

Kirikane

Kirikane is a decorative technique in which extremely thin pieces of metal foil, usually gold or silver, are cut and applied to wood or another substrate (base object) to create minute and intricate patterns. It was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1981.

Kirikane arrived in Japan from mainland Asia during the Asuka period (552–645) and was traditionally used to decorate Buddhist statuary. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, *kirikane* was largely replaced by the use of gold paint, which was faster and easier to apply. However, a pair of temples in Kyoto kept the technique alive, and it was revived after World War II by artists who applied it to non-religious works of art.

Gold foil is delicate enough to be torn by a stray breath, so *kirikane* artisans strengthen it by bonding several sheets together. Each sheet is briefly laid on a bed of hot ash, which heats the gold just enough to bond it to the other sheets when they are stacked together and pressed. Artisans hold and cut the layered foil with tweezers and a knife made of bamboo, a material that does not stick to the foil or conduct potentially damaging sparks of static electricity. The gold is cut into strips thinner than a human hair, which are then painstakingly glued to the surface of an object to create designs or embellish carvings.

The Ishikawa-born artist Nishide Daizō (1913–1995) was designated a Holder of Important Cultural Heritage in 1985 for his skill in *kirikane*.