

# The Beauty of Tortoise-shell Work



Hair ornament (comb and hairpin) made in the Edo era.

# Tortoise Shell and the Japanese

## —A brief history of tortoise shell culture and turtle conservation in Japan—

The history of the sea turtle in the life of Japanese people dates as far back as the Stone Age. Shell mounds containing turtle bones are distributed along the seacoast of the Japanese archipelago. These were mainly used for food.

Their shells began to be used for ornaments and furniture in the Nara era (A.D.745-784) when various kinds of tortoise shell craftwork were introduced from China. Those ornamental articles catered to the taste of the aristocracy. Today some of the articles are preserved as national treasures at the Imperial treasury “Shōsōin” in Nara City.

During the Heian era that followed (794-1190), tortoise shells were imported from China and made into adornments that symbolized the high status of the nobility.

It was not until the Edo era (1603-1866) that tortoise shell ornaments came to be possessed by the common people. During that time a variety of accessories using tortoise shell were developed together with its processing techniques. Since the majority of raw materials were imported from China in those days, the processing techniques first developed in Nagasaki (a port city opened to foreign trade), were later passed on to Osaka and subsequently to Edo (Tokyo). Today, Japanese tortoise shell craftwork is world-famous as one of Japan's traditional craft arts.

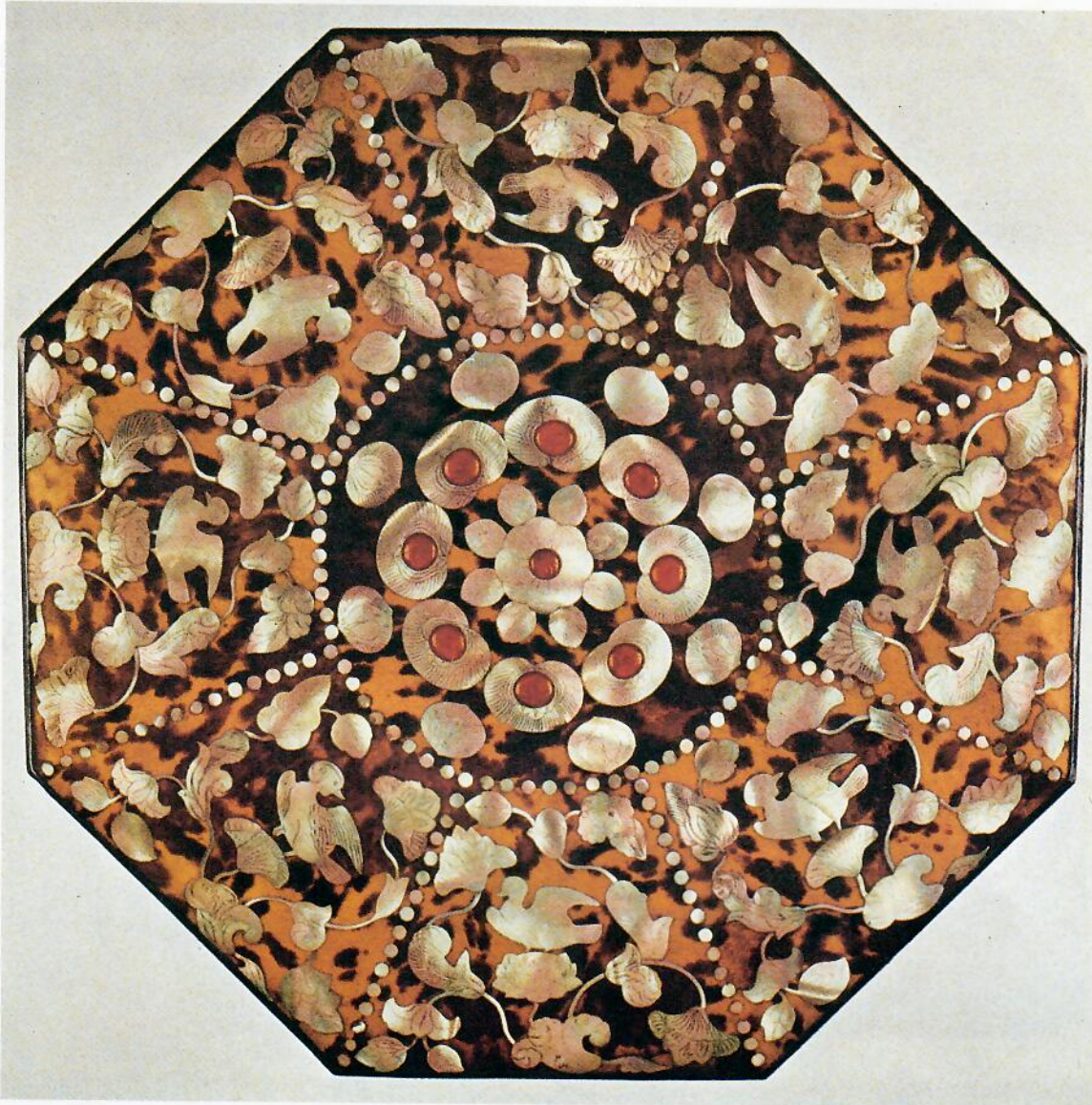
Japan has been importing a large amount of hawksbill shells from South Pacific countries. The increased demand has brought about the excessive

