

Metal Chasing (*Chōkin*)

Chōkin refers to a variety of decorative chasing techniques used in metalwork. These include specialized methods of engraving, carving, hammering, and inlay. They were collectively designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1955.

Chasing techniques arrived in Japan from continental Asia during the Yayoi period (300 BCE– 300 CE). Originally, the techniques were mainly used for ritual objects and personal adornments of copper, gold, silver, and bronze. As metallurgic and metalworking skills evolved, various alloys were devised, and these stronger metals were used to craft tools for daily use, such as pots, as well as swords and armor. Chasing techniques for decorating these new metal alloys evolved in tandem.

Even after Japan emerged from over a century of warfare into the relatively peaceful Edo period (1603–1867), the ruling samurai class continued to commission weapons and armor as status symbols. Chasing and other decorative techniques flourished. However, a major turning point for the craft came in 1876, when the newly established Meiji government banned the wearing of swords. Until that point, producing the ornamental fittings on swords had been the livelihood of many metalworkers. This change—combined with the increased mechanization of metal production—caused a sharp decline in handcrafted and hand-chased metalwork. On the other hand, around this time traditional Japanese crafts began appearing at international exhibitions, driving a demand for exports. Many metalworkers turned from producing pieces with martial applications to purely artistic works, redirecting and reviving the craft.

The *chōkin* technique most associated with Ishikawa Prefecture is *zōgan*, or inlay. This involves embedding softer metals, such as gold and silver, into a harder base metal. The local style is called *kaga zōgan*, named after the domain that preceded the modern-day prefecture. It is distinguished firstly by the way the inlaid metal is held in place. The artisan cuts into the base metal at an angle so that the deepest part of the cavity is wider than the opening. When the inlaid metal is hammered in, it spreads into this indentation while the base metal overhang is pressed down over it. This secures the inlay in place and leaves both metals flush. *Kaga zōgan* is also known for multilayered inlays and the use of copper alloys called *irogane*. These alloys can be treated with solutions to create protective oxide coatings and patinas of various colors.

Other *chōkin* techniques involve the use of chisels to engrave the metal with hair-thin lines, triangular marks, or wedges resembling brush strokes. Images can be carved in sunken relief, low relief, or three dimensions. The metal may also be pierced with holes to create openwork or minutely dented with a hammer to create a stippled texture.

The Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art holds many pieces demonstrating *chōkin* techniques, including some of the *zōgan* metal stirrups that were the pride of Kaga domain.