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BEAUTIFUL AND DURABLE
JAPANESE LACQUER

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BEAUTIFUL AND DURABLE JAPANESE LACQUER

Lacquer has been deeply connected to the culture and lives of Japanese people since ancient times. Sourced from the sap of the lacquer tree, lacquer has long been used to coat everyday wooden utensils such as bowls and tools, and since at least the eighth century, it has also been used for the creation of ornamental boxes and objects of art. Lacquerware has excellent practical and decorative qualities, and with advances in technology lacquer is now even applied to industrial goods on non-wooden surfaces such as camera bodies and watches. In this month's issue of *Highlighting Japan*, we zoom in on some examples of the beauty and durability of Japanese lacquer.

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Asai Yasuhiro's *Way of Light*, a *maki-e* box with inlaid tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl

Photo: Courtesy of Asai Yasuhiro

EDITORS' NOTE

Japanese names in this publication are written in Japanese order: family name first, personal name last.

JAPAN-UK SUMMIT MEETING AND WORKING LUNCH

On May 5, Mr. Kishida Fumio, Prime Minister of Japan, who was visiting the United Kingdom, held a summit meeting including a 20-minute head-to-head, and working lunch with the Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. An overview is as follows.

At the outset, Prime Minister Kishida stated that he was pleased to meet Prime Minister Johnson again and congratulated the 70th anniversary of the reign of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. The two leaders confirmed that the Japan-UK relationship is closer than ever before and that they would further deepen the bilateral cooperation; that the G7 would unite and lead the international community in response to Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and would make efforts to sanction Russia and support Ukraine.

The two leaders shared the view that the security of the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific is inseparable and that unilateral change of the status quo by force is not acceptable anywhere in the world. Prime Minister Kishida commended the deepening of Japan-UK security and defence cooperation and UK's engagement in the Indo-Pacific, including the deployment of the UK carrier strike group to the region and joint exercises last year, the permanent deployment of UK naval vessels to the region and the response to ship-to-ship transfers with North Korean-flagged vessels. Prime Minister Johnson stated that the UK remains committed to the region.

The two leaders welcomed the agreement in principle on the Japan-UK Reciprocal Access Agreement, negotiations for which began in October last year. They affirmed that the agreement would further deepen Japan-UK security and defence cooperation by facilitating joint operations and exercises between the Japan Self Defense Forces and UK military forces, and enable the two countries to make a further contribution to global peace and stability. The two leaders confirmed that they would accelerate the work towards an early signature.

With regard to the cooperation between Japan and the UK on future combat air system, the two leaders shared the view to reach mutual understanding on the overall picture of cooperation by the end of 2022, in cooperation with allies and other countries.

The two leaders exchanged views on the importance of economic security and energy security. In view of the risks that have emerged as a result of the Ukrainian crisis, they confirmed that cooperation among like-minded countries sharing fundamental values and coordination with international organisations are essential, and that they would strengthen their cooperation bilaterally and through the G7 and other fora. In this regard, they welcomed the progress being made in cooperation between Japanese and British companies in various fields, including offshore wind power and hydrogen.

The two leaders also confirmed that they would strengthen cooperation in areas such as climate change and digitalisation. Prime Minister Kishida explained the 'new form of capitalism', referring to the speech he delivered that morning at the Guildhall in the City of London, and gained understanding from Prime



Japan-UK Summit Meeting (head-to-head meeting)

Minister Johnson.

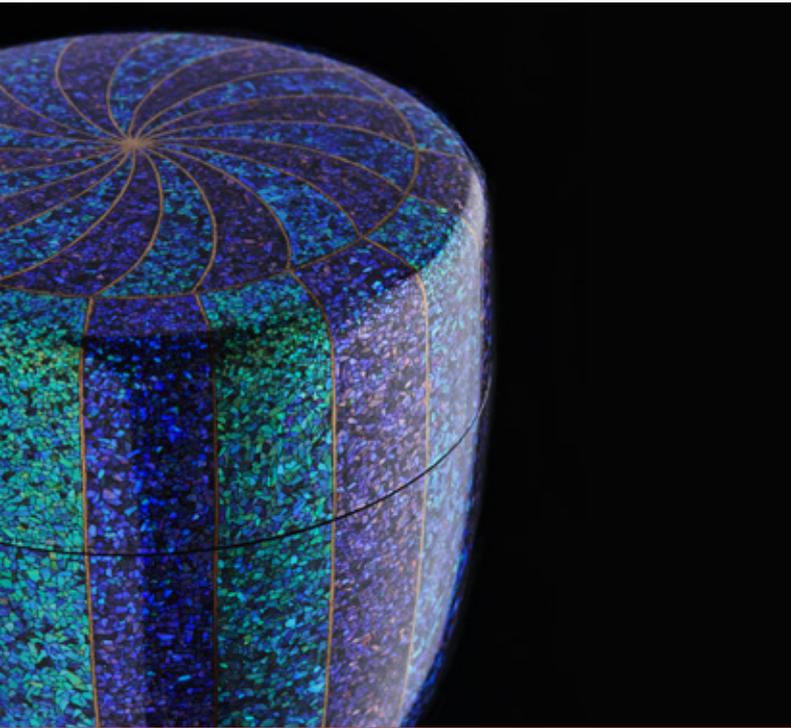
The two leaders also exchanged views on the procedures for the UK's accession to TPP11 and concurred on continuing their efforts to promote trade and investment between the two countries through steady implementation of the Japan-UK Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement and the Japan-UK Industrial Policy Dialogue. Prime Minister Kishida also stated that he would welcome British investment in Japan. Prime Minister Kishida expressed his hope for an early resolution through talks between the UK and the EU on the issue surrounding the Northern Ireland Protocol to ensure that Japanese companies operating in the UK and the EU would not be affected.

Prime Minister Kishida once again called for the early lifting of the UK's import measures on Japanese food products regarding radionuclides, and Prime Minister Johnson explained that the measures would be lifted by the end of June, depending on parliamentary procedures. Prime Minister Kishida welcomed it. During the meeting, Prime Minister Kishida presented Johnson with popcorn from Fukushima Prefecture, which the two leaders enjoyed eating together.

The two leaders reaffirmed that the G7 and the international community will continue to unite and cooperate in strong sanctions against Russia and support for Ukraine, based on the recognition that Russia's aggression against Ukraine undermines the foundations of the entire international order. Prime Minister Kishida explained that he is actively engaged in outreach to Asian countries, such as the visits to Indonesia, Vietnam and Thailand before coming to Europe. The two leaders concurred on the importance of outreach to Asia, Africa and other regions.

The two leaders also exchanged views on the situation in Asia, sharing strong concerns over the rapid and uncertain build-up of military power and increased military activities in the region, in addition to attempts to unilaterally change the status quo by force in the East and South China Seas. They confirmed their united and resolute response to attempts to unilaterally change the status quo and to economic coercion. They also reaffirmed their continued cooperation in dealing with North Korea regarding the nuclear and missile issues, including the launch of ballistic missiles on 4 May, as well as the abductions issue.

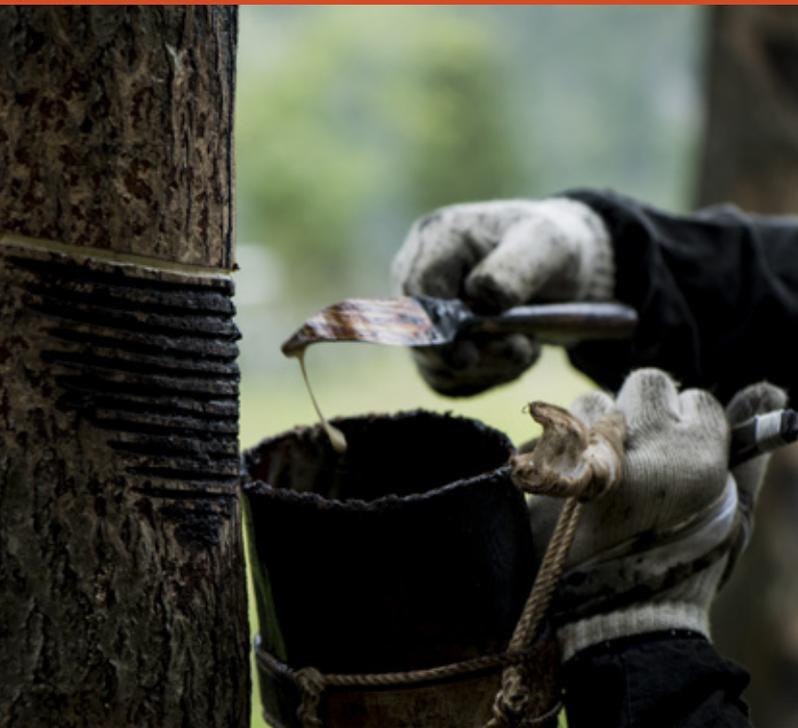
Asai Yasuhiro's *Aogai natsume* tea caddy (7 cm x 7 cm)
Photo: ©T.MINAMOTO



A three-tiered Kyo lacquerware box for food
Photo: Courtesy of Zohiko



Beautiful and Durable Japanese Lacquer



A lacquer tapper collects small amounts of sap oozing from a lacquer tree
Photo: Courtesy of Ninohe City

