

# Chapter 3

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## Pottery and Textiles

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Paul Haimes (haimes@fc.ritsumei.ac.jp)  
Ritsumeikan University  
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**T**HIS chapter offers an overview of pottery and textile design in Japan, emphasizing their historical development, regional diversity, and lasting cultural significance. Although both practices originated from everyday use, they embody sophisticated principles derived from local materials, techniques, and traditions. The chapter first examines pottery, tracing the emergence of regional kiln cultures and the development of distinctive styles throughout Japan, including the impact of international exchange in regions such as Kyushu. Subsequently, it addresses textile design, detailing the spread of cotton production and the evolution of key techniques such as *shibori*, *katazome*, and *yūzen*.

The subsequent discussion illustrates how both pottery and textiles exemplify the close relationship between craft and design in Japan. Despite industrialization and modernization, traditional methods, patterns, and materials continue to influence contemporary practice.

# 1 Pottery in Japan

Pottery traditions in several regions of Japan have developed over centuries, with the history of Japanese pottery extending back to the Jomon era (c. 14,000-300BC).

The major regions of traditional Japanese pottery emerged at different times, developing according to both local resources and cultural demands. Among these, the most enduring and historically significant are known as the Six Ancient Kilns (*Nihon rokkoyō*), which represent the foundations of Japan's ceramic tradition and continue to define regional identities today.

- **Seto** (Aichi Prefecture) – noted from the Kamakura period (1185-1333AD) for its pioneering use of glazes, giving rise to the generic term setomono for pottery.
- **Tokoname** (Aichi Prefecture) – one of the oldest and largest kilns in Japan, active since the Heian period (794-1185AD), famous for large jars and later red-clay teapots.
- **Shigaraki** (Shiga Prefecture) – producing rustic wares from the medieval period, much admired for their natural ash glazes and earthy tones.
- **Tamba** (Hyōgo Prefecture) – with roots going back to the late Heian, known for functional stonewares with subtle firing effects.
- **Echizen** (Fukui Prefecture) – flourishing by the Kamakura period, valued for unglazed jars with natural ash finishes.
- **Bizen** (Okayama Prefecture) – among the most ancient, dating to the late Heian period, and renowned for high-fired, unglazed stoneware relevant to tea culture.<sup>1</sup>

Although these six kilns represent the core of Japan's medieval pottery tradition, new centres emerged in Kyushu through international exchange at the beginning of the Edo period (1603-1868AD), particularly with Korea and China. These interactions gave rise to some of the most influential styles in Japanese ceramics.

## 2 Kyushu pottery

Hasami, in northern Nagasaki Prefecture, and nearby Arita, in Saga Prefecture, are among several towns in Kyushu renowned for Japanese porcelain. Despite their shared history, these towns developed distinct styles that persist today. Hasami ware is noted for its simple, modern designs, while Arita ware is characterized by elaborate blue glazing and Chinese-inspired motifs (Figure 1). The origins of these industries can be traced to the Imjin War (1592-1598AD),

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<sup>1</sup>K. Mori, ed. *Rokukoyō o tazuneru: Seto · Tokoname · Echizen · Shigaraki · Tanba · Bizen*. Visiting the Six Ancient Kilns: Seto, Tokoname, Echizen, Shigaraki, Tanba, Bizen. Tokyo, Japan: Heibonsha, 2019.



Figure 1: Example of Arita ware (artist unknown), from Arita village, Saga. Despite being only 6km from Hasami, Arita ware has maintained much more detailed motifs compared to Hasami ware.

during which Japan invaded Korea and forcibly relocated tens of thousands of people, including many craftsmen and potters.<sup>2</sup> Despite significant challenges, these artisans established kilns throughout western Kyushu. A Korean potter, Ri Sam-Pei (Referred to as “Sanbee Kanagae” in Japanese), is credited with introducing Korean porcelain techniques to Arita and Hasami after discovering kaolin clay deposits at Mount Izumi (Figure 2). Although his historical existence is debated, monuments and shrines across Kyushu continue to honour him and other (unknown) Koreans as the founders of porcelain production in the region.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 2: A monument to the Korean potter Ri Sam-Pei in Arita. The inscription here at the Izumiyama Quarry reads “Porcelain mine discovered by Ri Sam-Pei.”

