

niponica

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Discovering
Japan

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Special Feature

Splendor and Sparkle in Japanese Culture



Lacquer bowls decorated with *makie*, using fine gold powder to highlight the design. 19th to 20th century. Both bowls property of the Kyoto National Museum.



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Cover photo: Tokyo Tower forms an interesting contrast with a street brightly lit by LED illumination in Tokyo's Roppongi district. (Photo courtesy of Aflo)

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Special Feature

Splendor and Sparkle in Japanese Culture

This edition of *niponica* takes you into a world of gold, silver, light and other glittering touches used to highlight elements in Japanese culture, from traditional handicrafts to contemporary pop design.

Above: "Match the Shells" (*kai-awase*) is an ancient game. The aim is to find matching half-shells which have paired illustrations or *waka* lines of poetry. These ones, dating from the 17th century, depict scenes from *Genji Monogatari* (*Tales of Genji*) with gold and vivid color. (The *Tales* are a masterpiece of literature focusing on the lives of the aristocracy.) In the background are the boxes that hold them, called *Saishiki Genji e-kai oke*. Property of the Tokyo National Museum. (Photo courtesy of the TNM Image Archives)

Japan's Dazzling Artistic Traditions

Writings, pictures, crafts, architecture... Colorful decorative art shines at the heart of Japanese culture.

From a conversation with Hidaka Kaori

For many years, one aesthetic in Japanese art found beauty in avoiding decoration, embracing simplicity, and using colorless monotonous. Meanwhile, another tradition blended gorgeous materials such as gold and silver with vibrant color, fostering brilliance and ornateness.

Resplendent art for Buddhist scriptures and *waka* poetry

Using gold to depict the supernatural religious sphere in a decorative way is common throughout the world, and Buddhism is certainly no exception. In fact, one sutra says that a light shone from the Buddha. In Japan, beginning in the Heian period (794-1192), some statues of Buddha and temple interiors were decorated with gold. In China and other parts of East Asia, there were Buddhist texts transcribed in gold or silver calligraphy, and in Japan this practice was taken further, with gold and silver decorating many objects.

At the end of the 12th century, the ruling class gave religious institutions sutra prayer texts and works of art done by nobles, such as *waka* poetry collections and picture scrolls, and these were often brilliantly decorated. We can feel the nobles' artistic sensibilities even through their secular scrolls, which were sometimes decorated, like the scriptures, with gold and silver.

Haku-chirashi ("scattered gold or silver") was one of the most common decorative techniques in those days. Gold and silver leaf was cut into different sizes, or pulverized into a powder, or shredded into random shapes, and then they were mixed on paper to create a mystical world of illusion. This technique was soon applied to pictures as well. Artists sought elegant beauty by harmonizing the opulent brilliance of gold with the strong whitish hue of silver and the refinement of color.



Ink stone box with cover, depicting wheels in flowing water. 12th century. The *makie* artist sprinkled gold powder on wet lacquer, to make a background for the illustration, which is made with gold along with *sei-kin* (a gold-silver alloy) and mother-of-pearl. Box name: *Kata-waguruma makie raden te-baka*. Property of the Tokyo National Museum. (Photo courtesy of the Kyoto National Museum)



Playful touches, taking liberties with reality

Chinese and Western pictures generally aimed for realism, wishing to represent things as they actually were. At one time Japanese art was greatly influenced by China, but in the end it turned in a quite different direction. Rather than trying to express lofty ideals through a faithful portrayal of reality, artists in Japan displayed a playful spirit in design elements and eye-pleasing effects.

For example, the ink drawings of Chinese landscape artists emphasized the ruggedness of boulders and the craggy

steepness of cliffs, whereas Japanese pictures tended to avoid shadings and gradations to portray the unevenness of the land, and instead treated topography as a flat surface to be decorated with gorgeous materials, including gold and silver. Some of the many large folding screens produced in Japan beginning in the 16th century were covered with copious amounts of gold leaf. This caused them to lose depth and some stereoscopic effect, but on the other hand they achieved a unique form of expression through remarkable layouts of flowers, trees, animals and the like.

This technique, where perspective is intentionally ignored, led to many notable pieces of decorative art. They



Above: Part of the Mitsune Collection of *waka* poetry, decorated with *haku-chirashi* ("scattered gold or silver"). This work, called *Hongan-ji bon sanjuroku-nin kashu*, probably dates back to 1112. Property of Hongan-ji Temple.

Left: Some of the stories the aristocracy read were elaborately illustrated. This scene, from a picture scroll entitled *Ise monogatari emaki shodan*, dates from the late 13th century or early 14th century. Property of the Kuboso Memorial Museum of Arts, Izumi City.



indicate how Japanese artistic sensibilities were quite different from the approach taken by Chinese paintings.

A penchant for glitter throughout the history of Japanese decorative art

Makie decorative techniques combine lacquer and a sprinkled powder, usually gold or silver. This traditional Japanese lacquer craft began in the 8th century and evolved through various stages of development. *Raden zaiku* (mother-of-pearl inlay), using shiny pieces of shell, is also seen in other parts of the world, but interestingly, in Japan the inlay was combined with *makie* to achieve an even more exotic effect.

The gold leaf on Japanese pictures of the time was so thin that surprisingly little gold was used. On the other hand, the gold powder particles for *makie* are much thicker than gold leaf, so far more gold had to be used in *makie*

for a given surface. That explains why *makie* gold gives the impression of solid mass.

Beginning in the 10th century, the culture of the nobility favored *makie* and mother-of-pearl inlay to grace the lives of the wealthy, as seen in their diverse furnishings, architectural embellishments and more. Later, when the military class held power in the Kamakura period (1192-1333), dramatic *makie* backgrounds became even more opulent with gold leaf.