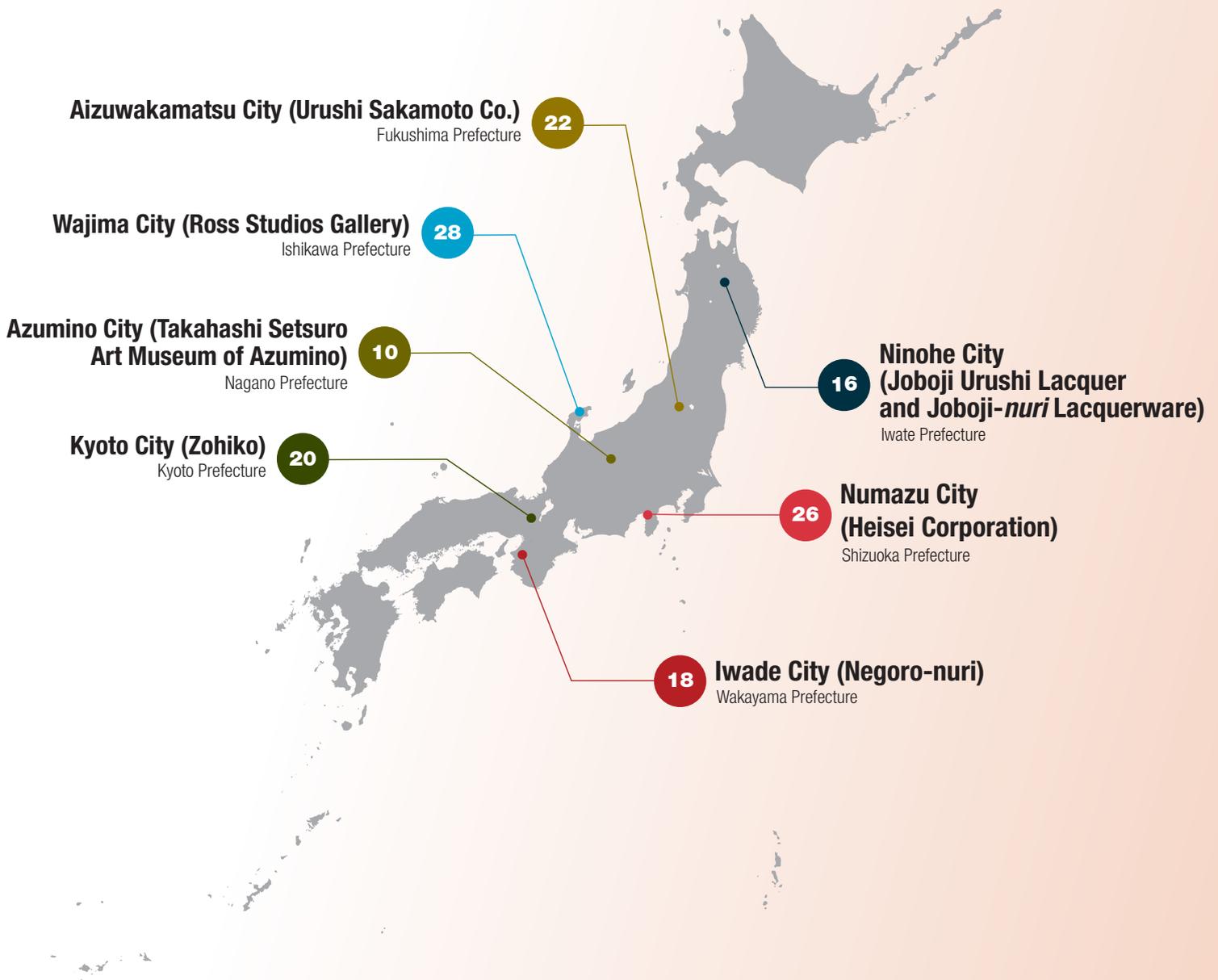


Flowering Stars of the Heavens (lacquered folding screen, detail) (1992) by Takahashi Setsuro, featuring motifs from the nature and scenery of Azumino City, Nagano Prefecture (length 176 cm x width 173 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino

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acquer has been deeply connected to the culture and lives of Japanese people since ancient times. Sourced from the sap of the lacquer tree, lacquer has long been used to coat everyday wooden utensils such as bowls and tools, and since at least the eighth century, it has also been used for the creation of ornamental boxes and objects of art.

Lacquerware has excellent practical and decorative qualities, and with advances in technology lacquer is now even applied to industrial goods on non-wooden surfaces such as camera bodies and watches. In this month's issue of *Highlighting Japan*, we zoom in on some examples of the beauty and durability of Japanese lacquer.



The History and Culture of Lacquer in Japan



Hidaka Kaori, professor at the National Museum of Japanese History
Photo: Sawaji Osamu

LACQUER has been deeply connected to the culture and lives of Japanese people since ancient times. We spoke with Hidaka Kaori, a professor at the National Museum of Japanese History, about the history and culture of lacquer in Japan.

When was lacquer, made from the sap of the lacquer tree, first used in Japan?

It is thought that the lacquer tree, which was indigenous to the Asian continent, was brought over to Japan during the Jomon period (about 16,000 to 2,900 years ago) and spread here. On studying wood found at an archaeological site in Fukui Prefecture, it was determined that it was from a lacquer tree that lived approximately 12,000 years ago. This is currently the oldest lacquer tree in Japan, but it is unclear how it was used at the time.

However, many examples of earthenware, wooden containers, combs, and worn ornaments such as earrings that used lacquer tree sap as a coating material have been unearthed from archaeological sites from the early Jomon period, about 7,000 years to 5,500 years ago. It is clear that lacquer was used by people from this time, if not sooner.

Lacquer is actually not that easy to handle. A rash will form if it touches the skin, and it is not easy to grow lacquer trees. Regardless, the reason why lacquer spread across Japan was because it was extremely useful. For example,

applying lacquer to a container prevents water leakage and increases durability. It also makes an object beautiful when painted on. It was also used as a glue to join broken pieces of earthenware together. Lacquer has been used in this way since the Jomon period for its excellent practical and decorative qualities.

Lacquer techniques have been refined since the Heian period (end of the 8th century to end of the 12th century), a time when court culture flourished in Japan. What kinds of techniques were developed?

The most famous technique is *maki-e*. With this decorative technique, a brush is used to draw patterns in lacquer on the surface of lacquerware. Gold or silver powder is then sprinkled on and sticks to the lacquerware before the lacquer dries. The origins of *maki-e* are not known,¹ but we do know that *maki-e* lacquerware came to be



A lacquered comb discovered at the Torihama shell mound site in Fukui Prefecture (Jomon period, 6,100 years old) (Collection of Wakasa History Museum) (8.9 cm x 7.8 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of Wakasa History Museum



A *raden* and *maki-e* “Cosmetic Box with Carriage Wheels in Water” (National Treasure, Collection of Tokyo National Museum) (12th century) (22.4 cm x 30.6 cm x 13.5 cm)
Photo: ColBase (<https://colbase.nich.go.jp/>)

produced in Japan from the 8th century onwards. *Maki-e* saw great development during the Heian period when aristocratic culture flourished. Lacquer, gold, and silver were extremely valuable, and *maki-e* cost a great deal of money. But the wealthy aristocrats used *maki-e* not only for various furnishing goods, but also in the building of their own homes, temples, and other buildings. *Maki-e* was an important method of expressing the aristocratic sense of beauty.

Lacquered ware was being produced in other parts of East Asia during this same period, but *maki-e* was not used at all. For this reason, since the 10th century, *maki-e* was exported to other Asian countries as a Japanese specialty and became quite popular.

How did lacquerware later spread to the general public in Japan?

Because the lacquerware used by the aristocracy had many overlapping layers of painted lacquer, it required a large amount of lacquer and was extremely expensive. But around the 11th century, a method was developed to create finished lacquerware with one or two coats of lacquer on top of the initial rough coating painted over the wood grain using a mixture of charcoal powder and persimmon tannins, which is fermented liquid extracted from the persimmon fruit. Using this technique, the amount of lacquer used was reduced and it became possible to create lacquerware cheaply. Everyday rice bowls, plates, and other lacquered tableware spread among the samurai, Buddhist monks and priests, and urban merchants, and by the 16th century, lacquerware was used among farmers, as well.

During the Edo period, when the Tokugawa shogunate ruled Japan for about 260 years from the start of the

17th century, the variety of products painted with lacquer increased dramatically as craft techniques developed. For example, helmets, armor, and other weapons, horse equipment, and furniture. But for most people, lacquerware was expensive. When ceremonies such as weddings and funerals were held, large groups of people would gather for meals, and so many pieces of lacquered tableware became necessary. However, it was not easy for a single family to prepare all of this lacquered tableware. For this reason, it was common to borrow the tableware from other families or share them as a community.

You can see lacquerware from Japan in old European castles and museums. When did exports of Japanese lacquerware to Europe begin?

Exports of Japanese-made lacquerware to Europe began at the end of the 16th century, if not sooner. The lacquerware was exported to mainly Portugal and Spain then England, the Netherlands, and other countries. As the Tokugawa shogunate had given permission for trade with Japan only to the Netherlands among Western nations, from the start of the 17th century they became the sole exporter of Japanese-made lacquerware.

At the time, Japanese lifestyles were quite different from those in Europe, so there were many items of lacquerware used in Japan that could not be used in Europe if exported as is. This is why most of the lacquerware to be exported was specially created after receiving an order from Dutch merchants and made to fit the lifestyles and preferences of Europeans. This export lacquerware was mainly made by artisans in Kyoto. We know that Dutch merchants would call these artisans to Dejima, a man-made island in Nagasaki that was the center for trade with the Netherlands, to place their orders, and would stop in Kyoto on the way to Edo (present-day Tokyo) to check the items being produced.

What kind of exported lacquerware was created?

A lacquered helmet with hollyhock leaf motifs (Edo period) (Collection of National Museum of Japanese History) (32 cm x 20 cm x 23 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of National Museum of Japanese History



For example, chests with many drawers, large coffers with lids, furniture such as tables, and tableware such as plates and coffee cups. A major feature of this exported lacquerware is the intricate patterns created with various techniques, including *maki-e* and *raden* (mother of pearl inlay), a technique where thinly cut fragments of seashells are used for decoration. You could say this was used to make the lacquerware appear more exotic and luxurious.

Lacquerware was also imported from other Asian countries at the time, but Japanese-made lacquerware was particularly admired, and was popular in Europe. The word “japan” begins to appear in lists of assets of the 17th century European aristocracy. This is because the word “japan” came to be used in Europe as a word referring to lacquerware in general.

One such enthusiast of Japanese-made lacquerware was Marie Antoinette (1755-1793), queen and wife of King Louis XVI of France. In her room at the Palace of Versailles was a shelf displaying a small collection of Japanese-made lacquerware. Her collection is now housed in the Palace of Versailles Museum, the Louvre Museum, the Guimet Museum, and more.

Professor Hidaka, you’ve been researching lacquerware for many years now. Can you tell us about the allure of lacquer?

The transparency and color of the lacquer changes greatly depending on the processing technique used after collecting the sap from the lacquer tree. It is also possible to create various beautiful effects by changing the materials painted with lacquer or the techniques used. The variations are virtually endless. That is the allure of lacquer.

I use bowls and other lacquerware in my everyday life, and they also have various practical advantages. For example, lacquerware is poor at conducting heat, so it never becomes too hot to hold, even with hot drinks. It is also good at keeping hot drinks from cooling down. It is extremely lightweight and it has a soft feeling when it is held in your hands or put up to your mouth.

And by re-coating lacquerware, you can use the same objects for a very long time. The world is aiming to become a sustainable society now. Lacquerware is undoubtedly suited to that kind of society. 🍱

Interview by SAWAJI OSAMU

i According to one theory, *maki-e* was brought over to Japan from the technique devised in continental China by around the 8th century at the latest.



