



Box by Masuda Mitsuo titled “*Moonlit Night in a Wood*,” gilding on copper (8.8 cm x 18 cm x 8.2 cm) (1993). Photo by Tanaka Gakuji. (Collection of National Crafts Museum)

# Masuda Mitsuo’s Expressions with Gold

**The late Masuda Mitsuo was a metal craftsman known for his particularly skillful use of gold.**

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**M**ETAL chasing is a technique used to engrave and emboss patterns onto metals such as gold, silver and copper using a chisel<sup>1</sup> (see pp. 10-11). Masuda Mitsuo (1909-2009) was a famous metal chaser who made effective use of gold in works that richly expressed scenes from nature such as the plants and animals of Japan’s four seasons. After entering the Tokyo Fine Arts School (now the Tokyo University of the Arts) at the age of 20, he continued to create art works over the course of about 80 years until his death in 2009. In 1991, he was designated as a holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property (a Living National Treasure).

Among the works he left behind is “*Moonlit Night in a Wood*,

a black copper box with gilding” made in 1993 (see photo). The brilliant golden full moon on the lid is a striking feature of the box.

“The most fascinating aspect of Masuda’s works is the skillful use of gold in thematic motifs that catch the eye. Gold highlights the subject and produces strength. And as gold is a material that changes little over the ages, the impact of his works remains undiminished,” says Karasawa Masahiro, Director of the National Crafts Museum in Kanazawa, Ishikawa Prefecture, which houses many of Masuda’s works.

There are many ways to use gold in metal chasing, such as open working, in which a sheet of gold is engraved following a design, and inlaying, in which gold is embedded in a base metal. For his box named “*Moonlit Night in a Wood*,” gilding on copper was used in the final process of the chasing, a technique in which a burner is used to evaporate the mercury from a molten alloy of gold and mercury that is fixed on the base

Water container by Masuda Mitsuo titled “Se (Shallow),” gilding on copper (10 cm x 17.9 cm) (1972). Photo by Tanaka Gakuji. (Collection of National Crafts Museum)




metal to secure the gold.

“Another example of Masuda’s use of gold plating on copper is his 1972 work the water container titled “Se (Shallow).” The striking originality of the colors and combination of gold plating on the copper base in this work had a major impact on the crafts world. Gold plating can create a large area of gold, and so express the dynamic flow of water. It produces a wonderful harmony with the color and texture of the copper base,” says Karasawa.

Master of modern Japanese ceramics Tomimoto Kenkichi<sup>ii</sup> (1886-1963) was a person whom Masuda regarded as a life-long mentor and whose teachings he unfailingly followed. “One of those teachings was that you should never create a pattern from another pattern”. Therefore, throughout his life, Masuda continued to create sketches and new patterns. This is why many of his works feature depictions of familiar natural scenes, plants, and animals.

“For example, the hare on his “Incense burner, hare design” (gilding on silver) from 1993 is so vivid you wouldn’t think it was made of lines engraved into metal. This advanced engraving technique is an alluring aspect of Masuda’s works,” says Karasawa.

Masuda was active as an artist until the end of his life. Many works exuding the presence of gold were produced from his home workshop, which echoed with the sounds of his chisel. 



Incense burner with hare design by Masuda Mitsuo, gilding on silver (7.1 cm x 7 cm x 7 cm) (1993). Photo by Tanaka Gakuji. (Collection of National Crafts Museum)

**Note:** The works pictured are in the collection of the National Crafts Museum but are not permanent exhibits.

i A tool used to cut and shave metal.

ii He perfected a technique to gild gold and silver at the same time, known as *iroe-kinginsai*.