capture of hawksbills in those countries, who are now making efforts to increase this species with enforcement of measures aiming at protecting adult turtles and their eggs.

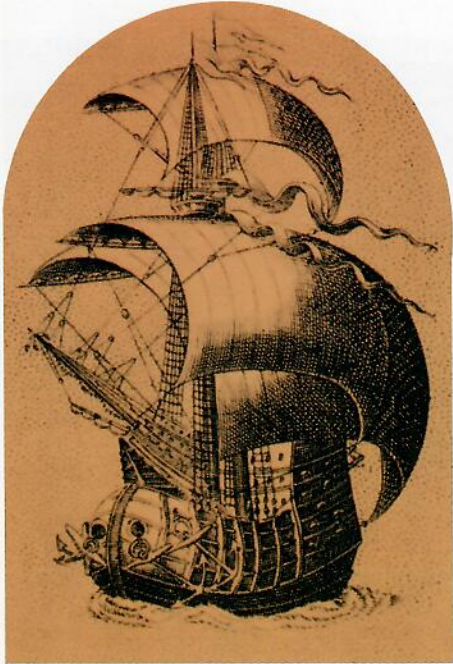
Japan, similarly, has a long history of conserving sea turtles dating back to the Meiji era (1868-1912) (with a brief interruption by WWII). The conservation activities involve protection and propagation of the four sea turtle species, namely, loggerhead, green, hawksbill and leather turtles, which inhabit the Japanese sea areas. Nine organizations including research institutes and protection groups, along with two sea turtle museums, are now actively conducting "the protection of naturally laid eggs" and "releasing of hatched fries." In addition, two laboratories are gathering eggs from protected female turtles. It is expected that research and conservation of sea turtles will be advanced as a result of these activities.

Federation of Japan Tortoise-shell Association, representing people engaged in producing traditional Japanese tortoise shell craft, has been restricting, from the standpoint of wildlife preservation, the amount of hawksbill imports at their own discretion. It has dispatched five different missions abroad in search of sites appropriate for hawksbill propagation. As a result, it provided the Republic of Palau in Micronesia with financial assistance for four consecutive years from 1982 in research work targetting on the propagation of hawksbill. The expert dispatched by the association has been continuing his work even though the Japanese grant aid project and dispatch of experts for the protection and propagation of sea turtles were completed in 1986.

The efforts described above resulted in the successful protection and breeding of eggs and the releasing of marked fries. Using Palau as a model, the hawksbill propagation scheme is now being extended to neighboring countries such as the Federated States of Micronesia and the Republic of Marshall Islands.

