

Gun Manufacturing Around Japan

Firearm production spread quickly after the introduction of Portuguese guns in 1543. Within a decade, manufacturing had begun in several different areas of Japan. The main centers were in Kyushu, where domestic production originated, and in the region around Osaka and Kyoto. Many foundries were established by swordsmiths who applied their sophisticated metalworking skills to making firearms.

Although the first domestically made firearms were copied from imports, Japanese gunmakers soon began introducing variations and improvements, and each regional center developed its own distinct style.

Satsuma (Kagoshima Prefecture)

When the lord of Tanegashima Island obtained two matchlock guns from Portuguese traders in 1543, he instructed a local swordsmith, Yaita Kinbei (1502–1570), to copy the weapons. A year later, Yaita established a gun works on the island. According to legend, Yaita married his daughter Wakasa to one of the Portuguese traders in return for a crucial gun-making secret: how to thread a heavy iron breechblock into the barrel's butt end to take the force of firing.

Satsuma guns are long and slender, with internally mounted lock springs and mechanisms made mostly of iron. The overall design is minimalist, with no trigger guards or slots to house a ramrod, but some Satsuma weapons have decorative touches, such as engraved serpentines or red-lacquered stocks.

Negoro (Wakayama Prefecture)

The Negoro gun works was founded by Tsuda Kenmotsu (1499–1568), one of Japan's first master gunners. A descendant of warrior monks from Negoroji Temple (in what is now Wakayama Prefecture), Tsuda lived for a time on Tanegashima Island.

In 1543, Tsuda purchased one of two Portuguese matchlocks that the lord of Tanegashima had obtained from Portuguese traders. He brought the weapon back to Negoro and employed swordsmiths to replicate the European weapon. Tsuda's manufacturing operation was soon overshadowed by the fast-growing gun works in Sakai, near Osaka, but gunnery training and matchlock production continued at Negoro.

Negoro guns are mostly large-caliber weapons, with broad muzzles, octagonal barrels, and externally mounted locks made of brass. These weapons were in great demand during the early years of firearm warfare in Japan, but few survive today.

Awa (Tokushima Prefecture)

Awa domain produced mostly medium-caliber weapons with long, broad-muzzled barrels. The locks on these weapons have U-shaped, externally mounted springs, a simple and popular design called *hira-karakuri*.

Sakai (Osaka Prefecture)

The arrival of firearms in Japan created opportunities for enterprising businessmen such as Tachibanaya Matasaburō (dates unknown), a merchant from the port city of Sakai, near Osaka. Tachibanaya's gun works became one of the two largest in Japan, and Tachibanaya became known by the nickname "Musket Mata" (Teppō Mata).

Tachibanaya's gunsmiths and their descendants produced weapons for some 300 years, primarily for the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868).

Sakai matchlocks are distinguished by long, octagonal barrels made from malleable iron. The guns have relatively bulbous butt ends that taper elegantly to narrow muzzles, and their brass locks have U-shaped, externally mounted springs.

Many Sakai guns were elaborately decorated, with metal-inlaid stocks and engraved lock plates and barrels. Sakai gunsmiths produced most of the ornate, expensive weapons, known as *daimyō-zutsu*, that were made exclusively for regional warlords.

Bizen (Okayama Prefecture)

Late in the Tokugawa period (1603–1867), a group of swordsmiths established a gun works in Bizen province, on the coast of the Seto Inland Sea. The matchlocks they produced are unadorned and durable, and they found popularity with gunners who needed reliable weapons rather than display pieces.

Kunitomo and Hino (Shiga Prefecture)

Soon after the first guns arrived on Tanegashima, the island's lord presented one to Shogun Ashikaga Yoshiharu (1511–1550), who sent it to a group of blacksmiths in the village of Kunitomo, along with orders to replicate the weapon.

The Kunitomo gun works soon became one of the two largest in Japan, alongside Sakai. It produced matchlock muskets for four centuries, supplying first the armies of warlords who waged the civil wars of the sixteenth century, and later the armies of the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868). More than 1,000 craftspeople worked at Kunitomo at its peak. In total, about a third of the Japanese matchlock guns that survive today are thought to have been produced in Kunitomo.

Kunitomo's gunsmiths and those in the neighboring town of Hino produced weapons of every kind, updating their barrel and lock designs to suit the times. Most Kunitomo guns are simple and easy to use, without many decorative touches. Practical innovation was the Kunitomo trademark; barrels became narrower and lighter over the years, and new components, such as screws, were introduced to their lock designs.

Sendai (Miyagi Prefecture)

When the Tokugawa shogunate (1603–1868) began restricting firearm production in the seventeenth century, some domains quietly amassed their own arsenals. The daimyo of Sendai, a wealthy domain in northern Japan, covertly sent craftspeople to Kunitomo to learn gun manufacturing. He then secretly established a gun works inside Sendai territory, where weapons were produced until the nineteenth century.

Sendai guns are practical and reliable. They are generally fitted with external torsion lock springs (*geki-karakuri*). Their wooden stocks sometimes have decorative flourishes, such as carvings of floral designs featuring gourds, grapes, or kudzu vines.