

Nishijin-ori [COLUMN]

High-grade textiles have been produced in Kyoto since the Heian period (794–1185), when the city became the capital of Japan and aristocratic culture, centered on the imperial court, flourished. Silk clothing, often elaborately decorated, was favored by the nobility, and a specialized industry gradually developed to meet this demand.

That industry, and the city of Kyoto as a whole, were devastated by the Onin War (1467–1477), a civil war that ushered in a long period of political instability. By the 1500s, however, artisans began returning to the city, bringing back new ideas and insights, including foreign influences picked up in port cities such as Sakai, near present-day Osaka.

A new cluster of textile workshops emerged in the part of Kyoto that during the Onin War had been occupied by the force that held the western side of the city. Renamed Nishijin (“western position”), the neighborhood soon became inextricably linked to the high-quality silk fabrics turned out by its artisans. The term Nishijin-ori (Nishijin weave) refers to handmade silk textiles produced in this area.

Nishijin-ori kimono, obi sashes, and kimono accessories were valued by the aristocracy and ruling warrior class from the 1500s and throughout the Edo period (1603–1867), becoming a sign of status and greatly enriching the artisans of Nishijin.

Though demand for Nishijin-ori is no longer what it once was, the textile industry of Nishijin remains vibrant and retains its traditional structure. Each step of the fabric-making process, from the selection and dyeing of silk threads to the design, decoration, and weaving on Jacquard looms, is done by a different group of specialist artisans, whose workshops dot the neighborhood.

Nishijin-ori often features elaborate designs limited only by the artisan’s imagination, though nature-themed elements such as flowers, birds, or insects are particularly common. The fabric has a natural sheen that makes the designs appear vibrant, and some textiles are even woven with thin strands of lacquered *washi* paper coated in gold or silver leaf for added extravagance.

Visitors can learn about the history of Nishijin-ori and view finished textiles at the Orinasukan Museum, where tours of the on-site factory are also available. Demonstrations by Nishijin-ori artisans take place at the Nishijin Textile Center.