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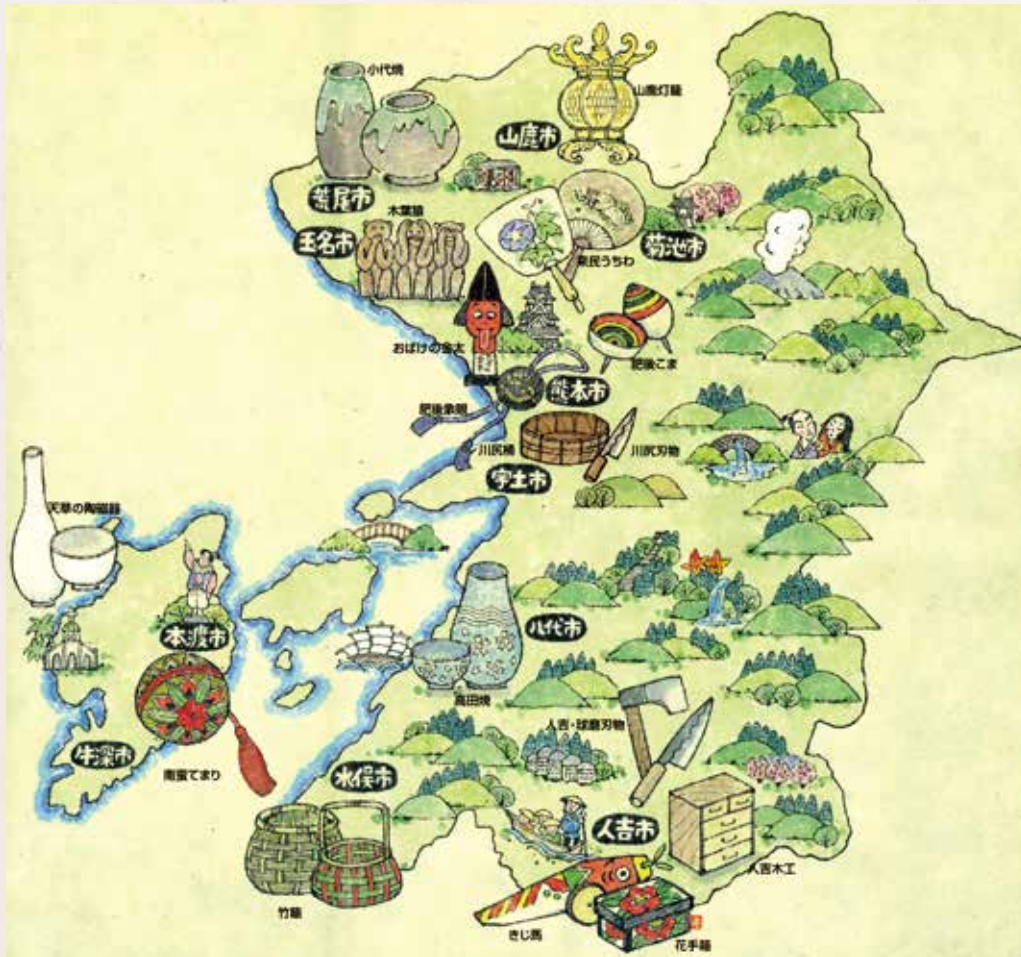
Traditional Crafts of Kumamoto

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Various traditional crafts are used in everyday life in Kumamoto.

These crafts are born from Kumamoto's natural environment, the skills of craftsmen, and the ingenuity used by locals in their daily lives.

Kumamoto's handicrafts are created through communication between the craft creators and the craft users. They are found in a variety of places and used in a variety of ways.



Traditional Crafts of Kumamoto

Craft items that originate from Kumamoto and were handed down for generations are designated “Traditional Crafts of Kumamoto.” To receive this designation, the craft must be made using traditional techniques and must have over 30 years of history. There are about 90 such designated crafts in Kumamoto, including metalwork, ceramics, woodwork, bamboo crafts, dyeing and weaving, paper products, and traditional toys.

Japan's Nationally Designated Crafts

To be deemed a “Nationally Designated Craft,” the traditional skills or techniques used to make the craft must have over 100 years of history, and must have developed in a fixed region with more than 10 organizations or 30 individual craftsmen currently engaged in the production of the craft. Over 200 crafts in Japan have been declared Nationally Designated Crafts, including Kyo and Arita ware pottery, and Wajima-style lacquerware. In Kumamoto, Shodai pottery, Amakusa ceramics, and Higo inlay metalwork all received this distinction in March 2003. In December 2013, Yamaga lanterns were the fourth craft from Kumamoto to be designated.