Wabi and *sabi* are cultural values that sprang from the tea ceremony in the 16th century. They idealized simplicity and tranquility, in contrast to the opulence of the aristocracy. Although *wabi* and *sabi* developed into one highly influential branch of aesthetics, the Japanese certainly did not abandon their penchant for glitter. For instance, the ornamental decorations promoted by the Rinpa school of Ogata Korin (1658-1716) became increasingly prevalent in the Edo period (1603-1867).

Japan's aesthetic values today favor bold, innovative design and feel-good effects, and against this backdrop the culture of *kawaii* ("cute") rules in the pop world. Japan's glittering decorative traditions live on today.

"Bold yet simple" describes these flowers on the gold background of a truly remarkable folding screen. By Ogata Korin, a master artist of the Rinpa school, this screen is the right half of a pair. Screen name: *Kakitsubata-zu byōbu*. 18th century. Property of the Nezu Museum.

Hidaka Kaori
Professor at the National Museum of Japanese History (Museum Science Division). Specializes in the history of lacquer ware art, especially *makie*, and in Japanese decorative art. Works include *Nihon Bijutsu no Kotoba Annai* ("A Guide to Japanese Art Terminology").



Ornate designs alive with shining color

Playful motifs and shapes can have an astounding impact when brightened with gold and silver.



Top: The perforated rim of the pot is overlaid with aquatic birds drawn with real gold. Pot name: *Iro-e ashikari mon sukashibori soribachi*. Property of the Idemitsu Museum of Arts.
Bottom: Shallow bowl with pine trees and snow, set off with gold. Bowl name: *Kenzanyaki iroe yukimatsuzu sara*. Property of the Yuki Museum of Art, Osaka. (Photo by Miyamura Masanori)
Both ceramics were decorated by the highly original Ogata Kenzan (1663-1743) of the Rinpa school.



Medieval armor accentuated with shining gold exudes an air of valiant bravado. The *sazae*-style helmet, with its hard-shell, thick-horn design favored by military commanders of the day, appears somewhat humorous to the 21st century eye. Dates from the 17th century. Name of helmet: *Kingyorin kozane nimai do gusoku*. Property of the Tokyo National Museum. (Photo courtesy of TNM Image Archives)



Ink stone box strikingly decorated in the Rinpa Makie style, with an animal/plant motif using gold, mother-of-pearl and lead. By Nagata Yuji. Box name: *Maki-shika makie raden ryoshi-bako*. 18th century. Property of the Kyoto National Museum.

Costume worn by the heroine Agemaki when taking the stage in the famous kabuki play, *Sukeroku yukari no Edo-zakura*. (Photo courtesy of Shochiku Co., Ltd.)





A Mikimoto necklace made from carefully selected pearls. It reflects the exceptional advantages of Japan's natural environment and advanced know-how.

Luster from the Sea: Japan's Treasured Pearls

Pearls are treasures from the sea, beloved down the ages for their gentle luster. Cultured pearl techniques developed around the end of the 19th century in Japan, and the country was soon producing beauties admired worldwide.

Collaboration: K. Mikimoto & Co., Ltd., Pearl City Kobe Promoting Organization, Japan Pearl Exporters' Association, NPO Hitotsubu-no-shinjuu, and Kobe Pearl Museum Steering Committee
Photo courtesy of K. Mikimoto & Co., Ltd. (pages 10 & 11); Pearl City Kobe Promoting Organization, and Kobe Pearl Museum Steering Committee (pages 12 & 13)

Cultured pearls for glamorous women worldwide

A pearl begins inside the body of a marine creature with a hinged shell, most famously the akoya pearl oyster. It grows around some small object that has gained entry into the shell, and that provokes the oyster into secreting a substance called mother-of-pearl. The mother-of-pearl builds up layer upon layer around the object, developing into what we call a pearl.

Natural pearls harvested in the wild are very rare, so rare that in the old days only a very limited number of people owned pearls. The idea that pearls could be farmed was considered to be just a pipe dream—until one Japanese man turned the dream into reality: Mikimoto Kokichi, later known as the King of Pearls.

Kokichi found a way to cultivate semi-spherical pearls in 1893, and in 1905 he succeeded in growing almost perfectly spherical ones, blazing a trail for the world's cultivated pearl industry.

His method: insert some foreign matter into an akoya pearl oyster, to make the oyster become a host growing a pearl around it. How is a farmed pearl different from a wild one? Actually, the only difference is the way the irritant enters the shell—either by happenstance, or by human intervention. When the pearls, one wild, one farmed, are removed from the shells, they are both real pearls, not different in any way.

Before Kokichi's breakthrough, pearls fetched a tremendously high price the world over. They were more expensive than a similar size diamond! Only people in the highest echelons of society—a very small minority—could own one. Kokichi is known for his



Mikimoto Kokichi (1858-1954). His success as the first person in the world to cultivate pearls earned him the nickname "King of Pearls."



Newspaper advertisements published in English extolled Mikimoto's products from 1907 until the 1920s.



Kokichi showcased his work in exhibitions all over the world. This *obi-dome* (decorative fastener for a kimono sash) was shown at the Paris Exposition in 1937.

declaration, "I'm going to give women everywhere the chance to adorn themselves with pearls." And he delivered on that promise. Pearls grown from techniques he invented were soon charming women worldwide, and by the middle of the 20th century the soft luster of pearls was gracing many necks.

Sophisticated yet simple beauty, thanks to a climate perfect for farming pearls

Keys for assessing the value of a gemstone are: size, color, shape, and condition. In the case of pearls, two more criteria are added: *maki* (literally, "whorl") and *teri* ("gloss"). *Maki* is the thickness of the mother-of-pearl layers around the core, while *teri* is the luster shining through from inside. The thicker the *maki*, the richer the luster, with a corresponding increase in price.

Maki and *teri* give Japanese pearls their value. The harvest occurs in November and December, when sea water temperatures are declining, creating the right conditions for the crystalline structure to tighten into



The *obi-dome* sash fasteners could be taken apart or combined with other elements, to serve as a brooch, *kanzashi* hairpin, ring or other item of jewelry. The ingenuity amazed people at the time.



