

Spring 2026 Special Exhibition

Falconry in Edo-Period Japan: The Bond Between Hawks and People



【Overview】

Throughout the ages, figures of power in Japan have practiced falconry, a form of hunting involving the skillful maneuvering of trained falcons; “falcons,” in this context, refers collectively to birds of prey such as goshawks, sparrowhawks, and peregrine falcons. Gradually, falcons came to be regarded as symbols of power, and during the Edo period (1603–1868), falcons owned by shoguns and daimyo lords were referred to as o-taka (“high and noble falcons”).

Like many other daimyo families, the Maeda family of the Kaga Domain (present-day Ishikawa Prefecture and part of Toyama Prefecture) owned many falcons, and practiced falconry within the domain. This endeavor involved not only the lord himself, but also a variety of people throughout the process.

During the Edo period, both falcons and the birds caught by them were also given as gifts, and this ritual exchange of gifts held important symbolism in samurai society, as a way of reaffirming relationships within the power hierarchy.

In this exhibition, we will explore the Maeda family’s history of falconry — not only hunting with falcons, but also raising and training them — as well as the gift-giving rituals associated with them, through a selection of old documents, falconry equipment, paintings, and more.

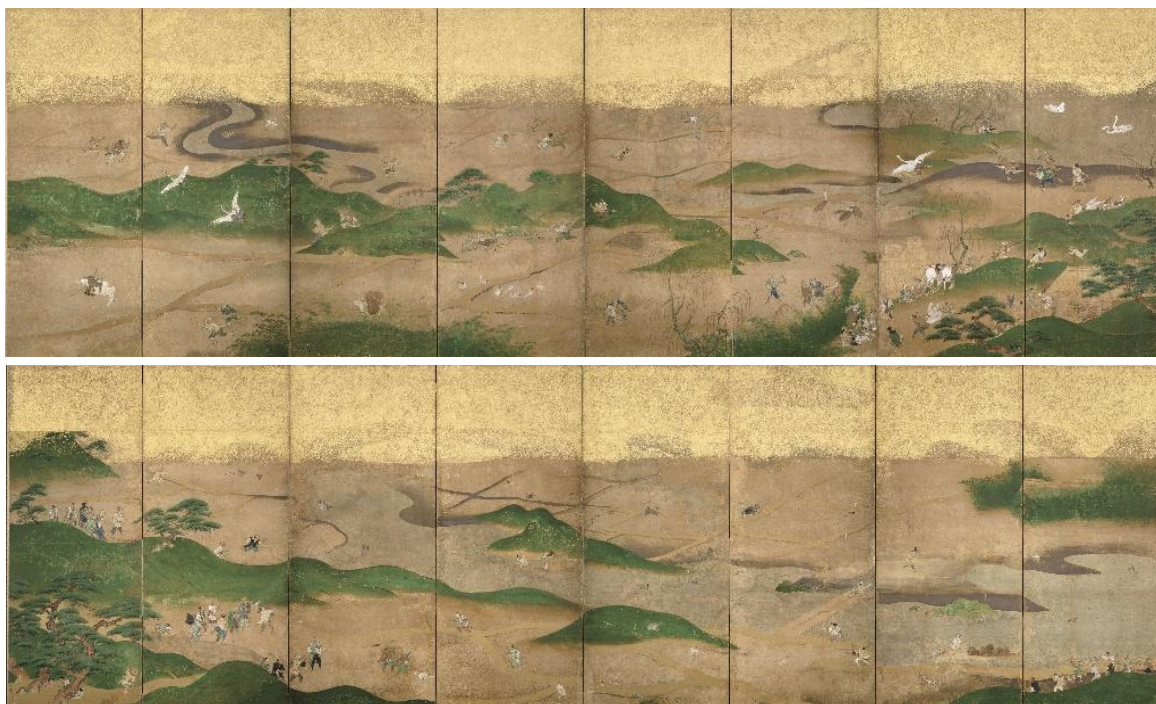
【Exhibition Details and Main Exhibits】

Prologue : Falconry in Edo-Period Japan

Falconry has been prized by the powerful all throughout Japanese history, and the shoguns and daimyo lords of the Edo period were no exception: they owned many falcons and practiced falconry. Falconry's liveliness and excitement also made it an ideal subject for paintings. The introduction section offers a visual overview of falconry during the Edo period, through falconry-themed art, as well as documents featuring illustrations of falconry equipment.



