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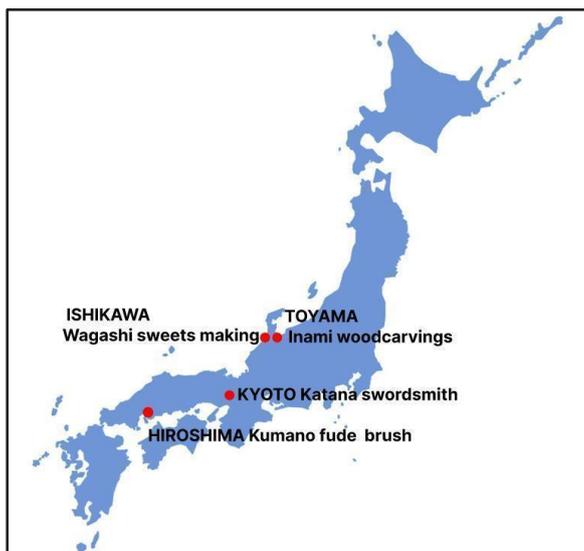
A Journey over Japan's Craftsmanship



A master carver in Inami, Toyama Prefecture, works on a "ranma" transom panel.

The beauty of Japan's traditional crafts — from woodwork art to everyday items like fude brushes to samurai warriors' katana swords — has long been sustained by the exquisite handiwork of artisans, whose skills have been handed down through generations.

This issue of Japan Tourism Spotlight features destinations where such artisanal traditions remain alive and well today — and visitors can not only see but also experience firsthand the craftsmanship that has been maintained for centuries. We will take you on a journey to trace Japan's handicraft culture by visiting the communities of artisans and learning about their skills under the guidance of master craftsmen.



Index

1. [How Inami in Toyama Carved Its Name in Woodcraft Heritage](#)

2. [Experience the Intricate Art of Making Versatile Fude Brushes](#)
3. [Learn Firsthand the Spirit of a Swordsmith in Rural Kyoto](#)
4. [Taste of Traditional Wagashi-making at Kanazawa Workshop](#)

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1. Inami in Toyama carved its name in woodcraft heritage

The origin of woodcarving in the town of Inami in Nanto, Toyama Prefecture, was forged in fire. Inami was originally a religious town centered on Inamibetsuin Zuisenji Temple. When a great fire swallowed the main hall of the temple in 1762, a master sculptor was invited from Kyoto for its reconstruction, and his techniques were passed on to local woodworkers. This resulted in the creation of the namesake woodcarving technique “Inami style,” a tradition now over 250 years old.



Inami woodcarvings of interior display and exterior signage ©Toyama Tourism Organization

The signature technique of Inami style is an openwork, three-dimensional carving. To achieve this, a master artisan may use over 200 types of chisels and carving knives. The technique is observed in intricate motifs like “shishi-gashira” (lion heads) or dragons and flowers, and can be seen used in traditional housing parts such as “ranma” transom panels, as well as in signposts and nameplates.

Today, the area enjoys a status as a woodcarving town, where around 200 craftsmen keep their workshops. Inami was designated as a Japan Heritage in 2018, as the whole town serves as a

living museum of its woodworking heritage. Workshops and traditional merchant buildings line its old streets, especially the main Yokamachi Dori that stretches from Zuisenji Temple.



Traditional houses and woodcarving workshops line Inami's Yokamachi Dori street. ©Toyama Tourism Organization

Walking down Yokamachi Dori is a sensory experience. Besides the rhythmic sounds of carvers' mallets hitting chisels in their studios, the air carries a distinct smell of wood from the workshops that line the street's cobblestone path. The street itself is a visual delight — carved signage and nameplates adorn traditional buildings. Eagle-eyed visitors can discover hidden wooden cats peeking from windows and front-door displays, showcasing the carvers' technical skills as well as the town's whimsical vibes.

The town encourages visitors to get their hands on their wood-carved pride, either as merchandise or as a workshop experience. Michinoeki Inami Kibori no Sato Soyukan has the Nanto Rakuichi, a souvenir shop, and the Create Kobo woodcarving workshop available for kids and adults alike. No experience is necessary, so beginners can carve coasters, plates, and other accessories. Courses range from one to three hours.



