

## The Udatsu Preservation District

The Udatsu Preservation District covers two main streets running east-west and four side streets running north-south. The streets have a traditional appearance, with no visible powerlines or modern signage.

### *Protection against fire and symbols of wealth*

The merchant houses in the area were built in the late Edo period (1603–1867) and early Meiji era (1868–1912), and many have fireproof walls on each side of the house that extend above the roofline. These *udatsu* walls are coated with fireproof plaster and capped with decorative tiles, and are designed to prevent the spread of fire. During the Edo period, most houses were built of wood, and if fire broke out, it could quickly spread from house to house along an entire street. Building a house with *udatsu* was expensive, and over time these raised walls became symbols of wealth.

The prosperous paper merchants of Mino competed with each other to install higher and more decorative *udatsu*. Each *udatsu* is topped with roof tiles, including those with the family crest or a demon-like talisman called *oni-gawara*. These fearsome demons are said to protect the home from fire, lightning, and evil spirits. Each *oni-gawara* in the Udatsu Preservation District has a distinct appearance. Not all merchant houses had these protective walls, but those that did typically shared them, so a single *udatsu* would serve two properties. The *udatsu* of the Hirata and Furukawa family houses are rare examples of separate but adjacent *udatsu*, each with different decorative motifs. The *udatsu* buildings in Mino were selected as National Important Cultural Properties.

### *Houses for business*

The two-story merchant houses in the preservation district had shops at the front on the ground floor, with living spaces for family and staff at the back of the house and upstairs. Land tax was based on the width of the street frontage, so most merchant houses were long and narrow. Internal courtyards, latticed windows, and skylights encouraged air circulation and brought light to the interior, without compromising privacy.

The front rooms of many of the merchant houses in the area now function as shops, and the Former Imai Family Residence is completely open to the public. It is the widest of Mino's merchant houses, indicating the wealth and influence of the Imai family, who served as administrative heads of the town for generations. The Kosaka sake brewery was built around 1772 and is still in operation. It retains many original features, including a brick-paved floor that runs the length of the building to facilitate deliveries by horse-drawn cart, a courtyard garden, and a storehouse that is now used as an art gallery. Visitors can see historical photographs and artifacts, and purchase sake at the store at the front of the building.