

The Future of Washi in Mino

In 2014, the craft of Hon-minoshi drew international attention when it was registered on the UNESCO list of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The washi industry has seen a decline over the years, as the demand for handmade paper has dropped in favor of cheaper wood-pulp products, and young people opt for less traditional professions. In the 1960s, the Association for the Preservation of Hon-minoshi Papermaking was established to help preserve the traditional techniques of making washi and to accept trainees and provide technical guidance to papermakers.

It takes at least 10 years of working as an apprentice to a member of the Association for the Preservation of Hon-minoshi Papermaking to qualify as a Hon-minoshi maker. There are currently six registered Hon-minoshi ateliers, but the local and national governments are making efforts to increase these numbers and to promote Hon-minoshi as a traditional craft and a versatile material. Mino City has established the Nurturing Successors of Hon-Minoshi Initiative, using public donations to help fund the training of new apprentices, and the national government partly supports training for papermakers and toolmakers. The government also funds workshops for the public and exhibitions of washi artworks.

Hon-minoshi is currently used in the conservation of valuable artworks and books owned by international institutions including the Smithsonian Institution in the United States, the British Museum in the U.K., and the Louvre Museum in France. Mino washi makers supplied the paper for the official award certificates for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games.

Washi paper is both eco-friendly and adaptable and has recently been used with new coatings and treatments to create waterproof paper, insulation materials, and electro-conductive paper. Making paper textiles was common in washi production regions in the Edo period (1603–1867). Gold and silver brocade was often made from strands of washi, gilded with gold or silver. The production of washi textiles declined in the Meiji era (1868–1912) due to the availability of cotton, silk, wool, and synthetic fibers. Recently, textile manufacturers are returning to using washi for its strength, flexibility, breathability, and smooth texture.