(Left) Guests at a Bed and Craft inn take part in a woodworking workshop; a woodcarving decoration at an inn.
©CORARE ARTISANS JAPAN

For an immersive experience in Inami, visitors can book a stay at Bed and Craft, where they can experience the craftsmanship of local artisans to the full. Each of its six lodgings has a resident master craftsman and serves as a gallery of their works, and the place allows guests to join woodworking and other workshops “as an apprentice.” Patiently guided by the respective master, they can carve their own wooden spoons or plates — all while gaining newfound knowledge and appreciation for the skills, patience, and craftsmanship needed to turn a block of wood into a timeless piece of art and history.

[Visit Toyama: Touring Inami, the Woodcarving Town](#)
[Bed and Craft](#)

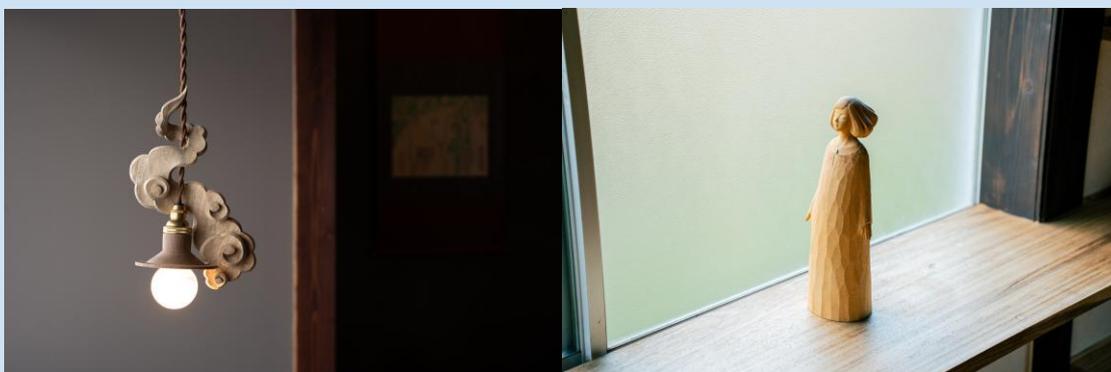
Deeper exchanges with tourists help sustain the craftsmanship



©CORARE ARTISANS JAPAN

Yamakawa Tomotsugu, architect and founder of the creative cooperative Corare Artisans Japan, says the foremost reason he opened the Bed and Craft network in Inami was his hope that visitors could see and get a hands-on experience of the local craftsmanship. “By staying in the town, taking part in the artisans’ workshops, and trying their own hands on the woodworking art, the tourists will remember the visit as a deep experience — which gives them a much stronger value than merely buying a souvenir,” said Yamakawa, who sees a great potential of tourism based on artisanal culture in reviving a regional community.

Such forms of tourism, Yamakawa hopes, will also help sustain the town’s craftsmanship into the future. With more than 200 woodcarvers in a town of roughly 8,000 people, Inami has a concentration of artisans rarely seen anywhere in the world. Still, the local handicraft industry faces mounting challenges in keeping up its traditional skills, including the unstable livelihood of many artisans and a shortage of younger workers to carry on the techniques through the next generations, he pointed out.



Woodcarving works featured in the interior of Bed and Craft inns ©CORARE ARTISANS JAPAN

Yamakawa founded Corare Artisans Japan with Inami's artisans because he wanted to establish a virtuous cycle in which the professionals would be more fairly rewarded for their handicraft work by establishing long-term partnerships with the artisans and multiplying their sources of income.

He sees a common problem facing Japan's traditional craftsmanship and artisans' communities across the country. Despite the high value of their skills, the systems for passing on the craftsmanship to future generations remain inadequate. Many artisans also find it hard to expand the fan base of their handicrafts beyond the local communities.

