

# Charms of Japanese Lacquer “Urushi”

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## Japanese People & Urushi

*Urushi* lacquer is very close to Japanese people. Lacquered bowls placed on the table every day are indispensable for such Japanese food as *miso* (soybean paste) soup and simmered meat or fish with vegetables. Lacquerware makes its appearance at major events of the year or life such as New Year's Day celebrations, where Japanese mark the occasion by sipping “*otoso*” spiced *sake*, or a wedding that represents a major turning point in life for a couple as they undergo a ritual of the “three-times-three” exchanges of nuptial cups of *sake*.

*Urushi* is made from the sap of Japanese lacquer varnish trees and has been used as a coating and adhesive agent since ancient times. A red-colored *urushi* product unearthed at ruins in Hokkaido in 2000 was learned to have been made about 9,000 years ago and that the technique of using *urushi* had already been established then. There has also been a report that *urushi* was once utilized as adhesive glue for an arrowhead. Japanese people became aware of the outstanding characteristics of *urushi* in ancient times and have made good use of it in their lives. They have utilized it not only for tableware and accessories but also for Buddha images, buildings, furniture, armor and every conceivable thing related to livelihood. Now, automobiles, cameras and cellphones making use of *urushi* have emerged.



An *urushi* coating has its own glossy texture and a graceful feel. *Urushi* lacquerware is also found in China and Korea. However, the “*makie*” lacquerware decoration technique of sprinkling gold powder over wet lacquer designs was originated in Japan during the Nara period (710-784). Since early modern times, many Europeans have been fascinated by “*makie*” lacquerware sporting *urushi*'s black color that seemed to draw them to be soaked ever and ever in it and its eternal luster. Many lacquerware products have crossed the sea from Japan. *Urushi* became the object of people's dreams in Europe and the United States and was called “*japan*.”

## Functions of Urushi

*Urushi* is extraordinary excellent not only for its beauty but also as paint and varnish. It is unaffected by acids, alkalis or organic solvents. It is strong in waterproofing, thermal and electric insulation, and antiseptis. It is precisely the wisdom of our forefathers as wooden lacquerware has the property of preventing one's hands from becoming hot even when it contains a



Echizen lacquerware: Gold powder-sprayed “*makie*” writing box with illustration of quails in the silver grass

Wajima lacquerware: “*Makie*” box with peony illustration



Tea box decorated by “*raden*” (seashell inlay) & an abalone shell

heated substance and also of keeping warm food inside from cooling off. Also, unlike ordinary paints, *urushi* does not contain any organic solvent and no heat energy is used to dry it. It has the quality of hardening by enzyme-induced natural chemical reaction. Thus, it is a very eco-friendly paint. Although *urushi* is said to be a living thing, chemical reaction gradually advances after it hardens, increasing its transparency with the passing of years. Lacquerware items preserved in the Shosoin warehouse in Nara City still shine beautifully although they have stayed there for more than 1,200 years.

## Making of Lacquerware

The process of manufacturing lacquerware begins, first of all, with “*kijizukuri*” or the making of a wooden base that becomes the bedrock of the whole operation. Recently, plastics have been used as the foundation for many types of ware put on sale as lacquered goods. However, the charm of “genuine” lacquerware is its light weight, a feel one gets in one's hand and its excellent heat insulation. Such allure comes only from lacquerware made of wood. The following is a general flow of the process: “*shitajisagyo*” or preparatory work (basic grounding in lacquerware), which is to reinforce plain wood and fine-tune its shape before it is painted, followed by “*shitanuri*” or first coating to prevent any substance from being absorbed, “*nakanuri*” (second coating) to enable “*uwanuri*” (final coating) to take root, and the finish coating. The process ends with “*kashoku*” (adding decoration) to the lacquerware such as “*makie*” and “*raden*” (inlay of shell pieces). The preparatory work in particular is a process undertaken meticulously; a craftsman reinforces portions of plain wood prone to wear and tear and makes it durable by pasting pieces of cloth to some parts of

