



Miniature inlaid cabinet
“Meishozu kodansu” by Komai
Otojiro (1842-1917) (h. 13.8 cm).
Photo by Kimura Yoichi
Photo: © Kiyomizu Sannenzaka Museum

Kyoto's Heritage Inlay Techniques

In this article we introduce *Kyo-zogan*, or **Kyoto inlaying**, a form of ornamentation revered for its delicate contrasts between the jet black of lacquer, the brilliance of pure gold, and the luster of silver.

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INLAYING is one of the oldest forms of craft ornamentation in the world, involving techniques to carve the surface of metals or wood as a base into which gold, silver, shells, and other types of metal and wood different in color to that base are inlaid to create patterns. It is said that metalwork inlaying, which takes metal as the primary material, was brought to Japan from the continent along with Buddhism via the Silk Road in around the 6th and 7th centuries.

The uniqueness of Japanese metalwork inlaying lies in the use of lacquer on the metal. Tatebe Kazuo, president of the Kyoto Art Inlay Union, says, “Japan has a humid climate, so we

have used lacquer to protect the metal from tarnishing. This is why Japanese metalwork inlaying is durable and retains the brilliance of gold and silver even after 100 or 200 years.”

Japanese metalwork inlaying is a traditional craft in several regions¹, but the precise history of “Kyoto inlaying” is unclear, although there are various theories. Still, it is said that it can be traced back more than a thousand years. “Kyoto inlaying” is also called “*nunome* (fabric texture) inlaying” because of the technique used, and it is famous for its delicacy and elegance. It is said that *nunome* inlaying flourished at the end of the Edo period (early 17th century to mid-late 19th century).

Nunome inlaying first involves carving 7 or 8 grooves in a 1 mm wide pattern resembling woven fabric on an iron base. The name “*nunome* inlaying” comes from how the fine grooves look like the spaces between threads in woven fabric. In these grooves, flat metal or lines of pure gold or pure

i In addition to “Kyoto inlaying,” Kumamoto’s “Higo inlaying” and Ishikawa’s “Kaga inlaying” are famous.

silver with a diameter of up to 1 mm are inserted to make patterns. After the gold or silver has been inserted, the iron is corroded to erase the pattern, tannin is applied as an anticorrosive, and then lacquer is coated on top 3 to 4 times to fix (bake) the pattern. Subsequently, the surface of the lacquer is gradually scraped to reveal (sharpen) the pattern. Finally, fine lines are added to the pattern to complete the work. One craftsman is responsible for all of these intricate and complex processes.

Tatebe explains, “Popular motifs for Kyo [short for Kyoto] inlays have always been flowers, seasonal features, and landscapes, which I think is related to how there were excellent Japanese-style painters in Kyoto who also worked on inlay sketches.”

In other words, because realistic expression was sought from the sketches, Kyoto inlaying was further refined through workmanship that included shading and texture.

In 1878, Kyoto inlays, displaying the best uses of these techniques, were exhibited at the Paris World’s Fair, to high acclaim in Europe. In particular, the works of Komai Otojiro (alias O. Komai) (1842-1917), were popular and most of them were exported overseas.

Currently, the main Kyo inlay products are accessories such as pendants and tie pins, small boxes and bags, and interior decoration items such as framed inlay art.

Tatebe says that “In Kyoto, there are several universities that have departments in traditional crafts, and they also pass on inlaying techniques. Some young artists are creating original works, so I look forward to what the future has to offer.”



A Kyoto inlay craftsman at work
Photo: Courtesy of Amita Corp.



Household goods made of brass with a mirror finish to reflect the Kyoto inlay designs on the brim at the base. From left, pen holder, bookend, paperweight, planter cover and vase
Photo: Courtesy of Amita Corp.



Close-up of Kyoto inlay jewelry with geometric patterns
Photo: Courtesy of Amita Corp.



Kyoto inlay jewelry
Photo: Courtesy of Amita Corp.