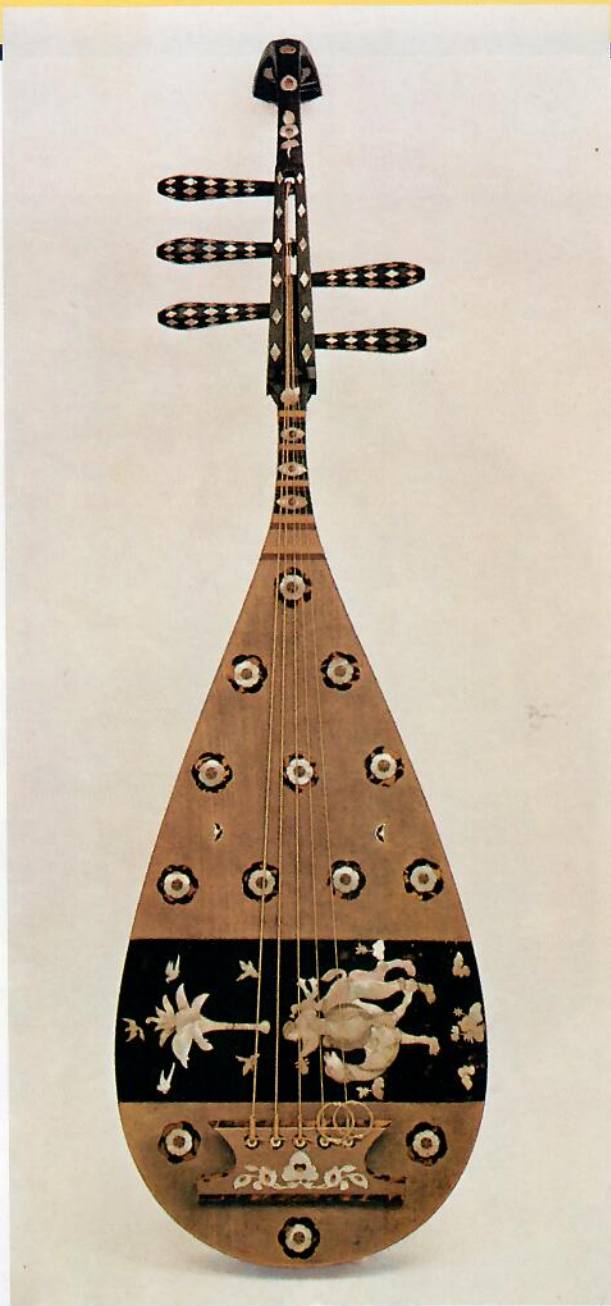


The oldest Japanese works of art—(Treasures of Shōsōin). About 12 centuries ago.  
Octagonal box with tortoise-shell and mother-of-pearl inlay.



Portuguese sailboat.

About five centuries ago, Chinese and Portuguese merchant ships brought tortoise shells to Nagasaki, wherefrom the processing techniques were expended to Osaka and Edo (Tokyo).

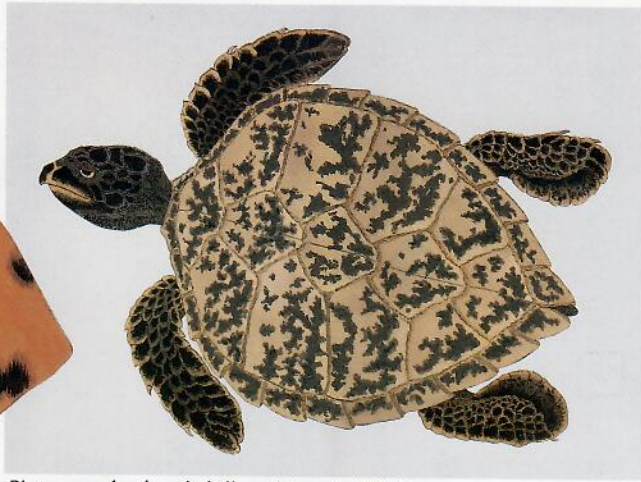


Biwa (a five-stringed lutelike musical instrument) with mother-of-pearl and tortoise-shell inlay. (Treasures of Shōshōin)



Beautiful tortoise-shell work was cherished both in the East and in the West.

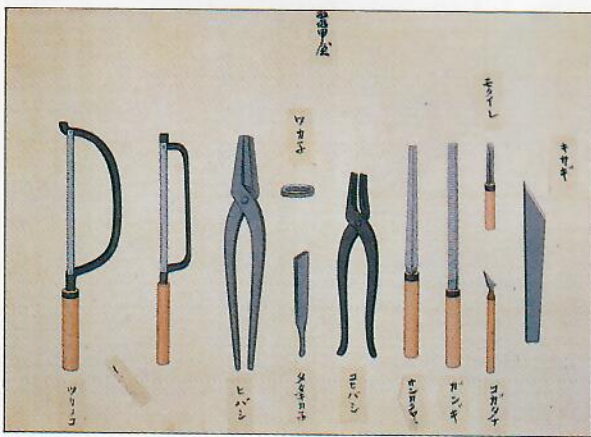
Made of oak with tortoise-shell and ivory inlay,  
Portuguese made  
22.8cm(width) × 41.2cm(length) × 32cm(height).



