

Former Imai Family Residence

The wholesale paper merchants of what is now the city of Mino became wealthy during the Edo period (1603–1867) at the end of the eighteenth century. The most prosperous were the Imai family, as evidenced by their large house in the center of Mino's historical district. Family members served as the *shoya* or head of Mino (similar to a mayor). Reflecting times when land taxes were determined by the width of a building's street frontage, the Imai family residence, built in the mid-Edo period, was the widest in town.

A house designed for work

The front of the house was for business use, with a wide entrance hall with a packed-earth floor. The hall ran the length of the house and was designed for accepting deliveries and receiving customers. While the average merchant house was approximately 6 to 10 meters wide, the Imai house is almost 22 meters wide. It was a sign of wealth, but it was also practical, as large horse-drawn carts that transported paper had to move to and from the storehouses at the back of the house. A wide, cantilevered front door could be latched to the ceiling and opened like a modern garage door, and the door sill could be removed to allow direct access for the horse carts through the entrance hall.

The living areas are elevated and have tatami-mat floors. Just inside the entrance, a narrow ladder leads to a small hatch to the upper floor. It was common in the Edo period for children as young as 10 to work in merchant houses as indentured apprentices or household servants, running errands, greeting customers, or helping with household chores. At night, the ladder was removed so that the apprentices, who slept upstairs, could not run away.

Public and private spaces

Customers were invited to remove their shoes and step up from the entrance hall to the accounts room (*choba*), an open space next to the entrance with tatami mats, an accounting desk, and a hibachi charcoal burner. It was common for customers and merchants to sit next to the hibachi to relax and smoke before getting down to business.

Esteemed customers might be invited to a small tea room behind the accounts room. An entrance

directly from the street was used by important guests, so that they did not have to enter the public area. The sliding doors in the tea room are made of Hon-minoshi paper.

Storehouses and gardens

Four storehouses (*kura*) at the back of the house served as storage for paper and other precious goods. The walls are thickly plastered as a fire retardant. The storehouses are now devoted to exhibitions documenting the history of the city of Mino through letters, paintings, photographs, and models. An enclosed garden separates the house from the storehouses.

Protection from fire

At the rear of the garden is a shrine dedicated to Inari, the deity of rice. The stone lanterns in front of the shrine are popular with visitors for their heart-shaped carvings. The carvings are *inome* motifs, said to resemble the eye of a wild boar. Wild boars were believed to be among the first animals to sense fire and run to safety. These heart-shaped marks are often seen at shrines and temples as a talisman against fire.

Merchants in the area built raised, plastered firewalls (*udatsu*) on both sides of their houses to prevent the spread of fire across rooftops. These firewalls became a sign of wealth, with increasingly elaborate decorations. The streets of the Udatu Wall Historical District are wide, both to accommodate the carts that once carried paper to the nearby port and to prevent the spread of fire.