

## Bamboo Art and Artists

Bamboo artisans have pioneered new uses for bamboo material over the years. Many examples of this innovation can be seen at the Beppu City Traditional Bamboo Crafts Center.

One of the larger art pieces, *Unryu* (Clouds and Dragon), was woven over a period of six months in 1993 by Tanabe Kochikusai (b. 1935). The central section represents a dragon rising upward, and the outer section symbolizes clouds. Nearby, there is an elegant palanquin, similar to those used to transport important persons during the Edo period (1603–1867), but about twice the size of palanquins used at the time. This work took artist Ninomiya Keichiku four months to complete in 1998.

The Center also has two “emperor’s chairs” (*Tenno no isu*), created for use by members of the Japanese imperial family during visits to the Center. The backs and seat sections are made from bamboo. Emperor Akihito (r. 1989–2019) sat in one of the chairs during a visit in 2000, and Prince Akishino and Princess Kiko used the chairs in 2008. Such public exhibition of items used by the imperial family is rare.

The bamboo hats on display represent the ingenious efforts by craftspeople to create commercial products for the modern era. These product prototypes were developed in 1950, but the hats never entered mass production. They can be custom ordered by customers today.

Many of the displayed works were created by artists from Beppu and other parts of Oita Prefecture. Foremost among these artists is Beppu native Shono Shounsai (1904–1974), who was Japan’s first Living National Treasure in bamboo crafts. Many consider Shounsai one of Japan’s most influential bamboo artisans, responsible for elevating bamboo crafting to the level of an art and for training countless others, including *Unryu* creator Tanabe Kochikusai. Shounsai originally intended to pursue painting and sculpture, but poor health from a young age made this impossible. He instead began training in bamboo crafting at the age of 19, inspired by bamboo flower baskets he had encountered.

Iwao Kounsai (1901–1992), also from Beppu, began his independent career in 1917 and garnered high praise at various exhibitions. He endeavored to promote bamboo craft and eventually trained more than 100 students. Iwao was officially recognized by the national government in 1969 as one of the nation’s top artisans.

Shiraishi Hakuunsai (1918–2012), a Beppu-born artisan taught by his father of the same name, made his first exhibition showings in the 1970s and continued exhibiting pieces at art events nationwide. He was particularly skillful in the *yatara* “wild” weaving technique, which produces a seemingly random crisscross pattern.

Sato Chikuyusai (1901–1929), born in the nearby city of Kunisaki, began his training after finishing elementary school. After studying basket dyeing in Tokyo and Kyoto, he returned to Oita Prefecture around 1922 to start his own business. He was a leading producer of high-end flower baskets who delivered seven pieces to the imperial family and taught Shounsai. Tragically, Sato died young at age 28, but his influence lives on.