Higo-Zogan



Higo-zogan, or Higo inlay metalwork, is a traditional craft in which gold and silver leaf are used to inlay intricate designs onto an iron base. The production of this craft started with inlay designs being used to decorate gun barrels and sword guards 400 years ago in the early Edo Period. Higo metalworking was renowned across Japan for its high quality throughout the Edo Period.

Currently, Higo-zogan techniques are used to inlay gold and silver designs on a black iron base to make pens, jewelry, and other accessories that emanate a deep sense of elegance and refinement.

Higo-Zogan Production Step-by-Step

1. A design is sketched onto the iron base in ink.
2. A chisel is used to finely carve into the iron base in preparation for inlaying the gold and silver.
3. Carved areas are given texture by being carved in four directions – vertically, horizontally, and diagonally.
4. Gold and silver are set into the carved areas using a deer antler. Any carved areas leftover outside of the design are rubbed out and erased.
5. The gold and silver surfaces are pounded with a small metal hammer.
6. A design is engraved into the gold and silver.
7. A corrosive liquid is applied, causing the iron not covered with gold and silver to rust.

The iron base is submerged in a tea solution for 30 minutes. Although the gold and silver design remains unharmed, the tannic acid within the tea reacts with the rusted portion of the iron base to form a film of black iron rust on its surface. This prevents the oxidation of the iron.



Metalwork

Metalwork in Kumamoto includes the following crafts: Higo-zogan, which originated from sword accessories; Kawashiri and Hitoyoshi-Kuma cutting tools, such as kitchen knives, farm hoes and sickles; and swords, the production of which dates back 750 years ago to the Kamakura Period.



Kawashiri Cutting Tools

The production of Kawashiri cutting tools dates back to about 550 years ago in the Muromachi Period. During the Edo Period, Kawashiri in Kumamoto was home to many blacksmiths, and a number of shipbuilding yards belonging to the Higo Domain (present-day Kumamoto Prefecture) were built. Kawashiri is famous for its knives, called “Kawashiri hocho.” Kawashiri knives are made by putting a piece of steel between two layers of soft iron and striking it repeatedly with a hammer. As long as steel remains, the knife can be repeatedly sharpened in this way.



Hitoyoshi-Kuma Cutting Tools

Hitoyoshi-Kuma cutting tools are made in the Hitoyoshi and Kuma regions of southern Kumamoto. The production of these blades dates back 800 years ago to the Kamakura Period. As many as 60 blacksmith forges gathered in one part of Hitoyoshi to make a blacksmith town. The smiths made farming tools during times of peace, and weapons during times of war. The area now boasts a strong lumber industry, and so in addition to knives, other tools are produced such as axes, hatchets, sickles and saws.

Ceramics

Kumamoto's modern ceramics industry began about 400 years ago. When the Hosokawa family moved to Higo Province (now Kumamoto) in 1632, potters also settled in the area and built kilns. Koda ware from Yatsushiro and Shodai ware from Arao and Tamana developed under the patronage of the Higo Domain, primarily producing ceramics used in traditional tea ceremony. In addition to these, there was Matsubase ware from Uki, Oda ware from Uto (Higo Domain's only porcelain ware), and Mizunodaira, Takahama, and Maruo wares from Amakusa.



Shodai Ware

Shodai ware originated about 400 years ago in northern Kumamoto. It became an official pottery kiln of the Higo Domain in the Edo Period and made ceramic cups used in traditional tea ceremony as well as various wares used in everyday life. Shodai clay has high iron content and is full of pebbles. Straw and wood ash is used in the glaze to create a simple yet dynamic style.



Amakusa Ceramics

In the Amakusa region, porcelain ware is made using the region's abundant porcelain stone (of which Amakusa is the top producer in the country), and earthenware is made using local clay deposits. The production of porcelain ware in the region started 340 years ago, while the production of earthenware started 250 years ago. White porcelain pieces with a translucent quality as well as unique earthenware pieces are made in abundance.



Koda Ware

Koda ware first started being made in Yatsushiro City in 1632 during the early Edo Period. The designs are made not by painting, but rather by embedding white kaolin into the motifs carved into the clay. The pottery is fired after applying a transparent glaze, and turns a slight teal color due to the iron content in the clay.

