

A silk scarf printed with colorful patterns



Region Crafting Silk Products with Samurai Heritage

In Japan, there is only one region where silk products are made through a complete process from raising silkworms to sewing—Tsuruoka City in Yamagata Prefecture. We spoke with one of the local silk manufacturers that has inherited the traditions of the silk industry that contributed to Japan’s modernization, while simultaneously producing products that meet the demands of contemporary society. (Text: Tanaka Nozomi)

A piece of silk fabric suspended from the ceiling of Silk Miraikan is said to be designed by an international textile designer, representing local agricultural products and climate.





Photo: miruadesign

The irregular thickness of *kibiso* makes it unsuitable for traditional silk reeling processes and raw silk production.

The Matsugaoka region in Tsuruoka was cultivated by approximately 3,000 former Shonai domain¹ samurai in 1871. The area, originally covered by primeval forest, was cleared, and by 1873, a 311-hectare mulberry field for silkworms was established. Subsequently, silk reeling factories and silk weaving factories were built. To this day, Tsuruoka is the only region in Japan where the entire silk production process, from raising silkworms to silk reeling, refining, dyeing, and sewing, is completed in a single place. Yamato Kyosuke of Tsuruoka Silk Co., Ltd., a leading company in the local silk industry, explains, “The greatest strength of the silk produced here is that it can truly be called ‘Made in Japan.’ Nowadays, with the emergence of synthetic fibers, the silk industry in Japan has declined. However, to revitalize this industry, the Tsuruoka silk town project was started in 2012.”

The project, initiated with the aim of preserving Japan’s silk industry, receives support from the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. It involves the development of new specialty products and expansion into new markets. Yamato comments, “We have developed a product using the first silk thread emitted by silkworms during cocoon spinning, known as *kibiso*². This material is a byproduct of the silk reeling process and, due to its coarse and irregular thickness, is unsuitable for use as raw silk without further processing. However, *kibiso* contains abundant water-soluble

Above: Silk Miraikan at the Matsugaoka Reclamation Site

Below: Exhibition showcasing the silk production process



Photo: miruadesign

proteins, providing high moisturizing, UV absorption, and antioxidant properties. It has such added value that it can be utilized as an ingredient in skincare cosmetics. That’s why we developed yarn effectively utilizing *kibiso* and expanded our product lineup under the new ‘*kibiso*’ brand, targeting fashion-conscious customers to explore new market opportunities.”

Furthermore, since

A stole made from *kibiso*, boasting a fluffy texture



Photos: miruadesign

The Samurai Silk product line, featuring designs that reflect Japanese tradition, includes prints of rice ears.

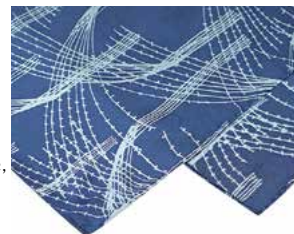


Photo: miruadesign

kibiso alone is not suitable for mechanical weaving, a new yarn has been developed by combining it with other fibers such as organic cotton and wool. These new yarns have been used to create fashion accessories such as stoles and bags. Also, towels including *kibiso* were developed in collaboration with towel producers. The silky texture characteristic of silk has been well-received, leading to their adoption as amenities in luxury hotels within the city.

“In 2017, Matsugaoka Reclamation Site, the only location in Japan where the entire silk production process, from raising silkworms to silk reeling, is carried out, was designated as a Japan Heritage site. Five out of the ten silkworm rearing buildings still exist,” says Yamato. “We have been trying to raise awareness of Tsuruoka as a town associated with the silk introduced by former samurai, using ‘Samurai Silk’ as a brand name for our products.”

In 2022, following its designation as a Japan Heritage site, the fourth silkworm chamber of Matsugaoka Reclamation Site was opened as Silk Miraikan. Visitors can learn about the history of the silk industry and the production process, observe the cultivation of silkworms, and experience silk weaving here. In the shop, a variety of Tsuruoka’s silk products are available for purchase. There is also a winery in the adjacent land that produces natural wines. The winery also features a restaurant serving Italian-French cuisine made with local ingredients, which pairs excellently with the wine. The Matsugaoka region, once cultivated by samurai, has now become a new hotspot attracting attention. ㊦

1. The domain headquartered in present-day Tsuruoka City, Yamagata Prefecture, during the Edo period (early 17th century to the late mid-19th century). It was governed by the Sakai clan. The first lord, Tadatsugu, was the uncle-in-law of Tokugawa Iyasu, the first shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate. The domain system was abolished in 1871.
2. *Kibiso* refers to the outer layer first emitted by silkworms when they create cocoons. Although unsuitable for raw silk due to its hardness and irregular thickness, it is often used as a material for handwoven fabrics because of its unique texture.