



Imari ware decorating the streets of the town

# HOW IMARI WARE TOOK EUROPE BY STORM

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*Imari ware began shipping from Japan to Europe in the late 17th century. The elegant porcelain thrilled royals and nobles, and was not only used as high-end crockery but also displayed as status symbols in royal palaces. The mountain village of Okawachiyama and its secret kilns is the best place to explore the history of Imari ware.*

THE origins of Japan's prized Imari ware can be traced back four centuries to Kyushu, when a potter discovered the white kaolin clay essential to producing porcelain in the town of Arita. Arita potters were soon making porcelain and shipping it from nearby Imari Port to other parts of Japan. Despite the source, their products became known as Imari ware—or Imari for short—and porcelain from the Edo period (1603-1867) is collectively referred to as Old Imari ware.

The Tokugawa shogunate's policy of isolation in the mid-17th century left Nagasaki as Japan's only point of contact with the outside world. Until that time a great deal of Chinese porcelain was exported to Europe, but during the chaos of China's transition from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty production virtually stopped. The Dutch East India Company, seeking an alternative to China's ceramics, began exporting Imari ware to Europe.

The white porcelain's exquisite beauty and gorgeous painted designs soon made Imari ware highly prized as interior decor in Europe. Aristocrats



In the summer there is an Imari ware windchime festival



Each piece is carefully painted by hand

competed amongst themselves to gain knowledge about the production process. In the 1670s August the Strong, the elector of Saxony and an avid collector of Imari, brought the production methods to his country, which ultimately resulted in the birth of Meissen porcelain. The craze for Orientalism among European nobility and royalty fueled an increase in exports of large vases and jars for decorative purposes starting in the 1680s.

Okawachiyama Village, situated in a mountainous region of Saga Prefecture and ringed by steep, rocky cliffs, boasts a number of Imari ware kilns. “This area became a source of special ceramic ware around three hundred and fifty years ago,” says Takanobu Hara of the Imari Nabeshima Ware Cooperative.

Fifty years after the birth of porcelain in Japan, in fact, Saga’s ruling Nabeshima clan sent all its highly skilled potters to Okawachiyama to produce wares for the clan. The goal was to present the Tokugawa shogunate with the most exquisite porcelain ware. To prevent the potters’ skills from being stolen, the clan built the village up against steep, rocky mountains and set up a checkpoint at the village entrance. The special porcelain made here was called Nabeshima ware, named after the Saga clan lord.

Imari ware still retains three special characteristics of Nabeshima ware: *iro-nabeshima*—which features gorgeous painted designs and is considered the epitome of porcelains—*nabeshima-sometsuke* blue-and-white ware, and *nabeshima-seiji*, made using magnetite found in Okawachiyama.

The village receives around 220,000 visitors a year. They come to explore the thirty pottery kilns and for the idyllic views of the mountain range surrounding the village. While the number of foreign visitors is growing yearly, the number of domestic tourists has declined. “We’re planning



A plate featuring distinctive Imari patterns



A vase decorated with tulips, donated to the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands

to hold events focusing on younger visitors in their twenties and thirties, such as decorating the streets of the town with Imari wind chimes, and to use social media to raise awareness,” explains Hara.

Among the village’s thirty kilns, the oldest goes back to the Edo period, and is run by the nineteenth generation of the same family. Other kilns established in the Meiji period (1868-1912) have been passed down for five or six generations. Many kilns opened in the Showa period (1926-89), all of them inheriting the advanced technical skills and tradition of Nabeshima ware to produce crockery to cater to the needs of modern living.

Since most of these operations are small in scale and privately run, they often do everything from drafting the design to shaping the pottery at the wheel to painting the finished pieces. They make tableware for daily use during the day and create their own art pieces at night. Even today, there are Nabeshima pottery kilns that bear the clan crest and continue to specialize in creating just one kind of item.

Craftspeople who have learned pottery techniques at Saga Prefecture’s Arita Ceramic University (integrated into Saga University in 2016) often head to Okawachiyama after graduation. Carrying on the ethos, technique and tradition from the clan kiln age, the ceramic products they shape retain their allure even in the modern world. ▮