Kumamoto's Ceramics



Paper Making

Paper manufacturing in Kumamoto developed in the Edo Period thanks to the promotion of new industries by Higo Domain. Mulberry production was prevalent in the area, and washi (Japanese paper) was used to create Yamaga-gasa (umbrellas) and Yamaga-toro (lanterns). Tesuki-washi, a type of handmade Japanese paper, was made in Yatsushiro under the patronage of the Kato and Hosokawa families. Kumamoto was a leading producer of washi with many manufacturing sites across the prefecture from the Meiji to Showa Periods. However, with the increasing popularity of western-style paper, washi fell out of use.



Miyaji Tesuki-washi

Miyaji tesuki-washi, or Miyaji handmade paper, was first made 400 years ago during the Azuchi-Momoyama Period in what is now present-day Yatsushiro City. To make this paper, mulberry tree bark is soaked in water overnight and then boiled for four hours. It is then beaten with a stick to soften the fibers, and then hibiscus root is added to bind the fibers together.



Kutami Fans

Kutami uchiwa are paper fans made in Yamaga City. The method of making these fans was brought to Kumamoto by a traveling priest from Shikoku about 400 years ago. The production of paper fans flourished thanks to the abundance of washi paper and bamboo in the area.

The underlying structure of the fan is made from bamboo, paper is stretched over the bamboo, and persimmon juice is used to shellac the paper. Persimmon juice improves the strength of the paper and is also effective as an insect repellent.

Yamaga Lanterns



Yamaga lanterns, also called Yamaga-toro, are created using only washi paper and glue to create a three-dimensional shape. These lanterns originated about 600 years ago in the Muromachi Period when paper lanterns made to look like gold lanterns were offered at Yamaga's shrine during the fire festival. In addition to golden lanterns, there are pieces crafted to look like famous buildings and shrines. There is no overlap in pieces of paper when pasting together Yamaga lanterns, and the structures, no matter how small, are hollow.

The Yamaga Lantern Festival takes place every year on August 15 in Yamaga City. During the festival, women wear these paper-made imitation gold lanterns on their heads and dance, while paper lanterns shaped like various buildings are presented as offerings to the local shrine.



Woodworking

Woodworking has thrived in Kumamoto since the Edo Period thanks to the prefecture's many forests. The Hitoyoshi-Kuma area is famous for its furniture such as chests and various woodturning items made using a lathe. Kawashiri in Kumamoto City is famous for its wooden buckets and barrels. In addition to these, inlay techniques are used in creating various sashimono (furniture made without metal nails) and also carved window transoms.



Hitoyoshi Furniture

Hitoyoshi furniture is made using just one wooden board and assembled without metal nails. The wood is joined together by interlocking teeth and wooden pegs cut by hand. Types of Hitoyoshi-style furniture includes boxes, tables, shelves, and more. They are constructed from wood with beautiful grain textures, such as elm, mulberry, and cherry.



Hikimono

Hikimono are woodworking items that have been formed by carving down a piece of wood as it rotates on an axis quickly with a sharp blade. A varnish is applied at the end to make the surface glossy, highlighting the beauty of the wood grain pattern. This woodworking technique is perfect for making various everyday items such as bowls and trays.



Magemono

Magemono are round containers whose sides are made from thin wooden boards that have been softened in boiling water and bent into shape. These containers are usually made from cedar or cypress, with glue used as an adhesive. Cherry tree bark is wound into rope and used to stitch the ends of the board together. The container is completed by attaching a bottom board and a lid. Magemono are often used as lunch boxes.



Window Transoms

Transoms are installed between the ceiling and top of the sliding screen door frame in Japanese houses. They are meant to bring in daylight, allow for ventilation, and act as a decorative piece. Camphor, ginko, or Yakushima cedar wood is carved into the basic shape with a chisel, and then a smaller chisel is used for detailed carving. Thin boards 1-3 cm thick may be carved all the way through to make open fretwork, called "usubori," while thicker boards 7-12 cm thick may be carved to make deep, three-dimensional reliefs, called "atsubori."



Buckets and Barrels

Japanese wooden buckets and barrels are made from cypress. They are made by leveling down part of the wood with a plane so that metal rings may be wrapped around to hold the bucket or barrel together. Glue is applied and then dried. The rings (called "taga") may be made of bamboo or bronze.

Bamboo Works

Bamboo flourishes in Kumamoto, and it is used to make a number of practical objects, such as farming tools, fishing gear, and shallow baskets. Bamboo craftsmen set up their workshops near bamboo forests to create and repair various bamboo items based on the needs of the local residents.

Higo Saburo bows are made in Ashikita Town and are highly regarded by the traditional Japanese archery world.



