

Urushi in Japanese Culture (1) Japanese People & *Urushi* Story

By Kazumi MUROSE

Misunderstanding of *Urushi*

There are great numbers of inherent cultural traditions in Japan. Culture featuring *urushi* is one of them. Many foreigners may have a hard time understanding what *urushi* really is in a word. After all, there are only a limited number of people who have a correct grasp of it even among Japanese.

Urushi is frequently translated as “(Japanese) lacquer,” but this is the problem in the first place. *Urushi* is tree sap and a natural paint unlike so-called lacquer, which is a chemical coating. *Urushi* is “*urushi*” no matter what. We should not force ourselves to translate it into foreign languages, but keep it in Japanese as is the case with such words as *sushi* and *judo* to forestall any misunderstanding. While the word *urushi* itself invites misunderstanding on its designation alone, I intend to report on its wonderful aspect correctly because *urushi* is my occupation.

Accordingly, I would like to write a story about *urushi* in four installments beginning with this article and cover its charm from different angles. First, I would like to outline Japanese *urushi* culture.

Urushi & the Japanese

Urushi sap performs what blood does to humans. When an *urushi* tree is damaged, its fluid gathers in the opening of the damaged part. It becomes solid and creates a cover or scab after touching the air as the tree seeks to protect itself. The fluid scraped together before it becomes hard is the undiluted, raw sap of *urushi*.

Urushi trees spread through all parts of East Asia, but its principal ingredients and the means of extracting *urushi* sap differ according to areas. A period of about six months from June to November is the time to take it out in Japan. However, *urushi* sap cannot be collected in bulk. The volume of annual *urushi*

sap gathered from a tree planted systematically and nurtured under careful control totals just about the amount to fill up a teacup. Each drop of *urushi* sap is a treasure in Japan where its output has been on the decline.

Japanese *urushi* is extraordinarily outstanding as coating and adhesive agents. *Urushi* maintains a gentle, charming and beautiful gloss as paint once it solidifies and becomes paint film strong enough to keep acid and alkali away from it. The secret of this probably lies in its ability to solidify. *Urushi* does not make itself “dry” by releasing water, but it “hardens” itself by combining oxygen in water vapor in the air and an enzyme in *urushi* together. Japan’s humid climate produces beautiful and strong *urushi*. It is not clear when the Japanese began to pay attention to *urushi*’s property, but burial accessories revealing the use of *urushi* as paint about 9,000 years ago were discovered in Japan at an archaeological site. Since then, Japanese began to have a relationship with *urushi*.

Although the Jomon era (145-10 BC) was a prehistoric period, the *urushi* culture of that time in Japan should not be underestimated. Jomon earthenware, bamboo baskets and accessories were given superb *urushi* coatings in terms of technique and formation, not to mention the effective utilization of *urushi* as an adhesive agent in repairing broken pottery. And, in recent years, I was taken aback by the excavation of *urushi* trees. Some people might wonder why its unearthing was so astonishing. What was surprising was not the uncovered *urushi* trees themselves but lines engraved in parallel to their trunks. These lines were the traces of *urushi* having been scraped and they showed no difference whatsoever from those used in collecting *urushi* at present. People of the Jomon period had already mastered the most effective means of gathering *urushi* and that method has been handed down unchanged for several thousand years to the present.

Photos: author



A trace of *urushi* sap collected

Urushi just after its sap is scraped



A "seigan"-type portable shrine with "makie" and mother-of-pearl inlaid decoration of flowers and birds Photo: Nagoya City Museum

"Makie": Flower of Japanese Urushi

The primitive means of expression in the use of *urushi* like "putting a coat of *urushi*" on something soon ushered in a new stage of adding a technique of decoration to it. The sphere of *urushi* culture is widespread in East Asia just as is the case with *urushi* trees. What makes Japan's *urushi* culture most characteristic amid its widespread presence is perhaps the technique of "makie," a method of decoration. *Makie* refers to the technique of drawing patterns in *urushi*, which are shown when fine metallic substances are scattered over sketched designs before *urushi* becomes solid. Sprinkling such metal powder is called "maki" (strewing) and, because it leads to the demonstration of "e" (picture), the two words are combined to mean "makie." This method of *makie* remains an original Japanese technique.

The technique is simple in words. However, it is varied in application by changing the kind of powder used, the size of grains, the way the powder is strewn and the method of making preparations. *Makie* is thus very rich in expression. Because almost all *makie* works are expressed in gold *makie* that is made on black *urushi*, some people tend to imagine the surface to be dull and monotone. Once they actually see it, however, they get the feeling it is rich in hue even though it is monotone. This is the result of a variety of techniques employed.

Objects covered by *makie* are indeed varied, ranging from not only tableware but also furniture, stationery, musical instruments, armor, vehicles and all the way to building structures. It has embellished all kinds of things and added colors to Japan's living culture.

"*Kingin no denso karatachi*" (a sword and a mounting decorated in gold and silver) produced during the Nara period in the 8th century and preserved at the Shosoin treasure house in Nara is said to be the origin of *makie*. The running animals and clouds displayed in *makie* in the sheath of a sword are elegant and suggest the possibility that the inception of *makie* could go further back in history. From that time onward, *makie* rapidly thrived during the Heian period (794-1192) and its name appeared frequently in historical documents. *Makie* was also employed to decorate the interior of Chusonji Konjikido (the Golden Hall of Chusonji temple) in the town of Hiraizumi, Iwate Prefecture, which UNESCO recently decided to put off listing as a World Heritage site. The technique of *makie* was completed during the Muromachi period (1336-1573) and it ascended all the way up to the top. The circle of people receiving *makie* expanded from part of the privileged classes to townspeople during the Edo period (1608-1867) as the diversity of *makie* went to extremities in technique, design and variety. It was during this period that some *makie* craftsmen



Work on "makie" under way

Photo: author

signed their names in their works and their products gained in popularity as a sort of brand-name items.

Thus, *makie* has remained the mainstream of Japanese *urushi* culture to this day.

Makie to World Stage

The aesthetic sense of *makie* won recognition not only at home but also in other countries. Its epochal point came in its encounter with Europeans.

Japanese first came into contact with Europeans in 1543 when they met the Portuguese. Subsequently, Jesuit missionaries became active in propagating Christianity and their activities led to the expansion of trade between Japan and Portugal. Such developments brought about a phenomenon of rising demand for Japanese *urushi*-ware in Europe. Missionaries coming to Japan filed orders with Japanese craftsmen for *urushi*-ware for use in religious rituals. In addition, they brought home made-in-Japan *urushi*-ware that attracted great interest among Europeans.

Europeans were captivated by the world of extravagant and beautiful *makie* featuring gold lacquer and the Japanese "black" that could not be reproduced by other paints. European trading partners changed from age to age because of political situations in Japan. However, wild enthusiasm for Japanese *urushi*-ware continued amid the evolution of interest in the Orient, with porcelain called "china" and *urushi*-ware "japan."

Urushi art is a typical Japanese product of beauty to the extent of having the word "japan" as a crown radical in English. And *urushi* art remains very much active even now. In this article, I covered the process of *urushi* development at a rapid pace, but I plan to go more slowly in the next installment to enjoy writing about *urushi* masterpieces.

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