

The “Edo Tokyo Kirari Project,” launched by Tokyo Governor Yuriko Koike in 2016, aims to discover businesses that have long made excellent products using traditional methods, polish them from new perspectives, and disseminate them globally in order to keep the craft alive. Businesses full of the

charm of tradition and the innovation needed to become brands representing Tokyo are chosen under the project. One of the companies recently selected is Isehan-Honten, the only remaining establishment that makes the highest quality safflower rouge, or “Komachi Beni,” in the traditional way.

Established in 1825, Isehan-Honten has been making *beni* for nearly two centuries. The technique used to produce this luminous scarlet has been passed on by the craftsman’s intuition—only by word of mouth. Today there are just two craftsmen remaining who have inherited this knowledge. However, visitors to the Isehan-Honten Museum of Beni in



The glowing iridescent green of “Komachi Beni” dried onto a small porcelain vessel.

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Tokyo’s fashionable Minami Aoyama district can learn a little about the production process and try *beni* for themselves. This is the place where the true *beni* can be purchased.

Anyone who has ever seen traditional Japanese art from the Edo period (1603-1868) will recognize one very particular ideal of beauty from the time: bright red lips. But what most probably do not realize is just how much time and effort went into making the very special rouge that was used by the top entertainers and fashion leaders of that time.

Beni is made from the petals of safflowers, which are yellow, but also contain a tiny percentage of red pigment.

This color is painstakingly refined through an extensive, labor-heavy process. Around 1,000 safflowers are needed to make a regular portion of *beni rouge*.

Safflowers are only harvested in early summer. Early in the morning when the thorns are still soft because of dew, the flower petals are picked and washed in water. Fermentation changes the petals from yellow to red. The fermented petals are pounded into a paste, which is made into flat oval shapes and dried in the sun to become what is called *benimochi*. The *benimochi* is put into water, then alkaline and acid solutions

Unlike modern lipsticks, *beni* feels completely weightless and natural, as if the user is wearing no makeup at all. And it complements the natural skin tone of the wearer, so that if three different women use it, it is likely to look like a completely different color on each. Depending on how many layers are applied, it can produce shades ranging from soft pink to a deep, bright red.

A spokesperson for Isehan-Honten said that “Komachi Beni” is still a popular gift from men to women, and from friends to new brides, as there is no need to worry about choosing the

A New Look at Traditional Makeup

Isehan-Honten aims to keep the custom of superior quality safflower rouge, or “Komachi Beni,” alive.

are added to make *beni-eki* (red liquid). Next a fascicle of hemp is immersed in this liquid and, mysteriously, only red pigment is adsorbed. This is squeezed out of the hemp into another container. The extra moisture is then carefully filtered to leave just the red mud. It is painted onto small porcelain vessels and left to dry. As it dries, the bright red turns iridescent green.

But the alchemy and magic does not stop there. When applying *beni*, a wet lip brush is used to dab onto the dried metallic green substance, and astonishingly, it reverts to brilliant red! In the Edo period it was fashionable to apply more *beni* in this way only on the lower lip.

right shade to purchase. It is also great for sommeliers and musicians, as it will not rub off on a glass or instrument. With its beautiful porcelain bowls, metallic green tint, and fascinating backstory, it is a gift that is practical, meaningful, and magical.



Just by sweeping with a wet brush, “Komachi Beni” changes to red.

The process of making “Komachi Beni”