A *raden* and *maki-e* decorative saddle (16th to 17th century) (Collection of National Museum of Japanese History) (26.8 cm x 38.8 cm x 9 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of National Museum of Japanese History



A *raden* and *maki-e* decorative coffer for export (16th to 17th century) (Collection of National Museum of Japanese History) (12.7 cm x 23 cm x 15.5 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of National Museum of Japanese History

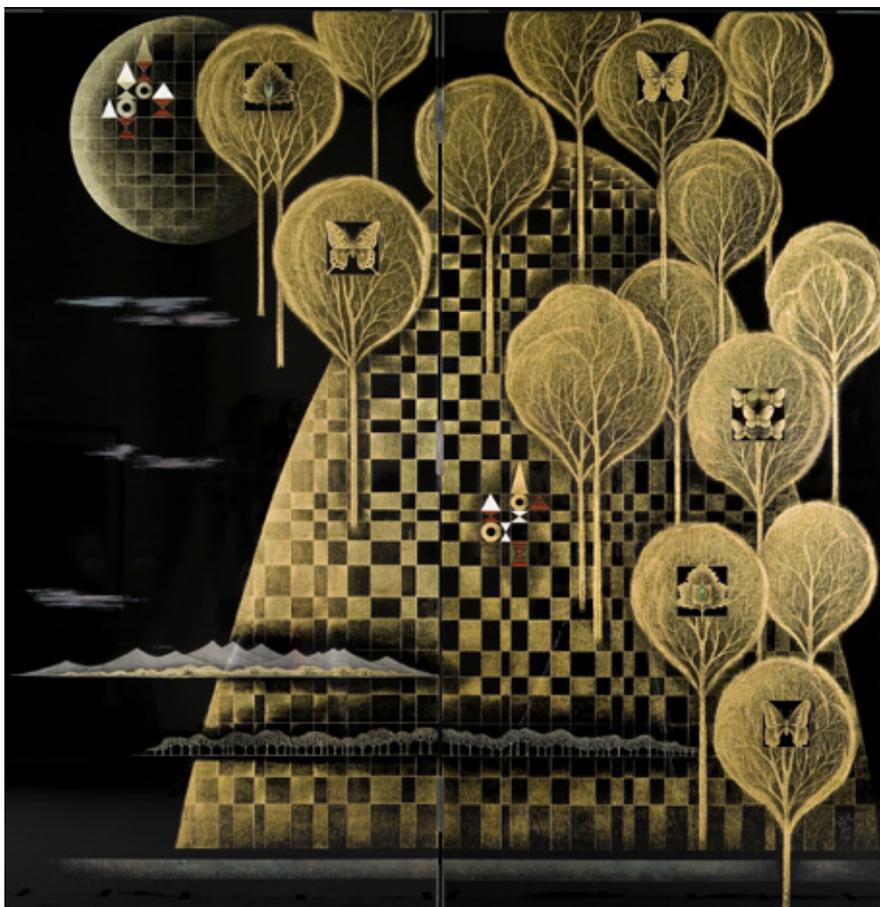


Maki-e dish with family crest and a motif featuring mountains, rivers and human figures. This family crest is of the Hinlopen family, which engaged in trade in Amsterdam (Collection of National Museum of Japanese History) (late 17th to 18th century) (53 cm diameter)
Photo: Courtesy of National Museum of Japanese History

Flowering Stars of the Heavens (lacquered folding screen, detail) (1992) by Takahashi Setsuro, featuring motifs from the nature and scenery of Azumino City, Nagano Prefecture (length 176 cm x width 173 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino

Turning Traditional Lacquer Art into Contemporary Art

The Work of Takahashi Setsuro



Takahashi Setsuro (1914–2007) was a lacquer artist who created many unique works using new techniques that he pioneered based on age-old and traditional methods in Japanese lacquer art. He was an artist who turned lacquer art into a new style of contemporary art.

YANAGISAWA MIHO

JAPANESE lacquerware developed as a traditional art and craft mainly through the production of familiar everyday tools such as tableware, chopsticks and boxes to hold letters. By contrast, rather than making items of practical use, Takahashi Setsuro created two-dimensional painting-like works such as lacquered panels and folding screens whose main function is purely ornamental. In particular, his lacquer panels earned high praise as a new form of contemporary art distinct from traditional lacquer artworks.

Takahashi Setsuro was born in the countryside surrounded by nature with views

Ancient Tombs of Many Seasons (lacquered folding screen, detail) (1984) by Takahashi Setsuro (length 172 cm x width 175 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino



Takahashi Setsuro (1914-2007)
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino, by Kaida Yu



Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino



Exhibition room
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino



The mountainous countryside of Azumino where Takahashi was born
Photo: Courtesy of Azumino Tourist Association

of nearby mountain peaks 3,000 meters high, in present-day Azumino City, Nagano Prefecture, roughly in the center of Japan's Honshu island. Tominaga Junko, curator at the Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino, says of the artist, "Takahashi Setsuro was a person who created a completely new contemporary art out of the extremely traditional material that is lacquer. He possessed a wonderful compositional and design ability to depict the detailed handiwork of lacquer art as large-scale works on big screens."

Takahashi Setsuro thought that "the most beautiful lacquer is black with *maki-e* gold, and after that vermilion," so he did not use many colors but created a variety of works using only lacquer in the three colors of black, gold and vermilion. In particular, Takahashi's favorite motif was the nature and scenery of Azumino where he had spent his childhood, themes which he reproduced on panels and folding screens. One of his most well-known works, *Flowering Stars of the Heavens*, is a two-panel folding screen. It is inlaid with numerous motifs inspired by the galaxies and stars you see when looking up from Azumino and the area's ancient tombs. It conveys a majestic worldview that seems to manifest the connections between people, the universe, and the earth through deep black and gold that glitters like precious stones, with vermilion acting as an accent to show the mountain ranges of the artist's home town. The work as a whole has a mysterious quality.

To express such a mysterious worldview, Takahashi repeatedly researched methods to express fine lines and give more vibrance to shades of gold and shadow effects, devising his own technique called "*sokin*." Takahashi applied *suri-urushi*ⁱ to engravings of patterns, embedded gold dust and gold leaf



Brilliant Constellation (lacquered folding screen, detail) (1988) by Takahashi Setsuro
(length 175 cm x width 172 cm)
Photo: Courtesy of Takahashi Setsuro Art Museum of Azumino

just before the lacquer dried, and wiped off excess gold to reveal delicate gold markings.

Using this *sokin* technique, he made *Tales of the Fossils*, unveiled in 1964. It was a work that married excellent technique with expressive perfection and was something that he described as "a monumental work for me, in terms of both technique and design."

In 1997, the Japanese government awarded Takahashi Setsuro the Order of Culture for being an artist of outstanding achievements. Subsequently, he continued to present major works until his death in 2007 at the age of 92. He left behind a legacy seemingly engraved on the cutting edge of Japan's long history of lacquer art. **7**

ⁱ A kind of lacquering technique. Raw lacquer is painted thinly on plain wood, emphasizing the beauty of the grain.



Asai Yasuhiro's *Aogai natsume* tea caddy (7 cm x 7 cm)

Photo: ©T.MINAMOTO

The Pursuit of Radiance in Lacquer

Sea Route, a boat-shaped box with *maki-e* and mother-of-pearl inlay

Photo: ©T.MINAMOTO

A profile of lacquer artist Asai Yasuhiro

FUJITA MAO

“IT shines like a galaxy floating in space.” “It’s like being drawn into a mystery.” These are words of praise for *Aogai natsume*¹ (Blue shellfish tea caddy) by lacquer artist Asai Yasuhiro. The artwork, in which more than 10,000 extremely small shell fragments less than a millimeter across are pasted onto a lacquered wood surface, blends traditional lacquer work technique with a modern sensibility.

Lacquer crafts are made by applying multiple coats of the sap of the lacquer tree to *kiji* (a wooden base or unlacquered woodwork). Decorative techniques used include *maki-e*, in which pictures and patterns are drawn with lacquer and sprinkled with gold and silver powder before the lacquer hardens, and *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay), in which fragments of shells with iridescent nacre such as abalone are applied to lacquer or inlaid into a carved lacquer surface.

The *raden* work *Aogai natsume* was born from Asai Yasuhiro’s desire to create a piece that maximizes the effect of the color differences inherent in shells. Asai made the piece by repeatedly lacquering a *natsume* tea caddy over a period of around six months and then spent another eight months pasting more than 10,000 tiny shell fragments onto the surface.

Asai says, “I started by selecting and pasting only the dark blue and dark green parts of the shell, but I could only get a small amount of these colored parts from each shell, so I sometimes wondered whether I should continue. To express

¹ “Aogai natsume” means “blue shell tea caddy.” A *natsume* is a palm-sized container for matcha tea used in the tea ceremony. “Blue” is a traditional color in Japan that broadly refers to a range of colors from blue to green, also including indigo.



subtle tones, I adjusted the spaces between the shell fragments while looking through a loupe or microscope, so I could only work on an area the size of the fingernail on my pinky each day, and I couldn't really picture ever finishing the piece."

Having overcome such difficulties, Asai's finished artwork gives off a galaxy-like radiance that changes depending on the viewing angle and the light hitting it, and though small (7 cm x 7 cm), it is endlessly captivating. This is the charm of *raden*.

