeling raw silk is exhibited in the space.

In 1935, the Toyama House received a guest whose experience in Shirakawa-go helped spread the word about gassho-style buildings to an international audience for the first time. This visitor was the German architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938), who spent three years in Japan studying the country's architecture in detail. In his writings, he praised the “rationality” and simplicity of gassho-style houses, which he compared to farmhouses in the Swiss Alps. Taut's words would later inspire local efforts to preserve these structures.