

Product Innovation and Coastal Trade

(QR code, Room 2)

The potters of Suzu specialized in making urns, storage jars, and mortars for food preparation, diversifying also into religious items and Buddhist statuary for the rising samurai class. During the Kamakura period (1185–1333), power shifted from the emperor and nobility to powerful warlords and samurai under shogunal rule. Buddhism, which had largely been the province of the imperial court, grew in popularity among samurai and the general populace. As Buddhism spread to rural areas, samurai and wealthy farmers began to build tombs and choose Buddhist cremations. Suzu potters made burial jars and urns for ashes, along with religious statuary.

While Buddhist sculptures were commonly carved from wood or stone, the potters of Suzu started to mass-produce Buddhist statues in the late twelfth to thirteenth centuries by pressing clay into wooden molds. It is believed that these statues would have been enshrined in village prayer halls in areas where a temple might be difficult to visit regularly.

The Noto Peninsula was on the shipping route between Hokkaido and Fukui along the Sea of Japan. Shipping was the most convenient way to distribute ceramics, which were both heavy and fragile. Many of the extant examples of Suzu ware were unearthed from sites in Suzu or recovered from shipwrecks.

By the fourteenth century, Suzu ware was distributed across a quarter of the Japanese archipelago. In the latter half of the fifteenth century, Suzu ware fell into decline, and production was discontinued. Although the exact reasons are unclear, it is possibly the result of improved productivity and distribution in other production centers such as Echizen (Fukui Prefecture), Tokoname (Aichi Prefecture), and Bizen (Okayama Prefecture), forcing Suzu ware out of the market.