

# Eye-Catching Designs in Picturesque Townscape ---Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter--- (Okayama Prefecture)

MAP



The beautiful white-walled townscape of the Bikan (Picturesque) Historical Quarter in the city of Kurashiki in Okayama Prefecture fills sightseers with feelings of nostalgia. Kurashiki flourished as a mercantile town from the Edo period (1603–1868), and thanks to the enormous efforts of its forefathers, who were quick to realize the cultural value of the townscape, and of local citizens who have cherished their community, the townscape survives to this day just as it was in the past. The historical quarter of Kurashiki is highly revered both in Japan and overseas and charms visitors with picture-postcard scenes wherever you point your camera.

This article focuses on creative designs that really should not be missed in a tour around the many attractions of the Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter. The designs were introduced by a sightseeing guide.



## **From Cotton Production on Reclaimed Land and Commerce to Spinning Industry**

Kurashiki's prosperity was built on reclaimed tideland. From the 1580s the construction of a seawall made headway, and the town and farms expanded outward. The foundation for Kurashiki's development lay in the fact that beyond the levee stretched the Seto Inland Sea, making it a convenient location for marine transportation. Also, thanks to the ebb and flow of the tide, ships were able to easily navigate their way up the Kurashiki River. The river was dredged like a canal and the riverbanks reinforced so that more ships could pass. As a result, Kurashiki became a thriving mercantile town.

The soil on the reclaimed land remained salty and was not suitable for growing agricultural products. Instead, the planting of cotton, which is highly salt-resistant, was recommended, and the Kurashiki area became a thriving cotton production center. Warehouses appeared to purchase the cotton from farmers and ship it as a commodity, and subsequently the number of merchants dealing in not only cotton but also rice and marine products increased. Eventually Kurashiki emerged as a flourishing commercial center.

Kurashiki is not a castle town. In the Edo period it was under the direct control of the Tokugawa shogunate and administered by a dispatched magistrate. Nevertheless, the autonomy of the merchants was recognized, and they were given favorable treatment. Kurashiki therefore developed as an autonomous town with merchants mainly steering the local administration.

The Kurashiki Spinning Mill was founded in 1889 to process raw cotton and produce yarn. The mill played a major role as a driving force behind the industrial growth of Okayama Prefecture in the Meiji period (1868–1912), it alone accounting for 8.9% of the prefecture's whole industrial production value. In addition to being a mercantile town, Kurashiki became a manufacturing town as well.

### **Some Buildings 300 Years Old, Others 100 Years Old**

The scenery of Kurashiki's historical quarter is an exquisite blend of the picturesque townscape featuring the *namako-kabe* walls of the white warehouses and lattice windows of the *machiya* (merchant's houses combining stores and town residences) and the willow trees lining the Kurashiki River. While the buildings give a sense of uniformity to the townscape as a whole, finer parts of the warehouses and residences display various unique designs.

The buildings do not date only from the Edo period. There are also buildings from the Meiji and Taisho (1912–26) eras. The characteristic of the Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter is that while these buildings display the architectural styles of the times, they also blend into the surrounding scenery. Some of the buildings are close to 300 years old, others are just 100 years old. Together they give a lasting impression of the profound depth of history.



## Basically Two-Story Buildings

Almost all of the buildings in the historical quarter have two stories with a low second floor. Originally the second floors were used not as residences but as storerooms. Until the Meiji period, except in the case of *ryokan* inns and eating places, living on the second floor apparently was not permitted.



## ***Nuriya-Zukuri*: Lavishly Plastered Outer Walls**

The outer walls on the two sides facing neighboring buildings and the second-floor front are covered with white plaster. Although the main purpose was to strengthen the building's fire resistance, the white plaster also has become the historical quarter's signature design. The fact that this expensive outer wall finish was continued on almost all of the buildings is evidence of Kurashiki's sustained prosperity over a long time. It is highly unusual to see such uniformity in so many buildings.



## ***Dozo-Zukuri*: Sturdy Whitewashed-Earthen Warehouse Style**

Although most walls of ordinary buildings only have the layer of plaster, the outer walls of warehouses, which are 20–30 centimeters thick, are completely coated in plaster and then tiled so as to increase durability and fire resistance. The black parts are flat tiles made by firing and solidifying clay. With much thicker walls than the *nuriya-zukuri* style, which was said to be fireproof, the sturdy warehouse structures were designed so that even if the outer wall were damaged by fire, the flames would not reach the timber frame inside.



## Roof Tiles Add Grandeur to Townscape

The roofs of buildings in Kurashiki are tiled with a combination of flat tiles and semi-round tiles using a technique employed in old temple architecture. The continuation of such tiled roofs adds grandeur to the historical quarter's townscape. Most of the relatively new roofs in the historical quarter are covered with pantiles (*sangawara*), which became common from the middle of the Edo period.



