

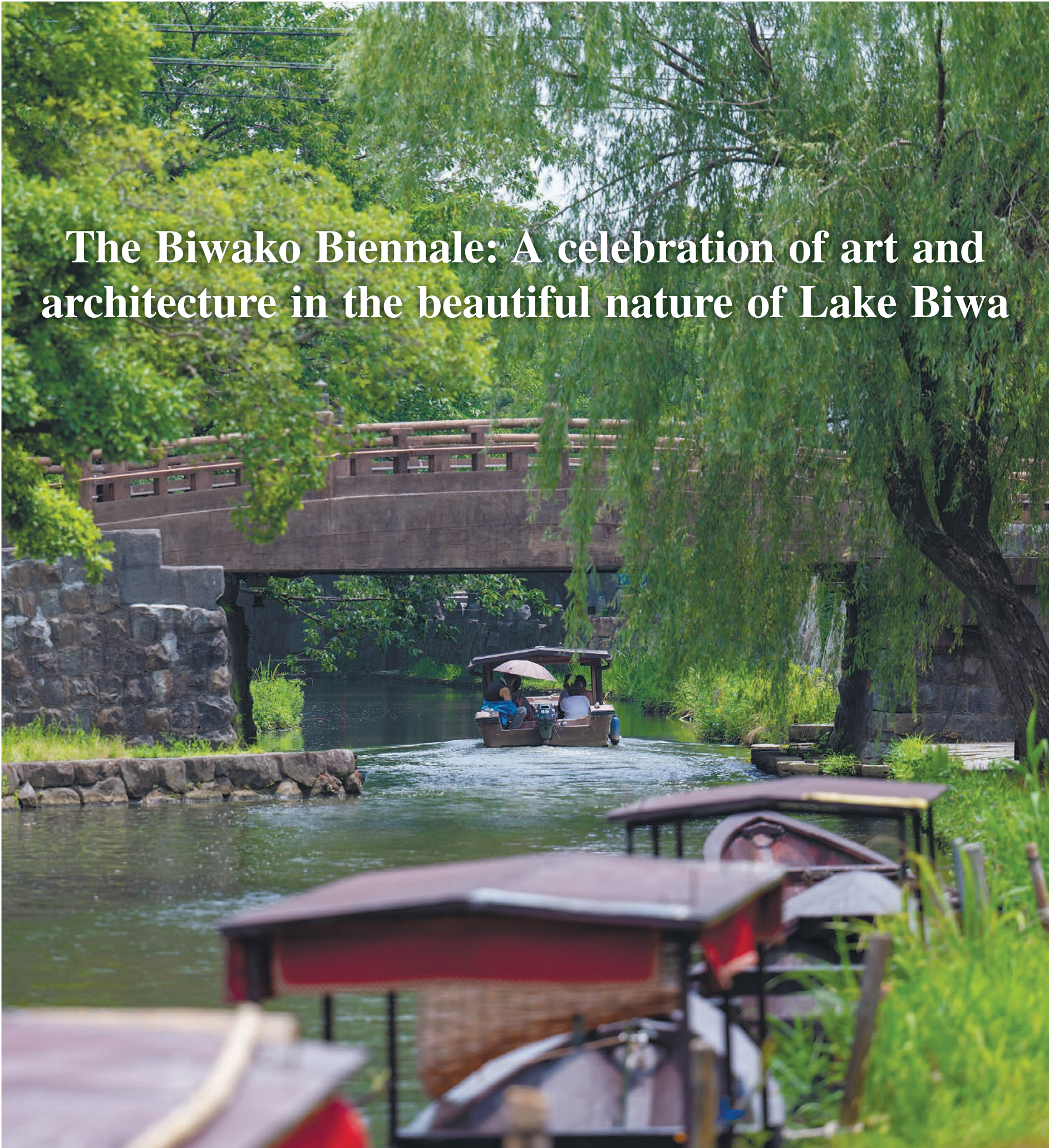
ArtsJP

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The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 serves as an information hub for foreign visitors who are interested in experiencing “The Beauty and the Spirit of Japan.”



The Biwako Biennale: A celebration of art and architecture in the beautiful nature of Lake Biwa

New beginnings for Biwako Biennale: Artfest features themed works from around the world

Pioneering director Yoko Nakata details the genesis of this popular regional event and its venues



“Yugen,” a folding-screen installation by Kikoh Matsuura, is displayed at a preliminary event for this year’s Biwako Biennale, in Shanghai in 2024. YUTO HIRAKAKIUCHI

A sound installation titled “Chozumaki” by Nelo Akamatsu is displayed at the Biwako Biennale in 2022. YUTO HIRAKAKIUCHI



An installation of cloud sculptures titled “Enku” by Julien Signolet is shown at the Biwako Biennale in 2022. YUTO HIRAKAKIUCHI

Kaori Shoji
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

The newest and 11th edition of the Biwako Biennale in Shiga Prefecture kicks off on Sept. 20, running for almost two months until Nov. 16. One of the oldest regional art festivals in Japan, the Biwako Biennale has been a part of The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0 since 2020. This year, the theme is “Flux,” reminding us that the world as we know it is in a constant state of change and flow. The biennale celebrates the state of flux with the works of 70 artists from around the world and its spirit is perfectly in keeping with the The Japan Cultural Expo 2.0’s objective: an invitation to share in the joys of Japan’s richly diverse art scene.

