

Nambu Tekki Ironware 1st Pick on Japan's Traditional Craftwork List

By Toshimasa YOKOZAWA

Origin of Nambu Ironware

Japanese *daimyo*, feudal lords who controlled their respective domains across the country, considered *sado*, or tea ceremony, was the indispensable element of culture for them to have in the early part of the Edo period (1603-1867). Nambu Shigenao, second lord of the Nambu clan – which controlled today's Iwate Prefecture in northeastern Japan – had a profound knowledge of *sado* and invited Koizumi Goroshichi Kiyoyuki from Kyoto as a teakettle caster in 1659 and employed him as his dominion's maker of kettles, among other things.

It is said that a small kettle with a spout and a handle that Koizumi made on a trial basis was the beginning of "Nambu tekki" cast-iron ware. His experimental creation spread out into the public in an instant and led to the completion of what is known today as the global brand "Nambu ironware" featuring a thin and light body. In 1975, the Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI, now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry or METI) designated it as the nation's first "traditional craftwork."



Production of Nambu ironware goes through many processes requiring experienced craftsmanship.



Photos: Kamasada

Flavor Grows As Used Long

The casting technology that made the production of Nambu ironware possible has a long history as the manufacturing process called *sogata* in Japanese that has continued since the medieval period. Under this method, a casting mold is first made by baking sand and clay. After the mold is completed, dissolved iron is poured into it. Manufactured goods coming out of this method are represented by a Buddhist temple bells of the Middle Ages. However, there are not many craftsmen who have had the technology handed down to them. Morioka City in Iwate Prefecture is a very precious production site for retaining the technology, even from a global standpoint. Together with fine-quality iron indispensable to the manufacturing method, the city is blessed with ample charcoal and sand suitable for a mold. It has developed the technique, design and quality of products by leaps and bounds in early modern times.

Iron is a natural material that becomes rusty over time and reverts to the soil. However, we see vintage iron kettles made several hundred years ago still being used at present. This is because their successive owners have paid particular attention to them while in use.

Also, hot water from a kettle is drinkable from the time it is used for the first time, but it takes time for it to demonstrate its genuine charms. Scale is formed in a kettle, allowing the taste of hot water to become mellow while the inner and outer parts of the kettle change moment by moment until exterior iron begins to release stable flavor. Thus, the more iron is used, the more flavor it produces to allow drinkers to enjoy sweet hot water.

Teakettle Caster at "Kamasada" Workshop

Morioka retains the appearance of a castle town even to this day. A Nambu iron kettle craftsman working in the workshop of Kamasada appeared on a serial TV drama titled "*Donto Hare*" (*Very Fine!*) broadcast by Japan Broadcasting Corp. (NHK) in 2008. Kamasada's iron kettles are made by hand, each undergoing 40 manufacturing steps according to traditional skills. In addition to carefully arranged iron compounding, Kamasada artisans still safeguard the centuries-old Nambu iron kettle production process known as *yakinuki* to prevent iron from getting rusty. As a traditional ballad goes, "there is no *kanake* (metallic taste) in Nambu kettles." These iron teapots bring about no



Outer appearance of time-honored ironware workshop Kamasada

metallic taste as they go through the *yakinuki* process in which they are tossed into an about 900-degree C charcoal fire and baked to create an oxidized membrane in the interior. The membrane is called “black rust” (Fe₃O₄), which plays a part in keeping red rust and metallic tastes from forming. The reason for refraining from touching the kettle’s interior is to keep the oxidized membrane from being damaged.

Tasty hot water comes from layers of scale overlapping one another on a membrane of black rust to build a strong layer while, at the same time, a minute quantity of iron dissolves to generate delicious hot water. In recent years, iron kettles are growing in popularity among young health-conscious women who consider that iron favorably influences the body. It is because iron is properly dissolved in hot water boiled in an iron kettle and gives a fine flavor when used for coffee, black or green tea or milk for babies, and simultaneously supplies iron (bivalent iron) more easily absorbable by the body than the iron included in other foodstuffs.

A distinctive feature of the Nambu kettle is the subdued blackish color of its outer surface brought about in the final stage of production by the application of *urushi* lacquer. The more the iron kettle is used, the greater taste and luster it produces.

Method Protected, Design Changed

Kamasada is a long-established Nambu ironware manufacturer in existence since the Meiji era (1868-1912), with its white-walled storehouse maintaining old-time elegance and befitting a row of stores and houses that give a feeling of the unspectacular lapse of time.

It has continued to date since it was first operated by its founder Gonjiro Miya (born in 1843). Its contemporary head is third-generation leader Nobuho Miya. He lived in northern Europe following the completion of his study at the graduate school of the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music (known today as the Tokyo University of the Arts). His works are simple but substantial, novel and beautiful and well known abroad, including in the United States and Europe. Miya was involved in the restoration and reproduction of the ornamental tops of the posts of Chusonji Temple’s Konjikido (golden hall) in Iwate Prefecture in 1989. He received many awards, including a grand prize at Iwate Prefecture’s *sado* arts and crafts exhibition in 1996. He incorporated innovative ideas into the manufacture of ironware exhibited at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 2003.



The manufacturing process always exposes craftsmen to danger.

In the Kamasada store, every possible ironware product related to livelihood is on display, including old teakettles, iron kettles, wind bells, flower containers, ashtrays, pans, rice cookers and frying pans. The store overflows with beautiful ironware with a touch of austere elegant black texture. All products are backed by high technology based on tradition and simple but novel designs that do not fade with times.

“To inherit traditional craftwork is to precisely protect and strengthen it, and leave it for posterity,” says Miya. “And we must break established designs because ‘things,’ too, must undergo change to match changing times.” Siding with both users and makers, he then imagines how to craft his products. Ironware that transcends time comes into being only from those master craftsmen who are constantly making progress.

Craftsmen’s Skills Being Inherited

Nambu ironware began to develop as a local industry when the Nambu Metal Casting Research Institute was established at the foot of Mt. Atago in 1914 under the leadership of Toshiatsu Nambu. The industry then made rapid development following the formation of the institute, which was initially headed by Somei Matsushashi.

A precursor to the Nambu Ironware Cooperative was set up in 1949. A total of 13 workshops belong to the cooperative now. A joint workshop was abolished in May 1986 and the cooperative’s office and four workshops were established in “Morioka Tezukuri Mura” (village of hand-made manufacturing) in Tsunagi, Morioka City. Visitors can enjoy making ironware themselves by hand.

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