



The phrase, *tojite take, hiraite hana* (“closed, like bamboo; open, like a flower”) expresses the beauty of the wagasa.

Photo: Wagasa CASA

## Gifu City: Japan’s Largest Manufacturer of *Wagasa*

Gifu City in Gifu prefecture remains Japan’s largest manufacturer of traditional Japanese *wagasa* umbrellas. We asked the Gifu Wagasa Association about the traditional manufacturing process handed down since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the region’s history as an umbrella making area. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

While umbrella making (currently called Gifu *wagasa*) in the city of Gifu dates back to the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it did not develop on a significant scale until after the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It is said that when Nagai Naonobu became the feudal lord of the Kano domain, which was based in Gifu, he encouraged lower-ranking samurai to engage in umbrella making to help pay their living expenses. Since that time, the area that included the Kano domain (today’s Gifu Prefecture) has been blessed with the materials needed for umbrella making, including fine-quality bamboo, *washi*,<sup>1</sup> vegetable oil, *kakishibu*,<sup>2</sup> and glue. Moreover, since the Nagara River and its well-developed water transportation system made distribution by ship convenient, umbrella making went beyond a side job for samurai, eventually becoming a regional trade. Before long, it was a stable,

flourishing industry, as demand for umbrellas rose in the large cities of the day like Edo (today’s Tokyo) and Osaka. As a result, the present-day Kano district in the city of Gifu and the surrounding areas became the center of one of Japan’s most distinguished *wagasa* making regions, through to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The golden age for *wagasa* production was after World War II, around 1950, when it is said that annual production exceeded 10 million umbrellas. In the 19<sup>th</sup>



The water transportation provided by the Nagara River that cuts through the city of Gifu has been the key to the development of the *wagasa* industry here.

Photo: PKTA



Photo: Wagasa CASA

Left: Sakura Wagasa, created by young artisan Kawai Mikiko, was given as a gift to a female actor overseas.

Center: Gifu *wagasa* specialty shop Wagasa CASA actively offers ideas for coordinating *wagasa* with Western clothing.

Right: Wagasa CASA offers coordination ideas for kimono as well, such as retro-looking kimono with a green *wagasa*

century, Japan relied on imports for Western-style umbrellas, but these gradually became to be produced domestically, and their popularity exploded with the postwar development of folding umbrellas. The subsequent appearance of cheap polyester umbrellas further drove this popularization. As a result, Gifu *wagasa* production fell sharply, but the area remains a representative *wagasa* making region of Japan, with most of the *wagasa* used in Japanese *buyo* dancing and other entertainment said to be manufactured here.

Gifu *wagasa* developed through a system in which wholesalers managed the artisans and divided umbrella making labor into over 100 processes, each of which was handled by a specialist, thereby achieving both efficiency and minute detail in production. This system was especially proficient at making *hosomono* (thin umbrellas), which are thin and compact when folded. *Hosomono* form slender, slim silhouettes when closed, and are often used as *janome* (snake-eye) *wagasa* for the performing arts, as well as umbrellas for traditional Japanese *buyo* dancing, and parasols.

Gifu *wagasa* have been valued traditionally for their slenderness, delicacy, and beauty, but another defining characteristic is the high quality of their elaborately formed structural design. When actually opening the umbrella, the user is fascinated by the delicate beauty of the geometric patterns created by the threads sewn into the inside, as well as the beauty of the light streaming in through the *washi* paper. In addition, the pitter patter of the rain, the gentle

fragrance of the vegetable oil applied for water resistance, and the feel of the bamboo when taken in the hand offer delightful sensations that only craftwork made from natural materials can provide.

In addition, the Kawara district along the Nagara River in the city of Gifu is attracting attention as a tourist destination with its traditional wooden buildings that line the area and lasting remnants of the old townscape. Gifu *wagasa* specialty shops have also opened in recent years, and are communicating the appeal of Gifu *wagasa* as traditional handicrafts. The *Sakura Wagasa* (cherry blossom umbrella), which was made by a young Gifu *wagasa* artisan, caught many eyes on social media, and was also used for promoting an overseas movie. While strolling through the traditional streets, you may want to look for an attractive Gifu *wagasa* to use as a parasol for the hot season. ■

1. *Washi* is Japan's unique paper, made by hand from paper mulberry, oriental paper bush, and other plant materials that are native to Japan.
2. Juice squeezed from unripe persimmons, which is then fermented. It is used as a dye, strengthener and preservative for paper, wood, and hemp.
3. The *janomegasa* is a small type of *wagasa* characterized by its rounded ring pattern. The snake's eye pattern symbolizes the eye of a snake, messenger of a god, and was also meant to ward off evil.



Photo: Wagasa CASA

Kawaramachi Town in the city of Gifu is a sightseeing spot where the old town scenery remains.