Above: Pearl farming in Japan is based on akoya oysters. Right: Pearl farm in Shima, Mie Prefecture, established by Mikimoto Kokichi to cultivate perfectly spherical pearls and do research.





An artisan sorts pearls one by one, categorizing them by size, color, *maki* (the thickness of the mother-of-pearl layers), and *teri* (the luster shining through from inside). The work is done in natural light.

finely textured layers of mother-of-pearl. When the layers develop uniformly, light striking the pearl creates a fine, deep *teri*. That subtle yet gorgeous luster is best seen in pearls cultivated in Japan, where seasonal differences are quite pronounced. That is why Japan's pearls are valued as the very finest.

Kobe, world center for the pearl industry

Pearls were a bright spot in Japan's export trade from the 1950s to the mid-1960s. They inspired women's couture trends and were sought after in high society, by Hollywood actresses and beyond. Fashionistas fell in love with "pearls from Japan," and male visitors from abroad would buy them for their sweethearts and family members. These were boom times for Japanese pearls.

The hub of the pearl industry was Kobe, already well-established as an international trade port. Situated in Hyogo Prefecture on the Seto Inland Sea, Kobe lies between major cultivation centers like Uwajima, Ise and Kyushu, and it had long served as a distribution center for pearls. Added to the advantages of its geographical location was a topographical feature north of the city—Mount Rokko. The sun's rays strike the mountain from the south, to be reflected back by the green mountain slopes as a soft light filtering down from the north. Experts say that a dependable source of natural light from the north, like the light from Mount Rokko, is essential for the precise evaluation of pearl quality. Kobe meets that condition, and so it was that artisan pearl experts flocked there.

International traders also came in large numbers. "Pearl City Kobe," the city's moniker, was bandied about more by people from abroad than by the Japanese themselves. A short story by Somerset Maugham



Pearls organized in pairs, mostly for pierced or ordinary earrings. A special talent is required to identify "twins" that are identical in size and hue.



Equal-grade pearls are lined up together, preparing them for their transformation into necklaces.

features a man going to take a look at the Japanese pearl business, along with someone working in the American Consular Service in Kobe. The comic actor Charlie Chaplin is said to have bought pearls for his wife while honeymooning in Kobe.

"Japan Quality"

Among connoisseurs today, just as in the past, common wisdom has it that if you want the best pearls, you go to Kobe. The city combines the skills of discerning eyes, the techniques of experts,

and the attention to detail of the Japanese. These three are taking pearls to ever more illustrious levels.

Today, 80% of the world's pearls pass through Kobe, on their way to markets around the globe. After passing through the hands of Kobe artisans, their value rises even more. "Japan Quality" is very much alive in the world of pearls.

Japan's pearls are a shining light in the world of beauty, continually fostered by work and talent.



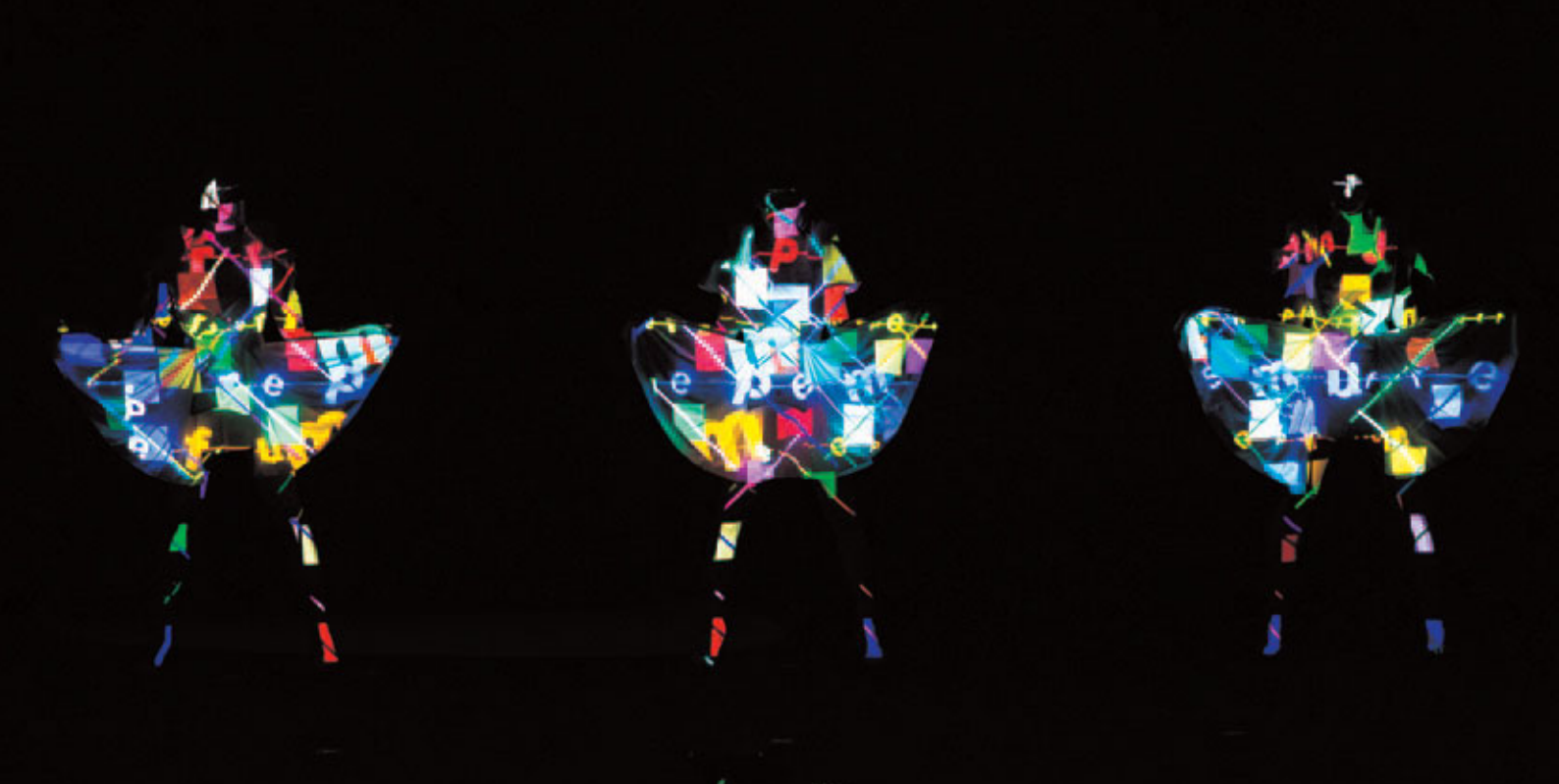
Gauges to measure the diameter and screening plates with holes named "Furui" to separate pearls by size are some of the tools for classification.



