

What Is a Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage?

Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage are nationally recognized masters of a traditional craft or performing art that has been designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage. Many countries have a national treasure designation for tangible items—such as artwork, archeological artifacts, and historical architecture—but Japan was the first country to designate *intangible* practices, like traditional music, performing arts, and craft techniques, part of its cultural heritage. Such practices are deemed as important to a country's culture and history as its tangible treasures, to be preserved for future generations against the homogenizing forces of globalization and modernization.

In 1950, the government began creating a framework to support the preservation and transmission of its full cultural heritage with the Law for Protection of Cultural Properties. This legislation was the first to define what constituted Important Intangible Cultural Heritage. A 1954 revision established a system for the designation of arts and crafts that fit this definition. The revision also contained provisions to recognize individuals or groups who mastered a designated art or craft as “holders” tasked with its preservation and promotion. Today, these people are referred to as “Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage” or, informally, as “Living National Treasures.”

The selection process for both Important Intangible Cultural Heritages and Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage is handled by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, Sports, and Technology. The minister submits candidates to the Council for Cultural Affairs, an internal body focused on cultural research and promotion. With the assistance of relevant experts, the council decides if the proposed candidates should receive the designation.

Only a few hundred people have been named Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage, a title they hold until death. Currently, the number of possible concurrent holders is capped at 116, although the actual number is usually lower. The number is set by the national budget, as all titleholders receive a stipend of at least 2 million yen each year. The funds are used for training successors, holding public performances or exhibitions, and creating archival documentation, such as films.

There are nine categories for Important Intangible Cultural Heritage under the heading of “Crafts”: ceramics, textiles, lacquerware, metalwork, woodwork and bamboowork,

doll making, paper making, *bachiru* (stained ivory engraving), and *kirikane* (applying thin lines of metal foil to create designs). Specific techniques are recognized under these broad categories, such as *saiyū* glazing within the ceramics category or *maki-e* ornamentation under lacquerware.

Ishikawa Prefecture has a proud history in many of these categories. In fact, as of 2022, the prefecture had nine individuals and one group designated Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in crafts—more per capita than any other prefecture.