

History of the Festival

The Sapporo Snow Festival began in the winter of 1950 when a group of middle and high school students built six snow sculptures in a corner of Odori Park under the supervision of their art teachers. There were also dog races, square dances, snowball fights, and a grand snow battle involving teams and flags. The event was a fun, lighthearted way to enjoy the snow, and about 50,000 people attended the festival. The event continued to grow and has been held annually ever since, with the exception of 2021.

Members of Japan's Ground Self-Defense Forces began assisting with the festival in 1955. Camp Sapporo is the home of the Northern Army, the largest army of several in the SDF, and some of the festival volunteers are stationed there. In 1959, 2,500 JSDF personnel took part in building the larger snow sculptures. Their engineering and logistics skills were invaluable in constructing the massive snow sculptures that now symbolize the event.

In 1972, Sapporo hosted the Winter Olympics and the snow festival gained international recognition. A 25-meter-high snow sculpture of the mythical character Gulliver that welcomed people to the festival that year was featured in media coverage of the Olympics, bringing awareness of the festival to a wider audience.

The year 1974 was one of development as well as hardship for the festival. The International Snow Sculpture Contest was held for the first time that year, and teams from six countries competed. The number of participating teams has varied from year to year, with as many as 20 locales competing in 1998 and 11 in 2020. The hardship of 1974 was due to the global oil crisis and the resulting shortage of fuel for trucks to bring in snow and to compact it. Because there was not enough snow to make the sculptures of solid snow, steel drums were used to take up space in the base of the structures. However, with less frozen material at the core, the sculptures started to melt more quickly than usual and there was concern that they might fall before the end of the festival.

In 1979, a snow sculpture by the artist Okamoto Tarō (1911–1996) boosted the reputation of the event even further. Okamoto is renowned as the creator of the iconic “Tower of the Sun,” a sculptural building constructed for the 1970 Japan World Exposition in Osaka.

In 1983, the restaurant and entertainment district of Susukino was added as a venue, followed by the addition of a winter playground at Tsudome in 2009. Susukino brought the element of ice into the festival with its Ice World event, which focuses on the carving and exhibition of elaborate ice sculptures. With Tsudome came the new dimension of outdoor activities like ice and tube slides as well as an indoor space with hands-on activities for all ages.

In 2013, projection mapping technology added motion, color, and sound to the snow sculptures. That development also brought a substantial increase in visitors, and now more than two million people visit the Sapporo Snow Festival annually.