Bamboo Baskets

Square baskets and other items made from bamboo are produced in Hinagu in Yatsushiro City and sold as souvenirs to people visiting the nearby hot springs. Everyday items such as fishing gear, shallow baskets, and flower vases are made from bamboo in Hondo in Amakusa City. In Kumamoto City and Yamaga City, craftsmen make various items for daily life out of bamboo.



Higo Saburo Bows

Higo Saburo bows are made from bamboo and used in Japanese traditional archery, known as “kyudo.” They are about 220 cm in length. The production of Higo Saburo bows began in 1924 when bow makers from Tokyo moved to Ashikita Town where the materials for making bows, such as bamboo and wax trees, are prevalent. Higo Saburo bows are made by gluing together alternating layers of giant timber bamboo and wax tree wood using an adhesive called “nibe,” which is made by boiling deer skin.

Folk Toys

Many of these toys were traditionally made for children using readily available materials with the hope that the children would grow up strong and healthy. Toys are still made in Kumamoto using color schemes traditionally found in the area. There are some famous toys that were originally used as lucky talismans.



Obake no Kinta

When Kumamoto Castle was constructed 400 years ago, there was a foot soldier who was quite good at making people laugh. He was called “Odoke no Kinta,” meaning “Funny Kinta.” Wind-up dolls were made based on this soldier in the 19th century, and were later called “Obake no Kinta,” meaning “Spooky Kinta.”

Obake no Kinta toys have a bright red face and a string attached which when pulled causes the doll’s eyes roll back and its long tongue to loll out.



Konoha-zaru

Konoha-zaru, or Konoha monkeys, are simple toys made of unglazed clay in the Konoha area of Gyokuto Town. They are formed without a mold by roughly shaping the clay with one’s hands. It is said that in 723, a refugee from the capital made items to be offered at a shrine using the red clay found at Mt. Konoha after he received a divine message in his dreams. According to legend, the leftover clay he threw away transfigured itself into monkeys. Konoha-zaru are nowadays used as charms to protect against illness and calamities as well as wish for the prosperity of one’s family.



Hikoichi Koma

Hikoichi koma, or Hikoichi spinning tops, were designed based on the folklore, “Hikoichi’s Witty Story.” In this story, a man named Hikoichi defeats a naughty raccoon dog using only his wits. The toy is actually an ornament shaped like the raccoon dog which can be taken apart to produce four spinning tops from the animal’s head, body, bamboo hat, and stage plus tail.

Folk Toys



Kijiuma, Hanatebako, Hagoita

More than 800 years ago, Heike soldiers settled in the remote regions of Hitoyoshi after being defeated in battle in the Kuma area. It is said that they began crafting kijiuma, hanatebako, and hagoita in response to feelings of homesickness for their former lives in Kyoto. These toys are made from the wood of various trees including paulownia, Japanese angelica, wisteria, and oak. They are given a rustic design with red, yellow, and green paint.



Okinjo Dolls & Itazumo Dolls

Okinjo and Itazumo dolls are toys from the Yatsushiro area. Okinjo dolls are made by painting paulownia wood. These dolls are used by young girls to play dress up or play house. Itazumo dolls were originally made in connection with sumo wrestlers from Hinagu in Yatsushiro City.



Higomari

Higomari is an ornamental ball with a core made from rice hulls and wrapped in cotton string colored with natural vegetable dyes to produce a design. Higomari have been made since around 1965 and were based on the ball-shaped ornament “temari,” which have been produced in various regions across Japan since the Edo Period.



Higotemari

‘Higotemari’ is an ornamental ball. Women have transmitted the method for crafting these balls for hundreds of years. The famous song ‘Antagata Dokosa’ was made for the ‘Higotemari’.

