

History of Bamboo Craft in Beppu

Beppu's bamboo ware production is believed to date to around the first century, when the legendary Emperor Keiko found high-quality bamboo in the area and used it to create baskets.

Although bamboo craft production has a long history, the industry's expansion is more recent and is tied to Beppu's development as a tourist destination. During the seventeenth through nineteenth century, as Beppu's popularity as a medicinal hot spring destination grew, large numbers of visitors began buying souvenir and gift items made from bamboo, which spurred growth of the local bamboo craft industry. The city's tourism industry continued to evolve in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, prompting local craftspeople to develop decorative and artistic works that differed from the utilitarian products traditionally produced.

With increased demand for new kinds of bamboo ware, Beppu's craftspeople founded professional associations to promote expanded sales through new product development, export, and other efforts. Meanwhile, schools and research facilities, such as the Oita Prefectural Bamboo Crafts Training Center, were established to train more craftspeople. Local artisans also innovated new crafting techniques and passed them down to successive generations, expanding applications for bamboo crafting and elevating it to the level of an art. In 1967, Beppu-born Shono Shounsai (1904–1974) became the first person to be designated a Living National Treasure in the field of bamboo ware, and in 1979, Beppu's bamboo crafts were designated a Traditional Craft Product by the national government.

The number of professionals trained in this traditional craft has dwindled over the years, and most remaining craftspeople are of advanced age. However, artisans and enthusiasts hope that the appeal of bamboo as a material and in the form of craft products will encourage younger generations to carry on the legacy.