

Kaga Yūzen Silk Dyeing

Kaga *yūzen* is a hand-dyeing technique in which artisans paint hand-drawn designs in a distinctive palette of five colors to render vivid and realistic natural images on silk. Along with Kyō *yūzen* from Kyoto and Edo *yūzen* from Tokyo, it is one of Japan's three major silk dyeing traditions. Kaga *yūzen* is used to decorate fabric accessories, such as bags and scarfs, and to create luxurious kimonos.

The history of Kaga *yūzen* begins in the sixteenth century in Kaga domain, in the area of present-day Ishikawa Prefecture. At that time, the domain was a major silk producer, but its textiles were dyed a solid pink color. In the mid-seventeenth century, artisans began decorating the fabric with basic patterns and pictures. The next stage of development is attributed to a famed designer of silk fans named Miyazaki Yūzen (?–1758). Historical records differ, but Yūzen was either born in Kaga, or else visited Kanazawa from Kyoto around 1712. His expertise in resist dyeing, a technique that enables the use of multiple colors, was passed on to other Kaga dyers. Yūzen's influence, along with the patronage of the domain's wealthy Maeda lords, allowed Kaga *yūzen* to develop into the refined art that continues today.

The Kaga *yūzen* process begins with the artist sketching the envisioned image (or series of images) on paper. The outlines of the image are then painted onto a long band of undyed silk using ink made from the Asiatic dayflower. (The ink is water-soluble, so the lines will wash out later.) Next, the design is traced with a sticky rice paste applied with a special piping bag. The paste resists dye and creates a barrier that keeps the dye contained within the lines.

After this, the image can be colored in. The artist hand-paints each section of the image using dyes in gradations of the five colors known as the *kaga gosai*: indigo, crimson, ocher, dark green, and royal purple. When painting flowers, Kaga artists often apply the dye at the outermost edge of each petal and brush inward, resulting in a characteristic gradation where colors are darkest around the edges and grow paler toward the center. The direction of gradation is reversed in Kyō *yūzen*.

When the Kaga *yūzen* design is fully painted, the silk is steamed to set the colors. Next, the image is completely covered with rice paste in preparation for dyeing the background. The paste will resist the background dye, preventing it from marring what

has already been colored. The background dye is also applied by hand using wide, short-bristled brushes, and achieving even coloration across a wide expanse of silk requires considerable skill. The silk is steamed once more to set the background color.

Now completely colored, the silk is ready to be washed. Cold water and stiff brushes are used to remove and rinse away the dayflower ink, rice paste, and any excess dye. Traditionally, this step was carried out in rivers and streams, where the long strips of silk were tied to sticks that held them in place against the current. Most modern workshops now have a shallow tank with running water, but during winter artisans using the old approach can still occasionally be seen at Kanazawa's Asano River.

There is a version of Kaga *yūzen* (called Itaba *yūzen*) that does not start with a hand-painted outline. Instead, the artist applies individual colors to the silk using a series of paper stencils hardened with persimmon tannin. The process works much like wood-block printing or modern-day screen printing.

Yūzen dyeing was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1955, and two Ishikawa residents have become holders of the *yūzen* technique: Kimura Uzan (1891–1977) in 1955 and Futatsuka Osao (1946–) in 2010. The Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art has many works dyed using the Kaga *yūzen* technique, including fine kimonos, hanging scrolls, screens, and other decorative items.