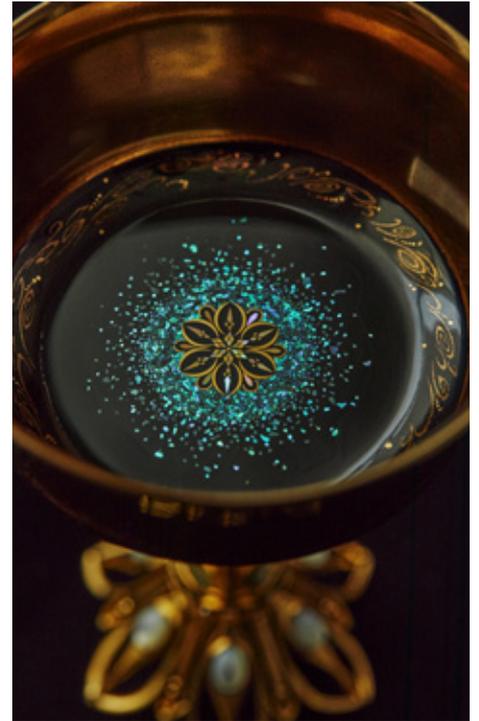
Asai first came across lacquer in an elective class in high school. Fascinated and enthused by lacquer's beauty and the interesting way it is made, he continued to study the craft. After graduating, he became an apprentice to Murose Kazumi, a lacquer artist and living national treasure, and continued his training. In 2012, at the age of 29, he won the Newcomer Award at the Japanese Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition for *Way of Light*, a maki-e box with inlaid tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl. In 2015, he received the Commissioner for Cultural Affairs Award at the Japanese Traditional Lacquer Art Exhibition for *Pulse of Light*, an ornamental maki-e box with inlaid tortoiseshell. He has created other important pieces such as the stemmed goblet with maki-e and inlaid mother-of-pearl, *Earth*, and the boat-shaped incense box with maki-e and inlaid mother-of-pearl, *Sea Route*, and he continues to work with lacquer in



Asai Yasuhiro
Photo: Courtesy of Asai Yasuhiro, by Hoshino Yuya



Pulse of Light, an ornamental maki-e box with inlaid tortoiseshell
Photo: Courtesy of Asai Yasuhiro



Earth, a takatsuki stemmed goblet with maki-e and mother-of-pearl inlay, viewed from above
Photo: ©T.MINAMOTO



Way of Light, a maki-e box with inlaid tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl
Photo: Courtesy of Asai Yasuhiro

various ways.

In 2004, Asai started planting lacquer trees in his hometown of Tottori with his family. Since then, more than 200 lacquer trees have grown, and all his works use homemade domestic lacquer.

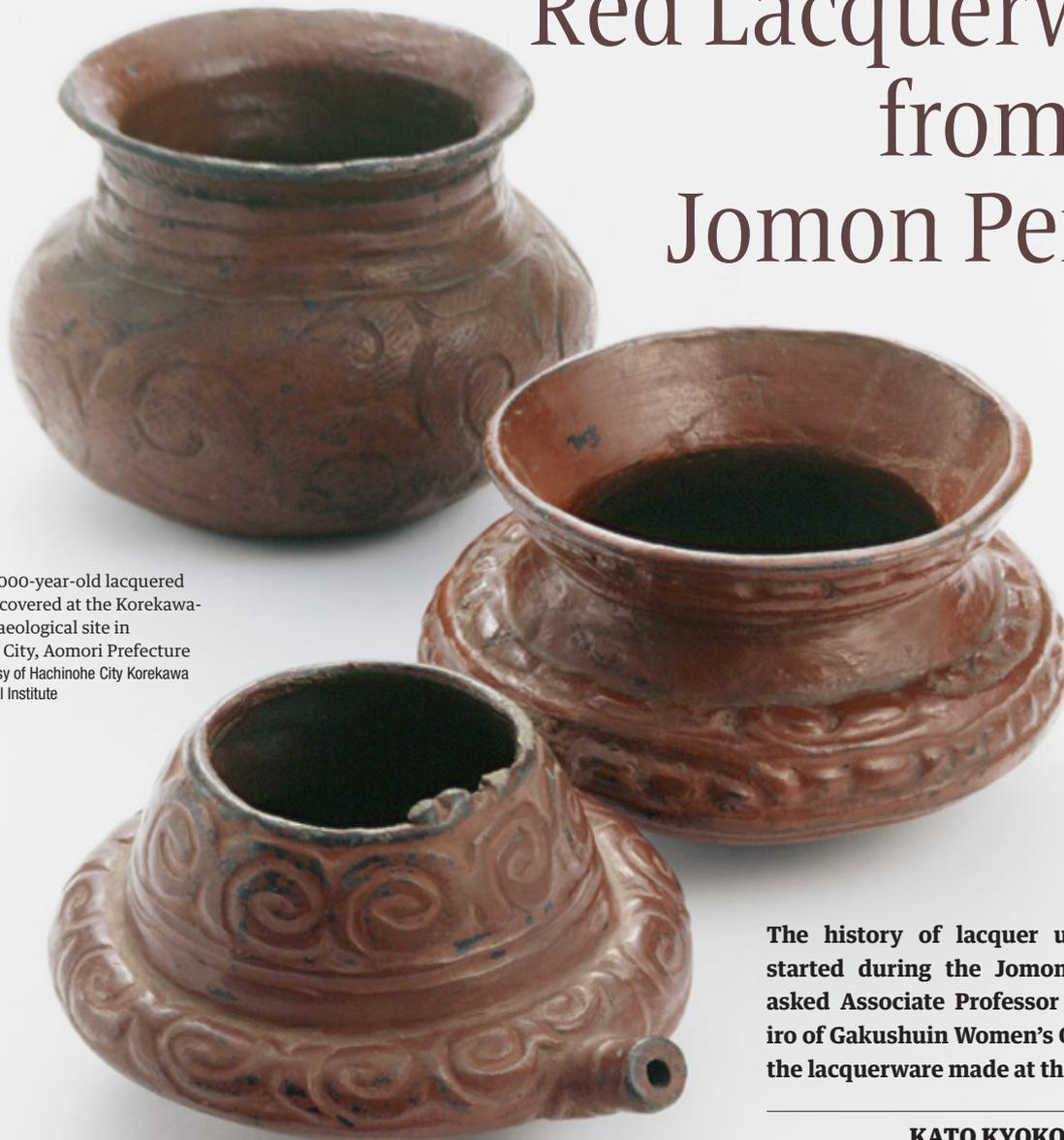
Asai says, "I am constantly aware that lacquer and lacquer crafts will outlive

me. My techniques and methods are not mine alone, but something to pass on to the next generation. I want to introduce the beauty of lacquer art and maki-e not only to Japan but also to the world, and to leave works behind."

With such sensibility and determination, Asai devotes his life to lacquer art. 

Red Lacquerware from the Jomon Period

Roughly 3,000-year-old lacquered pottery discovered at the Korekawa-Nakai archaeological site in Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Hachinohe City Korekawa Archaeological Institute



The history of lacquer use in Japan started during the Jomon period. We asked Associate Professor Kudo Yuichiro of Gakushuin Women's College about the lacquerware made at that time.

KATO KYOKO

THE 13,000-year period from 16,000 years ago to 2,900 years ago in Japan is known as the Jomon period. This was a time when people began to live settled lives and sustained themselves by collecting plant foods, fish and shellfish, as well as hunting animals. But recent research has also shown that people cultivated plants like chestnut and soybean. It was a time when not only stone implements but also much earthenware was made. The name of the period comes from the cord-marked pattern (*jomon* in Japanese) that is pressed into such earthenware.

During the Jomon period, lacquerware was also made alongside earthenware in various regions. Researchers have found lacquer trees dating from the beginning of the Jomon

period (around 12,600 years ago). After that, from around 7,500 years ago, people started making various utensils by using sap from the lacquer trees.

Associate Professor Kudo Yuichiro of the Department of Japanese Studies, Faculty of Intercultural Studies, Gakushuin Women's College, who is surveying and researching the use of plants during the Jomon period, explains, "It has been confirmed that fragments of a lacquered comb discovered at the Kamikuzuro Nakaya archeological site in Toyama Prefecture and the Mibiki archeological site in Ishikawa Prefecture are about 7,500 to 7,200 years old. At the present time, these are among the oldest remains of lacquerware products in Japan and, it is thought, the world. In any case, a culture of lacquer



Illustration of lacquer tapping during the Jomon period (illustrated by Ishii Reiko)
Illustration: Courtesy of National Museum of Japanese history



A roughly 7,200-year-old lacquered comb discovered at the Mibiki archeological site in Ishikawa Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Ishikawa Archaeological Foundation



A roughly 3,000-year-old lacquered basket discovered at the Korekawa-Nakai archaeological site in Hachinohe City, Aomori Prefecture
Photo: Courtesy of Hachinohe City Korekawa Archaeological Institute



A roughly 3,000-year-old lacquered wooden vessel discovered at the Korekawa-Nakai archaeological site
Photo: Courtesy of Hachinohe City Korekawa Archaeological Institute

use had undoubtedly developed on the Japanese islands between 7,500 and 6,000 years ago.”

In addition, lacquerware from the Jomon period has been unearthed in many locations in Japan. For example, red-lacquered wooden plates and red pigments from about 5,500 years ago have been found at the Sannai Maruyama archeological site of one of Japan’s biggest Jomon settlements in Aomori Prefecture, which is part of the world heritage Jomon Prehistoric Sites in Northern Japan. Already 7,000 years ago, it has been confirmed that the Jomon people had artistically combined red and black colored lacquer and used inlay techniques.ⁱ In the final Jomon period, they were also making things such as *rantai shikki*,ⁱⁱ so the Jomon people had a highly sophisticated lacquer culture.

You get a skin rash if you come in contact with the lacquer sap. Moreover, collecting the sap is very laborious (see

pp. 16-17). So why did the Jomon people make lacquerware despite such labor and risk?

“Red carries magical meaning as a symbol of the life force, but I suppose that lacquerware painted with red pigments was also considered ‘beautiful.’ The people of the Jomon period collected red iron oxide and cinnabar from nature and had a preference for making red lacquerware. I don’t think there’s any paint in the natural world that is as beautiful and graceful as lacquer.”

If the only purpose is to enhance durability and waterproofness, then there is no need to make it red. Just as Kudo says, the main goal might have been aesthetic. Together with black, red remains a color emblematic of Japanese lacquerware. Reconstructing the red lacquerware excavated from the Korekawa-Nakai archaeological site has revealed a level of perfection that might allow authentic Japanese cuisine to be served on it even today. This might be telling us that the lives of people who lived in Japan thousands of years ago were much stabler and more fulfilling than we tend to imagine. 

i Ornamental technique that makes patterns stand out by using clay of a different color from the base clay

ii Lacquered basket of woven *sasa* (bamboo grass)

A lacquer tapper collects small amounts of sap oozing from a lacquer tree

Joboji Urushi Lacquer and Joboji-*nuri* Lacquerware

Produced using traditional techniques, Joboji Urushi lacquer is highly regarded both for the vibrant colors it creates and for its remarkable durability.

SAWAJI OSAMU

ACCORDING to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Japanese government, the production of Japanese lacquer in 2020 was about 2 tons. Joboji Urushi makes up about 1.5 tons of that. Joboji Urushi is mainly produced in and around Joboji Town, Ninohe City in northern Iwate Prefecture in the Tohoku region of northeast Japan. In this area rich in lacquer trees, people have long used lacquer, which is produced from the sap of the lacquer tree. A stone tool

colored with lacquer, estimated to have been made 2,300 years ago, has been excavated in the Kamisugisawa archeological site in the town.