Biennale’s inception

This festival has a formidable history. Unlike other regional art festivals often funded by prefectural governments and corporations, the Biwako Biennale is a largely independent entity launched by Yoko Nakata. Nakata is one of the pioneers of Japan’s regional art festivals. For the past 24 years, she has been helming the Biwako Biennale, nurturing, supporting and supervising the event as it grew in scale and prominence. Her role as art director extends far beyond the borders of event production and her efforts have transformed the historic but too-quiet backwater of Omihachiman into a cultural hub of international repute. “When I first decided to hold the Biwako Biennale here, the residents didn’t even know what a biennale was,” Nakata said with a laugh. “But I knew that the city of Omihachiman, with its incredible history and beautiful natural land-

scapes, would be a perfect setting for this endeavor.”

Venues draped in history, nature

Centuries ago, Omi was the former name of Shiga Prefecture, and the merchants in this area prospered by transporting goods via Lake Biwa, the largest freshwater lake in Japan. Waterways connected Hachiman and other cities to the lake, making it a strategic route for transporting goods from areas along the Sea of Japan all the way to Kyoto and Osaka Bay. The Biwako Biennale’s main venue of Omihachiman bears the remnants of a bygone era when, in the late 16th century, Japan’s most famous warlord established his resplendent castle. A little while later and right up to the present day, the district thrived under the diligence and industry of an elite merchant group known as the Omi Merchants. Many of their houses still stand today. The biennale is distinctive in that many of these houses temporarily turn into galleries and museums for the event.

Nakata said: “Back in the early days of the biennale these merchant houses were empty and so were the streets. In 2004, there was only one cafe. Through the years, however, we convinced the owners of these houses to let us use them for the biennale and since then, they’ve been transformed into cafes, boutiques and guest houses.

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“Imagery Garden,” an installation by saiho and Sayuri Hayashi Egnell, is shown at the Biwako Biennale in 2022. YUTO HIRAKAKIUCHI

→ Continued from page B2

Now, people are coming in as well as inbound travelers who want to experience staying in an old Japanese house.” Thanks to Nakata and the biennale, there’s now a cycle of renovation, reuse and rejuvenation in Omihachiman.

The other venue is Okishima, an island in Lake Biwa. Okishima has a population of about 220, making it the only populated lake island in Japan.

“There’s a ferry to the island, but cars are not allowed,” Nakata noted. “The island is a gorgeous place, so rich in nature. At Okishima’s elementary school, we held a workshop with the students to create a mural, which will be on display at this year’s biennale.”

This year, the biennale will add a new venue. This is Chomeiji temple, part of the 33-temple Saigoku Kannon Pilgrimage and a work of art all its own. Erected in 619 on Mount Chomeiji, there are 808 stairs leading from the ground above the lakeshore to the temple, which offers panoramic views of both Lake Biwa and Omihachiman — a splendid launch point for the Biwako Biennale.

Chomeiji is also famed for its ties to Prince Shotoku, a revered regent and politician of the Asuka Period (538 to 710). Shotoku is said to have modernized government administration and endorsed diplomatic and trade relations with Asia, in particular mainland China.

“This year, we’ll be hosting our first exhibition by an artist from mainland China,” Nakata said. “Because of its relationship to Prince Shotoku, we felt that Chomeiji would be a wonderful setting for this work.”

Omi Merchants and Lake Biwa

In Japan, the Omi Merchants are revered as much for their modesty, discretion and self-discipline as they are for their wealth. Notably, many of the descendants of the original merchants have transformed their family businesses into prominent Japanese companies.

Behind the resounding success of the Omi

Merchants is a particular business ethic called *sanpo yoshi* (win-win-win), meaning that a business transaction should benefit three parties: the seller, the buyer and society at large. Some business pundits say that sanpo yoshi is the original version of the United Nations sustainable development goals.

With such an estimable local heritage, it’s little wonder that Nakata chose Omihachiman to host the biennale.

Untouched by developers and excessive tourism, one can say that Omihachiman is one of Japan’s best-kept secrets.

houses of Omihachiman.

“The houses themselves speak of the Omi Merchants’ legacy — of their prosperity and admirable business ethics. They’ve become empty of residents but now the descendants of the owners are glad that the houses have been cleaned, overhauled and given new life.”