The view from the roof of Hayashi Genjuro Shoten; the roofs in the foreground have *sangawara* pantiles.

## Patterned Semi-Round Roof Tile Ends

Many of the patterns on semi-round roof tile ends are a comma-shaped design known as *tomoe*. This traditional Japanese pattern suggests gushing water swirling outward. In the Edo period the disaster that people most feared was fire, and it is said that the *tomoe* pattern, which can be seen throughout the country, expressed their wish for protection against fire.



Nowadays many decorative roof tiles bear a family-crest design, but until the Meiji period only the samurai class and certain privileged households were permitted to have family crests. Ordinary folk could not have family crests, so until then the *tomoe* design was common.

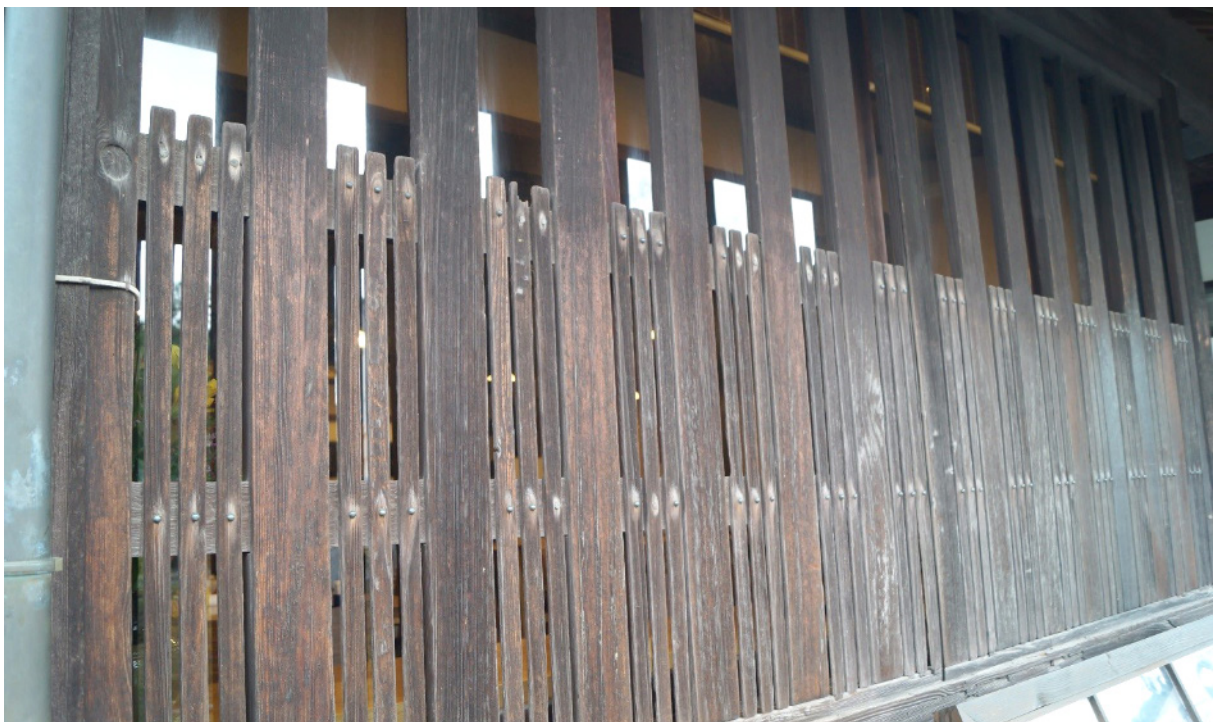
## Outer Walls Decorated with Attached Eaves

You will notice that on the fronts and sides of buildings small eaves are attached on the border between the first and second floors and above and below windows. The purpose of these eaves was to prevent the walls from getting damaged by rain and also, it is said, to give chic to the buildings by adding some elaborate design. The shapes and lengths of these eaves are varied.



## Kurashiki Lattice on First-Floor Windows Facing the Street

First-floor windows facing the street have a design that is unique to Kurashiki consisting of three or five short bars placed between the vertical thick bars. Positioned at eye level, these lattice bars prevent people on the outside from peering in but at the same time allow plenty of light to enter.



## Kurashiki Window on Second-Floor Façade

The second-floor window frames have protruding parts resembling animal horns. This design is generally known as *tsunogara-mado* (horn-patterned window). When three or five timber mullions are placed vertically in the frame, you have what is known as *Kurashiki-mado*, which is one of the characteristic designs of this district.



