

A Historical Walk Around Kyoto

Photo by Masayoshi Masuda



Uji River Fireworks Display

Uji River Fireworks Display is held around Uji Bridge in the south of Kyoto on the 10th of August. About 7,000 fireworks light up in the sky under the theme of the Tale of Genji*, written by Murasaki Shikibu (date of birth and death unknown). This display attracts about 200 thousand people to the riverside every year.

* The oldest full-length fictional love story by a noblewoman. It is based on noble life in the Heian period (794–1191).

Origin of Fireworks

In China, black gunpowder was developed for lighting a signal fire, and then it was first used for fireworks displays in Florence, Italy in the latter half of the 14th century. It was introduced to the world in the Age of Geographical Discovery.

Japanese Fireworks

Gunpowder was introduced to Japan in 1543 by Saint Francis Xavier (1506–1552), a Spanish nobleman from Portugal. Since then, it was only used for lighting a signal fire or a Ninja's weapon.

It is said that the first person who saw a fireworks display was Date Masamune (1567–1636), a military chieftain, in 1589. According to another theory, the first person was Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542–1616) who established the Edo Shogunate. In 1613, a British sea captain brought materials for fireworks and gave an order to a Chinese fire worker to show him a fireworks display. The fireworks display of the time wasn't the same as a modern one. Sparks rose from a tube. The modern one appeared in the 19th century. In the Meiji period (1868–1912), potassium chlorate, strontium, aluminum and other raw materials for matches were imported into Japan. By using these new materials, fireworks display various colors.

Nowadays, the Japanese fireworks display is one of the most elaborate in the world, and is exported to about 20 countries.

The typical Japanese fireworks are aerial fireworks exploding into the shapes of flowers such as the chrysanthemum. Fireworks displays are held in various parts of the country every summer. In Uji, purple was designated as a keynote of the Uji River Fireworks Display because the name of the Tale of Genji's writer, *Murasaki*, means purple in Japanese.

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