Since the 1950s, the production of domestic lacquer has declined significantly in Japan due to the spread of plastic products and the increase in imports of foreign lacquer. Under such circumstances, in Ninohe City, residents, private companies, and the local government have cooperated to continue to preserve the lacquer tradition through various initiatives, such as planting lacquer trees and nurturing artisans related to lacquer.

Joboji Urushi is not only produced in large volumes, but is also known for its high quality, for example by exhibiting high strength after painting and excellent durability, and producing vibrant red and black colors in lacquerware. For these reasons, it has also been used to restore



A stone blade colored with lacquer excavated in the Kamisugisawa archeological site in Joboji Town, Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture



A lacquer tapper at work in Joboji Town, Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture

All photos: Courtesy of Ninohe City

and repaint World Heritage Sites like the Konjikido of Chuson-ji Temple in Iwate Prefecture, Nikko Toshogu in Tochigi Prefecture, and Kinkaku-ji Temple in Kyoto Prefecture.

An indispensable technique for collecting high-quality lacquer is “*urushi kaki*” (lacquer tapping). Lacquer tapping is the technique of scratching the surface of a lacquer tree and collecting the small amounts of lacquer that leak out slowly with specialized tools. Lacquer tappers go into the mountains from June to November and collect lacquer little by little from about 200 trees. The freshly collected lacquer is milky white, but it gradually turns more brown. Individual trees are scratched once every few days. Scratching a tree without days to rest in-between puts stress on the tree and reduces the amount of lacquer. In six months, about 200 milliliters of lacquer can be collected from a single tree. In 2020, as a technique that requires expert skill, lacquer tapping was inscribed as a technique among “traditional skills, techniques and knowledge for the conservation and transmission of wooden architecture in Japan” in UNESCO’s Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

“According to those skilled in lacquer tapping, if you make a mistake in judging the length, depth, or days of rest when scratching the wood, you will not be able to collect lacquer as you want,” says an official of the Ninohe City Lacquer Industry Division.

Lacquer collected by lacquer tappers is turned into paint following refinement through stirring and extracting excess water by heat treatment as well as mixing with other ingredients to change the color into red or black. Products manufactured using the Joboji Urushi made in this way are called “*Joboji-nuri* lacquerware.” *Joboji-nuri* lacquerware is said to have started in the Heian period (late eighth century to late twelfth century) with the lacquering of self-made bowls and plates used for meals by Buddhist monks at Tendai-ji Temple, which remains a place of worship in Joboji Town to this day. Later, because of how it combines simple beauty and sturdiness, it spread throughout the country as a type of lacquerware for everyday use.

In *Joboji-nuri* lacquerware, the *nurishi* (also called a *nushi*) lacquer painter applies lacquer to a wooden material with a brush, dries it, and then polishes it with sandpaper, repeating the process at least six times.

“The major features of *Joboji-nuri* lacquerware are its smooth touch, beautiful appearance with vibrant and deep colors, and high durability. Also, if you use it every day, a natural sheen will appear. It is a kind of lacquerware that lets you enjoy changes like that as well,” says the official of Ninohe City.

Joboji-nuri lacquerware can be enjoyed not only as dishes for Japanese cuisine, but also as plates for serving French cuisine or cups for drinking wine, among other expanding uses. The unfading beauty of Joboji Urushi will last long into the future. 📌



Joboji Urushi is stored in wooden barrels



Joboji-nuri sake cups and server



Joboji-nuri soup bowl with chopsticks

A Negoro-*nuri* lacquerware bowl
Photo: Courtesy of Ikenoue Shinzan



REVIVING THE PRODUCTION OF “NEGORO” VERMILION LACQUERWARE



Negoro-*nuri* master craftsman Ikenoue Shinzan
Photo: Courtesy of Ikenoue Shinzan

The vermilion lacquerware called “Negoro-*nuri*” has a long history dating back to the medieval period, but production of it ceased for some time before recently being revived. Negoro-*nuri* is said to become more attractive with use, a characteristic which owes to its complex and laborious production process.

FUJITA MAO

NEGORO-*NURI* (also known as “Negoro”) had been produced since the medieval period in Iwade City, Wakayama Prefecture, on the Kii Peninsula slightly west of central Honshu. It was used for a variety of everyday utensils thanks to its durability and high quality. The lacquerware is attractive for two more reasons as well. One is that its luster grows over time. The other is that the vermilion lacquer on its surface wears away with use over many years to reveal patterns of black lacquer undercoat (*shitaji*), adding attractive color tones to the lacquerware.

Negoro-*nuri* is said to have been produced by specialist lacquerware craftsmen in a workshop at Ichijozan Daiden-poin Negoro-ji Buddhist Temple (Negoro area, Iwade City, Wakayama Prefecture) from the Kamakura to Muromachi periods (late twelfth century to late sixteenth century). The Negoro lacquerware produced was mainly everyday utensils such as rice and soup bowls, and tools, and was used by shrines and temples as well as by members of the upper class. It has a complex production process of twenty-six steps. Multiple lacquer undercoats are applied to the wooden base, after



With use, the black lacquer has become visible, creating new patterns
 Photo: Courtesy of Ikenoue Shinzan

revived the original technique at Negoro-ji Temple, where it had originated in the medieval period.

The coloring pigment used for vermilion lacquering is cinnabar, which is a natural mineral. Cinnabar was said to be as precious as gold in medieval times, which tells us that Negoro-nuri was made mainly for the upper classes. The vivid crimson color produced by cinnabar has appealed to people through the ages.

Says Ikenoue, “Negoro-nuri is not only durable, it’s also easy to use and has a simple beauty of form that one never tires of. The vivid vermilion color of a new piece is stunning, but its luster becomes even more pronounced with use. Even scratches and signs of aging look like a beautiful pattern. And even if the surface peels off after years of use, there’s no need to apply a new coat of lacquer as you would with ordinary lacquerware. The passage of time may itself be said to create beauty.”

In December 2019, Ikenoue received the Japanese Government’s Commissioner for Cultural Affairs Award. He has also begun to train others in the Negoro-nuri craft, holding classes for professionals and running community classes for the public to make plates, bowls, and chopsticks in order to pass on the authentic medieval techniques he has revived. **7**

which hemp cloth is affixed to the edges, rim, and other easily chipped parts of the vessel. More layers of lacquer are then applied, and a soft wooden spatula is used to smooth it into a uniform shape. The vessel then undergoes processes such as *sabi-tsuke*¹ and polishing to produce the finished undercoat. Next, a primer coat of black lacquer is applied and left to dry, after which the surface of the vessel is repeatedly polished and lacquered. A final top coat of vermilion lacquer is applied to complete the Negoro-nuri process. It takes more than three months to produce the undercoat lacquer layer, compared with around one month for ordinary lacquerware. As a result, the thickness of the undercoat is said to be two to three times that of ordinary lacquerware.

It is this complex and laborious process that produces Negoro-nuri’s defining characteristic of durability. Normally, freshly boiled water can damage lacquerware. However, Negoro-nuri is able to withstand boiling water, dropping, and even being washed and dried by a dishwasher.

“Negoro-nuri originated during a turbulent period of civil war, so it needed to be easy to use, portable, and unbreakable. That’s why Negoro-nuri employs a unique technique that produces a toughness not found in ordinary lacquerware.”

So says Negoro-nuri craftsman Ikenoue Shinzan. Ikenoue was apprenticed to the late Kawada Sadamu, a leading researcher on Negoro-nuri lacquerware. In 2000, more than 400 years after production of Negoro-nuri ceased, Ikenoue



Ikenoue painting vermilion lacquer at the workshop
 Photo: Courtesy of Ikenoue Shinzan



A community class led by Ikenoue
 Photo: Fujita Mao

ⁱ *Sabi* (rust) is made by mixing powdered whetstone containing water with raw lacquer and allowing it to rest for at least one day. It is then mixed with raw lacquer and applied to the wood with a spatula.

Kyo lacquerware soup bowls

Delicately Elegant Traditional Kyoto Lacquerware



Kyoto cuisine served
in Kyo lacquerware



A three-tiered Kyo lacquerware box for food



Kyo lacquerware plates
for wagashi sweets

There is a lacquerware establishment in Kyoto that has been creating tableware for Kyoto cuisine and tea ceremony utensils for over 360 years. We interviewed Nishimura Hikobei, the tenth-generation family head of Zohiko, about traditional Kyoto lacquerware.

SATO KUMIKO

KYO (short for Kyoto) lacquerware is believed to have originated in the Kyoto area in the latter half of the eighth century. It was further refined and developed into a delicately elegant craft to respond to demand from aristocrats and Buddhist monks after the capital was moved from Nara to Kyoto in the year 794. Later, from the early modern period, tea masters with a keen sense of beauty drove the demand for Kyo lacquerware. The *maki-e*ⁱ technique for lacquerware surface decoration unique to Japan has continued to evolve in Kyoto.

Zohiko is a long-established Kyo lacquerware shop based in Kyoto City. Says tenth-generation family head Nishimura Hikobei, “When compared with lacquerware from other regions, Kyo lacquerware is distinguished by its delicacy, which is achieved through the application of multiple layers of lacquer over base woodⁱⁱ that has been sanded down to make it paper-thin. Its form is sharply defined yet has softly rounded edges, giving it a soft and gentle feel.”

Zohiko was founded in 1661. In the early nineteenth century, Nishimura Hikobei III received the title of “*maki-etsukasa*” (great master of maki-e) from the Imperial Court, and in his latter years created the maki-e panel *Fugen Bodhisattva on a White Elephant*ⁱⁱⁱ, which was highly acclaimed by the people of Kyoto. Since then, Zohiko has continued to pass down and refine its techniques through the generations, producing a wide variety of lacquerware ranging from Kyoto

cuisine tableware and tea ceremony utensils to house fittings, supporting many different cultural traditions in Kyoto. In the twentieth century, after Hikobei VI exhibited the company’s wares at the World Expo in Chicago in 1893 and Hikobei VIII did likewise at the World Expo in Paris in 1925, demand from Europe and the United States increased, prompting the company to focus on making export pieces. Under Hikobei IX, Kyo lacquer was applied on the Imperial throne in the *Seiden-Matsu-no-Ma* (State Room) of the Imperial Palace in 1965.

Today, Zohiko produces not only high-end maki-e lacquerware, but also a wide range of tableware for everyday use to suit modern lifestyles, such as cups that can also be used for wine. In addition, the company is looking at new ways to collaborate with overseas manufacturers and designers, such as by applying a decorative maki-e finish to fountain pen shafts. Says Nishimura, “I believe that the true appeal of Kyo lacquerware lies in its ‘functional beauty’ together with its delicate elegance that has been refined through long history and tradition.”

