

# The Nebuta Festival: Aomori's Summer Spectacle

The Nebuta Festival is held in Aomori Prefecture every year over the six days from August 2 to 7. Here we introduce the features of this leading Japanese summer festival, which attracts spectators from all over the country. (Text: Morohashi Kumiko)



The Nebuta Grand Prize of the 2022 festival went to the Ryuoh (Dragon King) *nebuta* featuring the Hachidai Ryuoh (eight deities that protect the Dharma) that are enshrined in the Asamushi district of the city of Aomori.

The Nebuta Festival is held during the height of summer every August 2-7 in Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost prefecture on Japan's main island of Honshu. Held chiefly in Aomori City and its surrounding areas, it is one of Japan's most famous summer festivals, attracting a total of 1.05 million tourists (in 2022) during its six-day duration.

The festival is most known for its enormous floats, called *nebuta*. According to the Aomori Nebuta Festival Executive Committee office, *nebuta* are built within size restrictions of up to 9 meters wide, 7 meters deep, and 5 meters high including the float support, and the actual floats will be about that size. Each *nebuta* weights 4 tons in total. In 1980, the Aomori Nebuta Festival was designated one of the Important Intangible Folk Cultural

Properties of Japan.

The spectacular parade of *nebuta* through the streets at night is one of the festival's highlights. The *nebuta* parade is joined by dancers called *haneto* (meaning "jumpers" in Japanese), who dance wildly to the beat of taiko drums, creating an extremely fascinating and enthusiastic atmosphere.

Some say the Nebuta Festival originated as a variation of the Toro Nagashi<sup>1</sup> lantern floating festival, but its origin is actually uncertain. It is believed that *nebuta* festivals like the present style based on kabuki and other themes first appeared in the 1800s. The size of the *nebuta* floats began to expand after the end of World War II in 1945, becoming revitalized and catching the big tourism wave, leading to its growth into the



A musical ensemble playing traditional Japanese instruments such as the *yokobue* (transverse flute) marches along with the *nebuta*.

giant it is today.

*Nebuta* are newly built every year, with production usually beginning around May. “*Nebuta* motifs are conceived by *nebuta* makers called *nebuta-shi*, who mostly use Japanese folk myths or historical stories from overseas as their subject matter. *Nebuta-shi* need to do a lot of background research, so they study a variety of documents and other materials. Once the subject matter is decided, they formulate a concept and put together a rough sketch.”

Once the rough sketch is finished, a tent is put up on the shore for actual production. Each participating group erects a huge tent-like structure around 12 meters wide, 12 meters deep, and 8 or 9 meters high.


“They build a framework of wood and wire in the tent, and paste Japanese *washi* paper on it to give shape to the *nebuta*. The sight of 40 to 50 people working together to put the *nebuta* onto the float support is quite a spectacle.”

It takes dozens of people to pull a completed *nebuta* through the streets. At night, the floats are lit up by as

many as 1,000 pieces of lighting equipment installed inside them. This sensational scenery makes the *Nebuta* Festival particularly powerful and spectacular among traditional Japanese festivals, and greatly inspires those who see it.

Last year, due to COVID-19 measures, advance applications were required for a chance to be selected as a *haneto*, but this year participation is open to everyone as before. So, the main attraction of this year’s festival is not only of course the fun of watching the *nebuta*, but is also attractive to participate freely as a *haneto*.

“Free participation means that you can join any team as long as you prepare a white *yukata* with decorations. They’ll be on sale at the festival site, or you can rent one in advance.”

We hope you’ll get a chance to enjoy the Aomori *Nebuta* Festival in person, whether only to watch it or also to take part in it. 

1. A Japanese custom observed in the summer on the last night of the Obon Festival, in which a series of memorial events are held for ancestral spirits. Small lanterns are lit and floated into rivers and into the sea to send off the ancestral spirits.



Left: Anyone can participate in the festival as a *haneto* as long as they wear a costume.

Above right: A *nebuta* decorated with the motif of Zhong Kui, a Taoist deity said to ward off evil spirits.

Below right: A *nebuta* based on Okinawan legends