Korean pottery, characterized by its stark, white, and minimal aesthetic in contrast to the more patterned and colourful Chinese forms, significantly influenced Kyushu’s porcelain, par-

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<sup>2</sup>S. Turnbull. *The Samurai Invasion of Korea 1592-98*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury USA, 2008.

<sup>3</sup>P. Haimés. “Museums, Memory, and the Korean Legacy in Japanese Porcelain Pottery.” In: *Conflict and Empire in East Asia to 1945 in Heritage, Memory, and Museums*. Ritsumeikan University, Kyoto, 2025.

ticularly in present-day Hasami ware.<sup>4</sup> Sōetsu Yanagi of the Mingei movement regarded Korean ceramics as the highest expression of the *muji* (plain, unpatterned) aesthetic, a view shared by Kanjirō Kawai, who travelled to Korea with Yanagi and Shōji Hamada in the 1930s.<sup>5</sup>

Yanagi attributed the tender, sorrowful qualities of Korean crafts to the peninsula’s history of suffering, a theory he termed the “beauty of sorrow” (*hiai no bi*), which later informed the Korean concept of han. Although han theory remains controversial, it has gained some acceptance in Korea, and Yanagi’s perspective continues to influence Japanese discourse on Korean crafts. Notably, Yanagi publicly condemned Japan’s actions in Korea while promoting Korean crafts.<sup>6</sup> The impact of Korean pottery on Kawai was so profound that he temporarily ceased production, resuming around 1949 after wartime disruptions, motivated by a renewed interest in exploring original ceramic expressions.<sup>7</sup>

The influence of Korean craftsmanship is particularly evident in Hasami ware, which features simple, modular forms that contrast with the ornate, Chinese-influenced Arita ware. The stylistic divergence between Hasami and Arita, despite their proximity, reflects their distinct target markets: Hasami potters adopted mass-production techniques to supply affordable goods for daily use, while Arita potters focused on Chinese-style ornamentation to fill a market gap during a decline in Chinese exports in the 1600s.



Figure 3: Today’s Hasami ware continues the minimalist tradition, and a clear split in style between pottery from Hasami and Arita remains clear.

Both towns owe a considerable debt to the Korean artisans who were forcibly relocated to the region, a historical fact often minimized or omitted in western Kyushu’s museums and publications, which frequently use euphemistic language such as “brought back” instead of “abducted.” A more thorough acknowledgement of this history would more accurately reflect

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<sup>4</sup>Haimés, see n. 3.

<sup>5</sup>Soetsu Yanagi. *The Beauty of Everyday Things*. Trans. by Michael Brase. Penguin UK, 2018.

<sup>6</sup>Yanagi, see n. 5.

<sup>7</sup>Haimés, see n. 3.

the profound impact of Korean potters on Kyushu pottery and Japanese design.<sup>8</sup>

### 3 Brief overview of other pottery regions

Other notable pottery centres in Kyushu include Arita (which, as previously noted, contrasts with Hasami ware through its elaborate, Chinese-inspired porcelain), Karatsu in Saga Prefecture (known for stoneware with simple glazes, once favoured for tea ceremony ware), and Satsuma in Kagoshima (recognized for earthenware with crackled glaze and ornate over-painting).



Figure 4: A vase created by Kanjirō Kawai, on display at the museum housed at his former residence. The work shows clear influence from Korean pottery.

Beyond Kyushu, Mashiko in Tochigi became prominent as the home of Shōji Hamada and played a central role in the studio-pottery revival of the early postwar period. In Kyoto, the Higashiyama neighbourhood developed a vibrant pottery scene, largely due to Kanjirō Kawai, whose house still features a public pottery kiln. Each region possesses a distinct history of materials, techniques, and influences, reflecting Japan's regional diversity. Figure 4 shows an example of Kawai's work.

