

みやこ
世界に通じる 京の職人
Kyoto Artisans and Their Worlds

KCJS, Spring 2026
Instructor: Melissa Rinne

Since its inception in 794, the ancient capital of Kyoto has been a center for Japan's high-end artisanal industries. Neighborhoods, and even streets, were often defined by the various guilds that prospered throughout different parts of the city, from the famed weaving workshops of Nishijin to the hand-applied *yūzen* dyeing used for the finest kimono, from objects crafted for daily life in Kyoto *machiya* (townhouses) to the exclusive implements made for the court, elite warriors, and practitioners of *chanoyu* (tea) by hereditary family workshops dating back multiple generations. For centuries, decorative and applied arts made in "Miyako" have exemplified the pinnacle of refinement and quality.

This course will explore Kyoto's centuries-old artistic traditions in such areas as woven and dyed textiles, bamboo, paper, ceramics, lacquer, and carpentry through engagement with the city's living artists and craftspeople. In addition to learning about the production techniques used in various artistic mediums and the intricate divisions of labor within each industry, we will look how multigenerational businesses are reinventing themselves to meet the needs of the modern society, sometimes straddling the line between artisan and artist. When possible, we will also visit major art exhibitions, guided by leading artists in these craft (*kōgei*) genres. We will also learn about efforts to preserve traditional industries into the future.

During site visits to artist studios, workshops, and exhibitions, students will be expected not only make careful observations but also to ask questions reflecting their understanding of the readings, take detailed field notes, and consider approaches to the study of materials, techniques, contemporary craft, and intangible cultural heritage. Success in this class will require a high degree of initiative and proactive participation, a commitment to doing the readings and to submitting fieldwork reports (1000+ words per week) documenting these visits. In addition, students will be responsible for promptly writing thank you letters to the artists visited on a rotating basis (several letters per student per semester). Due to the size of the studios we will visit, this class will be limited to approximately ten students, chosen through essays written after the first class.

In lieu of a final exam, students will give a presentation on the research topic of their choice and write a final paper (5000+ words) based on their own research and analysis on a traditional industry, artistic practice, or other area of choice. Assessment will be based on classroom participation and thank you letters (20%), fieldwork reports (40%), final presentation (20%), and final paper (20%). Class attendance is mandatory.

In preparation for the final presentation and paper, each student must identify a particular area of interest and engage in independent research, including some combination of interviews, site visits, and library and web research in Japanese and English. Students should discuss their plans for these reports with the instructor(s) as early as possible in the semester in order to jointly consider the resources that might be available.

Melissa M. Rinne is Senior Specialist in the Curatorial Division of the Kyoto National Museum. Educated at Brown University, Kyoto City University of Arts, and Kyoto University, she specializes in Japanese art history, especially textiles, bamboo, and other decorative arts. Her books and articles have been published by the Asian Art Museum, Princeton University, the Kyoto National Museum, the Tokyo National Museum, and the Fowler Museum at UCLA, and she has translated numerous Japanese art historical publications. A former Associate Curator of Japanese Art at the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, she is active in the International Council of Museums (ICOM), currently serving as chair of its International Committee for Museums and Collections of Decorative Arts and Design (ICDAD).