



Kanazawa Gold Leaf

Traditional techniques of gold leaf production have been passed down for over 400 years in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture. Today, Kanazawa-made gold leaf accounts for more than 98% of all the gold leaf produced in Japan.

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GOLD leaf is an alloy of gold and very small amounts of silver or copper that is stretched thin. Since ancient times in Japan, buildings and Buddhist sculptures, as well as household furnishings and accessories have been decorated by covering them with gold leaf. Gold leaf has been used on many historical buildings, such as the Konjikido (Golden Hall) at Chuson-ji Temple in Iwate Prefecture (see pp. 10-11), Kinkaku-ji Temple in Kyoto, and the Yomeimon Gate in Nikko, Tochigi Prefecture (see pp. 12-13). The main production area for this gold leaf is Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture. Today, more than 98% of the gold leaf in Japan is made in Kanazawa.

During the Edo period (early 17th to mid-late 19th century), what is now Kanazawa City was a castle town for the Kaga Clan, the largest clan in Japan at the time. The successive generations of feudal lords in the Kaga Clan encouraged the development of traditional crafts, and they put effort into the production of gold leaf among other major crafts, including

Entsuke gold leaf, pounded and stretched more than 70,000 times (one-ten-thousandth of a millimeter thick)
Photo: Courtesy of Society for the Preservation of Traditional Kanazawa Gold Leaf

fabric dyeing and ceramicsⁱ. Gold leaf production developed centered on the town of Kanazawa and these traditional techniques have been passed down over 400 years.

Yamaga Naohisa, the director of the Ishikawa Prefectural Gold Leaf Commerce and Industrial Cooperative, says, “The connection between Kanazawa and gold runs deep, with the name ‘Kanazawa,’ or ‘marsh of gold,’ given to the area because gold particles were collected upstream from the Saigawa River that flows through the city. Even during the Edo period when gold leaf production was limited to Edo (present-day Tokyo) and Kyoto by the Tokugawa shogunate, gold leaf production continued in secret without pause in Kanazawa, continuing today.”ⁱⁱ

Gold leaf is an alloy containing small amounts of silver or copper that has been thinly stretched out by a rolling mill and cut by a gold leaf artisan who has inherited the traditional techniques. The leaf is then placed between paper and pounded to make the leaf as thin as possible. Gold leaf will not stretch out uniformly if pounded directly, so it must be stretched out while placed between something.

Kanazawa gold leaf is made by beating and stretching one gram of gold down to one square meter (100 cm x 100 cm) with a thickness of just one-ten-thousandth of a millimeter. From that one gram of gold, about 50 sheets of gold leaf can be produced.

Special Japanese *washi* paper is used in *entsuke*, a traditional technique that has been carried out for over 400 years. First, the gold that has been stretched out into sheets with a rolling mill is cut into 5-cm squares. Next, after placing single squares in layers between Japanese washi paper (roughly 21-cm squares), the gold is pounded with a machine until it is one-thousandth of a millimeter in thickness and has spread out over the whole of the paper squares. The surface of the gold becomes smooth and easy to handle after beating it multiple times, and the leaf is then made into uniform 20-cm



Gold leaf, which has been stretched to one-thousandth of a millimeter, is placed in special paper to be further stretched

Photo: Courtesy of Ishikawa Prefectural Tourism League



Soft-serve ice cream covered with gold leaf

Photo: goro/PIXTA

squares. The leaf is then further cut up into small and large squares and rectangles, and work continues until the leaf is one-ten-thousandth of a millimeter in thickness. The gold leaf made in this way is carefully trimmed with a special bamboo tool, one sheet at a time.

To be a gold leaf artisan, one must be highly proficient, skillfully placing the sheets of gold leaf between sheets of paper, carefully beating the gold leaf numerous times, then cooling the hot leaf by dividing it into small portions. This uniquely Kanazawan method of gold leaf production was registered on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2020 as “Traditional skills, techniques and knowledge for the conservation and transmission of wooden architecture in Japan.”

Yamaga says, “Gold leaf production has continued in Kanazawa because it has all the conditions needed, including a highly humid climate that reduces static electricity resources. Since the 1960s, new more efficient techniques have been adopted, but gold leaf made through the traditional *entsuke* technique still has a special sparkle.”

Today, the gold leaf used in the restoration of cultural properties in Japan is almost always from Kanazawa. In recent years, use of gold leaf has found a wide range of uses, including interior and exterior decor, everyday goods, accessories, and food and drink, and demand from abroad is also increasing. In Kanazawa, there are many shops that sell gold leaf in a variety of ways. For example, the soft-serve ice cream wrapped in gold leafⁱⁱⁱ that was sold when the section of the Hokuriku Shinkansen line connecting Tokyo with Kanazawa opened in 2015 was a big hit. In response to the increase in demand, efforts are being taken to train future gold leaf artisans in Ishikawa Prefecture. For instance, an artisan training program has begun funded by Tiffany & Co., a global jewelry brand. These days, Kanazawa gold leaf is drawing attention from all over world. 

ⁱ Today, this is Kaga Yuzen dyeing and Kutani ware ceramics

ⁱⁱ Some say that gold leaf making was suspended for a time during the Edo period but was revived in the Meiji period (1868–1912).

ⁱⁱⁱ See *Highlighting Japan* June 2016, “Striking Gold” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/201606/201606_11_en.html