### 4 Kiln designs

Traditional Japanese kilns are wood-fired and constructed on slopes. Two primary designs are prevalent: *Anagama* (a tunnel-shaped kiln) and *Noborigama* (a multi-chambered climbing kiln), both introduced to Japan from China via the Korean peninsula. Bernard Leach, who collaborated closely with members of the *Mingei* movement, described Kanjiro Kawai's *Noborigama*-style kiln as follows:

The sloping yard at the back of the house belonged to Kawai, and upon it stood his steep 'climbing kiln.' The best part of the first two of the eight chambers he kept

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<sup>8</sup>Haimes, see n. 3.



Figure 5: The kiln at the back of Kawai's house in Kyoto, built in the *Noborigama* style.

for his own work. The rest were hired out approximately by the cubic foot to a group of other local potters, each of whom had a locked wooden shed containing their own pots and saggars, for which a rental was paid according to the value of the anticipated resulting firing. This sharing of large kilns was an old custom of Kyoto potters.<sup>9</sup>

Kawai's kiln remains in use in present-day Kyoto and is viewable at the *Kawai Kanjiro Memorial Museum*, located at the house he designed and formerly inhabited (Figure 5). Interest in Japanese pottery remains robust, partly due to the efforts of Yanagi and his associates. While the *Mingei* movement promoted all forms of Japanese folk craft, its association with pottery is especially notable. Two of the movement's three central figures, Hamada and Kawai, along with their close associate Leach, were accomplished potters, which contributed to the movement's prominence in pottery.

## 5 Japanese textile design

Japan has a rich textile tradition, ranging from the distinctive indigenous aesthetics of the *Ainu* in Hokkaidō to the *Ryūkyū* motifs of Okinawa, influenced by neighbouring cultures. While regional traditions remained distinct, the widespread adoption of cotton served as a unifying force, transforming production and consumption across the archipelago. The introduction of a cotton species suited to Japan's climate during the Edō period brought significant social and economic changes and facilitated increased interregional trade.<sup>10</sup>

During the Edō and Meiji periods, rural populations increasingly engaged in textile production, which was often considered more profitable than crop cultivation, though its stabil-

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<sup>9</sup>Bernard Leach. *Beyond East and West: Memoirs, Portraits and Essays*. Faber & Faber, 2012, 210.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas Murray and Virginia Soenksen. *Textiles of Japan: The Thomas Murray Collection*. Foreword by Anna Jackson. Munich: Prestel, 2019, p. 520. ISBN: 978-3-7913-8520-4.

ity was subject to weather conditions. This expansion of trade made cotton products accessible throughout Japan, including remote areas, and individuals across social classes, from merchants to samurai, wore cotton garments. Although textiles made from animal skins, including fish, exist in Japan, this discussion focuses primarily on cotton-based textiles.<sup>11</sup>



Figure 6: Example of a wall hanging, usually referred to as *kakejiku* or *kakemono* (simply meaning “hanging thing”), using the *shibori* technique. Created by Machiko Haimes.

Japanese textile design, similar to Japanese pottery, demonstrates the integration of craft and design, with traditional techniques such as *kasuri* (ikat), *shibori* (tie-dye), and *yūzen* (hand-painted silk) coexisting alongside contemporary reinterpretations. Motifs from kimono patterns, *kamon* (family crests), and regional weaving traditions continue to influence modern graphic and product design, underscoring their enduring impact. Yanagi articulated this principle in his observations on pattern:

Pattern emerges when the excessive has been excised and only the essential remains. There is nothing superfluous; it is speech without words, concise and succinct. What has not yet been fully simplified is not yet a pattern. In that sense, patterns are not a form of decoration but an expression of non-adornment. Yet this simplicity must not be interpreted as rough-hewn elision. In Zen terms, it is ‘an all-inclusive void.’ It includes all and signifies all ... Pattern is movement within quietude, a state in which opposites are one. There is no pattern without quietude; there is no pattern without movement.<sup>12</sup>

The emphasis on simple, understated forms in Japanese patterns reflects a broader aesthetic continuity that connects traditional and modern practices. Patterns historically used in kimono

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<sup>11</sup>Murray and Soenksen, see n. 10.

<sup>12</sup>Yanagi, see n. 5, 74–5.

design and other traditions are evident not only in contemporary kimono but — as we will see in subsequent chapters — also in motifs adopted by graphic designers and interactive designers.