Wholesalers come to this hall in Kobe to submit their bids. No lights are installed in the ceiling—evaluation is done only in natural light.



The international port of Kobe. Mount Rokko forms a backdrop to the city, and the sun's rays, reflected back from the mountain slopes, are an ideal form of natural light for handling and evaluating pearls.



Light Brings Technology to Culture

Japanese art and design have begun embracing the high-tech potential of light, adding sparkle to culture. These pages feature some of the marvels of light and visual effects: a techno pop group that tours the world; illumination in delightful old Kyoto; goldfish in an aquarium shaped like folding screens; genetic modification to create clothing that glows in the dark; and a toy that makes 3D projection a snap. Culture in Japan is glittering in new ways, thanks to the marriage of light and technology.

Sound and light, all synced on stage

Japan's techno pop group Perfume wowed an audience from around the globe when they performed at the Cannes Lions International Festival of Creativity in Cannes, France, in June 2013. The festival is one of the biggest for creators working in advertising.

Singing and dancing on the festival stage, the three girls were transformed into a moving canvas of sparkling computer graphics. Infrared cameras and other distance-measuring cameras were used to generate projected images that synced with the girls' movements. Even though the girls were moving about, dancing and singing, the images followed them precisely, with no lag or overlapping. Patterns were sync-projected on their costumes using new techniques, and the images took on a life of their own.

Making this technically possible is a group of projection creators called The Rhizomatiks. They have left the days when images were projected on a two-dimensional surface—instead, they use projection mapping to cast light on three-dimensional forms. With their technology, the images seem to adhere to the performers' bodies and costumes. The group is now bringing their creativity to various fields including music, TV commercials and web design.

A scene from Perfume's performance at an ad festival in Cannes, France. The Rhizomatiks' projection mapping techniques make it possible to sync visual effects with the three girls' movements.

©Cannes Lions, Dentsu Inc., Getty Images



Goldfish swimming in a folding *byobu* screen

Goldfish have been kept as ornamental household “pets” in Japan since the 18th century. More recently, goldfish and folding *byobu* screens came together in a highly unusual show, in an amazing combination of high-tech visual effects. The show took place in Tokyo from July to September 2014. The set, called “Byoburium II,” had hundreds of goldfish swimming in an aquarium that looked like oversized folding screens. “Scenes from nature” was the theme of the visual effects. The aquarium, made from 25-cm thick acrylic glass, was 7 meters wide and 2 meters high. The approximately 600 goldfish and imagery worked well together, creating an entirely new world of beauty.

The producer was art aquarium artist Kimura Hidetomo. After gaining experience at a tropical fish store, he began freelancing, establishing a new commercial niche called “Art Aquarium.” His art blends aquarium displays, art, design and entertainment, using light, visual effects, sound and aroma. His exhibits travel around Japan, stimulating the five senses.

The goldfish starring in the shows are well looked after, and staff make sure the projected light has no impact on their health.

Byoburium II had about 600 goldfish swimming inside. Visual effects were used to make the aquarium resemble folding *byobu* screens. (Photo courtesy of H. I. D. INTERAQITICA Co., Ltd.)



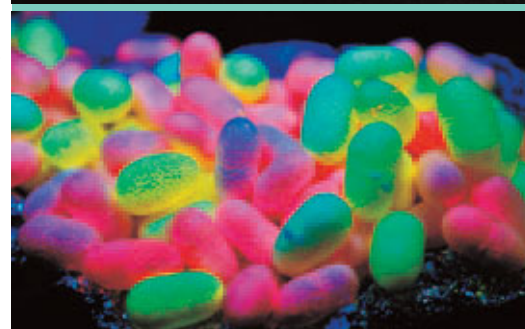
Fluorescent silk

A silk kimono floats in the dark, emitting a pale green light. The threads come from silkworms that were genetically engineered by transplanting genes from fluorescent coral. The technology was developed by a government-affiliated research center in Tsukuba, Ibaraki Prefecture. In the project’s early days, the developers transplanted genes extracted from fluorescent jellyfish, but now they use a coral species called *Galaxea fascicularis*, which gives a brighter effect.

To accomplish all this, the first step is to place a silkworm egg (diameter: about 1 mm) under a microscope. A metal needle is used to open a tiny hole in the egg, and then a nano-diameter glass needle is inserted into the hole to inject the egg with DNA. The DNA has been embedded with fluorescent coral genes. Using this method, the fluorescent coral genes only make their way into some of the cells of the first-generation silk worm, so it cannot make fluorescent silk. However, when the first-generation silkworms breed, the resulting second generation possesses the modified DNA throughout their bodies, so the silk they make includes the fluorescent protein found in the coral species. Threads from their cocoons glow green in the dark if a blue LED light is shone on them. Thread from silkworms embedded with the genes of other coral species will emit a pink or orange light.

Research is moving forward in other directions as well, to discover more new functions of silk—for example, threads containing antibacterial constituents. The hope is that these can one day be used to make fibers useful for regenerative medical treatments and the manufacture of new substances for cosmetics.

