

Imaemon Kiln and Museum

Imaemon family is known for its long history of producing Nabeshima ware. Named after the Nabeshima family, the lords of Saga domain, this style of porcelain is considered to be the highest quality porcelain that was produced in Japan during the Edo period (1603–1867). Nabeshima ware was primarily produced to be given as gifts to the shogun, and its production was kept a closely guarded secret. Imaemon kiln was responsible only for applying multicolored overglaze enamels (known as *uwa-etsuke* or *aka-e*) on prepared pieces of porcelain.

Located in the neighborhood of Akae-machi (“overglaze town”), the building that today houses the showroom and main offices of Imaemon kiln dates to 1830, when it was rebuilt in the aftermath of the Great Bunsei Fire of 1828. The 190-year-old building has been outfitted with modern wiring and plumbing, but otherwise remains much the same as when it was built. The Imaemon family still lives in the building as well. The workshops were moved across the street during the Meiji era (1868–1912). During the Showa era (1926–1989), buildings were moved back when the main road was widened to make room for automobiles. Generations of artisans at Imaemon kiln tossed water used to clean the brushes out of the windows, resulting in the reddish stains that are still visible on the roof tiles of the main building’s first floor.

The Imaemon Museum of Ceramic Antiques is in a more modern building next door. The collection of objects amassed over several generations sheds light on the personal interests of each head of the Imaemon family. The first floor features early seventeenth-century *Ko-Imari* (Old Imari) pieces collected by Imaemon XIII (1926–2001). Although the pieces are less refined than those produced during the peak of Arita’s porcelain industry, they are important artifacts in the study of the history of Arita ware.

The second floor displays eighteenth-century pieces made as gifts for the shogun and for export to Europe. They were collected by Imaemon XI (1873–1948) and Imaemon XII (1897–1975), and their designs showcase the talent of the craftsmen of the time. On the third floor is an important collection of firing tools and broken ceramics from former kiln sites that Imaemon XIII personally collected during the 1950s.

Also on the third floor are representative works from the portfolios of the most recent heads of the family. Of particular interest are Imaemon XI’s cosmetics set created for the Imperial Household, and his pieces inspired by the subsequently cancelled 1940 Summer Olympics that had been awarded to Tokyo. Decorative ceramics by the current head of the family, Imaemon XIV (b. 1962), are also on display and often feature seasonal designs including snow, rain, plums, and rice.

The Imaemon kiln buildings are part of the Arita Uchiyama Important Preservation District for Groups of Historic Buildings.