

## Yamaga Lantern Folk Art Museum

The traditional paper lanterns known as *toro* are an integral part of Yamaga's history and culture, as well as a central motif that is visible around town. Visitors to the Yamaga Lantern Folk Art Museum can view *toro* and learn about the painstaking craftsmanship required to create them.

### *Ancient origins*

The legendary Emperor Keiko of the first and second centuries CE is said to have visited the Kyushu region and encountered heavy fog as his procession traveled along the Kikuchi River. The people of Yamaga brought torches to aid his passage. This episode is commemorated in the annual Yamaga Lantern Festival, with *toro* representing the villagers' torches.

### *Technical aspects of Yamaga toro*

The craft of making paper lanterns flourished in Yamaga due to the area's cultivation of paper mulberry plants, whose inner bark is used in the production of *washi* (traditional handmade paper). Artisans passed on their expertise in paper craft within local communities, sustaining the practice over generations. Yamaga's lightweight *toro* are constructed with numerous thin strips of *washi* paper and minor amounts of glue. During the Yamaga Lantern Festival in August, roughly a thousand women perform a synchronized dance wearing golden and silver-colored *toro* upon their heads.

### *Diverse forms, intensive craft*

While the word "lantern" might conjure up a singular shape or form, Yamaga *toro* actually encompass a wide variety of designs. The *toro* displayed at the museum include elaborate architectural models of real buildings such as the Yachiyoza Theater, the museum itself, and famous shrines and temples. There are also changing *toro* exhibits that reflect contemporary culture and society.

Larger *toro* take up to several months of meticulous work to create. Learning this specialized craft entails years of apprenticeship and intensive commitment, and there

are fewer than 10 masters active in the lantern-making craft today.

*A cultural archive in a historic building*

The museum's exhibits include photographs, posters for the festival from years past, and tools used in lantern-making. They offer historical and technical context for the craft and the lanterns on display. There are also craft workshops for various ages and levels of experience, in which participants can make a *toro* to take home.

The Yamaga Lantern Folk Art Museum is located in a building that was constructed during the Taisho era (1912–1926) and formerly housed a bank. Many features of its Romanesque architecture and interior structure remain intact to this day. In 2002, the building was registered a Tangible Cultural Property.