Oji-suji Tsuru Onari Zu ("Crane Hunting in the Oji Area"), from *Ryuei Gishiki Zue* ("Album of Pictures Depicting Shogunate Ceremonies"), 1846, from the Collection of Ishikawa prefectural Museum of History



Falconry Folding Scenes by Kusumi Morikage, Edo Period (17th Century), from the Collection of Nitto Boseki Co., Ltd.

Section 1: Falconry Grounds and the Environment

The places where falconry is practiced are called takaba (“falconry grounds”). In addition to falconry grounds within their own territory, the Maeda family also practiced falconry near Edo (modern-day Tokyo) during the early modern period (ca. 17th to early 18th century), on the grounds that they had been granted by the shogun. The Edo period (1603–1868) saw the development of new rice fields in many areas; this development gradually extended into the bird habitats within falconry grounds, which in turn led to environmental issues such as the loss of prey birds. In this section, we look at the extent of falconry grounds, as well as environmental conservation efforts that took place there.



Map of Grassy Areas in Newly Developed Land with Taxable Yield in Higashi-Kagatsume Village, Kanaura, 1860, from the Collection of Ishikawa prefectural Museum of History

Section 2: Daimyo Lords and Falconry

The heads of the Maeda family, the daimyo lords of the Kaga Domain, would often go out to practice falconry within their territory, accompanied by vassals and falconers. Falconry was an intimately familiar form of hunting for these lords, and the equipment they used has been passed down to this day. This section takes a look at how falconry was practiced by the daimyo, with a focus on their equipment and old documents. It also features paintings of falcons and falconry passed down by the Maeda family, offering a sense of the family’s interest in falconry.



Suzu-ita (“Bell Plate”), a Piece of Falconry Equipment Handed Down within the Maeda Family, Edo Period (19th Century), from the Collection of the Maeda Ikutokukai Foundation



Tethered Hawks Folding Screens, Edo Period (17th Century), from the Collection of the Maeda Ikutokukai Foundation

Section 3: The People Who Made Falconry Possible

Falconry relied on the efforts of many different people. In this section, we introduce the falconers who raised and trained falcons, the people who prepared the falcons' food in service to the domain government, the people who headed environmental management at falconry grounds, the people who provided falcon nestlings as tribute to the domain government, and the peasants who collected falcon nestlings.



Diagram of Hawk Feathers, 1692, from a Private Collection

Section 4: The Raising of Falcons

The falcons that belonged to the Maeda family were kept in falconry stables called mews not far from Kanazawa Castle, in the vicinity of what is now Ishibiki, Kanazawa; the falconers also lived near these. Being animals, falcons would occasionally experience injury or illness, and similarly, raising falcons also necessitated large amounts of food. This section takes a closer look at the actual work of keeping and raising falcons.

