

Carriage of a JR Kyushu Shinkansen train with gold leaf decorating the walls and sliding door



# Expanding Uses for Gold Leaf

A company in the major gold leaf producing area of Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture, is greatly expanding applications for gold leaf, capturing the imagination of people around the world.

## SUGIYAMA MAMORU

**G**OLD leaf has a long history of use in Japan, mainly for fine arts and crafts. Production of gold leaf<sup>1</sup> has continued in particular in Kanazawa City, Ishikawa Prefecture, where it began more than 450 years ago, and today, Kanazawa-made gold leaf accounts for more than 98% of all the gold leaf produced in Japan. The company Hakuichi, founded in 1975 and relatively new among Kanazawa gold leaf makers, has greatly expanded applications of gold leaf, pursuing their vision with a spirit of taking on challenges. The company's gold leaf is being used in such wide-ranging fields as cosmetics, food, architecture and astronomical technology.

“Our founder's spirit of taking on challenges has become a part of Hakuichi's company culture. In 1987, the company developed mold-cut edible gold leaf, and in 1997, it launched its construction business and industrial tourism, all of which were advanced efforts in the industry,” says the chief of the company's public relations department.

Hakuichi founder Asano Kuniko married a man who produced gold foil for handicrafts and Buddhist altars in Kanazawa, but when their family

A building in the Ginza district of Tokyo with gold leaf patterns on the exterior



All photos: Courtesy of HAKUICHI, Inc.



Wine glasses with a base covered in gold leaf, made in collaboration with Riedel

A perfume bottle covered with gold leaf for the 100th anniversary of Guerlain's Mitsouko fragrance in 2019



business fell on hard times due to the 1973 oil shock, she tried to improve the situation by launching Hakuichi, creating crafts using gold leaf. This was the beginning of the establishment of a new genre of crafts known as Kanazawa foil crafts.

Following this, the company developed its adhesion and coating technology, and even expanded the applications of gold leaf to modern architecture, overcoming the tendency for gold leaf to peel off, which is one of its weaknesses. For example, they have worked on interior decorations using gold leaf at high-profile places in Japan such as Narita Airport, Tokyo Skytree, Toki-no-hiroba Plaza at JR Osaka Station, and Osaka International Airport. They were also commissioned to apply gold leaf decorations to the walls and doors of JR Kyushu Shinkansen trains, after meeting the strict standards of fire resistance and durability required of transportation systems.


Evidence of the new potential of Hakuichi's gold leaf can be found in

A clock covered with gold leaf at the Toki-no-hiroba Plaza in JR Osaka Station



its use in 2014 in the radio telescope at the Nobeyama Radio Observatory in Nagano Prefecture, a leading center of astronomical research in Japan. Over the course of ten days, three experienced Hakuichi artisans applied thicker-than-normal gold leaf (3/100 of a millimeter) to the reflecting mirror, the part of the radio telescope (2.5 x 3.5 meters) that catches faint radio waves from space. This increased observational efficiency by 15%.

Since then, the company's gold leaf has been used in the design of wine glasses with golden bases in collaboration with the well known Austrian glass manufacturer Riedel (2016) and on limited edition 100th anniversary bottles of Mitsouko (2019), the flagship perfume of fragrance house Guerlain. "These collaborations were made possible by actively publicizing the challenges we've taken on," says the chief of the company's public relations department. In 2017, a Hakuichi product was selected as a gift for the President of the United States for the Japan-US summit.

Today, Hakuichi is a front-runner among gold leaf manufacturers and continues to drive the traditional industry of Kanazawa gold leaf as a global brand. 

<sup>i</sup> See *Highlighting Japan* October 2022, "Kanazawa Gold Leaf" [https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202210/202210\\_06\\_en.html](https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202210/202210_06_en.html)