

## Kanazawa — Precious Traditions

Story and photo by Bill Tingey

Kyoto is not the only place where the characteristic signature of the past can be found and enjoyed in Japan. Roughly halfway between Kyoto and the major Japan Sea port of Niigata, for example, is the city of Kanazawa. Here there is a wealth of tradition, quality and interest that has been centuries in the making.

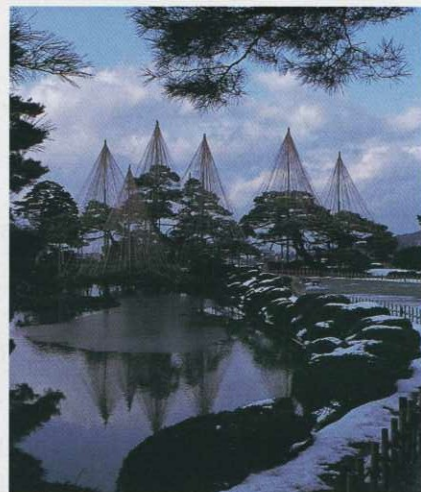
The history of the city really began in the middle of the 16th century when the Buddhist Ikko sect established a religious administration in what had up until then been little more than a village. The community grew with the presence of the sect until this powerful religious group was finally overthrown in 1583 by Maeda Toshiie, a retainer of Oda Nobunaga who had been entrusted with "the pacification of the nation" by the Emperor.

The Maeda family subsequently made Kanazawa its home for the next 300 years, a fact which influenced so much that happened in the city. The extensive scenic Kenrokuen gardens, for instance, were laid out in 1819 by Lord Maeda Narihiro. Covering an area of some 10 hectares, the gardens combine a number of characteristic elements in a particularly dynamic way and on a scale unrivalled in Japan. The name, Kenrokuen, bears witness to the fact that the gardens have six main features — vastness, seclusion, ingenuity, venerability, a sense of coolness derived from water and vistas. A walk through Kenrokuen at almost any time of the year is a delight but it is in winter that the ancient Karasaki pine beside the Kasumigaike lake is shrouded in a protective canopy of ropes. Each year before the onset of winter, poles are erected amongst the twisted branches of this 170-year-old black pine and rice-straw ropes are hung from their tops to form a number of umbrella-like veils, which help to prevent damage from

settling snow. These rope canopies are topped off with what appear to be images of birds. Although in private gardens a gardener may fashion such rope ends into such things as a crane, at Kenrokuen the bird-like form is simply a result of the way the rope-ends are tied. The total effect, however, is as much a part of the winter scene in Kenrokuen as the snow and has, over the years, become as much a feature of the gardens as the pine itself.

Close by Kenrokuen is the place from which the name Kanazawa is said to derive. A thousand years ago, an Imohori Gotoro who made a living from pulling potatoes discovered gold when washing his crop in a stream. It was this event that gave the place its name, Kanazawa, quite literally "gold valley."

Kanazawa, in fact, has always been closely associated with gold, mostly in the form of gold leaf. In simple terms, the making of gold leaf involves beating a piece of gold containing small proportions of silver and copper until it is wafer thin, and then beating a number of thin leaves together between sheets of very fine Japanese



*Kenrokuen's Karasaki pine with its veils is part of the winter scene in Kanazawa*

paper. The finished product is so thin that it will float away on a person's breath, and measures between 0.1 and 0.2 microns thick. This means that held up to the light faint images can be seen through this glittering film.

Sparkling in quite a different way is the display of fish at the Omicho market. It is just another expression of the wealth of this city that has managed to gracefully retain its traditions in the hubbub of the modern world.



*In cooperation with the  
JAPAN TRADITIONAL  
CRAFT CENTER*

Fly to Komatsu airport and take a bus to Kanazawa or get there by train. See gold leaf at the Kanazawa Yasue Gold Leaf Museum close to the main station (076-233-1502). Many of the local crafts can be seen and purchased at the Ishikawa Prefectural Showrooms "Kanko Bussankan" near Kenrokuen (076-222-7788). Go to the Japan Traditional Craft Center, Minami Aoyama, Tokyo (03-3403-2460), to see or buy crafts from all over Japan.

