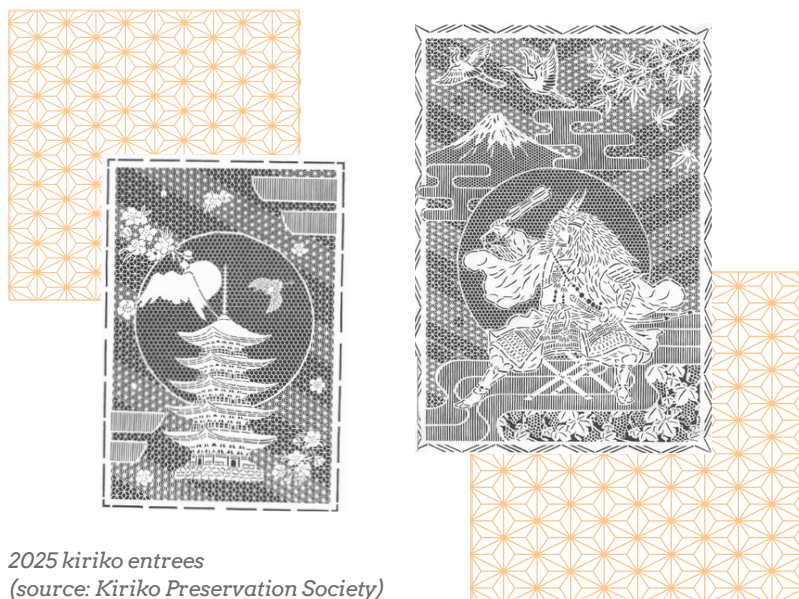


SAWANOBORI KIRIKO: YAMANASHI'S 350-YEAR-OLD PAPER CRAFT

In November of last year, a friend from Tokyo was visiting, and I was eager to show her some of the places I have come to cherish in Yamanashi. High on that list was Tenka Chaya, the historical teahouse where writer Osamu Dazai completed his famous work, *One Hundred Views of Mount Fuji*. It was there that I had the pleasure of meeting **Yoshida-san**.

The tea house was characteristically busy, but we managed to get a table next to two other women. Our conversation with them began simply—the typical “Where are you from?”—but soon evolved into a discussion about ***kiriko***, a traditional Yamanashi craft that surprisingly few locals have even heard of. My own knowledge was accidental: a year prior, I had been tasked with translating the explanation for the *kiriko* that the Governor of Yamanashi was presenting as gifts to international partners.

In Japan, mention *kiriko*, and most people picture Temma Kiriko, the renowned cut glassware from Osaka. However, the *kiriko* of Yamanashi is entirely fashioned from paper. Recognized as an “Intangible Folk Cultural Asset,” this 350-year-old craft originates from the small Sawanobori area. Much like Mexico’s perforated *papel picado*, *kiriko* are thin sheets of Japanese paper stacked and painstakingly cut with a specialized, chisel-like knife called a ***tsukinomi***.



2025 *kiriko* entrees
(source: Kiriko Preservation Society)



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The resulting identical pieces, with their see-through quality (*sukasu*), are still locally referred to as *Osukashi*. Aside from being exquisite works of handcrafted art, *kiriko* serve an important religious function, embodying annual prayers for plentiful harvests and prosperity. The culmination of this year-long effort is the **Rokkaku-do Kiriko Festival** every October 13th.

It turned out that Yoshida-san was not just a long-time practitioner of *kiriko*, but an active member of the **Kiriko Preservation Society**. Months after our initial meeting, she generously invited me to the first beginner's workshop of 2025—an invitation that perfectly coincided with a planned visit from my mother, who was traveling from Canada. My mother, always open to new experiences, ended up trying *kiriko* with me the very day after she arrived.

The workshop, held in the local community hall nestled among peach and cherry orchards, had a truly lovely atmosphere. Yoshida-san even greeted us with two miniature *kiriko* keychains, each featuring the *kanji* of our names—a surprise I realized she had been preparing since asking for our names a month prior. During the session, my mother observed, “It is like making lace out of paper.” This phrase, I believe, perfectly captured the magic and delicate beauty of the craft.