To sustain their craftsmanship, a mechanism needs to be established whereby the artisans would be adequately compensated for their time; for example, by finding multiple sources of revenue not only from the sale of their products, but also through collaboration with accommodation services and experience programs, Yamakawa said, adding that tourists taking part in the artisans' workshops and experiencing their skills will do more to increase long-term supporters of their work than visitors merely purchasing their products.

2. Experience the intricate art of making versatile fude brushes



Calligraphy brushes (left) and various makeup brushes ©fudenosatokobo

The humble Japanese fude brush has held an important place in history and culture since the tool was introduced from China alongside Buddhism and early writing systems around the 6th century. Monks and scholars were the first ones to use the fude for writing sutras. For centuries, it was a key instrument in record-keeping, literature, prayers, and calligraphy. It was integral not only for religious and educational purposes but also for artistic expressions. Today, beyond its traditional uses, the fude found a home in makeup and painting activities, reflecting adaptive craftsmanship and ensuring this traditional tool meets modern functions.

It was around the 1830s and '40s, during the late Edo Period, that brush-making found its place in the town of Kumano in Hiroshima Prefecture. Then, as education became mandatory during Japan's modernization drive beginning in the late 19th century, the demand for brushes increased, jumpstarting the production in Kumano, cementing its status as a brush production capital. In 1975, Kumano Fude was designated by the government as a Traditional Craft.

Creating a Kumano fude is a meticulous process involving over 70 steps. It begins with the selection of hair from animals — such as horses, goats, or deer — based on texture, elasticity, and length. In a critical step, the hair undergoes multiple soakings, combings, and mixings until all the hair becomes uniform. Another arduous phase is the careful removal of malformed hair using a small knife. The hair strands are then carefully shaped into cones and bound tightly

before they are inserted into a handle. This manual process ensures a quality that mass production cannot replicate.

Visitors to Kumano can test for themselves the intricacy of fude-making. At Fudenosato Kobo museum and workshop, they can not only learn the history of the craft but also watch the making of calligraphy fude by government-certified masters of traditional craft — and try their own hands on the finishing process in a session that takes about an hour. Roughly 1,500 kinds of fude for calligraphy, paint, and makeup purposes are being sold at the facility, which also holds various fude-related exhibitions.

When calligraphy was no longer a compulsory subject at schools, fude producers in Kumano added paint and makeup brushes to their product list. Today, Kumano makeup brushes are prized by many of the world’s leading makeup artists for exceptional performance and durability, their “airy” touch to the skin, and the combination of design and functionality.

There are workshops that enable visitors to experience the making of makeup fude. In classes offered by Koyudo Makeup Brush Workshop, they can craft their own makeup brush under the guidance of artisans. Here, they can learn how to shape the bristles and insert them into wooden handles. This experience can last from 15 to 45 minutes. The workshop also offers a factory tour with history lessons about the craft.



A step in the calligraphy fude production process (left) and a scene from a makeup brush-making workshop..
©fudenosatokobo/©KOYUDO

Outside the brush-making workshops, the town of Kumano itself is a place to behold. Fude Zuka is a monument erected to pay respects to the old brushes that reached the end of their use — and the spirits of animals whose hair was used for the brushes. During the Kumano Fude Matsuri (Brush Festival) held every autumn, the town holds various events like discount sales of fude, giant calligraphy performances, and a ritual burning of old tools.

[Fudenosato Kobo](#)

[Shaquda: Kumano Fude Cosmetic Brush Making Workshop](#)

[Koyudo: Workshop tour and brush-making experience](#)

3. Experience katana-making craft in rural Kyoto



©Woodland Kyoto

Traditional swordsmithing is a key part of Japan's cultural heritage. It has been preserved by skilled artisans who combine expert craftsmanship with traditional techniques and spiritual practices. Even after the production of Japanese swords as weapons was outlawed after the end of World War II, swordsmiths licensed by the Agency for Cultural Affairs continued to forge katanas as works of art instead.

In the rural Tamba region of Kyoto Prefecture, about an hour's drive from central Kyoto City, master swordsmith Nakanishi Yuya upholds this ancient craft at his Masahiro Sword Forge. As one of Japan's few remaining active swordsmiths, he utilizes techniques passed down through centuries. Established in 2014, this forge is one of the two in Kyoto Prefecture dedicated to Japanese sword production, making it a vital location even within a region known for its long history and traditions. Nakanishi's operation stands out as a rare active hub for this craft, set in a location by the mountains where the natural surroundings enhance the connection to ancient practices.