Right: Cocoons embedded with coral genes. The development project is the work of the National Institute of Agrobiological Sciences. Above right: When a blue LED light strikes a kimono woven from fluorescent silk, it glows green and pink. (Photos courtesy of the Yomiuri Shimbun)



Small in size, powerful in 3D potential

The box is small enough to rest on the palm of your hand, yet displays 3D images, like a Tokyo night scene. It was released as a fun, user-friendly toy by a major Japanese toy manufacturer in January 2014. The company publicized it as a package deal with gum, although the toy turned out to be the main attraction.

To use it, first get your smartphone to read the QR code printed on the box. That lets you download video data. Next, take off the box cover and remove the parts inside. They include a transparent reflector plate, which you slide into place in the box. Then line up your smartphone (which now has the video data) on the box, with the phone screen down. The video is projected from the smartphone screen and reflected inside the box, to create a kind of 3D action scene.

The first video scene released by the company reproduced a light show that had been presented in Tokyo. The box brings the latest projection technology to the world of toys and it won the industry’s Japan Toy Award 2014 Grand Prize, in the Innovative Toy category. The affordable price boosted its popularity, and the company is now releasing a series of videos, some featuring favorite children’s characters.

This toy projects video images from a smartphone as 3D images. (Photo courtesy of BANDAI Co., Ltd.)



Low-energy lights brighten the night in Kyoto districts

Light and flowers are the themes of the Kyoto Hanatoro event held in Kyoto twice a year, in the early spring and early winter. About 2,500 outdoor lanterns subtly illuminate the white plaster walls and ancient flagstones of the beautiful Higashiyama district. They also light up pathways through bamboo groves and trails along watercourses in the Saga and Arashiyama districts, where nature is at its best. The light for the lanterns comes from LED lamps developed by a local manufacturer of electronic components.

Incandescent bulbs were used when the event began in 2003. The organizers considered using LEDs, but it was difficult because at the time LEDs were too big to fit into the lanterns and they could not throw out light over a wide area like an incandescent bulb. But then a local electronic component manufacturer succeeded in producing a small LED lamp, by mounting the LED chip directly onto a ceramic substrate, and by developing new methods for optimizing the shape and material of the covering. The new lamps project light across an ample 180 degrees, and the light has characteristics just right for the sought-after mood. And of course the distinctive advantage of LEDs—low power consumption—means that the event’s electricity bill is only about one-eighth what it was with incandescent bulbs.



Outdoor lanterns lit by LED lamps illuminate pathways in the Higashiyama district of Kyoto. The LED lamps were developed by ROHM Co., Ltd. (Photo courtesy of Kyoto Hanatoro Promotion Council)

Flat Media Take On Another Dimension

~Symbols to brighten up manga and text~

Girls' manga are good at showing the emotions of their heroines and heroes, and *kawaii* emoticons brighten up email messages.

Collaboration: Miuchi Suzue Bureau, Hakusensha Inc., and Hobunsha Co., Ltd.

Manga, a shining medium

Established expressions of emotion in girls' manga



She holds a flower from someone she thinks about often and smiles... the stars in her eyes and the shining background show her love. Scene from *Garasu no Kamen* (Glass Mask).

Garasu no Kamen (Glass Mask)
©Miuchi Suzue/Hakusensha Inc.



Kitajima Maya was just an ordinary sort of girl until, that is, she blossoms in the world of performing arts and gets swept up in one adventure after another. The story has taken readers up to Volume 49 so far (as of December 2014).

How to make people and objects stand out



The artist uses light to attract our attention to specific objects (above left), and reveal inner emotions (below left). Scenes from *Keion!* (K-ON!).
Keion! (K-ON!). ©kakifly "K-ON!", Hobunsha Co., Ltd.

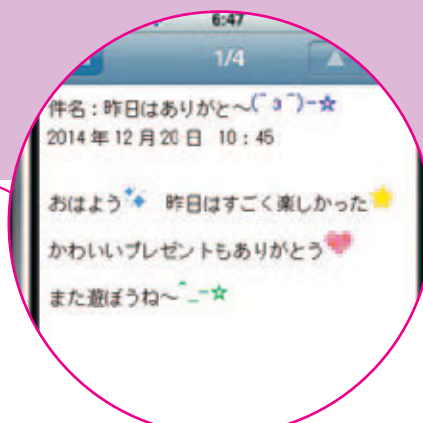


It is senior high school days and the antics of members of a club playing light music make for a heart-warming story. The serialized four-panel manga ran to four volumes.

Emailing in fun and color



Emoji, the Japanese name for emoticons, are becoming a regular part of smartphone email messages. They express feelings like "I had a good time" or "I'm happy about that," with specific symbols and pictures, making for easy communication.



Summer Festivals Sparkle with Color

Summer in Japan is a time of many festivals, some dating from the ancient practice of driving away evil spirits, some focused on Buddhist ceremonies (*o-bon*), a time to honor one's ancestors in mid-August. Decorative *dashi* floats light up the warm night air, and the spirits of the dead are welcomed along with the Shinto gods and the Buddha. The celebrations and rituals, passed down from one generation to the next, add light and color to people's lives, raising excitement to fever pitch in the already hot summer.