The creation process begins with stacking 10 to 15 layers of A3-sized Japanese paper. The choice of paper is crucial: traditionally, a unique, thin variety called "**Mino washi**" is employed, produced exclusively in Gifu Prefecture's Mino City for over 1,300 years. This paper, mainly composed of *kōzo* (paper mulberry) fibers, is thin yet strong, becomes whiter with age, and when held up, allows light to pass through gently. The duality of being delicate yet durable allows *kiriko* artisans to easily cut through multiple stacked layers. The paper maintains a robustness and flexibility necessary to ensure the sheets do not rip apart during the precise cutting process. Its strength, beauty and versatility is so great that it is even used in high-end items like wedding dresses!

After the design is finalized and pinned to the top layer, the cutting begins in early **April**. The *tsukinomi* blades, some as narrow as 0.5 mm, are usually handmade by filing down the sides of a steel saw blade to create the desired width and length. Practitioners use three to five different blades depending on their specific design's needs. To protect the paper from the humid Japanese summer air in between working sessions, the *kiriko* is carefully wrapped in newspaper.

The cutting work gathers momentum in earnest from September onward. Since most *kiriko* practitioners have full-time jobs, they often find the time to work on their pieces before or after their shifts. I was particularly charmed by a scene in an official documentary showing a *yakitori* vendor diligently cutting his *kiriko* during moments when he had no customers. I couldn't help but wonder if his finished piece carried a faint, delicious scent of grilled chicken!

For the subsequent workshops, believing in the philosophy of "the more the merrier," I invited several friends to join me. Initially, I felt a little nervous about how we might be received. Not only were my friends and I non-residents of the **Sawanobori area**, but we were visibly not from the Japanese archipelago—ethnically. We were as much of a collection of outsiders as possible. However, that worry was quickly eased. I was delighted by how welcoming everyone was. We were keen to learn this traditional craft, and they seemed pleased to see "outsiders" taking an interest.

Yoshida-san, who has been practicing *kiriko* for 17 years, and Takane-san, a long-time pillar of the Sawanobori community, often came by our workstations offering steady encouragement and insightful feedback. Later in the day, Yoshida-san's grandchildren would also come later to practice. The feeling one had of a true, living community was refreshing.

I'm not sure how the news spread, but during the second workshop, a journalist from the **Yamanashi Nichi-Nichi Newspaper** came to interview our group of foreigners trying *kiriko* for the first time. One of my co-workers and a few other Japanese friends discovered the article a week later and sent it to me. The title made me smile: "Foreigners Try Their Hand at Kiriko." It always surprises me how the subject, "Foreigners do XY in Japan" generates significant press here. I suppose it's similar to how "doing XY normal activity, but IN JAPAN" holds high interest for people outside of Japan.

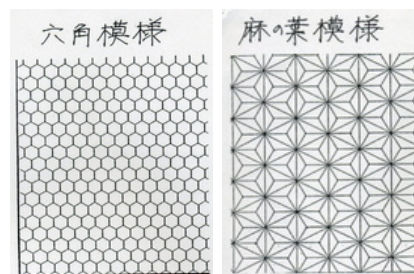


Article in the Yamanashi Nichi-Nichi Newspaper

Attending the workshops at the Sawanobori community hall every month quickly became a delightful tradition for my friends and me. Before the workshop, we'd hunt for a new lunch spot and catch up with each other. It was wonderful discovering and re-discovering **Minami-Alps City** through these lunches. I felt like I had finally joined the ranks of the "happy retired Japanese women who convene to learn new skills and occasionally gossip at the local Denny's," which I had always dreamed of.

Over the next two months, during my free time between workshops, I slowly pieced together my *kiriko* design. Initially, I considered introducing a "Western touch" by using an Alphonse Mucha piece as the main motif. I thought this could be a fun reversal, given that Mucha was one of the many painters influenced by Japanese art in the 19th century. Through trial and error, however, I quickly learned that adapting Mucha's drawings to the *kiriko* format would be far too difficult.

Sticking with the traditional *kiriko* method, I made sure to include the required **rokkaku** (hexagonal) and **asanoha** (hemp leaf) patterns, which can be found in the Rokkaku-do Temple. While researching traditional Japanese patterns, I was surprised to find a wealth of reference books at the prefectural library. I made a note of my favorite patterns: waves, irises, chrysanthemum flowers, bamboo, and lotuses. I also reviewed past *kiriko* pieces from the online archive and realized I was particularly drawn to works featuring organic subjects like insects and animals. This sparked my next best idea after Mucha: adapting a **ukiyoe** piece that featured an organic subject. Specifically, I wanted something in the whimsical aesthetic of Hokusai's "Manga"—his collection of sketches of everyday life.