Master Nakanishi opens his forge to participants in a workshop program not merely to share his craft, but to keep the techniques alive for future generations. This is especially important at a time when traditional swordsmithing has become increasingly rare as swords lost their practical role in modern life. Nakanishi sees great value in allowing people to take part in the workshop. Through hands-on experience, participants gain more than just technical insight; they develop a profound appreciation for the discipline, intuition, and respect required to work with fire and steel.

The primary hands-on experience centers around forging a small utility knife, known as a kogatana, with a blade less than 15 cm long. Participants use tamahagane, the same high-purity steel traditionally utilized for full-length katana. Under the master's guidance, participants engage in key stages of traditional sword-making, starting with heating steel in a pine charcoal-

fueled furnace and then hammering it by hand to shape and stretch the metal. Specialized clay is then applied for differential hardening. Participants may also ask the swordsmith to engrave a personal name or message into the handle.

Throughout the process, direct instruction and support are provided. Even beginners actively contribute to each stage while learning the intuition, respect for fire, and traditional techniques that define the craft. Sessions are conducted in small groups, each lasting about 3.5 to 4 hours. The workshop concludes with the participants taking home their completed knife safely packaged in a wooden box, creating a meaningful, tangible connection to this centuries-old legacy.

[Masahiro Sword Forge: Katana knife making and workshop tour in Kyoto](#)

4. Learn wagashi creation at a Kanazawa confectioner



Wagashi confection by Koshiyama Kanseido on a plate (left) and wagashi-making workshop
©KOSHIYAMAKANSEIDO

Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, occupies a special position in the history of wagashi, or Japanese confectionery, owing to its development as the castle town of the Kaga Domain during the Edo period. The domain's considerable wealth fostered an environment where cultural pursuits thrived.

The tea ceremony held particular importance in this setting, demanding confections that could temper the bitterness of matcha, evoke the transience of seasons, and align with ideals of simplicity, balance, and understated elegance. These requirements, combined with the region's strong agricultural base — including reliable supplies of azuki beans — and longstanding customs of hospitality toward guests, elevated wagashi making to a central element of Kanazawa's identity. The city became recognized as one of the foremost locations in Japan for producing refined, high-quality sweets that carried deep cultural significance.

Koshiyama Kanseido traces its origins to 1888. Over the course of six generations, the shop has upheld its foundational techniques while making measured adjustments to meet shifting preferences and modern realities. Traditional methods guarantee that every confection retains the nuanced seasonal references, subtle flavor layering, and visual delicacy that distinguish high-quality wagashi craftsmanship.

A workshop offered by Koshiyama Kanseido opens these traditions to direct participation. Lasting approximately 40 minutes, the session guides participants in crafting two distinct types

of seasonal fresh unbaked sweets — namagashi or jo-wagashi — creating two pieces per variety. Experienced confectioners provide instruction as attendees handle sweetened bean paste and use specialized tools to form shapes inspired by the current season. Through this hands-on process, the workshop illustrates the level of care needed to harmonize taste, mouthfeel, and appearance. Participants leave with the sweets they have made themselves, carrying away not just the finished pieces but a direct, personal insight into the artisan's work.

This connection to wagashi naturally leads to Kanazawa's historic venues. The sukiya-style tearoom at the Nomura-ke samurai residence, with its meticulously maintained garden dating back centuries, creates an appropriate setting for appreciating tea and jo-wagashi together, tying the sweets to the refined world of feudal-era Kanazawa.

Koshiyama Kanseido sustains the vitality of Kanazawa's wagashi legacy while making it reachable. The workshop serves as an effective means for visitors to experience time-tested techniques firsthand in a city that has carefully retained its castle-town heritage, creating a meaningful link between past artisanship and present experience that is best expressed in this area of Japan.

[Workshop — Koshiyama Kanseido](#)

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