Art, lights and magic

This year there will be more than 200 works by 70 artists, and Nakata said that every one of them went through her personal selection process. “For every biennale I go abroad and make the rounds of art exhibitions, including student exhibitions in art schools and universities. The artist’s age, career history, notoriety — none of that matters. My only

measure for selection is whether I love their work.”

In the early days of the Biwako Biennale, Nakata says many residents weren’t exactly receptive to the idea of an art festival springing up in their midst.

“They were apprehensive of what an art festival would be like, and of artists coming in from outside. They had a notion that artists were unusual people who would be hard to get along with. On the contrary, they were friendly and respectful of the locals and the environs. Now, everyone gets along. The other great news is that through the years, the children of Omihachiman got to grow up with the biennale. For them, art is a part of the Omihachiman streetscape and woven into the fabric of their daily lives.”

The same experience applies to the volunteers and interns that come in from all over Japan and abroad. “One of the staff member’s daughters is the artist saiho whose exhibit ‘Imagery Garden’ will be showing again this year.”

Lighting is another huge concern for Nakata, who emphasized the illumination of each exhibition represents the be-all, end-all of the biennale.

“People who come to Omihachiman will notice that these old historical houses were never wired for electricity,” she said. “Instead, they were designed to bring out the contrasting beauty of light and shadow. I think that the Japanese had a much more polished sense of aesthetics back when there was no technology. Now, sadly, our senses have become blunted and we just don’t have the same eye for beauty or the knack for noticing details that our ancestors had. This is why I put so much emphasis on lighting the exhibits. I want the buildings, the lighting and the exhibits to play off of each other and display hidden depths of beauty and allure.

“The biennale is not just about the art exhibits, it’s about the surroundings and the lighting, which I want to deploy as reminders of something evocative from long ago.”

“Every piece of art in the biennale is pre-

International Art Festival Biwako Biennale 2025

Exhibition period:
Sept. 20 (Sat.) to Nov. 16 (Sun.)
Venues:
Omihachiman Old Town,
Chomeiji temple, Okishima island,
Shiga Prefecture
Hours:
10 a.m. to 5 p.m.
(Last admission: 4:30 p.m.)
Closed on Wednesdays (except Nov. 12)

For more information, visit:



Omihachiman's Old Town TAKAO OHTA

cious to me,” Nakata said.

The secret jewel

Despite that vision, moving the needle from zero to live art festival was harder than Nakata anticipated.

“I knew the venue of Omihachiman would work, but the logistics of securing the sites took some convincing,” she said. “The owners’ families had these buildings and houses for generations and perhaps they were apprehensive. But when they saw the actual biennale take place, they were glad they took the leap.”

“There used to be an ancient capital city in this prefecture, long before Kyoto. There are more temples here per capita than anywhere else in Japan. To hold an art festival here is so meaningful. The artists who come here all say they love the experience and some of them are repeat exhibitors,” she said.

Untouched by developers and excessive tourism, one can say that Omihachiman is one of Japan’s best-kept secrets, a jewel tucked away at the very back of the safe, as it were. “It’s an enchanted city. People who visit here keep coming back because there’s no way you can get enough from just one trip,” Nakata said.

“It is said that there are about 100 regional art festivals in Japan, but the Biwako Biennale is something special. The entire city of Omihachiman is a work of art and I hope that when people visit, they savor every moment.”

Yoko Nakata, general director of Biwako Biennale
Born in Otsu, Shiga Prefecture, Nakata lived in the U.S., the Philippines and France after graduating from Kwansei Gakuin University in 1980. After returning to Japan, she founded the Biwako Biennale international contemporary art festival in 2001.



Lake Biwa’s Okishima is the only populated lake island in Japan. BIWAKO VISITORS BUREAU



Biwako Biennale founder and General Director Yoko Nakata admires a garden from her office, which also serves as an exhibition venue during the art festival, in Omihachiman Old Town. TAKAO OHTA

INFORMATION

ART AND CULTURAL EVENTS ACROSS JAPAN

Japan’s cultural treasure troves are scattered across the archipelago. These are regional art festivals, often tucked away in the mountains or found on the streets of rural villages. The festivals offer amazing viewing experiences while connecting viewers with the culture, nature, lifestyles and ambience unique to each region. Held far off the beaten track, regional art festivals provide an opportunity to discover your very own, personal Japan.

Go for Kogei: Going for free expression

Since its launch in 2020, Go for Kogei has drawn artists, creators, designers and craftspeople to Japan’s northern coastline along the Sea of Japan. The aim is to explore free forms of expression within the context of *kogei*, or Japanese artisanal and handcrafted art products.

Set against the beautiful cityscapes of Ishikawa and Toyama prefectures, Go for Kogei infuses the heritage of traditional craftsmanship with contemporary ideas and practices.