(right) Rokkaku and (left) Asanoha patterns (source: Kiriko Preservation Society)

Once my design was finalized, Yoshida-san printed it onto A3 paper and secured it to the top of my pile of 15 *washi* paper layers on a backing board, using eight thumbtacks. Soon enough I became a *kiriko* addict and I worked on my piece almost every morning before work. Although it's recommended not to exceed two hours of *kiriko* work at a time, in order to avoid one's level of concentration dropping, I must admit I often went over that limit on weekends. With a podcast, documentary, or music playing in the background, the hours would vanish. I'd look up, realizing the sun had set and my neck was stiff. There is a quality to *kiriko* that is **meditative**. It is almost spiritual, in fact, and deeply Japanese. It demands that you recognize your limits: pushing past fatigue risks an incorrect cut that could ruin the entire piece. It reminds you that success is not achieved quickly, but through the patient compounding of many short, precise, and purposeful actions. Ultimately, the craft is a testament to discipline, proving that every significant goal is reached through small, consistent, daily steps.

I stumbled upon **Utagawa Kuniyoshi**'s "Famous Heroes of the Kabuki Stage Played by Frogs." The frogs looked simultaneously cool, humorous, and dynamic. While some practitioners take the analog approach—cutting and pasting designs like a collage before photocopying—I chose the digital route using my iPad. I first traced all the frogs from Utagawa's *ukiyoe*. Then, I added lotuses, bamboos, chrysanthemums and the required *asanoha* and *rokkaku* patterns. Yoshida-san mentioned that she prints her designs so that the patterns precisely match the width of her *tsukinomi* blades, but I'm afraid that skill is still far beyond my current technical ability.

September quickly arrived, signaling crunch time. One of my friends, who had just finished their design at the start of the month, stayed up past midnight most nights to finish their piece. One night, I spontaneously invited two friends over to work on our *kiriko*. We ordered pizza and cut away until midnight, leaving small pieces of paper scattered across the floor like artificial snow.



Finally, **October 11th**—the submission day—arrived. As everyone was finishing their pieces that day, we departed for the community hall a little later than usual. Once there, we wrote our names and were assigned a number. The thumbtacks securing the paper were then removed for the first time, revealing our pieces in all their splendor. The first ten layers were set aside to be donated, and the final five were handed back to us to share with friends and family. The donated layers were bound with string and placed in the next room where all the other entries were lined up on a table. It was a true joy to see all the *kiriko* that the community had been diligently working on for months behind closed doors. I was amazed by the complexity and composition of many entries. Every single one was a wealth of design ideas and techniques that I was eager to try next year.

The following day, I returned to the community hall with anticipation to see how our pieces had ranked. It wasn't difficult to spot them; I simply looked for the names written in full *Katakana* (the Japanese script reserved for foreign names and words). While marveling at the displayed art, I heard sounds of excitement near the entrance: the Yakitori Man had arrived!



