

# Edo Kiriko

## – Beauty of the Japanese Spirit –

By *Onda Hideo*

IT is no exaggeration to say that cut glass in Japan dates back as far as the ancient *haku-ruriwan*, a white glass bowl stored in the Shosoin Treasure House in Nara Prefecture (Imperial Repository). The contact with foreign cut glasses, trade with the outside world, the arrival of foreign religions and the influx of foreign wisdom throughout Japan's history have all contributed to creating the foundation of the traditional glass craft of *Edo Kiriko* as we know it today.

Commodore Matthew Perry was amazed at a cut glass lagena presented by Kagaya Kyubei, a glass artisan, when he arrived in Japan with a squadron of black ships in 1853. Perry is said to have praised the fact that the people of a supposedly uncivilized country were capable of producing such a marvelous piece of glass art. The superb cut glass techniques that impressed Perry have been carried on through the years by many craftsmen who have remained faithful to the long tradition of Edo Kiriko.

Satsuma (the present Kagoshima Prefecture) feudal lord, Shimazu Nariakira, the manufacture of Satsuma Kiriko became an official business of the domain and an art object that made use of the best research and development of the day. Satsuma Kiriko has a design cut into the colored thick overlay (a colored layer on top of the transparent glass), and the copper-red glass is particularly famous. However, with the death of Nariakira in 1858 and the destruction of the glass factory in the British Bombardment of Kagoshima, or the Anglo-Satsuma War in 1863, the 20 some years of history of the Satsuma Kiriko cut glass was brought to an end. The style underwent a revival in the early Showa Period, and today the focus remains on works that are faithful to the original approach.

In contrast, Edo Kiriko was produced by ordinary people working under normal business pressures. Its characteristic design was *nanako*, or fish scales. The *nanako* design is a

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The history of Edo Kiriko goes back to 1834 when Kagaya Kyubei used emery powder to carve designs on glass in his shop in Odenma-cho in Edo (the present Tokyo). Kagaya's *hikifuda* (one-sheet catalogue) that still exists today, features a wide range of cut glass products. The word "kiriko" was first used as a name for cut glass at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and there is a description stating, "a table-grade salt caster made of glass kiriko" in *Ransetsu Benkan* published in 1788. The *Kojien*, one of the well-known Japanese dictionaries, explains that kiriko has two meanings: (1) a shape made by cutting the edges of a square object off at an angle; and (2) cut glass.

The Edo Kiriko made in the late Edo period are still preserved as the traditional craft of that age along with *Satsuma Kiriko* products. However, distinct differences exist in their origin and the development of their respective manufacturing styles. Thanks to the support of the

typical Edo Kiriko pattern, but the same design is also often featured in Britain and Ireland during the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Considering that many British and Irish products started to appear in Japan at the time, it is likely that the roots of Edo Kiriko designs actually came from there. The materials used in Edo Kiriko all had a high lead content with very little use of colored overlays, and the color was mainly a slight yellow-green tint in clear glass. In addition to *nanako*, there are others designs such as *kagome* (basket weave), *asa-no-ha* (hemp leaf), *koshi* (lattice) and *kiku* (chrysanthemum) that exist in their own right, as well as in combinations. The political upheaval of the Meiji Restoration did not affect Edo Kiriko, and as part of its drive to actively introduce Western things to Meiji Japan, the Japanese government specified Shinagawa Glassworks as a model factory in 1876 to adopt the latest European glass technologies. With regard to cut glass, in 1882 the skills of British engraver

Emmanuel Hauptmann were passed on to Japanese craftsmen, and this helped to establish the technical foundation for today's Edo Kiriko.

Soda glass became the predominant type in the Meiji Period (1868-1912), and in 1921 crystal glass (high quality lead glass) was introduced in Japan. Clear and colorless crystal glass has a high refractive index for light waves. It has a beautiful surface and projects a sense of weight. Around the same time, research related to cut glass techniques also progressed, with the successful development of the acid washing method needed to polish crystal glass.

As the Showa Period (1926-1989) began, the number of glass factories gradually increased, bringing a dramatic increase in the range and spread of cut glass products. If we take a look at the kinds of products, we find everything from simple flower-patterned tumblers to superb crystal or color overlay vases or tumbler sets and berry sets (fruit bowls) that have genuine value as craft items. Mass production of overlay glass and improvements in the quality of crystal and plain glass were the important factors in the rise of the prominence of cut glass.

detail in the Edo Kiriko traditional designs of the kiku, kagome and nanako patterns mentioned above, as well as the *kumo-no-su* (spider web) and *shippo* (cloisonné) patterns, further highlighting their artistic qualities. Advances in tools and machinery aside, Kiriko cut glass is still made by hand. The experience of the craftsman is still an essential ingredient, as are instincts and artistic sense. That each artisan's style is different also reflects the fact that Edo Kiriko is very much the work of master craftsmen.

Glass has been with us since the birth of humankind, just like pottery. Both serve not only as vessels and utensils in our everyday lives, but also as a source of beauty and comfort. I hope each Japanese Edo Kiriko piece becomes a world-class work of art – the manifestation of the skills of craftsmen passed down over 200 years, putting people in touch with the Japanese soul. Challenging the limits of technique may be the unique mission of Edo Kiriko in the world's cut glass industry. **JS**

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After World War II, various aspects of the Western lifestyle flooded into Japan, and in particular, the American lifestyle brought the bright primary colors boldly used in women's clothing and for cars. The subdued colors of the pre-war period and the staid, khaki-centered hues of the wartime years all but disappeared.

This changing sense of color also manifested itself in glass goods, and with the advent of machine manufacturing, they were mass-produced in a previously unheard of range of colors, which, of course, had a major impact on the cut glass industry.

From around 1975, various diamond wheels (metal disks with diamond powder on the outer edge) appeared. The shape of the edges and the roughness of the powder depend on the cut glass designs. These keen-edged tools brought out the fine