Participants will witness works from some of the most exciting frontrunners of Japan’s Kogei art scene. Ikuya Sagara’s

Kayabuki (Thatched roof) work provides an excellent entryway to understanding the thatching culture, while Shuji Nakagawa’s handcrafted wood products speak of the deep relationship between the Japanese and the wooden containers in every stage of their lives. Visitors can also check out the works of Tomoko Taka, a native of Wajima, Ishikawa Prefecture, and self-taught embroidery artist who launched a supportive and collaborative project for the children of the Noto Peninsula after the 2024 earthquake. Her project embodies the spirit of kogei by demonstrating the restorative powers of handwork.



Schedule: Sept. 13 (Sat.) to Oct. 19 (Sun.) [closed Wednesdays]
Hours: 10 a.m.-4:30 p.m. (last admission 4 p.m.)
Venues: lwase area (Toyama), Higashiyama area (Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture)
Information: <https://goforkogei.com/en/>



Yuki Hayama’s “Ssangyong” is displayed at the Masuda Sake Brewery during Go for Kogei in Toyama in September and October 2023. OSAMU WATANABE

Tokyo Biennale: Wandering deep into the wonders of Tokyo

The Tokyo Biennale is now in its third edition. The theme this year is “Wander for Wonder,” which serves as an invitation to walk, wander and discover new perspectives by moving through this amazing city.

This year, 39 artists, units and groups will participate, as the Tokyo Biennale takes the festival beyond the buildings and confines of exhibition venues to explore the city itself. Tokyo’s extraordinary and multilayered history may begin to reveal itself as participants stroll through the sights and streets.

This year, the Tokyo Biennale launched the “Social Dive” open call program, which called for projects from around the world that explore and delve into the theme of *sampo* (walking). Five projects were chosen from the 1,004 that answered the call.

Attendees are invited to also check out the Tokyo Perspective photography project. Besides the photo exhibition compiled by artists who wandered through the city, copies of their work will be available for purchase at 7-Eleven stores nationwide.



Schedule: Oct. 17 (Fri.) to Dec. 14 (Sun.)
Main venues: Etoile Kaito Living Building, Toeizan Kan’ei-ji temple
Exhibition areas: Ueno/Okachimachi, Kanda/Akihabara, Suidobashi, Nihonbashi/Bakurocho, Yaesu/Kyobashi, Otemachi/Marunouchi/Yurakucho
Information: <https://tokyobiennale.jp/tb2025/?lang=en>



Adam Roigart’s “For the Public I-III” (shown in Stockholm in 2024) is one of the projects chosen for this year’s “Social Dive” program.

Roots and Arts Shiraoi: There is something for everyone

Shiraoi in southwest Hokkaido is a stunningly beautiful town, rich in nature and history. The majority of the town is forest, and it’s famed for nurturing the heritage and culture of the indigenous Ainu people.

Shiraoi is the stage for Roots and Arts, a community-based art project that has been exploring and rediscovering the culture and traditions of the region since 2021. Roots and Arts is all about experiencing Shiraoi’s vibe and culture while enjoying and participating in the exhibitions and workshops that happen over the event period.

There’s something for everyone in Roots and Arts. From toddlers to older people, the works on display will excite and delight the senses.

A total of 10 projects will be exhibited in nine different locations, including the work of Amsterdam-based Chikako Watanabe, who was in residence in Shiraoi for Roots and Arts. Don’t miss the giant patchwork project that celebrates the gathering of diverse cultures. Visitors may also want to check out a workshop for making musical instruments from locally sourced materials.



Schedule: Sept. 19 (Fri.) to Oct. 13 (Mon.) [closed Mon. to Wed. except public holidays]
Venue: Shiraoi, Hokkaido
Information: <https://www.shi-ra-oi.jp>



A variety of handicrafts are displayed during Roots and Arts Shiraoi in Hokkaido.

Japan Cultural Passport Campaign Aug. 5 (Tue.) to Feb. 8 (Sun.), 2026 7 days: ¥3,500 | 14 days: ¥6,500 | 21 days: ¥8,000



The Japan Cultural Passport is a digital pass that lets you explore about 30 cultural facilities nationwide with just a QR code on your smartphone. From cultural properties and modern art to science and technology, it eases access to a wide variety of attractions in a convenient and cost-effective way.

Featured regions: Kanto / Chubu / Kansai / Chugoku / Kyushu

Highlights include:

National treasure artworks, modern and contemporary Japanese paintings, innovative design and craftwork, samurai and ninja period drama sets, regional cultural heritage, seasonal gardens and displays of dinosaur skeletons and meteorites.

Model Courses:

Recommended routes are introduced on the official website at <https://www.japanculturalpassport.com/en/>

Pass Overview

- Valid for 7, 14 or 21 consecutive days
- One-time entry to each facility