Even today, many Kyoto families still continue the custom of serving special dishes during the New Year and other seasonal celebrations^{iv} on lacquerware that has been carefully passed down from generation to generation. “Originally, maki-e patterns incorporated meanings and stories. Cranes, turtles, pine, bamboo, and plum were auspicious designs for special occasions, while seasonal scenes such as autumn foliage were for tea ceremonies. New lacquerware designs at Zohiko are always created with these Japanese cultural traditions in mind,” says Nishimura.

The beauty of Kyoto lacquerware reflects the depth of Kyoto’s long history and traditional culture. **▼**

i See pp. 7-9

ii Bare wood before lacquer is applied to produce lacquerware

iii This led to the naming of the store, “Zohiko.” (Zo means elephant in Japanese.)

iv Days or annual events that mark the change of seasons

Kyoto cuisine served in Kyo lacquerware (Cooperation: Tankuma Kitamise)



All photos: Courtesy of Zohiko



Lacquered fishing rods



One of the pen stands with lacquered pedestal commissioned by Parker Pen for the White House to commemorate President Reagan's inauguration

Lacquer Coating Technology for Industrial Goods

A company in Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture, has developed a technology to coat various goods such as cameras, watches and automobile parts with lacquer, expanding the range of ways the material can be used.

SASAKI TAKASHI

LACQUER has traditionally been used for wooden craft products such as tableware and furniture, typically being applied to unpainted wood, or *kiji*. However, Urushi Sakamoto Co., Ltd. in Aizuwakamatsu City, Fukushima Prefecture, has explored the development of new technologies in order to expand lacquer's application to industrial goods made from various materials.

A type of lacquerware known as "Aizu-nuri" has been made in Aizuwakamatsu for more than 400 years. Urushi Sakamoto

was founded in 1900 as a company that produced the lacquer used for Aizu-nuri. Sakamoto Asao, who became the third-generation president in 1978, made it the company's mission to develop unique technologies that matched the needs of the times.

Sakamoto explains, "When I became president, Japan was in a period of high economic growth, with the traditional lacquerware industry already having entered a period of stagnation due to the mass factory production of daily necessities using plastics and the like. I decided to jump on this industrialization trend as a way to utilize lacquer since it is an excellent natural paint with extremely high durability, water resistance, heat insulation, and antiseptic properties, while also being pleasing to the eye."

The company started developing technologies for applying lacquer to industrial goods, such as for use as a rust inhibitor

A DSLR camera with lacquered body and logo



Headphones with lacquered housing



All photos: Courtesy of Urushi Sakamoto Co., Ltd.
(Affiliated brands: Top left to right: Shimano, Parker Pen, Christofle, Citizen; bottom left to right, Pentax, Fostex, Suntory, Esoteric)



Cutlery with lacquered handles



A watch with a washi paper and *maki-e* (platinum foil and powder) face

on ship hulls, as a reinforcement agent for building materials, or to improve speaker sound quality. In 1982, the Parker Pen Company placed an order with the company for 2,000 pen stands to gift the White House in commemoration of the inauguration of US President Ronald Reagan. Sakamoto fulfilled the order by commissioning first-class local craftsmen and delivered the hand-lacquered pen stands as requested, but was surprised when they were all returned due to the coating being “uneven in color and of varying quality.” Sakamoto then understood that a product won’t be accepted as an industrial good unless it has a uniform finish. He solved the problem with the pen stands by developing a unique technique of uniformly applying lacquer using a sprayer, and when after a year they were sent for a second time, all the items were accepted and praised as “beautiful.” Through this experience, Sakamoto made up his mind that “The merits of traditional crafts and the way industrial goods are assessed are different things, so I have to pioneer the industrial field on my own.”

Sakamoto’s pen stands earned the company a reputation among manufacturers in Europe and North America, and since

then, the company has received orders from many famous overseas companies and provided its lacquer painting technology to them.

Orders have poured in from Japanese and foreign manufacturers of such goods as cameras, watches, audio and home appliances, cars, and airplanes. The company’s lacquer-coating technology has been used for instrument panels for luxury cars, first-class cabin furnishings for airplanes and even carbon fishing rods. The technology has earned the company high praise and numerous awards, starting with the 1st Monodzukuri (manufacturing) Nippon Grand Award from the Japanese Government’s Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry in 2005.

Sakamoto explains, “What we have always kept in mind is the need not to cling to tradition, but to make use of tradition in the present day.”

Urushi Sakamoto’s lacquer-painting technology is now being used in the fashion industry, adding lacquer’s luster to pendants and handbags, for example. Focusing on the appeal of lacquer as a natural material, the company continues to explore lacquer’s potential. 

Lacquered bottles of whisky



CD player with lacquered surfaces



Products featured are examples related to the article and not endorsements.

Concerning the Act on Promotion of Resource Circulation for Plastics

Plastic products

Photo: Purana/PIXTA

As part of Japan's "3R [Reduce, Reuse, Recycle] + Renewable" initiatives to promote resource circulation of plastics in each stage of the entire lifecycle of plastic products, in collaboration with all stakeholders including municipalities, businesses and consumers, the Act on Promotion of Resource Circulation for Plastics (hereinafter "the Act") was brought into effect on April 1, 2022.

SAWAJI OSAMU

INTRODUCTION

Plastic is lightweight, durable, easy to mold, and non-corrodible, making it an indispensable material in society today. And its utility extends to a wide range of products, containers, and packaging.

At the same time, there is a growing need to promote domestic resource circulation of plastics as a way to deal with the issues of marine plastic litter, climate change, and enhanced import control of waste materials in other countries and so forth. The Act was brought into effect on April 1, 2022, to strengthen the comprehensive resource circulation system for plastics used in diverse ways. The Act focuses on plastic as a material used in a wide range of products and aims to promote resource circulation of plastics based on the "3R + Renewable" initiative by all stakeholders at every stage of its lifecycle, from product design to waste disposal. Towards the resource circulation of plastics in Japan, a number of initiatives are advancing while collaborating with all stakeholders including municipalities, businesses and consumers at each

stage of the lifecycle of plastics.

DESIGN AND MANUFACTURING

Based on the Act, the government published "the Guideline for design of Plastic-containing Products" as a way to encourage designers and manufacturers of plastic-containing products to produce environmentally friendly design. The guideline prescribes using less plastic, reducing excessive packaging, designing products that are easy to disassemble and separate, and using recycled plastic and bio-based plastic. Moreover, the government has introduced a certification scheme to recognize excellent product designs. The government preferentially procures such certified products and requires consumers and businesses to use them.

SALES AND PROVISIONS

The Act is asking retailers and service providers who provide "specified plastic-containing products" to take action. "Specified plastic-containing products" refers to 12 plastic items in

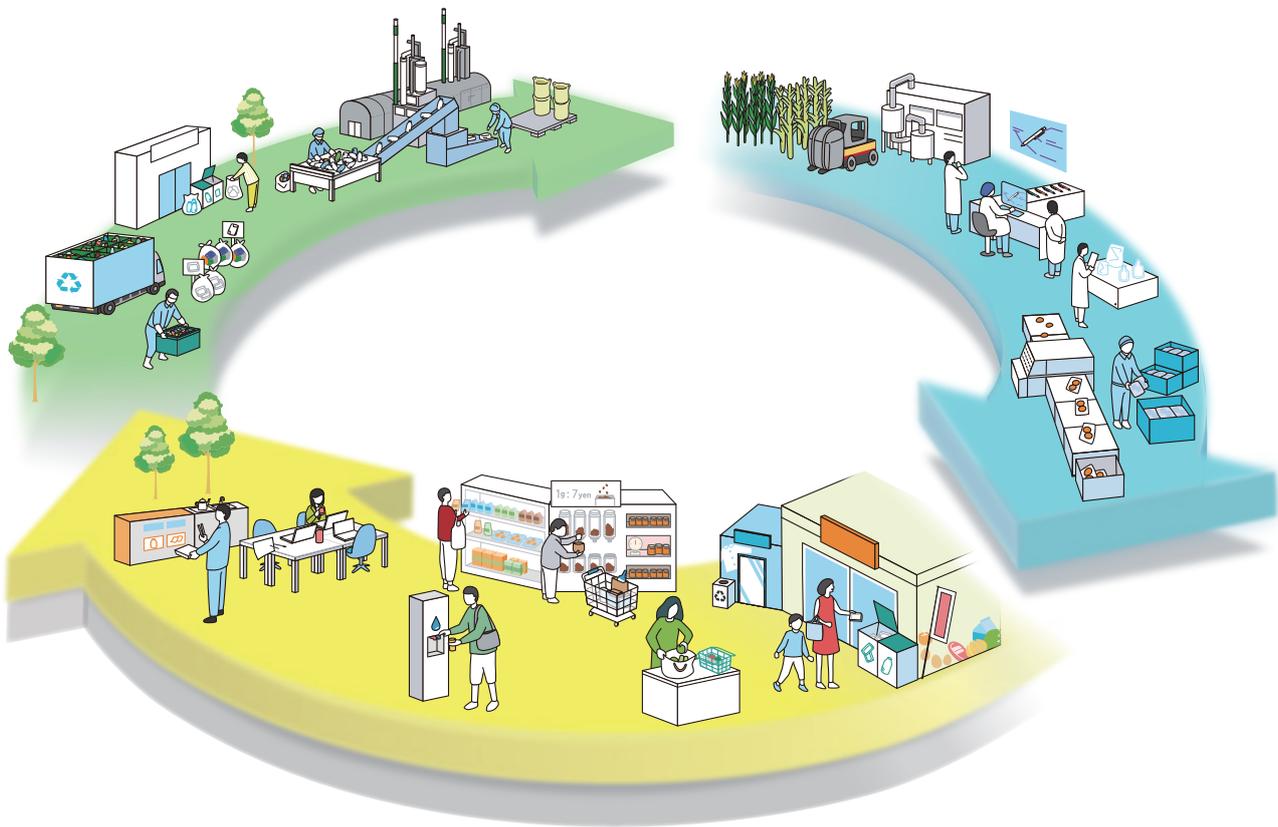


Illustration of plastic resource circulation

The Act is designed to promote “3R [Reduce, Reuse, Recycle] + Renewable” initiatives

total: forks, spoons, table knives, stir sticks, and straws provided by retailers, restaurants, and so forth; hairbrushes, combs, razors, toothbrushes, and shower caps provided by accommodations; and hangers and clothing covers provided by laundry services and so forth. Retailers and service providers who provide specified plastic products are required to implement any initiatives to reduce the amount of waste of these items. In detail, businesses that are subject to this provision are required to offer any initiatives concerning “how to offer,” such as asking consumers’ wishes on whether or not to use the products, giving them point rewards for not receiving the products, and charging for their use; and “what to offer,” such as offering items made from alternative materials.

