

Former Toyama House

The Toyama House is perhaps the best-preserved example of a traditional farmhouse built in the *gassho* or “praying hands” style. This style of dwelling was developed in the Sho River valley during the latter half of the Edo period (1603–1867). The steeply slanted thatched roofs resemble hands pressed together in prayer. Other characteristics of the style, all present in the Toyama House, include a spacious multilevel attic with windows on the gable ends, an *irori* sunken fireplace in the middle of the first floor, and a pit for producing saltpeter (potassium nitrate, an essential ingredient in gunpowder) underneath the floor.

The house was built around 1850 for the Toyama family, which was the largest in the village of Miboro at the time. Its family heads held the hereditary position of village headman. Up to 48 members of the extended family lived together in the house; this was a common arrangement in Miboro and similar communities, where farmland was scarce and everyone’s labor was needed for home industries such as silk production. Anthropologists researching the extended family system from the late 1800s first attracted scholarly attention to the Toyama House.

Appreciation of the building itself and others like it was greatly influenced by the German architect Bruno Taut (1880–1938), who spent three years in Japan studying the country’s architecture in detail. Taut visited the Toyama House in 1935 and in his subsequent writings praised the “rationality” and simplicity of *gassho*-style houses, which he compared to farmhouses in the Swiss Alps. Taut’s words would later inspire local efforts to preserve these structures and have their cultural value recognized.