

Kanazawa *wagasa* are known for eye-catching, vibrant colors and elaborate, elegant patterns.

FEATURES



Kanazawa Wagasa: The Ultimate Functional Beauty Born from the Local Climate

The city of Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefecture has a significant amount of rainfall throughout the year and heavy snowfall in winter. The main characteristics of the *wagasa* (traditional Japanese umbrellas) made in this region are their sturdiness and beauty. We interviewed the owner of the only remaining shop that specializes in making Kanazawa *wagasa*. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

Photo: Matsuda Wagasa



Matsuda Wagasa was among the collaborators in the creation of exhibits that showcased traditional Japanese crafts at the crafts exhibition Homo Faber held in Italy in 2022.



Left: Matsuda Wagasa, a Japanese umbrella shop with over 127 years of history
Right: A snowy view of an old Kanazawa townscape

The most notable characteristic of Kanazawa *wagasa* is the combination of beauty and outstanding sturdiness that enables them to withstand the weight of rain and snow. At the peak of this craft, there were more than one hundred *wagasa* shops in Kanazawa, but today just one remains: Matsuda Wagasa, established in 1896. The store's third generation owner, Matsuda Shigeki, and his three apprentices perform all operations required to make a Japanese umbrella, except a few special components.

Wagasa making is practiced in various regions throughout Japan. Especially, Kanazawa *wagasa* is known as the features of sturdy, elegant, and magnificent. The local climate is distinguished not only by frequent rains, but also by wet and heavy snowfall, so Kanazawa *wagasa* are made solid enough to withstand the weight of the heavy snow, and yet beautifully crafted to the smallest detail.

The sturdiness of *wagasa* is embodied in the key elements of its structure: the umbrella frame and the Japanese paper (called "*kasagami*") that is attached to it. Made of bamboo, the umbrella frame is crafted strong and solid, with no effort to make it slender. Also, thick Japanese paper is used as *kasagami*. The craftsman attaches the paper to the frame, making sure that it is not too tightly stretched, paying particular attention to the center of the umbrella, where four layers of paper are affixed.

The elegance of *wagasa* is embodied in the geometric *chidori-gake* (zigzag) pattern of variously colored threads woven together on the inside, just above the head, visible when the umbrella is opened (see photo). *Chidori-gake* has a practical purpose of strengthening the inner bamboo frame that supports the umbrella, but it is also designed to be aesthetically pleasing. So, although it serves as reinforcement, *chidori-gake* has decorative design properties and reflects the craftsman's hope that, even on rainy or snowy days, the sight of the beautiful combination of colors on the inside of the *wagasa* will cheer up its owner. The edges are sewn with a process called *koito-gake* which reinforces the umbrella and gives an elegant look to the thread patterns.

So Kanazawa *wagasa* are distinguished by functional beauty born from the practical necessity of creating a reinforced structure tailored to the local climate. At the same time, the elegance and magnificence of the overall design when the umbrella is opened is another attractive feature. "Today, we are not restricted by traditional standards for beauty of form, and proactively collaborate with artists across various fields. For instance, we commission artisans of Kaga Yuzen¹, a technique originally used for kimono, to paint drawings on the umbrellas," says Matsu-moto Yoshiko, an artisan at Matsuda Wagasa. Currently, 90% of all Kanazawa *wagasa* buyers are people residing outside Ishikawa Prefecture and customers from overseas. As a traditional craft, *wagasa* have powerful artistic appeal.

Wagasa are finished by coating the *kasagami* with vegetable oil (perilla oil), which gives the paper unique translucency. When the Kanazawa *wagasa* is opened and viewed from the inside, the patterns painted on the paper right above the *chidori-gake* colorful threads shine through like a stained glass window. Hold it up in the rain to enjoy the soft and warm sound of raindrops that only an umbrella made of sturdy Japanese paper can make. Kanazawa *wagasa* offer a blend of strength and beauty that needs to be seen in person to be truly appreciated. ▮



A *koito-gake* process of sewing the edges in order to reinforce them.



A *chidori-gake* pattern woven with colorful threads (center of the photo). A beautiful world unfolds for those who look up.

1. Kaga Yuzen is a fabric-dyeing technique used mainly in Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture. The technique was established in the mid-17th century. It is characterized by hand-painted realistic patterns of plants and flowers. (For more information, see https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hij/html/202212/202212_05_en.html)