Riverside entertainment, now a tradition Sumida River Fireworks Festival, Tokyo

Launching fireworks into the night sky provides a fun time for everyone. The custom is said to have started on the Sumida River in the 18th century in the Edo period, as part of a festival to honor people who died in epidemics, or to pray for protection from evil. That was the beginning of Japan's development of distinctive ways to coordinate colors and express changing moods with fireworks. (Photo courtesy of Aflo)

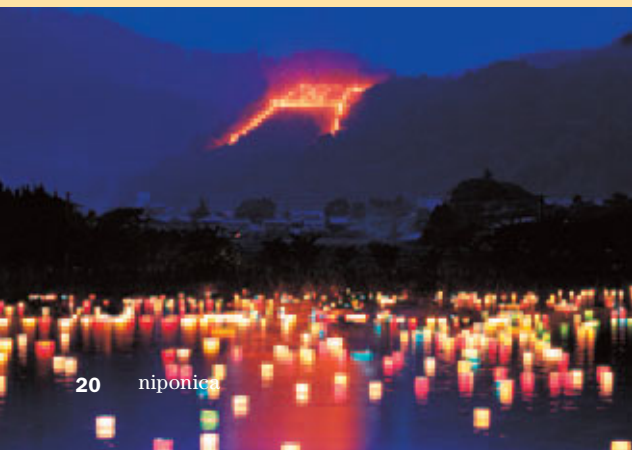


Elegant Imperial Court culture lives on Gion Festival, Kyoto

Yasaka Shrine's annual festival lasts for the entire month of July. *Yamaboko* floats like the one above decorated with gorgeous fabrics come to life in the light of *chochin* lanterns. (Photo courtesy of Aflo)

Flames light the return journey of the dead Gozan Okuri-bi, Kyoto

Every year on the mountain slope, firewood is laid in the shape of a written character or illustration, then set alight. This is a traditional farewell to the souls of the dead who have visited for a short while. The photo shows a conflagration in the shape of a *torii* shrine gate, as seen from Hiro-sawa-no-ike Pond. Below those flames are illuminated lanterns drifting on the pond. Together they create a fantastic floating world. (Photo courtesy of Aflo)



Giant colorful lanterns for mid-summer nights Nebuta Festival, Aomori

Heroes of legend are depicted in many colors on huge paper lanterns. They light up the night streets, pulled on heavy floats during this bold and brash festival. There are many Nebuta festivals in the Tohoku region (the northern part of Japan's biggest island, Honshu)—the best known are in Aomori Prefecture, especially the ones in the cities of Aomori (below) and Goshogawara (right). (Photos courtesy of Aflo)



Fanciful decorations for a city Tanabata Festival, Sendai

Legend tells us that the star-crossed lovers Hiko-boshi and Orihime can get together only once a year. The Tanabata Festival in Sendai City, Miyagi Prefecture, celebrates their annual reunion in a big way for three days, beginning on August 6. People write their wishes on fancy paper strips (*tanzaku*), then tie them to thin bamboo poles. These, together with colorful *washi* paper decorations (*fukinagashi*), become immense streamers decorating the city. (Photo courtesy of pixta)

Dance of the golden lanterns Yamaga Toro Festival, Kumamoto Prefecture

Yamaga City in Kumamoto Prefecture has an old tradition of decorating lanterns during the *o-bon* festival. About 60 years ago at festival time, local women began wearing lanterns on their heads while dancing parade style. The lanterns, covered with gold or silver *washi* paper, are now illuminated with battery-powered LED bulbs.



O-sechi Scrumptious treasures in boxes ring in the New Year

Photos by Kuribayashi Shigeki, Ebato Masashi Collaboration: Akasaka Asada restaurant

It would be hard to imagine the New Year holidays in Japan without festive meals called *o-sechi*. The word *o-sechi* apparently comes from *sechiku*, meals prepared for the gods. *Sechiku* were served at other times of the year as well—to mark a change in the season, to express hope for a bumper harvest, or to wish for success for one's children and grandchildren, and safety in the home. The New Year holidays are most closely associated with *o-sechi*, so the word has come to mean New Year's meals.

When the new year comes, people hope for good luck and future happiness, and they wish for more and more of these good things. *Jubako* boxes are one distinctive feature of *o-sechi*. The food is arranged in these square boxes, and the boxes are then placed one on top of the other, to express this abundance of “more and more.” Also impressive is the wide variety of food, from reconstituted dried delicacies to veggies to seafood. Just about everything is prepared at the end of the year, so it can be enjoyed on January 1 and for several days after. The simmered foods and other dishes are made to stay fresh for quite a while. For certain items—some salty-sweet, some salty, some with a nice tang—the cook aims for bright colors and shiny surfaces. Around 10 varieties of food are placed in the boxes. The ingredients and cooking style may vary slightly, depending on the region and the family, but you are sure to find these three: *kuro-mame*, *date-maki* and *ta-zukuri*.

Kuro-mame are black soybeans cooked with sugar and soy sauce. *Kuro* means “black” and *mame* means “beans.” But *mame* also means “hard-working” or “diligent,” so to eat them is to invite a willingness to work with energy and enthusiasm during the coming year.

Date-maki is an omelet roll made from eggs mixed with minced white fish paste. The word *date* includes the connotation “elegant” or “showy,” and the fancy rolled egg certainly attracts the eye. In the old days, important documents were stored as scrolls, so rolled egg has another connotation as well—the hope for success while studying or training.

Ta-zukuri adds radiance to the display. It is made by frying dried young anchovies, then glazing them with a simmered mixture of sugar, sweet *mirin* sake and soy sauce. Anchovies were once used as a fertilizer for the fields, so in *o-sechi* they represent the hope for a good harvest. (*Ta-zukuri* literally means “making a rice field.”)

In more traditional times, as the end of the year drew near, several days were spent in homes around the country preparing *o-sechi*. Today, though, a growing number of families are buying it at places like department stores or restaurants. But something that has not changed is the spirit behind *o-sechi*—every family's hope, as they celebrate the New Year by eating

the food of good fortune, that they will enjoy happiness throughout the coming year. The vibrant colors and beauty of these boxed culinary treasures represent the hopes of families around the nation.

Top left: Sweet and salty roasted *ta-zukuri* (dried Japanese anchovies). Length: 2 to 3 cm.
Center: *Kuro-mame* (black soybeans), simmered in a sweet sauce with care to prevent the skin from wrinkling. Chefs have been known to sprinkle on a bit of gold powder to add color and glamour.
Right: *Date-maki* omelet roll made from eggs mixed with minced white fish and shrimp.

