

Turning a New Leaf

A young company from the gold leaf producing heartland of Japan is bringing a modern sheen to this most traditional craft. **Miho Yanagisawa** reports.

Even after several thousand years, gold has never lost its radiance. It is a symbol of holiness, as well as of wealth and prosperity. Gold has enthralled people the world over since before the time of Christ.

In Japan, also, gold has often been used with Buddha statues, buildings and works of art. And Kanazawa is the production center for gold leaf, which has played an important cultural role.

Kaga Domain in the present-day Kanazawa Prefecture was referred to as a millionaire clan, a reflection of its prosperity. Founder Toshiie Maeda ordered the manufacture of gold and silver leaves in 1593, as part of his efforts to promote culture. Since then, gold leaf production has become established in Kanazawa—several difficult periods notwithstanding—as a craft almost unique to the city. Today, as much as 98% of the national production of gold leaves is from Kanazawa.

There are several reasons why gold leaf production became so firmly established in Kanazawa. The greatest factor is that high-quality paper that is regarded as vital for making gold leaf, and the pure water for manufacturing this paper is available in Kanazawa.

Gold leaf is made by expanding a mixture known as *zumi*, made by mix-

ing a minute amount of silver and copper with gold, to several ten-thousandths of a millimeter. Gold is expanded by tucking the *zumi* between Japanese paper in several layers, and then knocking it from above. The quality of gold leaf varies dramatically according to the quality of paper used and the level of technology incorporated in the knocking.

A novice might think that the value would be higher if gold thickness were retained without knocking, because the amount of gold is larger. However, the color, sheen, and the radiance of gold leaf are significantly determined by how uniformly and thinly the leaf is finished. Beauty is achieved only when high-quality Japanese paper is combined with the skills of craftsmen developed over many years.

However, gold leaf production in Kanazawa is not particularly well known, and certainly not to the point where people readily associate Kanazawa with gold leaves. Even among Japanese people themselves, it not well known that the gold leaves used with Kinkaku-ji temple in Kyoto and Toshogu shrine in Nikko, which are designated as World Heritage sites, were made in Kanazawa.

Kanazawa Gold Foil

“Perhaps it is not so well known that gold leaf is being made in Kanazawa because manufacturers have been satisfied that gold leaf is regarded as a

This mural at Narita Airport was created by Hakuichi Co. artisans from the company's own Kanazawa gold and silver leaves.



MIHO YANAGISAWA

Kuniko Asano, CEO of Hakuichi Co.

material used with products such as Japanese lacquer ware and fixtures,” says Kuniko Asano, CEO of Hakuichi Co. Founded only thirty years ago, Hakuichi was not content with the tradition and customs of conventional gold leaf manufacturing, and developed products that went beyond the conventional framework. The company has made the name “Kanazawa Gold Foil” well known.

“Gold foil was designated as a material of traditional crafts by the then Ministry of International Trade and Industry in 1977. Since it is a material, gold leaves are regarded as valuable only when used as a part of famous crafts in various parts of Japan, such as the Nishijin textiles of Kyoto, the Buddhist altars of Mikawa or the folding screens of Shizuoka. None of these products display the name ‘Kanazawa gold leaf.’ As such, ordinary consumers rarely recognized Kanazawa gold leaf and I felt that this was not right,” says Asano.

Asano is married to the fourth son of the owner of a manufacturer of Kanazawa gold leaves, and for some years after her marriage lived the life of a housewife. However, her life changed totally when the oil shock struck in 1973. Recession came, and orders for gold leaves declined drastically. Her husband's company faced a crisis. Asano decided to start making products as “Kanazawa gold leaf crafts,” and began selling them despite lacking any connections.

