

Katsuyama: Traditional Townscape, Contemporary Art

The former castle town of Katsuyama is situated along the Asahi River in northern Okayama Prefecture, a location that made it a wealthy merchant town during the Edo period (1603–1867). The river allowed easy transport of lumber from the area's timber industry to ports downstream, while goods flowed overland along the Izumo Road, a trade route connecting western cities along the Sea of Japan with the city of Himeji in southern Hyōgo Prefecture.

Katsuyama's merchants built elegant homes, shops, and storehouses along the main street, which is now a historical preservation district. Two-story buildings with interlocking ceramic roof tiles, slatted wood screens, and white plaster facades line the narrow road, their shopfronts flush with the pavement. Keen-eyed visitors will spot decorative plaster reliefs (*kote-e*) on the walls and ornamental *shibi* figures on the gables. *Shibi* sculptures depict dragons and other mythical beasts, and are said to ward off fires. Aside from the occasional passing car, it is a townscape that remains largely unchanged over the past century.

Another distinguishing feature of Katsuyama is more modern: the proliferation of colorful shop curtains called *noren*. Traditionally, these half-length, often-generic curtains are hung outside a shop's door to indicate it is open for business. The *noren* of Katsuyama, however, are extraordinary. All are original, naturally dyed artworks created by local weaver and dyer Kano Yoko. She collaborates with each shop owner, designing an image that represents that person's business. Some are literal depictions, like a steaming cup of coffee surrounded by dancing beans for a café. Others are more abstract, expressing the spirit of the owner and enticing visitors to enter and find out what kind of business might possibly be represented by a happy little ogre squatting in a field of green. (A bar, as it turns out.)

A simple stroll along the main street, taking in the vibrant *noren* against the backdrop of traditional architecture, is pleasure enough to justify a visit to Katsuyama, but interesting experiences wait inside the shops as well. A 200-year-old sake brewery welcomes visitors with a shop and restaurant. Galleries showcase local art and handicrafts such as woven bamboo baskets, while souvenir shops sell freshly steamed *saka manjū*, a traditional bun made with sake and filled with sweet bean paste. And Kano Yoko can be found at her atelier, available for a hands-on dyeing lesson or to design an original *noren* for a truly unique souvenir.