Below: *O-sechi* cuisine from the high-end restaurant Akasaka Asada, packed tastefully in *jubako* boxes.





1. In Kinosaki, expect to see people strolling about wearing *yukata* and *geta* clogs.
2. Ichinoyu, one of the town's seven public baths.
3. The street from Kinosaki Onsen Station to the hot spring district features restaurants serving crab (a local specialty).
4. Shops selling souvenirs like crab-flavored confections are on the same street.
5. Crab-shaped *monaka* (a tasty treat unique to Japan, made from rice cake dough stuffed with an bean paste)



Kinosaki Onsen Spa is ranked as one of the best hot spring areas in the Kansai (Kobe-Osaka-Kyoto) region. It is in Kinosaki-cho, Toyo'oka City, in northeastern Hyogo Prefecture.

Hot mineral waters first pushed their way to the surface about 1,300 years ago, and they are known for their therapeutic qualities. An illustrious author even set one of his novels here, and people from all walks of life have long had a high regard for Kinosaki Onsen.

The area is renowned for its seven *soto-yu*. A *soto-yu* (literally, "outside hot water") is a public bathing facility that is open to everyone, not managed like a traditional *ryokan* inn, which only serves guests who stay the night. Kinosaki's *soto-yu* baths are located along both sides of the Otani River, which runs through the middle of the town. Each bath has its own story of origins, and a reason to be proud of its acclaimed status. Come find the one that best suits your fancy.

When rambling about, try wearing a *yukata* and *geta*, the "standard attire" for spa goers in Kinosaki. A *yukata* is a simple kimono-like garment worn with little underneath it, while *geta* are wooden clogs with crosswise supports and thongs for the toes. When dusk falls and lights brighten the walkways along the river, the willow trees and arched bridges create their own scenes of beauty. Strolling in *yukata* past the *soto-yu* baths in softly lit surroundings brings a feeling of contentment to the mind and body.

On the banks of the Otani River, there are a number of traditional *ryokan* inns. Some have an illustrious past, having welcomed travelers for decades. Most have *uchi-yu* (inside baths) with interesting decors, providing a different type of experience from the *soto-yu* baths.

When winter comes, the best gastronomical experience is crab, the king of Japanese winter cuisine. Snow crab caught here, called *matsuba-gani*, excel in their ample supply of meat and their subtly sweet taste.

Strolling
Japan
4

Kinosaki and Izushi

Stroll from spa to spa

Photos by Ito Chiharu and Nishiyama Shogo
Maps by Oguro Kenji
Collaboration: Nishimura-ya Honkan and Soba Fuji



Photo: Atago Bridge in Kinosaki



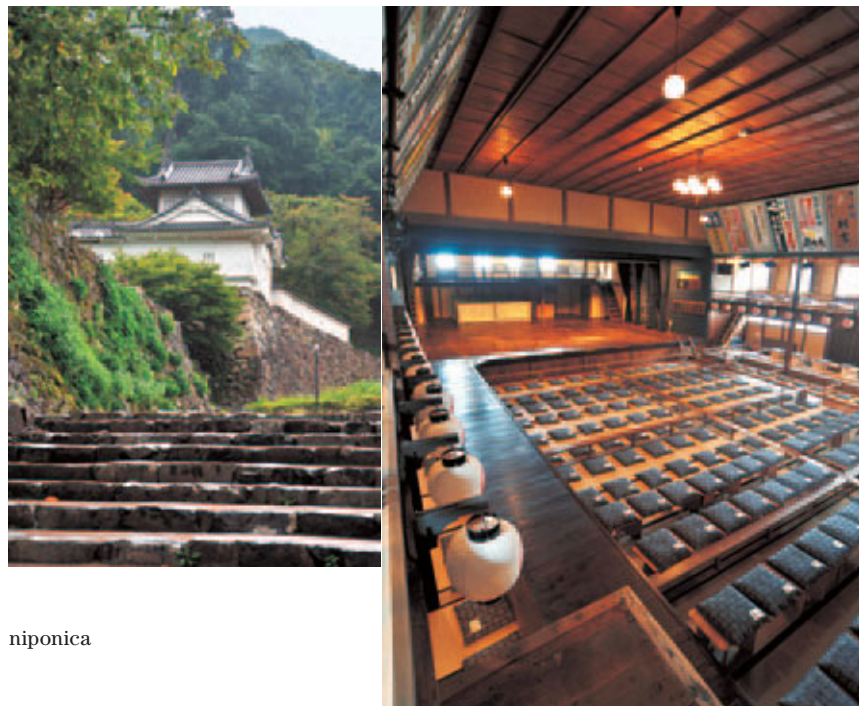
Nishimura-ya Honkan's history goes back 150 years. The inn's hot spring bath and cuisine leave nothing to be desired.
Left: The bathhouse's *hinoki* cypress wood emits a scent bathers find refreshing.
Right: A feast for the eye. Morsels of famed Tajima beef (Kuroge *wagyu* of Hyogo Prefecture), set off nicely with crab.



The lookout at the top of Mount Daishi offers views of Kinosaki and the Sea of Japan. Ride the ropeway to the lookout for seven minutes of excitement in the air.

A favorite daytime pastime in Kinosaki is riding the ropeway to the top of Mount Daishi, where you will find a *soto-yu* called Kono-yu. From the mountaintop lookout are glorious views of the spa town, distant mountain ranges, and the Maruyama River flowing to the Sea of Japan. How each part of this panorama displays itself depends on the season and weather.