Asano herself says this was possible because she was a novice, and the company grew because she was not



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shackled to the conventional wisdom of the industry. It was commonly believed among gold leaf manufacturers that gold leaves come off easily so they cannot be used with daily products. But she thought if leaves come off easily, adhesives should be improved, and worked hard to develop a new and unique adhesive. The problem was resolved quite readily, which enabled the company to manufacture daily commodities adorned with gold and silver leaves as well as Western leaves made from brass. Although the company faced difficulties many times, it has grown into Japan's only comprehensive gold leaf manufacturer, owning comprehensive production lines that encompass every step from gold foil manufacturing to processing, while also manufacturing craft products.

Everyday Gold

Although Hakuichi was founded because Asano wanted to help her husband, her two wishes laid the foundation for the company: she wanted people to use gold leaf products more frequently in their daily lives and she wanted the name Kanazawa gold leaf to become better known. She saw no future in gold leaves if they were used only with works of art exhibited in museums.

"The Japanese people must preserve Japanese traditions. This is why we want our customers to take in their hands and use more gold leaf products," she says.

Gold leaves can be processed into any type of curve because it is extremely thin, at just several ten-thousandths of a millimeter. Moreover, its appearance changes in many ways, reflecting the light and colors of its surroundings. Making use of this feature and combining gold leaves with materials such as plastics, wood, metals, glass and ceramics, the range of products that use gold leaves has expanded. The products handled by

Hakuichi are diverse, ranging from daily-use products and interior decorations to foods, cosmetics and building materials.

Today, low-priced gold leaves can be imported from overseas. Hakuichi would achieve higher profits if these leaves were used, but the company has made it a policy not to use them.

"By making products in the town of Kanazawa using gold leaves made locally, we can preserve traditional technologies cultivated over centuries and also revitalize Kanazawa gold leaves. Relying on low-priced imported leaves is against this philosophy. We will never take the easy way out," says Asano. Concerning processing of gold leaves, the company is determined to conduct all processing in-house because outsourcing would only result in a technology drain.



Simultaneously modern and traditional, a selection of Hakuichi Co.'s "Kanazawa Gold Foil" tableware; right, a sample of the company's newly developed durable gold leaf tiles

Beyond Tradition

Another point Asano keeps in mind is to maintain contacts with consumers so as to grasp their needs and reflect them in products. Asano believes this will allow gold leaves to develop into products that are readily familiar to anyone, instead of confining them to the framework of tradition.

With these points in mind, the company developed tiles adorned with gold leaves on the surface in December 2008. Conventionally, gold leaves discolored when baked on tiles. However, the company developed its own technologies for making durable tiles that can be used with utility fa-

cilities, while retaining the radiance of gold leaves. The sheen of gold leaves can also be adjusted, and detailed designs can be rendered with them. Hakuichi has already commercialized easy-to-handle building materials such as sheets and resin boards that use gold leaves. With the new tile product, the company expects demand for gold leaves to widen as they come to be used more frequently in people's daily lives.

Meanwhile, the company created a wall decoration at the passengers' terminal in Narita Airport, the gateway to Japan, that depicts gold fish made from gold and silver leaves swimming leisurely. The wall decoration was completed in February 2008, with the hope of increasing recognition of Kanazawa gold leaves and presenting traditional beauty and technol-

ogy. Commenting on the wall decoration, Sales Department General Manager Shigemi Saito says, "Recently, Japanese taste has been subject to trends in many areas, and many young people are inclined toward Japanese styles. However, Hakuichi has tried to propose Japanese taste that incorporates prevailing trends, instead of just using the conventional Japanese elements. Although

we were thinking of expressing Japan with the wall decoration at Narita Airport, I think we succeeded in creating an image that transcends the conventional image of Japanese taste."

In recent years, Hakuichi was assigned the task of handling part of the interior decoration of a shop in Aoyama, Tokyo of a French chocolate manufacturer. It has also moved into the fashion industry with clothes with gold leaves that can be dry-cleaned. As can be seen, Kanazawa gold leaf has earned increasing recognition worldwide, along with the name Hakuichi. ■

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