Several principal techniques are employed in Japanese textiles. *Shibori* is an advanced tie-dye method in which cloth is bound, stitched, or folded before dyeing to produce intricate patterns (Figure 6). Each variation yields distinct effects; for example, *itajime* creates geometric shapes, while *kanoko shibori* results in small, dotted patterns.

Another technique, *katazome*, utilizes stencils and rice-paste resist to block areas of cloth from dye, enabling highly repeatable patterns that range from abstract motifs to representations of nature.



Figure 7: Example of a modern *yūkata*, similar to a kimono but much lighter, designed using the *yūzen* method.

A significant development in the seventeenth century was *yūzen*, a freehand painting technique that employs rice-paste resist (*nori-oke*) to delineate areas where dye should not penetrate. This method enables the creation of highly detailed motifs, often depicting seasonal flora, birds, or landscapes. Unlike *shibori* or *katazome*, *yūzen* is notably more pictorial and illustrative (Figure 7).

In objects such as *obi* (belts), it is common for threads to be dyed prior to weaving (Figure ??). Two primary types of dyes are used: plant-based dyes (*shokubutsu senryō*), derived from natural sources such as indigo (*ai*), persimmon (*kaki*), safflower (*beni*), and madder (*shikon*), which produce subtle, layered colours that age gracefully (Figure 9); and synthetic dyes (*kagaku senryō*), introduced in the late nineteenth century, which allow for reproducible colours and significantly expand the range of possible hues.



Figure 8: Cotton being dyed with plant-based indigo dye at a weaver's shop in the Nishijin district of Kyoto.



Figure 9: Cotton being dried after being dyed with indigo and safflower dyes. At a weaver's shop in the Nishijin district of Kyoto.

## 6 Bashofu

Although the discussion here has focused on textiles made from cotton, there is one significant exception worth mentioning: the *bashofu* cloth of Okinawa, which Yanagi referred to as “One of Okinawa’s most remarkable achievements.”<sup>13</sup> This is a material created from the fibre of bananas.

As with other kimono designs in Japan, pattern plays a significant role. Yanagi describes the process of creating *bashofu* as follows:

First the patterns to be used are decided. Then threads are prepared for dyeing by tying them with the skins of the banana plant and threads left over from the weaving. The patterns are those of old, each one of which has been assigned a distinctive name. Dyeing is done in indigo and brown. In olden days yellow and red

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<sup>13</sup>Yanagi, see n. 5, 95.



Figure 10: Example of a *bashofu* kimono, from the Second Shō dynasty — the final dynasty of the Ryukyu Kingdom (1469-1879AD). From the collection of the Tokyo National Museum. Photographer unknown.<sup>15</sup>

were also employed, but now it is only these two ... When the dyeing is finished, the thread is woven on a loom. The woven cloth is then completed by boiling it again.<sup>16</sup>

Yanagi claimed that although this fabric does not receive as much attention as those from the mainland, there were villages (in his lifetime) in the north of Okinawa's main island, Naha, where every woman knew how to make *bashofu*. Nevertheless, today the town of Kijoka on the island's north is the centre of contemporary *bashofu* production. Beyond kimono design, the fabric is now utilized for a number of other products, such as curtains and tablecloths.<sup>17</sup>

## 7 Summary

A joint examination of pottery and textile design is warranted, as both disciplines combine simple materials with sophisticated techniques to produce elegant forms and subtle patterns. This chapter traced the development of pottery traditions, including the Six Ancient Kilns and later centres in Kyushu, as well as textile techniques such as *shibori*, *katazome*, and *yūzen*. Throughout both crafts, traditional techniques, materials, and nature-inspired motifs continue to inform contemporary practice. The enduring interest in these traditions, both within Japan and abroad, is partly attributable to the *Mingei* movement. Together, pottery and textiles form a

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<sup>16</sup>Yanagi, see n. 5, 98–9.

<sup>17</sup>M. Bartok. “Bashū Culture Weaves Its Spell in Kijoka.” In: *The Japan Times* (June 2012). URL: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/life/2012/06/03/travel/bashfu-culture-weaves-its-spell-in-kijoka/>.

foundation of Japanese craft and design and remain central to Japan's cultural identity, and its international appeal.

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