Pictures of a hawksbill and its shell (left)



Comb and tortoise-shell craft workshop



Tools for making tortoise-shell craft

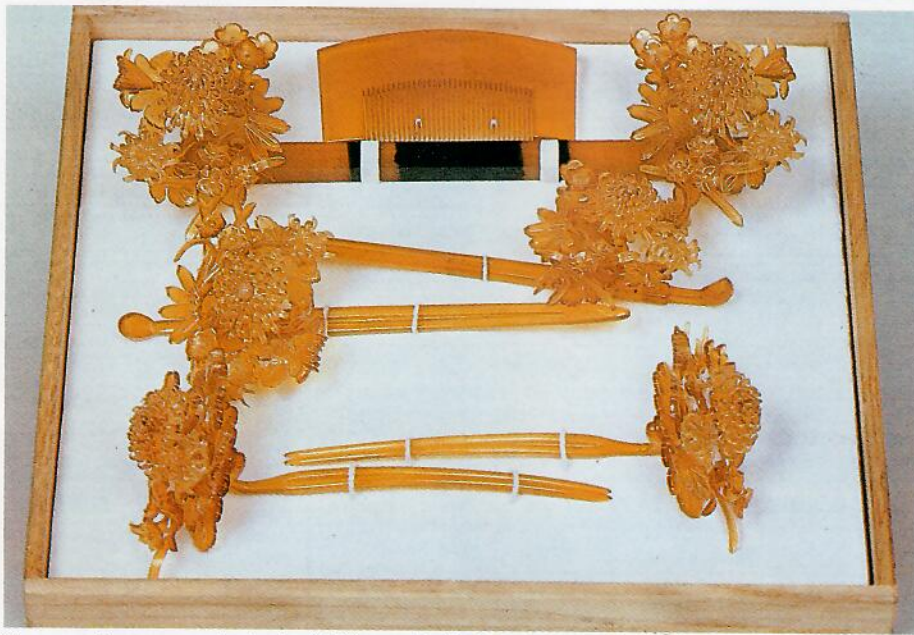


Tortoise-shell comb made in the Edo era.