DISCHARGE, COLLECTION, AND RECYCLING

Three measures are defined for the “discharge, collection, and recycling” stage. The first is related to sorted collection and recycling activities by municipalities. In Japan, most municipalities have been sorting, collecting, and recycling used PET bottles and other plastic packaging waste as a resource, with the help of residents, under the existing Act on the Promotion of Sorted Collection and Recycling of Containers and Packaging. The new Act requires municipalities to sort, collect, and recycle not only plastic containers and packaging waste but also other plastic products waste.

The second is to make it easier for businesses such as manufacturers, retailers and others to collect and recycle plastic products.

The third is to require businesses to reduce the amount

of plastic waste generation and to recycle plastic. Moreover, the Act introduces measures to facilitate recycling by such businesses.

CONCLUSION

Based on the Act, Japan will continue to work to create the conditions for more sophisticated circulation of plastics and for the transition to a circular economy by promoting resource circulation efforts based on “3R + Renewable” initiatives by all entities throughout the lifecycle of plastic products. [7](#)

Note: This article has been created using official published materials.

Plastic containers

Photo: Kukota/PIXTA



A concrete café counter coated in lacquer

Technology to Coat *Concrete with Japanese Lacquer*

Technology has been developed that makes it possible to coat concrete and other building materials with lacquer, adding new value to the traditional coating material.

KATO KYOKO

Lacquer is a traditional Japanese paint made from sap harvested from the lacquer tree. This lacquer is widely used as a coating for familiar wooden items such as plates, bowls, chopsticks and cases to hold letters, and has long been popular among Japanese people.

The Heisei Corporation, which has its headquarters in Numazu City along the Pacific coast of Shizuoka Prefecture in the center of the main island of Honshu, has developed a new technology to coat concrete and other non-combustible materials with lacquer. The technology was patented in 2017. The surface of these materials is waterproof, antibacterial, and possesses the same texture, colors, and luster of lacquered wood, but with conventional concrete underneath the lacquer, the materials work well with modern construction methods and are being used more and more as modern building materials not

only for personal residences but for hotels and cafés as well. Due to its deep shine and beauty, lacquer is highly praised both in Japan and abroad as a coating that uses natural materials (see page 7). However, when it is applied to strongly alkaline substrate surfaces such as concrete or plaster, a chemical reaction occurs, making stable fixation and best use of its attributes difficult. In addition, the use of new construction materials, which are inexpensive and easy to use and maintain, has spread, especially in modern times, and lacquer's use in ordinary architecture for homes and public facilities has decreased drastically in modern-day Japan. Thanks to this new technology, however, it has become extremely easy to incorporate lacquer into a variety of buildings.

Aruga Tatsuki of Heisei Corporation led the development of the technology. He says, "I was surprised at the beautiful texture never before seen when we first



Sample building materials coated in lacquer



A craftsmen smoothing a concrete surface for coating with lacquer

coated concrete with lacquer as a practical internal experiment.” This first example of lacquered concrete was a surprise for Aruga, who was born into a family of lacquer craftsmen and had studied lacquer techniques and design. “I was fascinated by the unique texture and look of the cool, modern concrete texture beneath the traditional luster of lacquer. I was reminded again that lacquer is a coating that brings out the characteristics of a material to the fullest.”

But development of this new technology was challenging. A neutral to slightly acidic pH is needed for urushiol, a resin and primary component of lacquer, to set. Different from wood, lacquer doesn't set completely and doesn't stick well when coating alkaline concrete with lacquer. Soon the lacquer will peel off and the color may change. Aruga and others carried out research into fixing lacquer onto alkaline non-combustible materials and produced many prototypes. The key to solving the problem came from an old technology used to coat the surface of iron by baking it to prevent rust, something that is used in the process of creating Nanbu *tekki* (cast iron products made in Iwate Prefecture since the 17th century, see March 2012 edition of *Highlighting JAPAN*). This technique, which involves rubbing lacquer into heated iron kettles, makes use of the fact that lacquer sets at high temperatures. Aruga then thought of a method for adding heat to the surface of building materials. Through trial and error, he and his team established the technology to stabilize lacquer on highly alkaline materials like concrete by applying special treatments to the materials, and a patent was awarded for this technology.

Heisei Corporation has been praised for the design representations of lacquer from this technology and was awarded the GOOD DESIGN AWARD 2017 for its lacquer coating technique applied to non-combustible materials by the Japan Institute of Design Promotion (JDP).

Aruga is currently the supervisor (and chief) of Spatial Urushi Art, a lacquer (Urushi) project developed by Heisei Corporation, proposing and using lacquer in spaces (Spatial) with a variety of styles. For example, in a normal home, they were able to express a warm texture and transparency with a unique hint of orange



A hotel lobby renovated with walls coated with lacquer over non-combustible building materials



A variety of lacquer-coated interior furnishings in the Heisei Corporation showroom

by coating a plaster-covered wall at the entrance to the home with lacquer. They also worked on a hotel lobby with jet-black lacquer walls and indirect lighting to create a spatial presentation and a lacquered concrete café counter that offers both a sense of dignified solidity and softness. In such ways, this project is creating a variety of expressions through lacquer, and Heisei Corporation is considering expanding this use of lacquer overseas.

Lacquer coating finishing work requires a time-consuming and labor-intensive process, making it more expensive than the more commonly used paints. This is one of the reasons why, currently in Japan, use of lacquer is declining. In such a situation, technology to coat concrete and other non-combustible materials produces new value for this traditional coating material. 7



Wall of a house fitted with calcium silicate board (a board made of non-combustible materials) coated in lacquer

Suzanne Ross making a lacquer work



Pursuing New Aesthetics in Wajima *Urushi* Lacquerware

Suzanne Ross from the United Kingdom continuously creates numerous works as an *urushi* lacquer artist from her home in Wajima City, Ishikawa Prefecture, one of Japan's premier producers of lacquerware.

SATO KUMIKO

Ross Studios Gallery in Wajima City, Ishikawa Prefecture by the Sea of Japan is full of a diverse range of *urushi* (lacquer) works, including easily handled vessels with simple and warm texture, glossy accessories that combine pearls and precious stones with *urushi*, and bold paintings that bring together *washi* and *urushi*. These were all made by Suzanne Ross from London, England. Ross moved to Wajima City in 1990 and has come to create all kinds of original lacquer works based on the traditional techniques of Wajima-*nuri* but with her own unique sensitivity and innovative ideas.

Ross first encountered Japanese lacquerware as a student at a London art school. She recalls, “There was an exhibition about Japanese traditional crafts at the Royal Academy of Artsⁱ and I was so taken with a piece of lacquerware I saw there. I felt it was so beautiful with the gold and shell fragments glittering in the deep dark lacquer.” That piece was a *suzuri-bako* inkstone box by the Japanese painter and craftsman Ogata Korinⁱⁱ (1658-1716). The experience motivated her to try to make her own lacquerware and she decided to go to Japan.

When Ross first came to Japan in 1984, she met a teacher teaching ink painting and calligraphy in English in Tokyo, and this allowed her to learn about Japanese aesthetics. Ross explains that “Japanese painting seeks meaning also in the empty spaces where nothing is drawn. Subjects are sometimes not painted completely on the paper. For example, you intentionally might draw the branches of a tree only partly on a screen. Doing this makes the people seeing it imagine what comes after that. I was influenced by this uniquely Japanese aesthetic.” Subsequently, she moved to Wajima and enrolled at the Ishikawa Prefectural Wajima Institute of Lacquer Arts in 1990.

The Wajima Institute of Lacquer Arts is a school whose purpose is to transmit the techniques of holders of Important Intangible Cultural Property, known as Living National Treasures, to the next gen-

i. Combined art school and art museum

ii One of the most prominent painters and craftsmen of the early-modern period in Japan. A representative work is “Red and White Plum Blossoms” (National Treasure).



1



5



2



3



4

- 1 A lacquerware bowl using lace as reinforcement
- 2 Jewelry combining *maki-e* and semiprecious stones. From the left, *urushi* combinations with lapis lazuli, Akoya pearl, and amber.
- 3 A plate in which a combination of lace, gold *maki-e* and lacquering creates wonderful nuances
- 4 A box lacquered with *maki-e* and *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay) quail's egg shell inlay and silver *maki-e*
- 5 Ross's studio, located in a beautiful natural environment

dilapidated old-style cattle barn, turning it into a studio together with her husband.

Calling it “a place like heaven where you hear the murmuring of the river, that is close to the Sea of Japan, and where you are surrounded by a myriad plants, animals and insects,” Ross comments that “The nature here is truly beautiful. I take walks in the mountains and on the shore every day, getting inspiration from that nature. I want to spend the rest of my life using the time given to me to focus on making my works.”

This year, 2022, Ross will be taking on a big project that she hasn't tried before, namely applying *maki-e* to musical instruments at the request of New York musicians. Ross's adventures and challenges with lacquer are far from over. 7

actively worked to present her works. She has also been awarded several prizes, such as being selected for the Ishikawa Modern Art Exhibition.

In particular, her numerous pieces of lacquerware using lace as the base, which are one of her lifeworks, have earned praise both in Japan and internationally. She has broadened the scope of lacquer art through this completely new expression of lacquerware, where the lacquering gives the lace an unprecedented glossy surface and texture. The jewelry Ross makes by combining *maki-e* and semiprecious stones is popular among young Japanese and foreigners who are not familiar with lacquer art. Moreover, she has been continuously and vigorously engaged in activities to communicate the appeal of lacquer both in Japan and abroad, for example by giving lectures and holding workshops to introduce Japanese *urushi* in London, Hawaii, New York, and elsewhere.

At present, Ross's studio is located some way up the mountains from urban Wajima. She took over a more or less



Ross wearing a lacquered accessory that she made herself

eration. There, Ross studied traditional Wajima techniques as well as techniques for applying *maki-e* and *raden* (see p. 7-9). Ross says that she has also challenged herself to broaden the possibilities of lacquer, for example by using French lace instead of linen to reinforce bowls.