the rim and bottom of the wood shaped into a bowl and thus increasing its strength, then paints it over with a mixture of *urushi* and earth powder, and repeatedly – several dozen times – goes through the process of coating it with *urushi*, and drying and polishing it up. What is covered by this “*shitaji-sagyo*” becomes invisible when the product is finished but the process sways the sense of fitting snugly felt by its user, robustness and the beauties of its workmanship. In the process of painting that repeats coating and drying, the latter operation is somewhat unusual. Dry air cannot bring about the desired result since it is an enzyme-triggered chemical reaction that dries up lacquerware. Lacquered work is dehydrated in a room with humidity ranging from 70% to 80%. Control of the humidity level is very important because lacquer contracts when humidity is high. Dust is a formidable foe. Those concerned must remain sensitive to keep dust out of the worksite as much as possible and wear clothes that do not release any dirt. During the years including the Edo period (1603–1867), as legend goes, workers took the trouble to row a boat to the open sea to plaster *urushi* on lacquerware because humidity in the sea was suitable for drying in the absence of dust. Japanese spent a considerable time and effort for the manufacture of lacquerware since years gone by.

### ■ Association with Lacquerware

Lacquerware thus manufactured at much expense in time and effort can tolerate long years of use and be possible for repair. I have heard somebody say that “this ‘*hotoke-sama*’ (a Buddha image) has a much more graceful face than when it was created because it has received wholehearted prayers from many people.” It could be said that “good lacquerware used for a long time” may have a good taste, including a spiritual aspect. Lacquerware made by traditional skills is very attractive in that it can be put back together when damaged. A brand-new piece of lacquerware without any trace of flaws is not the only one that is valuable. It is hoped that lacquerware packing memories and love of its owners attached

to it will continue to be used while undergoing repair, just like humans who overcome illnesses and injuries during the period of long life. A lacquerware product that has inscribed history together with its owner will never diminish its allure.

### ■ Ways to Enjoy Lacquerware

I would like to suggest that those who want to have fine lacquerware get a product that they can be particular about, the kind that might fit their sense and that might not lead them to become tired of owning it since *urushi* products are bound to be used for a long time. It is not necessary to have expensive lacquered articles, but the goods manufactured by those who do not spare time and effort and properly carry out their assignments bear price tags commensurate with their work. I wish that many people will get pleasure from lacquerware that came out of Japanese sensitivity for beauty, outstanding technique, advanced expertise and devotion to their work. There are many pieces of *urushi* ware that stand out as superb artistic craftwork. However, a lacquered spoon may be cited as one of the items that people can enjoy with utmost casualness. It is small, charming in shape and glossy. In addition to being surprisingly lightweight, it does not give any sense of cold metal feeling when one brings food into one’s mouth with it and helps unfurl mellow savor in the mouth. It goes perfectly with desserts such as yogurt and ice cream. There is a boom called “*my hashi*” under way in Japan as people take their own chopsticks with them when eating out. It is designed to stop using disposable chopsticks available at restaurants as a means of grappling with eco-friendly life. People may find pleasure in using diversely designed chopsticks and pouches as part of their personal adornment. While Japanese food is increasingly gaining popularity as healthy diet in various countries, it is pretty cool for diners to



Wajima lacquerware: plates



Wajima lacquerware: lunch boxes & chopsticks

carry “*my hashi*” with them when they go to *sushi* bars or restaurants serving Japanese cuisine.

### ■ Traditional Japanese Craft

With feelings of appreciation to a blessing of nature, Japanese once used traditional crafts nurtured by affluent nature for a “long time,” “continuously with occasional repair” and “to the very end.” Also, traditional craftworks, including *urushi* whose performance as paint and varnish is more excellent than high technology, are a treasure trove of wisdom and technique for resolving environmental problems. Traditional craftworks have an important role to play in an attempt geared toward a recycle-oriented society. We should take a renewed look at traditional Japanese craft from an environmental perspective as well.

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Photos: JapanTraditional Craft Center  
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