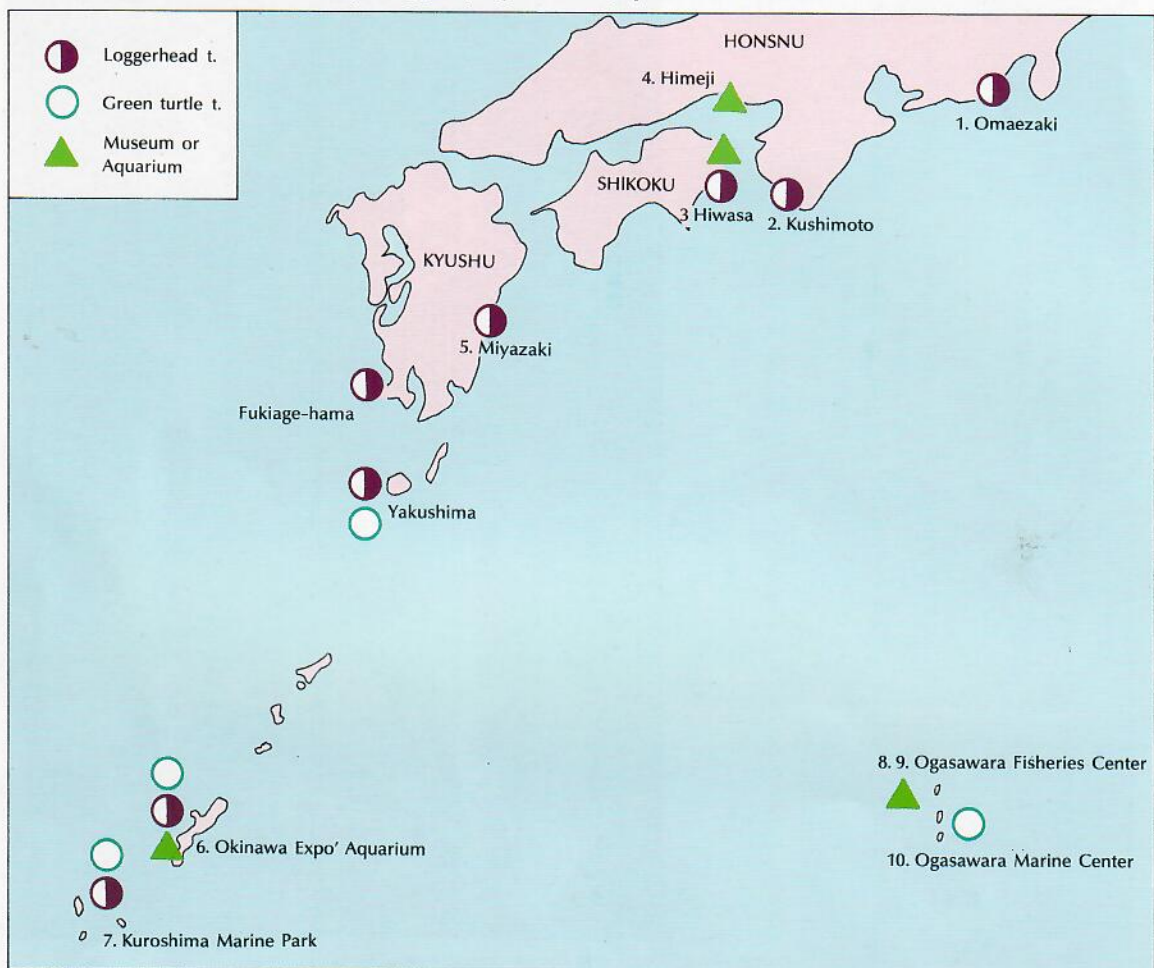


Japanese bride adorned with tortoise-shell hair ornament.



Ornaments were made in the Meiji era. (Bridal Ornaments)

### Major egg-laying sites of Japanese sea turtles



Table—Institutes for protecting sea turtles and the number of hatchings released.

|    | Location                                  | Years     | No. of Hatching Released | Turtles       | Name              | Address  |
|----|---|-----------|--------------------------|---------------|-------------------|--|
| 1  | Omaezaki Board of Education               | 1979~1986 | (268)<br>54,532          | Loggerhead    | Yoshio Kawarazaki | 2905 Omaezaki, Omaezaki-machi Haibaragun, Shizuoka Pref. |
| 2  | Kushimoto Marine Park                     | 1973~1986 | (100)※1<br>736           | Loggerhead    | Itsuo Miyawaki    | Kushimoto-cho, Nishimuta-gun Wakayama, Pref.             |
| 3  | Hiwasa Chelonian Museum                   | 1984~1986 | 1852                     | Loggerhead †1 | Satoru Nitto      | Ohamakaigan hiwasa-cho, Kaifu-gun, Tokushima Pref.       |
| 4  | Himeji City Aquarium                      |           |                          | Loggerhead    | Itaru Uchida      | Chūoukōen Tegarayama Himeji City, Hyogo Pref.            |
| 5  | Miyazaki Wildlife Research Center         | 1977~1986 | (281)<br>12,000          | Loggerhead †2 | Shigeru Nakajima  | 3083 Hamayama, Shioji, Miyazaki-City, Miyazaki Pref.     |
| 6  | Okinawa Expo' Aquarium                    | 1983~1986 | 600                      | Loggerhead    | Senzoh Uchida     | Motobu-machi, Okinawa Pref.                              |
| 7  | Kuroshima Marine Park                     | 1983~1986 | (115)※2<br>3,450         | Loggerhead    | Naoki Kamezaki    | Kuroshima, Taketomi-cho, Yaeyama-gun, Okinawa Pref.      |
| 8  | Ogasawara Island Office Fisheries Section | 1913~1939 | (60)※3<br>38,970         | Green         | Norio Tohyama     | Omura, Chichijima, Ogasawara-mura, Tokyo.                |
| 9  | Ogasawara Fisheries Center                | 1975~1981 | (179)<br>61,528          | Green         | Yoji Kurata       | Kiyose, Chichijima Ogasawara-mura, Tokyo.                |
| 10 | Ogasawara Marine Center                   | 1982~1986 | (192)<br>52,510          | Green         | Hiroyuki Suganuma | Byobudani, Chichijima, Ogasawara-mura, Tokyo.            |

( ) : shows the numbers of adult turtles. ※1=included 87 of Green turtle ※2=Young turtle. included 55 of Green turtle ※3=Young turtle †1=Natural monument of Japan †2=Natural monument of Miyazaki Pref.

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