Since she became an independent lacquer artist in 2000, Ross has organized several solo exhibitions, displayed works at traditional craft exhibitions, and



Bronze statue of Basho, located in the Basho-an Historical Site Observation Garden (Koto City, Tokyo) by the Sumida River, which is said to have been the site of Basho-an, where Basho lived

Photo: Sawaji Osamu

Matsuo Basho

The Unparalleled Haiku Poet

The Japanese short poem the “haiku” is beloved all around the world. In this first instalment of a new series that introduces haiku poets who have made a lasting impression on the history of this poetry form, we profile arguably the greatest of them all, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694).

SAKURAI SHIN

HAIKU is a type of poetry unique to Japan that expresses natural aesthetics and human emotions in a limited number of characters. The poems typically comprise 17 *on* (phonetic units similar to syllables) in lines of five, seven and five (5-7-5) syllables. The basic rule is to include only one word to express the season, called a “*kigo*,” among the seventeen syllables. The *kigo* are categorized as spring, summer, fall, winter and new year words, and people usually reference a book called the *Saijiki*, which lists such *kigo* like a dictionary, when composing haiku.

The most important haiku poet in the history of haiku is Matsuo Basho (hereinafter Basho). He lived until he was about 50 and created about 1,000 poems. In his later years, he came to be called “Haisei” (Great Master of Haiku), which signified that he was unparalleled by any haiku poet.

Noro Tatsuya of the Koto City Basho Museum in Tokyo says, “Basho was someone who perfected haiku as a literary art with high artistry, despite them being short poems of only 17 syllables.”

Basho was born in 1644 in present-day Iga City, Mie Prefecture. He came across *haikai*¹ at the age of 19 and moved to Nihonbashi (now Chuo City, Tokyo)

in Edo at the age of 29 with the dream of making a living out of haikai. After becoming a master of haikai at the age of 35, he started living

in a house called Basho-an in Fukagawa (present-day Koto City) along the Sumida River in 1680. Basho was based in Fukagawa for about 14 years until his death, leaving behind a wealth of works.

The following poem is arguably Basho’s most famous work and the one that established Basho’s original style, called “*shofu*” (Basho style). Basho made this haiku on the subject of the frog (*kawazu* in old Japanese) in the spring of 1686 when his disciples were gathered at his house.

*Furuike ya
kawazu tobikomu
mizu no oto*

An ancient pond
A frog jumps in
The splash of water

—Trans. by Koto City Basho Museum

“The frog, which is a *kigo* for spring, has a croak which has been treated as a symbol of the frog itself. However, Basho did not represent the croak of the frog in this poem but used its jumping movement and the splash of water as his motifs, thereby emphasizing the ‘tranquility’ of the pond so much that

Portrait of Basho by painter and haiku poet Matsumura Gekkei (1752-1811) (Collection of Koto City Basho Museum)

Photo: Courtesy of Koto City Basho Museum

it feels like we can hear the movement of the small frog jumping,” says Noro. “In haiku, unnecessary explanations are omitted as much as possible. It encourages the reader to imagine the scene and emotions of the poem.”

It is important for haiku to have



Basho-an as depicted in an 1836 book introducing sights in Edo (present-day Tokyo)

Photo: Courtesy of Koto City Basho Museum

yohaku (empty space) that allows the reader to exercise their imagination. It is precisely such yohaku that yields the yoin (lingering note) that resonates with the heart. His composition of such poems is one of the ways Basho was innovative.

Basho traveled around the country and composed many haiku in various places. *Oku no Hosomichi* (The Narrow Road to the Deep North) is a travelogue written about his travels with disciples in some regions such as the Tohoku and



A display of the kind of clothes, hat, sandals, and other objects that Basho might have used on his travels, at Koto City Basho Museum

Photo: Sawaji Osamu

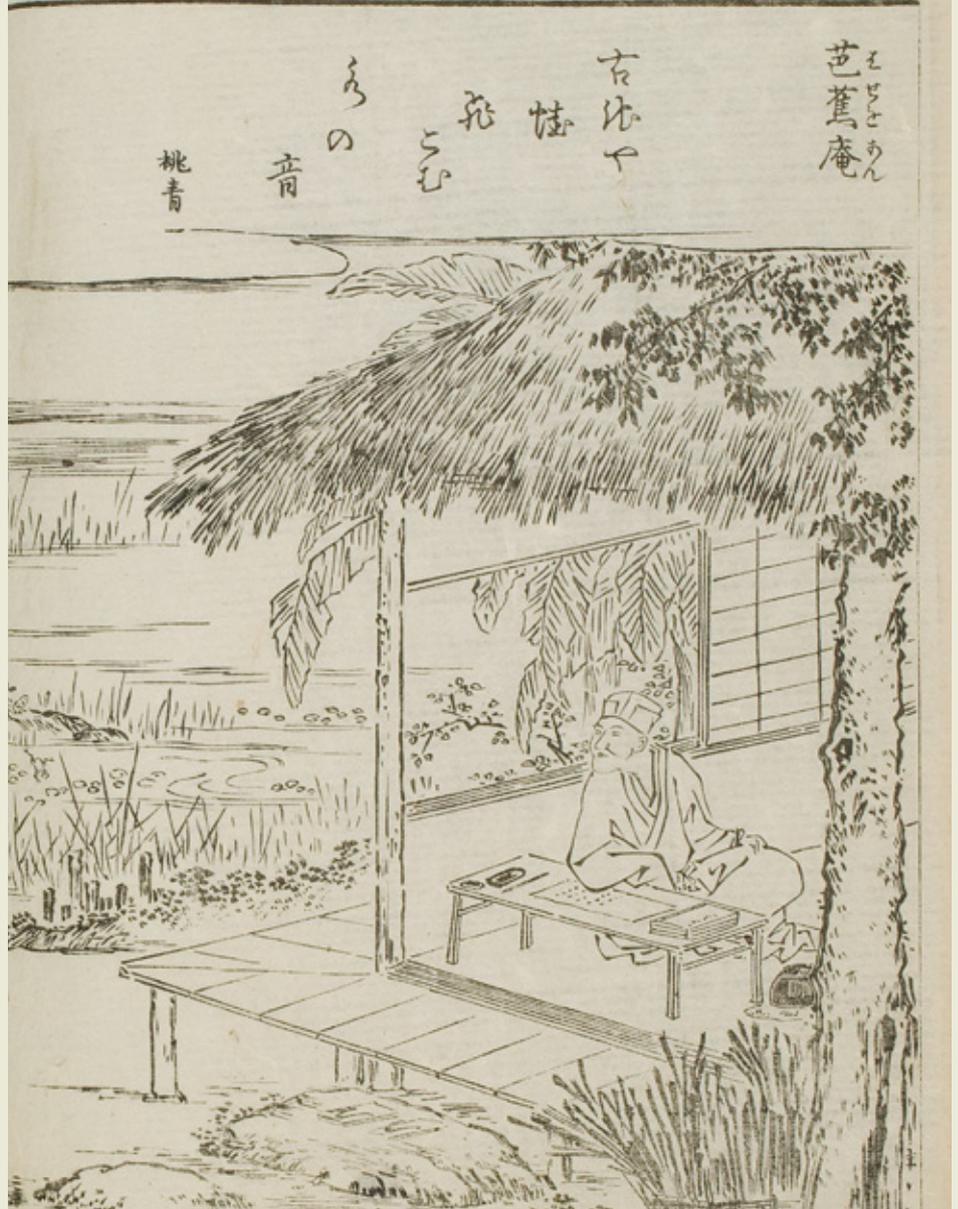
Hokuriku regions in 1689. It contains 50 poems, one of which is the following.

*Araumi ya
Sado ni yokotau
Amanogawa*

Turbulent the sea
Across to Sado stretches
The Milky Way.

—Trans. by Donald Keene

This poem, which uses the autumn kigo “Milky Way,” describes a scene with Sado Islandⁱ in a turbulent Sea of Japan at night and the Milky Way extending high above in the sky. With this short



poem, Basho is able to evoke this magnificent image of nature and space in a reader who has not actually seen it. This poem is also regarded as one of Basho’s masterpieces.

Haiku has now become a form of expression that is popular not only in Japan but also in other countries, with enthusiasts existing all over the world. For example, John Lennon, a member of the Beatles, said in an interview when he came to Japan in 1971 that “I think haiku is the most beautiful poetry I’ve ever read. I’d like to simplify my lyrics [to be] as beautiful as haiku.” There are numerous other examples of passionate enthusiasts in Europe, such as the former President of the European Council Her-

man Van Rompuy, who has produced a haiku anthology of his own.

The Basho-an International English Haiku Competition has been held by the Koto City Basho Museum annually since 2018. Regardless of nationality or age, anyone can submit a haiku via the website. There is a rule that it should consist of two to three lines, but it is not necessary to include a kigo. Last year, the fourth time the competition was held, there were more than 1,500 submissions from 34 countries and regions.

The haiku form whose artistry Basho established may be considered one of the few literary styles in the world that allows anyone to freely express what they feel with simple words. 

i Haikai is also known as *haikai-renga* and has its roots in the classic poetic form of *waka*. *Waka* is generally composed using 31 syllables in lines of five, seven, five, seven, seven (5-7-5-7-7) syllables. Traditional *waka* poetry often has a single author, but *haikai* is composed by multiple people. It starts with one person composing only the five, seven and five (5-7-5) syllables of the first half, called the “*hokku*,” which is then followed by another person (other persons) composing the latter lines of seven and seven (7-7).

ii See *Highlighting Japan* November 2021, “The Island of Gold Seeking to Become a World Heritage Site” https://www.gov-online.go.jp/eng/publicity/book/hlj/html/202111/202111_06_en.html



Mizubasho in bloom

SEASONAL FLOWERS

Mizubasho

Asian Skunk Cabbage



Mizubasho in the Oze marshland

Lysichiton camtschatcensis, or *mizubasho* in Japanese, is a plant found in wetlands mostly in northern and cooler parts of Japan, famously in the Oze marshland on the main island of Honshu. The mizubasho in Oze appear as a memory in the lyrics of the well-known Japanese song “Memories of Summer.” Mizubasho bloom in spring in the lowlands, but spring comes later in the highlands due to the cooler temperatures, and in Oze the flowers bloom in late May or early June, which explains the “memories” at the beginning of “summer.” The tiny flowers of the mizubasho are densely packed on an inner yellow spike. The outer white part of the inflorescence is called a bract, a modified leaf which protects the flower, and which generally ranges in size from 5 cm to 20 cm. In the Japanese language of flowers, the pure white mizubasho carries the meaning of “beautiful memories.” The plant’s English name is “skunk cabbage” owing to its musky scent, but the mizubasho of Japan is mildly fragrant. In the flowering season, people visit marshlands such as Oze to see the beautiful spectacle of mizubasho in bloom.

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