

Imaemon Kiln History and Vision

One of the most celebrated producers of Arita ware, Imaemon kiln traces its history to 1644. The Imaemon family was responsible for decorating porcelain with colorful overglaze enamels for the official Saga domain kiln. The techniques have been passed down for fourteen generations, and the current family head, Imaizumi Imaemon XIV (b. 1962), was designated a Preserver of Important Intangible Cultural Properties in 2014 for his knowledge and skill. Imaemon kiln creates contemporary designs from traditional imagery and techniques, striving to preserve its historical roots while redefining craftsmanship in the present.

Imaemon I (d. 1665), an accomplished applier of overglaze enamels, used a technique that had spread to Japan from China in the early 1600s. His skill was noticed by Nabeshima Katsushige (1580–1657), lord of Saga domain. In 1644, Katsushige had established an official kiln near Imari to exclusively produce the highest quality porcelain, which was gifted to the shogun or used exclusively by the Nabeshima family. In 1672, Katsushige's successor, Nabeshima Mitsushige (1632–1700) designated the Imaemon family as the only ones permitted to apply overglaze enamel to porcelain made at the domain kiln. This decoration technique was a highly guarded secret and passed down from father to son. Porcelain made for the domain came to be called Nabeshima ware, and its style is characterized by designs in overglaze red, yellow, and green on underglaze blue.

The domain system was abolished after the Meiji Restoration in 1868. The official Nabeshima kiln was closed. In 1873, Imaemon X (1848–1927) began creating his own porcelain pieces instead of only applying glazes. Under Imaemon XI (1873–1948), the kiln was appointed as an official purveyor to the Imperial Household in 1934. In the aftermath of World War II, the Arita porcelain industry suffered greatly, but Imaemon XII (1897–1975) focused on reviving traditional techniques and recreating antique pieces made by his predecessors. For preserving this handcrafted process, the kiln's pottery decoration techniques were designated an Important Intangible Cultural Property in 1976.

Imaemon XIII (1926–2001) brought substantial change to the kiln's philosophy. He argued that traditional craftsmanship did not only need to recreate the past but could be expanded to meet modern needs. Traditional methods combined with new techniques would produce more modern and creative pieces. He pioneered new coloring techniques such as *fukizumi* (spraying on underglaze pigment) and *usuzumi* (a method of applying a light-gray underglaze). Imaemon XIII was named a Preserver of Important Intangible Cultural Properties in 1989.

In 2002, Imaemon XIII's second son succeeded him as Imaemon XIV (b. 1962). He has continued his father's legacy by using the traditional *sumi-hajiki* ("repelling ink") technique to create new, reversed patterns. He is also well-known for using designs outside of the traditional Arita ware repertoire like snowflakes and tessellating geometric shapes. Imaemon XIV continues to appreciate and respect the traditions passed down from his ancestors while exploring out new ideas. He considers the

Imaemon kiln to be only a small part of Arita's history. For him, the kiln's role is to enhance understanding and appreciation of Japanese art and craft.