

# DISCOVER THE MILLENNIA- OLD CRAFT: INKAN SEALS *in Yamanashi*

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Written by Katie Liu  
Yamanashi Prefectural  
Government

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Inkan Seals in  
Yamanashi

# What is Inkon/Hanko?

Inkan seals are often traditionally used to sign papers and authenticate documents for official and legal purposes in Japan, instead of a handwritten signature, like many countries in the West. With origins from China, although both share similar uses, you could say that it is much more prevalent in everyday life in Japan nowadays. The words Inkan (印鑑) and Hanko (ハンコ) are often used interchangeably. Originally, the word hanko referred to the tool itself, with inkan referring to the seal made on paper.



Hanko comes in various shapes, with round-shaped hankos, which are the most common for office use; in addition to square-shaped hanko. Hanko are often made from materials such as animal horns and tusks, as well as wood, quartz, and stone. There are different types of hanko: jitsuin are usually registered at the city hall and used for taking out a house mortgage and large purchase such as cars or signing bank documents, whilst mitomein are generally used for everyday life, including signing for the delivery package. Other than its traditional use for official documents, hankos are appreciated for their artistic value and design; artists may stamp these on paintings to use as their signature.

As the world enters the digital age, the use of this traditional craft may decline in the future as authorities may consider the abolishment of hanko. However, aside from official uses in the office, there are ready made hanko seals which feature a wide range of designs for use in arts and crafts; you can find stores selling seals with animated characters to cherry blossom patterns and Japanese motifs. Even if it loses its functional use, it continues to hold a place in the creative field, further proving how this contemporary use for hanko keeps this art alive whilst retaining a significant connection to Japan's heritage.







Japan's Biggest Stamp Monument in Front of Kai-Iwama Station

## History

Did you know the majority of inkan seal production in Japan comes from Yamanashi Prefecture? The tradition of the seal engraving industry in Yamanashi dates back to the Bunkyo era (1861-1864), after crystal ore was excavated from a high-quality crystal mine in the mountains. Most of the manufacturing was based in Kofu city, Ichikawamisato town, and Minobu town, with its legacy enduring on to this day.

Located southwest from Kofu City, Ichikawamisato town boasts a long history of seal making. Often considered as the home of hanko – Ichikawamisato's inkan industry flourished during the Edo period. The town was formerly known as Rokugo Town, in present-day Rokugo district of Ichikawamisato town, farmers first began with selling tabi socks as a side hustle, making sales with door-to-door business strategy. However with the decline of tabi socks in the Meiji period, they opted in selling seals instead.



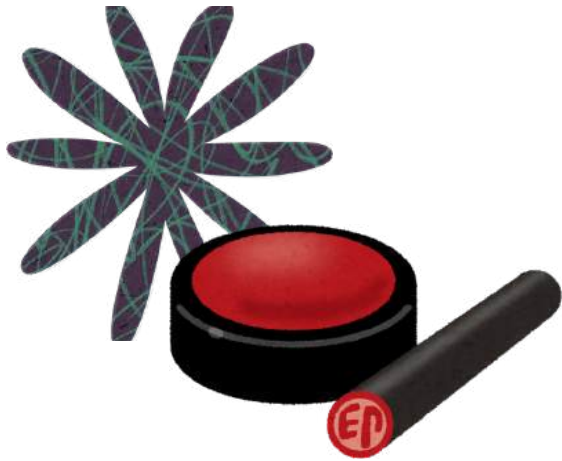
At this point in time, telephones and Internet were not as common as today, this meant that even as the art of seals became a booming sensation, seals craftsman travelled throughout the nation to take orders. Then, upon their return, these craftsmen would create the seals and deliver it to customers. However, from the past and even in present time, why aren't there many shop selling seals? This was due to the fact that many craftsmen worked in their own makeshift workshops in their own homes because of the level of skill and time necessary needed for crafting. It goes to show how intertwined the seals arts are with their lives, and passing on these legacies to their own children.

Moving into the digital age, the art of hanko had become more known overseas. Online shopping helped pick up the pace for orders as catalogues were distributed throughout Japan to collect orders. This made it easier for customers to customise and order hanko – hailing the town's reputation as the 'Town of Seals'.





# Inkan Workshop



Inkan (印鑑) or hanko (ハンコ) crafting workshops are available in Ichikawamisato Town, where experts at the Inkan Museum or local craft workshops offer a unique and traditional experience for both citizens and visitors from abroad.

The inkan making process generally takes approximately an hour. During this process, the materials are first chosen, and then you choose the font of the kanji (Chinese character) of your name, or for those who do not have one, you can choose one from a catalogue, or have it in Katakana or English. From there, a pen is used to mark the areas which need engraving. There is a certain uniqueness in engraving your own hanko by hand, it shows not only the individuality of one's identity, but also a work of art as a result of one's efforts.







I had the extraordinary experience of engraving my own hanko with an expert craftsman Mr Mochizuki Kouga, at his workshop as part of the Prefecture's efforts to promote the seal engraving workshop to tourists and overseas visitors. As someone interested in art, I am delighted to finally have a seal to use in signing my watercolour artworks. Overall, I would say it was a memorable and rewarding experience where I was able to choose the design for my very own hanko and bring it to life before my eyes. Prior to the workshop, we were able to choose our kanji character and suggest fonts and the design with Mr Mochizuki, who took our ideas and created a template. There are many designs to choose from – design wise, and I preferred a round and old-looking font, and it was possible to choose which area would be engraved and inked. The actual engraving of my name was difficult, but with some assistance from Mr Mochizuki, I was content with the end results.





# Museum & Festival

Ichikawamisato Town



An annual festival is held in autumn in Ichikawamisato town to commemorate not only the significance of hanko seal engraving, honouring the craftsmanship, but also promoting the seal industry to visitors. During this festival, a commemorative ceremony is held where unused seals are burned at Mori Park, and a memorial is held. Last year, there were many booths and activities for visitors to try their hand at: seal carving workshop, Rokugo Taiko performance, Ichikawa washi kite making workshop, food stalls, and many more! This festival is organised by the Rokugo Seal Engravers Cooperative Association, comprised of inkan craftsmen and inkan manufacturers. Additionally, the association opened the Rokugo Seal museum back in 2007.

Outside Kai-Iwama station lies the biggest ink stamp in Japan with the words passed down from Yamanashi's famous warlord Shingen Takeda, "Immovable as the mountains". At the Rokugo insho seal museum, there are preserved exhibits that date as far back as the Meiji period, including those with ivory carving, a collection of seals by Chen Jieqi originating back to China's Qing dynasty, tools used for seal carving, catalogues for seal sales, and works by predecessors and contemporary artists. There are also displays of early Showa period advertisements, diplomatic permits, and crystal ores. Many of which are considered to be valuable exhibits, and as it shows the periods in which Chinese characters evolved and the characteristics of each era.



Address: 409-3244 2160 Iwama, Ichikawamisato-cho,  
Nishiyatsushiro-gun