

The History of Traditional Crafts in Ishikawa

Ishikawa Prefecture has long and robust craft traditions that encompass ceramics, textiles, lacquerware, metalwork, and woodwork.

The most significant phase in Ishikawa's craft history was the Edo period (1603–1867). During this time, the area was part of Kaga domain, one of more than 250 relatively autonomous domains under the authority of the shogunate based in Edo (now Tokyo). Kaga was governed by the Maeda family from 1583 until the domain system was abolished in 1871.

Kaga was the wealthiest domain in Japan due to its bountiful agriculture—particularly its production of rice, which was the basis of the Edo-period economy. The Maeda family turned their considerable resources to cultural development, inviting some of the country's leading craftspeople and artists to Kanazawa. The Maedas provided them with generous patronage in exchange for founding local workshops and teaching local artisans their techniques.

Another element in the evolution of Ishikawa crafts was the establishment of a multi-discipline crafts workshop called the Kaga Domain Workshop (Osaikusho). The workshop's original purpose was to make and repair weapons during the decades of warfare that preceded the Edo period. Even after hostilities had mostly subsided, the first Maeda lord, Maeda Toshiie (ca. 1539–1599), was hesitant to disband the workshop in case hostilities broke out again. Instead, he directed the artisans there to focus on ornamental techniques, such as the decoration of armor and weapons. The peace held, however, and Kaga's third lord, Maeda Toshitsune (1594–1658), officially changed the workshop's mission to the promotion of decorative arts.

Artisans from diverse fields worked together at the Kaga Domain Workshop. This kind of artistic cross-pollination was rare, as craftspeople generally operated independently and kept their techniques secret. However, in the collaborative atmosphere of the workshop they were able to combine their specializations to produce masterpieces. Key techniques to emerge from the workshop include Kaga *maki-e* and Kaga metal inlay.

The Maedas made gifts of their artisans' finest works to other samurai lords, members of the aristocracy, and favored retainers, fostering the influence and prestige of Kaga

domain. Merchant ships began to stop at ports in Kaga and take crafts to be sold as far north as Hokkaido and around the southern tip of Japan's main island to reach Osaka and Kyoto. Gradually, Kaga products became known around the country, establishing a reputation for quality and beauty of workmanship that endures in Ishikawa today.