

Higo Inlay

Higo is the old name for Kumamoto, and the traditional craft of Higo inlay involves engraving intricate designs into iron, then inlaying them with silver or gold. The iron is then rust-proofed and blackened with a tea solution to create a very strong color contrast.

The technique originally came to Japan from Europe. It became a popular Kumamoto craft in the early seventeenth century under Hirata Hikozo, a blacksmith whom Hosokawa Tadaoki (1563–1646) brought to the city from Omi Province (present-day Shiga Prefecture). Local metalworkers started producing ornamental gun barrels, sword guards, and smoking pipes exclusively for the samurai class.

A Shift in the Market

The bottom dropped out of the Higo inlay market when the Meiji government passed an edict banning the wearing of swords in 1876 and began to strip the samurai of their centuries-old privileges. This forced the craftsmen to cater to the needs of a less-elevated clientele. The roughly 15 Higo inlay craftsmen still practicing in Kumamoto today make items like cufflinks, tie pins, pendants, and pens. Official efforts are being made to promote this ancient craft. When Japan hosted the G7 Summit in 2016, then prime minister Abe Shinzo gave each of his fellow world leaders a fountain pen decorated with Higo inlay. When Kumamoto hosted the 24th IHF Women's Handball World Championships in 2019, the medals were decorated with Higo inlay.

More information is available at the Kumamoto Prefectural Traditional Crafts Center, and workshops are offered at some of the old shops near the castle.