## Diverse *Mushiko-mado* Designs

Windows with thin vertical lattice bars look like insect boxes, which is why they are called *mushiko-mado* (insect-box windows). These *mushiko-mado* windows were prominent in townhouses in Kyoto and Osaka earlier and first appeared in Kurashiki in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Originally the frames and lattice bars were plastered, but later townhouses came to display various designs, such as square or round plain timber bars or iron bars.



Kurashiki lattice window (left), *mushiko-mado* window (right)

## Full-Fledged Tiled *Namako-kabe*

In order to stave off fire, wind, and rats, and also for decorative purposes, people would cover the outer walls of their townhouses with square, flat tiles and thickly plaster over the joints. Because these thick plaster joints resemble a sea cucumber (a much-loved dish on the Japanese dining table), the walls are called *namako-kabe* (*namako* meaning sea cucumber in Japanese). The joints are filled with a mixture of sand, slaked lime, seaweed glue, and finely cut hemp and straw, so they do not easily crack due to the glue ingredients. Nowadays *namako-kabe* walls are made in various places. They may look just the same as the real McCoy, but actually many of them do not employ traditional techniques and are made simply using mortar instead of tiles.

There are several types of *namako-kabe* pattern. Common patterns in the historical quarter of Kurashiki include the *umanori-bari*, in which the tiles are unaligned and resemble somebody riding a horse (*umanori*), and *shihan-bari*, in which the tiles are placed diagonally. *Shihan-bari* is said to have improved the shedding of water. Incidentally, the *namako-kabe* design can be seen on walls inside JR Kurashiki Station too.



This warehouse, a symbol of Kurashiki's historical quarter, now houses a museum.





## A Rather Unusual Wall Pattern

In this outer wall the wainscot has been fixed into position by hammering in ship nails. The unique eye-catching pattern, not very common in the historical quarter, was formed by fluid from the nails trickling down the wall after they had been exposed to rain and oxidized.



## Buildings Skirted by Short Bamboo Fences

In the past the eaves did not have gutters, so rainwater fell from the eaves to the ground. The short bamboo fences skirting the buildings, called *inuyarai*, were positioned so that the dripping rainwater did not splash up from the ground onto the walls---and also to keep passersby a certain distance away from the building.



## Vestiges of Merchants' Landing Areas

Merchants' houses used to have stepped landing areas to load and unload cargo transported on the river. Even when the water level changed due to the ebb and flow of the tide, it was possible to lay a gangplank from here to the ship. The foothold steps jutting out from the wall were also used when loading and unloading cargo. Because the reflection on the river resembles the V-shaped formation of migrating wild geese, these landing areas are known locally as *gangi* (*gan* meaning wild goose).



## **Kurashiki Ivy Square: Site of the Meiji Period Brick Spinning Mill**

The outer walls of the spinning mill built in 1889 were left intact when the building was renovated into a sightseeing complex housing a hotel, museum, and other facilities. Although the leaves fall in winter, in summer the walls are completely covered by the green ivy. In the past, when there was no air conditioning, the ivy had the effect of lowering the temperature inside the building.



## **Kurashikikan: The Old Town Hall**

The timber Western-style town hall building was constructed in 1917. After the town hall moved, it was used as a public pawnbroker store and employment agency. The building now remains as a registered tangible cultural property and is open to the public as a tourist information office and free rest area.



## Ohara Museum of Art: An Imposing Showa-Era Structure

The Ohara Museum of Art, one of the symbolic buildings of the historical quarter, was opened in 1930 as Japan's first museum of modern Western art. Known internationally as a distinctive private nonspecialist museum, its display includes world-famous masterpieces by El Greco, Gauguin, Monet, Renoir, and the sculptor Rodin.



Visitors to the museum's main hall are greeted by Rodin's *The Burghers of Calais*.



Around Japan, because of the changing times, it is becoming increasingly difficult to preserve traditional townscapes and local cultures and lifestyles. In the Kurashiki Bikan Historical Quarter, where there are no vacant houses and the scenery is well-nigh perfect, a nonprofit organization is playing a central role in restoring and utilizing the townhouses, preserving the scenery, and maintaining the district's vitality. There is a superb blend of Japanese and Western, retro and modern, and new facilities occupying renovated townhouses and warehouses, such as cafes, galleries, *izakaya* pubs, and souvenir shops, are opening all the time and melting into the wonderfully soothing townscape. While cherishing tradition, Kurashiki's historical quarter is continuing to create new amenities and add new attractions.

Cooperation: Regular Sightseeing Guide Contact Office

Tel.: 086-425-6039 (in the Kurashiki City Tourist Rest Area)



**Mr. Koji Kanzaki,**  
chairman of the Regular Sightseeing Guide Contact Office

Kurashiki Visitor's Guide

<http://www.kurashiki-tabi.jp/for/en/bikan.html>