Dyeing and Weaving

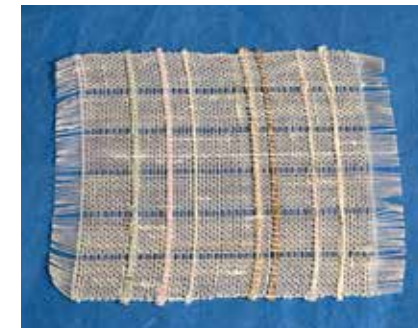


Gogatsu Sekku Nobori

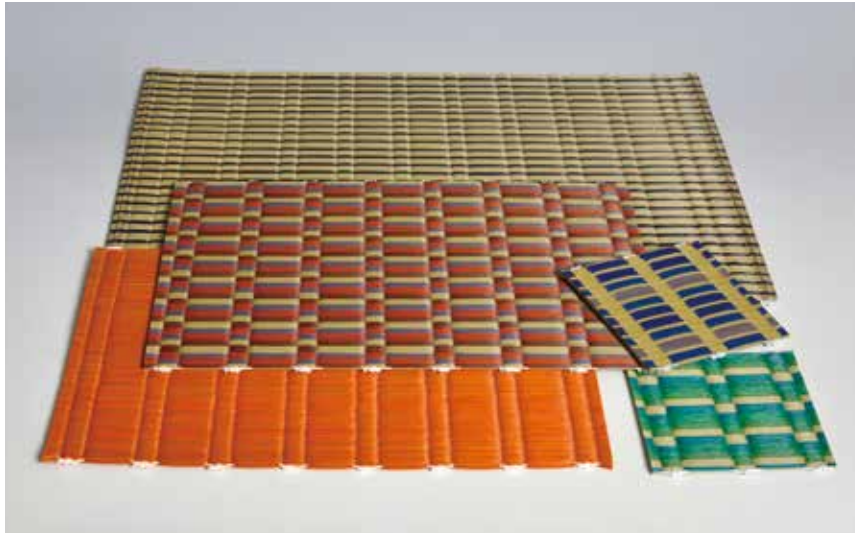
Gogatsu Sekku Nobori are flags measuring nearly 8 meters in length that are displayed alongside carp streamers on May 5 in celebration of Boy's Day. These flags are displayed to wish for the health and growth of young boys.

These flags started being made about 100 years ago in Kagami Town in Yatsushiro and the Kawashiri area of Kumamoto City. Gogatsu Sekku Nobori currently being produced still have an old-fashioned style to them, with images of warriors and carp swimming upstream and painted by hand using gradation and layered painting techniques.

Kumamoto's Dyeing and Weaving



Traditional Crafts of Kumamoto



Hanagoza

Yatsushiro City in Kumamoto Prefecture is a major producer of rushes, the grass used to make Japanese tatami mats. Hanagoza are mats of various sizes woven from these rushes and have been produced since the Meiji Period. In addition to rug-like mats, kitchen table placemats and coasters are also made.



Vine Crafts

Vine crafts include baskets, sieves, and other items used in everyday life made by weaving together naturally growing vines. These sorts of crafts were abundantly produced in the Aso region from the mid-1800s to about 1945. More recently, vines are used to make wall décor and flower baskets.



Lacquered Sharkskin

Lacquered sharkskin is a type of lacquer art from the Yatsushiro area used to produce jewelry and other accessories. The production of these accessories started about 40 years ago and draws on the techniques used in making lacquer ware for Buddhist religious articles as well as the sharkskin scabbards for Japanese swords. Layers of lacquer are applied to shark or ray skin and then polished. A pattern is produced by polishing down the uneven texture of the skin.



Decorative Roof Tiles

Decorative roof tiles are found on the roofs of Japanese houses. Roof ornaments are made in the shapes of ogres and “shachi,” a mythical creature with the head of a dragon and the body of a carp. High quality clay from the Ogawa area in Uki City is used and shaped with a spatula, dried, and then fired to give it a glossy finish. In addition to these roof tiles and ornaments, there is an increasing demand for similar ornaments that can be placed in other areas than the roof.

Traditional Crafts of Kumamoto



Drums

Drums have been used since long ago in the religious rites of shrines and temples as well as by farmers to summon rain. The Uto people at one point used very large drums when summoning rain. These drums are made by hollowing out a piece of elm or other wood and then stretching cowhide across the frame. The drum is hollowed out by hand leaving a wavy texture on the inside walls, which creates a unique resonance when the drum is beaten.



Three-string Instruments

Sangen are a type of "shamisen," a three-stringed instrument used in Japanese folk music. During the Meiji Period 150 years ago, there was a famous sangen musician in Kumamoto and folk music was very popular at the time. The plectrums and bridges used to play the sangen are made in Uki City.

The bridge, which supports the instrument's strings, is made from water buffalo horn with inlaid gold, silver, and lead. The base of the plectrum is made from water buffalo horn or ivory while the tip is made from tortoise shell. Alternative materials for ivory and tortoise shell are currently being sought.

Kumamoto Prefectural Traditional Crafts Center



Kumamoto Prefectural Traditional Crafts Center exhibits total of 90 traditional works of Japanese including Higo-Zogan, woodworking, Bamboo Works, ceramics, and cutting tools.



Opening hours [Open] 9:00 am - 5:00 pm
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