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A journey through Japan's traditional craft workshops

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Shokunin proudly features 25 intimate artisan profiles, from family-run ceramic studios in Fukuoka, to a female-focused glass studio in Chiba and ceremonial lantern-makers practicing for more than 50 years in Tohoku.


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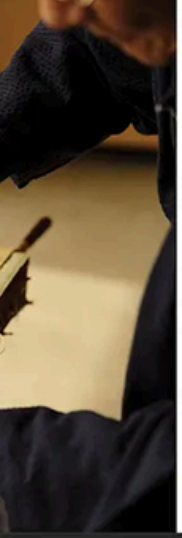

A Journey Through Japan's *Traditional Craft Workshops*

Japan is home to some of the world's most treasured *Shokunin*. Literally translating to artisan in English, the Japanese meaning runs much deeper. A true Shokunin is someone who dedicates their life to mastering their craft. It's a rejection of mass produced perfection and a personal responsibility to preserve the legacy of their skills for future generations.

When I moved to Japan in early 2018, I quickly became obsessed with all types of Japanese handicrafts and folk traditions. From mask-makers in rural Shimane and glass workers standing over glowing furnaces in Chiba, to indigo dyers with stained hands in the mountains of Oita, each time I entered a workshop I felt as though I was stepping into another world entirely.

In the West, we often romanticise the idea of purpose, as though each of us is born with a single calling. In Japan, or at least in the world of Shokunin, this takes on a different meaning. It isn't about destiny or waiting for inspiration to strike. It's about doing what comes naturally. Showing up every day and doing the work, often without glamour or reward. Mastery comes as the result of abundant repetitions of mundane acts. It's unromantic, and the more time I spend in these studios, the more it makes sense.

The Japanese folk craft movement, *Mingei*, argues that true beauty is found in objects of utility; in things designed to be lived with. In this sense, many of the crafts I encounter on my journeys can also be described as *getemono* (ordinary things): tea whisks, woven textiles, bamboo baskets, objects made to be used daily. They carry a conscious imperfection, a respect for raw materials and a beauty that comes from everyday use.

Kyushu

"I want to maintain the traditional spirit of *Hirose Kasuri*, whilst showing that it can still be used in new ways. That's the only way it keeps going."

The Amano Family

Founded in 1680, Amano Kouya has passed through five generations of dyers. Today, it is guided by Takashi Amano, who grew up with indigo in his nature. After studying dyeing and weaving at Seian University in Kyoto, he returned to Yanagi to learn the family craft under his grandfather Kei. While the studio's history lies in yarn-dyeing for Hirose Kasuri fabrics, Takashi has pushed the work in new directions, experimenting with cloth dyeing and pattern work. "Indigo is endless," he explains, his hands stained permanently blue from years of immersion in the vats. "Every piece carries its own spirit. No two pieces are ever the same."

Patterns in the Threads

The Amano family indigo is inseparable from Hirose Kasuri, a resist-dyed fabric technique brought to the area in the 18th century. Threads are bound and dyed so that when woven, their alternating dark and light sections form intricate geometric motifs. The effect is only revealed when the threads come together on the loom, as though the fabric's final design is hidden until the last possible moment. At its peak, Hirose was one of western Japan's three great kasuri centres, rivalling the textile regions of Kurume and Iyo. Today, Amano Kouya is the last working dye house still carrying the technique forward. "I want to maintain the traditional spirit of Hirose Kasuri, whilst showing that it can still be used in new ways. That's the only way it keeps going," explains Takashi.

The Process of Indigo

Amano Kouya has refined the process of aizome (traditional indigo dyeing for over 150 years. Threads of cotton or silk are immersed in the indigo vats, stirred and pressed by hand or bamboo poles. The yarn emerges green at first, then turns blue as it oxidises in the air, deepening shade by shade with each repeated soak. Once ready, bundles of thread are taken to the family's home courtyard where they dry naturally in the bright sun. "It looks simple, but everything depends on timing," Takashi describes. "The temperature, the weather, how long the threads stay in. You learn it by doing it every day."

Preservation & Adaptation

A century ago, the hills of Hirose rang with the sound of looms and dye vats. Today, most have fallen silent. The decline of handmade textiles after the war left Amano Kouya as the last of its kind in Yanagi. Yet its survival is not merely nostalgia. Takashi's decision to adapt the process by dyeing cloth, alongside yarn, experimenting with new indigo patterns, and welcoming visitors to see aizome for themselves has allowed the workshop to live on.