While you are in Kinosaki, consider going to Izushi-cho, as well. It is about 40 minutes away by car. Like Kinosaki, the town developed against a backdrop of history and culture. You will want to see the Shinkoro clock tower (a local icon), the ruins of Izushi castle, the residence of a feudal chief retainer who served high-ranking samurai, and the remarkable red-walled *saka-gura*, where saké was once brewed and stored. These and other buildings, dating from



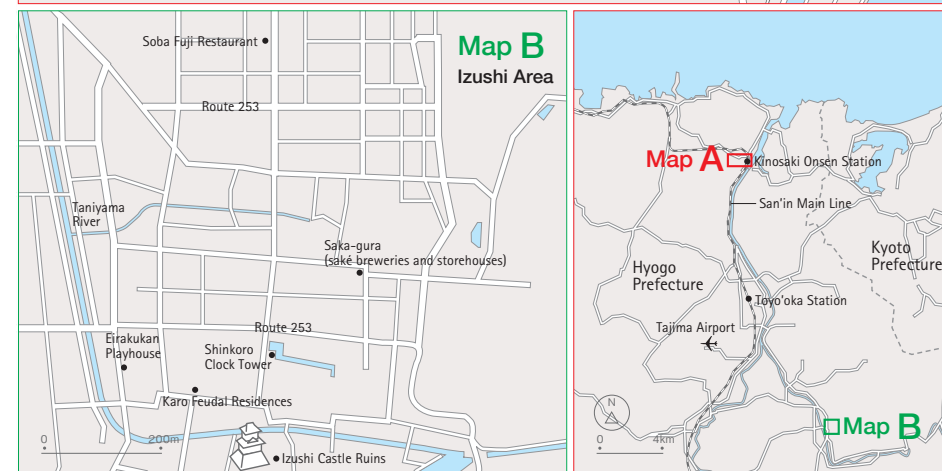
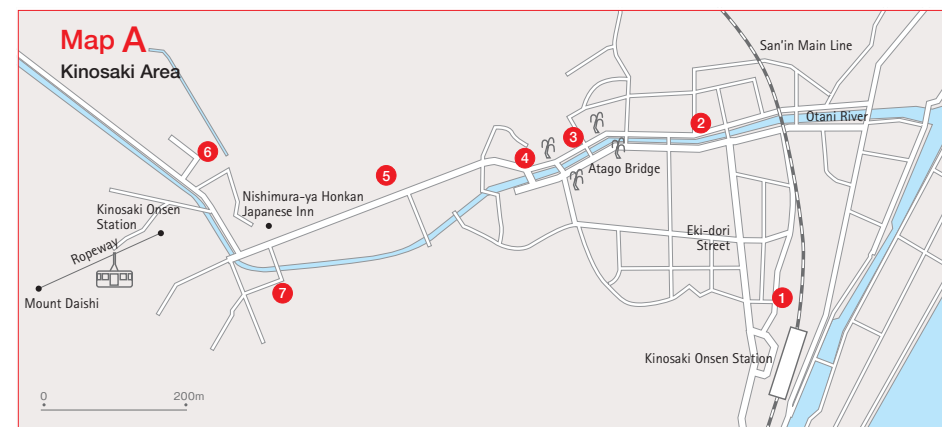
Above: The Shinkoro clock tower is now an icon for the Izushi district. The yesteryear sound of gongs and drums announce the time three times a day.
Far left: Ruins of Izushi Castle. The stone walls have stood guard ever since the castle was built in the 17th century.
Left: Interior of the historic playhouse, Izushi Eirakukan.

the 17th to the 20th centuries, are waiting to be discovered throughout the district. One of them, the Eirakukan Playhouse, was built in 1901 and still offers charm and beauty in the form of kabuki plays, traditional *kyogen* comedies, *rakugo* comic monologues, and more. In the old days towns throughout the country had a playhouse like this one, but few remain.

Sara-soba buckwheat noodles are Izushi's culinary claim to fame. They are served on small, locally made Izushi pottery plates, ready to be dipped in a rich and hearty broth made from bonito fish flakes and *kombu* seaweed. The town has more than 40 *sara-soba* shops. Some offer lessons in making noodles by hand, and others sell confections made from buckwheat flour. Seeing how each place is unique in its own way is another way to enjoy your Izushi adventure.



Above: *Sara-soba* buckwheat noodles, a local specialty of Izushi.
Far left: In Izushi, you may want souvenirs of the highly favored *soba karinto*, a deep-fried confection made from kneaded buckwheat dough.
Left: Try your hand at making buckwheat noodles at Soba Fuji Restaurant.



Kinosaki and Izushi Area Maps

Map A: Kinosaki Area

Seven *soto-yu*
 ① Satono-yu Hot Spring
 ② Jizo-yu Hot Spring
 ③ Yanagi-yu Hot Spring
 ④ Ichino-yu Hot Spring
 ⑤ Goshono-yu Hot Spring
 ⑥ Kono-yu Hot Spring
 ⑦ Mandara-yu Hot Spring

Map B: Izushi Area

●Getting there
 By air, fly from Osaka International Airport (Itami) to Tajima Airport. From there, take a bus (approx. 40 minutes) to Kinosaki Onsen Spa. To get to Izushi from there, take a bus from JR's Toyo'oka Station (approx. 30 minutes).

●For more info
 Nishimura-ya Honkan Inn website:
<http://nishimuraya.ne.jp/honkan>
 Eirakukan Playhouse
 Japanese-language website:
<http://www.izushi-tmo.com/eirakukan/>
 Soba Fuji Japanese-language website:
<http://www.sobafuji.com/>



Edo Kiriko

Photo by Horiguchi Hiroaki

Collaboration: Edo Kiriko Cooperative Association

Kiriko began in the first half of the 19th century and lives on today as a traditional form of Japanese glass art. Patterns engraved as grooves and curves on the glass bend and reflect light, creating a twinkling, glittering show. Cut glass products brought to Japan from the West sparked the imagination of artisans in Edo (now Tokyo) and launched them on their own ventures, using emery powder as an abrasive.

The intricate geometrical lines engraved with minute detail by expert artisans and the vibrant yet transparent colors make Edo Kiriko truly special. When natural light shines through, it takes on a soft gleam, and evening dinner tables are transformed into works of art. Cut glass works made in Japan will add sparkle and enjoyment to your home.

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