

Obori Soma Ware Today

Beyond the Disaster, Towards the Future

Distinctive features: Painting of horses, blue glaze with cracks, and a double-layered structure

Obori Soma ware is the name of pottery produced in the Obori district of Namie Town, with a history spanning over 300 years. It is said to have begun when Hangai Kyukan, a retainer of the Soma domain, recognized the pottery-making skills of his servants and promoted the craft.

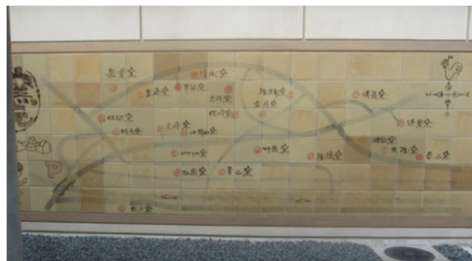
The places where Obori Soma ware is made are called pottery studios, and it is said that there were 120 studios during the late Edo period. One of the distinctive features of Obori Soma ware is the “running horse design.” This represents the Soma domain’s “sacred horse” and is painted by the pottery owners, their families, and craftsmen. The second feature is the “blue glaze with cracks.” These cracks occur due to the difference in shrinkage rates between the clay material and the glaze used on the pottery. Since these cracks are not artificially created, no two pieces are the same, making each piece one-of-a-kind. The third feature is the “double-layered structure.” Obori Soma ware has a double-layered bottom, which gives it both a heat-retaining and heat-insulating properties. Obori Soma ware was designated as a traditional craft by

the Japanese government on February 6, 1978.

The “Togei no Mori Obori” we visited for the interview used to be bustling with many tourists before the disaster, but now it serves as an exhibition space for artworks and materials. A painting of horses adorned the outer wall of the building. It was painted by Yuzo Asakura, an artist from Kashima Ward in Minamisoma City.

The painting was so vibrant and full of energy that it seemed as if the horses might leap out at any moment.

At the evacuation site in Nihonmatsu City, Mr. Hidetoki Hangai (71), a potter who has reopened Kyukan Studio and commutes to Namie Town, gave us a tour of the facility. Inside, there were numerous machines used to produce Obori Soma ware. Each machine served a different purpose, such as ensuring uniform clay hardness or flattening the clay. “In the past, everything was done by hand, and it was extremely laborious, but now, thanks to the machines, the work has become much easier,” Mr. Hangai said.



A map with the names of the studios that existed before the disaster



A painting of horses by Yuzo Asakura (Togei no Mori Obori)



Obori Soma ware teacup: The three main features—horse illustrations, blue glaze with cracks, and double-layered structure—are be-loved.

Supporting the Desire to Pursue



Mr. Hangai, who commutes three times a week from his evacuation site in Nihonmatsu to Namie Town for the revitalization of Obori Soma ware.

Interviewing Mr. Hidetoki Hangai, potter of Kyukan Studio

Q: How did you feel when you started this job?

A: I had always thought I would take over this job since I was a child, so I was determined to do it.

Q: What are the good points and features of Obori Soma ware?

A: The blue glaze with cracks, the horse illustrations, and the double-layered structure are its distinctive features. The double-layered structure keeps drinks warm or cold. During cold seasons, it embodies the spirit of hospitality, making sure drinks don’t cool down. The heart-shaped holes represent the hamachidori (a type of bird), and I think our ancestors had a refined sense of beauty.

Q: How did you feel during the Great East Japan Earthquake?

A: Even though I wasn’t responsible for the disaster, I had to evacuate because of the radiation from the nuclear accident. It was so frustrating that it brought me to tears. While I was evacuated outside the town, I was bullied, such as having my car scratched. I lost 8 kilograms because of the stress. However, support from the people of Namie and hearing them say, “When you think of Obori Soma ware, you think of this (blue glaze with cracks),” helped me keep going.

Q: Are there any challenges in continuing this work?

A: Since I’m crafting in Nihonmatsu City, I sometimes wonder if it’s still okay to call it Obori Soma ware. However, I believe it will be fine as long as I keep going.

Q: Could you tell us about the inheritance of this craft?

A: Right now, we’re accepting members of the Local Vitalization Cooperators and focusing on training successors. If you try to force it, you won’t improve, so I want to support those who have the desire to learn.

Evacuated due to the earthquake and nuclear disaster

A potter rises toward revitalization

Due to the tsunami caused by the Great East Japan Earthquake on March 11, 2011, and the hydrogen explosions at the Tokyo Electric Power Company’s Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant, radiation levels rose and posed potential harm. The residents of Namie Town were forced to evacuate outside the town, and the potters also had to leave. As a result, the number of potters decreased from 22 before the disaster to only 7 afterwards.

“Togei no Mori Obori” made a fresh start by building a temporary facility in Nihonmatsu City. At that time, to show gratitude for the warm support from the residents of Namie Town, they distributed 600 plates for serving Namie Yakisoba noodles to the townspeople. In June 2023, they resumed operations at their original location, where the Osetomatsuri festival was held. Currently, the seven remaining potters continue producing Obori Soma ware while still residing in places such as Fukushima City and Nihonmatsu City, where they have evacuated.

The office of the Obori Soma Potters’ Cooperative Association had also evacuated to Nihonmatsu City. However, in March 2021, a new gallery and office were established at the “Namie-no-waza Nariwai-kan,” located within Michi-no-Eki (Roadside Station) “Namie.” Here, works by Obori Soma ware potters are displayed and sold, including versatile cups from Kyogetsu Studio featuring charmingly illustrated horses.

Thirteen years after the disaster, there is clear determination to revitalize the region through Obori Soma ware.



A versatile cup of Obori Soma ware with a cute horse illustration.

Editor’s Note

I believe that the inheritance of tradition is one of the most difficult regional challenges. Passing on the craftsmanship takes a tremendous amount of time

and is no easy task. When Mr. Hangai first started making pottery, he struggled and was told, “You have to learn the techniques by watching and absorbing them with your eyes.” Obori Soma ware has a history of over 300 years, and even though the Great East Japan Earthquake forced people to leave Namie Town, the desire to pass on the traditional craft of Obori Soma ware to future generations led them to rise again. Through this interview, I was able to feel how deeply connected Obori Soma ware is to the community and how much it is loved by so many. In order to preserve such traditional crafts, it will be necessary not only for successors to carry on but also for younger generations like us to take an interest and focus attention on them. (Shugo Watanabe)

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