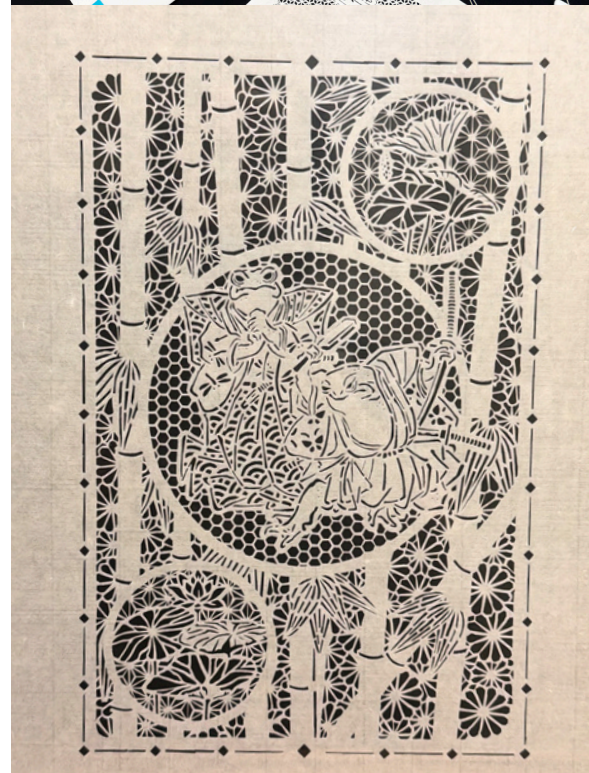
Kin-chan's 2025 artwork



Kin-chan's 2021 artwork

His real name is Kanegura Asakawa, but everyone affectionately calls him **'Kin-chan'**. Meeting him felt like encountering a local celebrity. The deep affection the community held for him and his art was obvious, as everyone huddled around, eager to see his newest piece. Being the perfectionist he is, he had taken his *kiriko* back home to "fix it" after submission. This year, he chose to depict two of the Seven Lucky Gods: Ebisu, the god of fishermen and luck, and Daikokuten, the god of wealth and luck. Kin-chan is renowned for his ability to make two-dimensional paper art look incredibly expressive, round, and full of life—and these gods were no exception. Much like Kin-chan himself, the deities were jolly old men with benevolent smiles. After chatting with him for a while, I was honored to receive feedback on my own piece. Apparently, I would have earned extra points for incorporating more *asanoha* and cloud designs. I immediately took note of this advice for next year's entry.

Later, Yoshida-san confirmed a hilarious detail: Kin-chan's artworks do, in fact, smell like grilled chicken. It turns out that even though the entries are anonymous to keep the judging fair, the judges can always spot—or rather, sniff out—a Kin-chan original (haha)!





Finally, the day of the festival, **October 13th**, arrived. My friends and I reached the community hall just in time to watch the children carrying the portable shrine (*mikoshi*) as it slowly processed toward the Rokkaku-do Temple. In addition to the *mikoshi* parade, the festival featured games for kids, performances, food stalls, and even a raffle for local residents, where the grand prize was 20 kg of rice—a substantial prize in today’s economy!

Inside the tiny hexagonal structure of the temple, the *kiriko* were displayed beautifully in neat rows. I was surprised that all the submissions managed to fit inside! It was a pleasure to meet some of the creators whose work I had admired since seeing their pieces on Saturday. One creator shared that he starts contemplating the design for his next piece immediately after the current festival ends! I also took note of this for my next piece (haha).

After a few hours, the Buddhist priest arrived and commenced the prayers with a select group of community members. As the sun began to set, the *kiriko* truly came alive, illuminated by the gentle lighting inside the temple. Here we were, in a small community in Yamanashi, with music playing softly in the background and the fruits of our labor gently swaying as the breeze passed through the temple. With **Mt. Fuji** looming large in the distance, seemingly blessing the festival, it was a truly magical scene.



Since its designation as an **Intangible Folk Cultural Asset** in 1975, the Kiriko Preservation Society has worked diligently to promote and safeguard the *kiriko* craft. In 1987, they established a "**Kiriko Club**" at Toyo Elementary School and continue to instruct students there. They also actively recruit new practitioners by participating in events, setting up hands-on demonstration corners, and organizing exhibitions.

Despite these efforts, the tradition faces existential threats common to regional crafts across Japan. The loss extends to the very tools: when I attempted to buy new *tsukinomi* blades, I learned the craftsman who made them had passed away, forcing current makers to either forge their own or acquire custom pieces from fellow artists.

The paper itself is endangered. Mino *washi* paper highlights this decline. In its 1,300-year history, the paper’s production once sustained 5,000 households: today, fewer than 30 workshops remain. The crisis is amplified by climate change. The **biodiversity** that once fueled regional craft differences is being eroded, threatening the extinction of materials historically vital to Japanese traditions. Natural materials inspire the tools and practices that define *kiriko* and other art forms. Local governments are now sponsoring events to educate citizens and promote the protection of local *satoyama* (forests) which support traditional paper-making in Japan.





The efforts to protect *kiriko* are not merely about preserving a technique; they are about safeguarding the community's **living archive**—a role *kiriko* has filled for centuries.

As the 2021 YBS documentary on the craft beautifully put it: '*Kiriko* has continued for over 350 years since the early Edo period, and in that time, it has also served as a mirror reflecting the transition of the eras.' The pieces that decorate the community hall span generations: depicting soldiers from WWII, celebrating marriages and births, honoring local history, and memorializing passed relatives.

This communal spirit is deeply embedded in the *kiriko* offering itself. *Kiriko* is not a craft reserved for professionals, nor is it a commodity to be sold—it is a gift shared. Of the 15 layers you cut, you donate your best 10. At the festival's conclusion, the cuttings are taken down and distributed, along with amulets, to every Sawanobori household as a final blessing.

In a digital age that promises boundless connectivity, we often overlook the most vital link: the local bond to our **community** and the land that sustains us. *Kiriko* serves as a powerful reminder that community, much like our natural environment, is a living entity, built and fiercely guarded by continuous action and love.