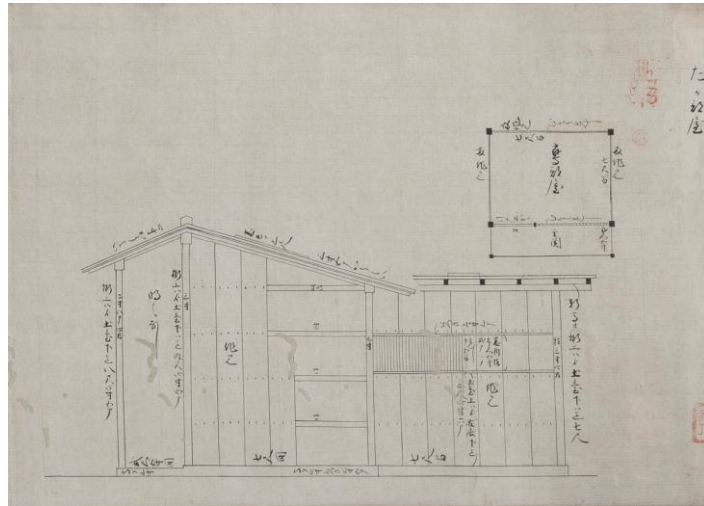
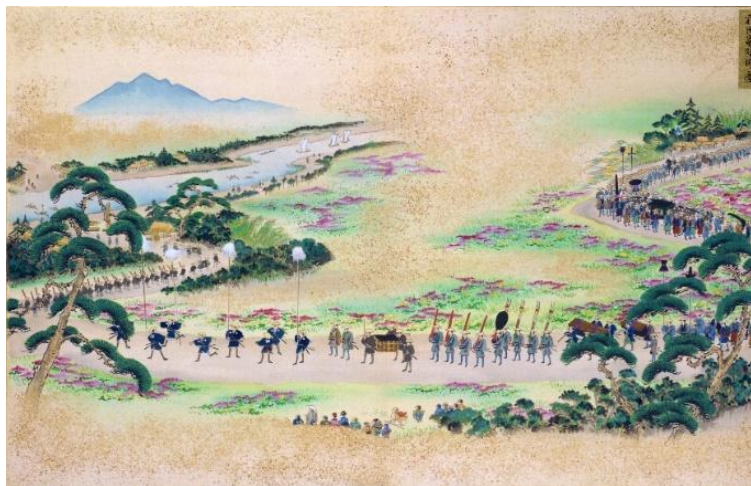


Diagram of Falconry Mew (Partial), 1845, from the Collection of the Kanazawa Municipal Tamagawa Library

Section 5: The Gift-Giving Rituals Associated with Falcons

During the Edo period (1603–1868), falcons were even given as gifts. The daimyo lords of regions that raised falcons would offer falcons as gifts to the shogun; after a length of time, some of these would be given by the shogun to powerful daimyo, such as branches of the Tokugawa family, or the Maeda family. Within samurai society, birds caught by falcons were also commonly given as gifts, as well. This section explores the gift-giving rituals associated with falcons.



Maeda-ke Kikoku no Zu ("The Maeda Family's Return Home"), from *Ryuei Gishiki Zue* ("Album of Pictures Depicting Shogunate Ceremonies"), 1865, from the Collection of Ishikawa prefectural Museum of History

Epilogue: Falconry into the Modern Era

With the end of Japan's feudal period in the second half of the 19th century, the systems and structures the Maeda family had for falconry were either modified or dismantled entirely. However, the Maeda family still continued to keep falcons, and even after moving to Tokyo, they continued to practice falconry in places such as around their villa. In this final section, we look at the way that different falconry systems and structures changed or were abolished during this time of transformation, and what falconry looked like in this period.



Portrait of Maeda Toshitsugu, 15th Head of the Maeda Family, 1889, from the Collection of Maeda Tosanokami-ke Shiryoukan Museum

Dates: Sat., Apr. 25 to Sun., Jun. 7, 2025

Hours: 9:00 to 17:00 (last admission at 16:30)

Open 7 days a week during the exhibition period

Venue: Special Exhibition Room and Project Exhibition Room

Admission: Adults ¥1,200 (¥960), university and professional school students ¥960 (¥760)

- Free admission for high school students and younger
 - Prices shown in parentheses above are price per person for groups of 20 or more, or prices for visitors 65 and older.
 - Free admission upon presentation of disability certification or Mirairo ID, for holder and one accompanying person.
- Additional fee required for admission to the Kaga-Honda Museum.
- Electronic tickets are also available (with no designated date/time).

Electronic Tickets :

- Admission: Adults ¥1,200, university and professional school students ¥960

Notes

- Discounts (such as for visitors 65 and older) are not available with electronic tickets. To take advantage of discounts, please purchase tickets at the counter on the day of your visit.
- Electronic tickets have no designated date or time, and there are no guarantees for admission time slots.

Organizer: Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of History

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