

Wajima Lacquerware: Striving to Promote Japan's Leading Traditional Craft

By Takeshi SODA

Photo: Hiroaki Ishii
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Like other traditional Japanese craft, "Wajima lacquerware" made in Wajima City, Ishikawa Prefecture, has been hit by stagnant demand due to radical changes in the lifestyle of Japanese people, increasing imports of cheap overseas products and other factors. Its production has fallen to less than half its peak level. This has caused many problems, ranging from financial plight for those in the business to difficulties in finding successors to Wajima lacquerware craftsmen.

Moreover, the big earthquake that hit the Noto Peninsula jetting out into the Japan Sea in March 2007 damaged most of the city's lacquerware business establishments and destroyed workshops and products, wreaking havoc on the industry.

However, rather than being dispirited by the stagnation of traditional craft and the quake damage, the industry has been fighting vigorously for reconstruction and revitalization of the region with support from the national and Ishikawa prefectural governments, striving to promote its products overseas and develop new products. What follows describes those efforts.



Wajima lacquerware sake cups used at a banquet on the opening day of the July 2008 G-8 Hokkaido Toyako Summit

Wajima Lacquerware: Japan's Leading Traditional Craft

Known as Japan ware, lacquerware is the country's leading traditional craft. Wajima lacquerware, in particular, which is made in Wajima City at the tip of the Noto Peninsula in central Japan, has a history of 600 years. Being the strongest among Japanese lacquerware and at the same time being very elegant, Wajima ware is lacquerware of the highest quality.

Workmen use traditional techniques and put their heart and soul in making Wajima ware. Every piece is made by hand. Because its production involves more than 100 processes, each requiring a high degree of skill, there is division of labor. Some work on wood to shape it as a base product, while others specialize in applying lacquer or decorations. Therefore, before a piece is finished, it passes through the hands of many workmen, which means that it takes somewhere between six months to a year to finish a product.

Wajima Lacquerware Production

Output of Wajima lacquerware was approximately ¥7 billion in 2005, accounting for 25% of the total production of wooden lacquerware in Japan. Wajima is by far the largest wooden lacquerware-producing region in Japan.

Wajima ware accounts for about one-third of the city's total shipments of finished goods and workers engaged in the business occupy some 12% of the city's working population. It is indeed an important industry for the city.

However, production in terms of value has fallen below half its peak level reached in the early 1990s, resulting in such serious problems as financial straits for firms engaged in the business and difficulties in securing successors to craftsmen.

Heavy Quake Damage

On March 25, 2007, a magnitude-6.9 temblor hit the Noto Peninsula. Intensity in Wajima City, which was closest to the epicenter, registered just over 6. In Ishikawa Prefecture, the quake caused one death, injured 338 (some seriously), destroyed 2,426 homes (including half-collapsed houses) and partially damaged 26,955 others.

The damage was most severe in Wajima City. Most of the city's Wajima ware establishments, numbering more than 600, were affected by the quake. The damage included not only the breakage of finished products and goods in process, but also the collapse of or damage to sturdy storehouses with thick mortar walls (called *dozo*) where craftsmen worked. This made it extremely difficult for many craftsmen and businessmen to see whether they would ever be able to resume their businesses. As many craftsmen were already elderly, it was feared that they would quit working altogether.

¥30 Bil. Fund for Post-quake Reconstruction

The Noto Peninsula quake damaged a large number of industries and businesses in the region: Wajima ware, sake brewing, shopping streets, tourism, etc. The central and prefectural governments responded by creating a ¥30 billion fund promptly after the quake to aid reconstruction, with particular emphasis on the Wajima ware/sake industries and shopping areas, all of which were severely hit.

A reconstruction committee, comprising the municipal government of Wajima, the city's Chamber of Commerce and Industry, and the lacquerware industry, drew up a restoration plan. Based on the plan and using the fund, the city is trying to rebuild the Wajima ware industry through a diverse menu of support that may be termed an "Ishikawa Prefecture process," featuring both "hard" and "soft" aid to the stricken small and medium enterprises.



Participants in an evening of “Kaga cuisine” sponsored by Ishikawa Prefecture savor the local dishes at the New York residence of the Japanese consulate general on Feb. 20, 2008.

Shop in New York Helping Tap Overseas Markets

Taking advantage of a boom in things Japanese (“wa”) in the United States, the Wajima Chamber of Commerce and Industry opened an office-cum-shop in New York City at 551 La Guardia Place, New York, N.Y. 10012-1402 in September 2006 to sell lacquerware, conduct public relations activities through exhibits, and test the water for new Wajima lacquerware. The project is supported by the “JAPAN BRAND Development Assistance Program” of the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry.

Another project designed to cultivate overseas markets was an evening of “Kaga cuisine” sponsored by Ishikawa Prefecture to showcase its local dishes at the New York residence of the Japanese consulate general on Feb. 20, 2008. This is traditional luxury cuisine in Kaga, an old name of the Ishikawa region. As demand for authentic Japanese cuisine is increasing in the United States, particularly among the rich, the event was designed to introduce to the world from New York what “real Japan” is and Ishikawa’s gastronomic culture, placing “Kaga cuisine” at its center. It was accompanied by Wajima ware and other kinds of tableware as well as *sake*. The event was also designed to introduce foods from Ishikawa. The local gastronomic culture was greatly admired and given high marks by those who attended, including the founder of restaurant guide “Zagat”, magazine reporters and managing chefs of restaurants known throughout the world – opinion leaders with large influence on food culture and fashion.

G-8 Summit: Another Chance for Overseas Publicity

Wajima lacquerware cups were used for a toast at an official dinner held July 7, 2008, on the opening day of the Group of Eight (G-8) summit at the Toyako lakeside resort in Hokkaido.

These cups were 8.2 cm in diameter and 8 cm high. Their finish coating was in red lacquer; in Japan, red has been the color for auspicious occasions since ancient times. At the center of the cup, green leaves – the symbol of nature – and a wild cherry blossom – Japan’s national flower – were drawn in colorful lacquer. Over this design, the initials of each national leader were drawn in *makie* gold-relief lacquer. The initials of fellow summiters were drawn near the rim of the cup in *makie* and blue seashell mother-of-pearl inlays.



Group of Eight (G-8) leaders and their wives enjoy Japanese cuisine at a banquet on the opening day of the Hokkaido Toyako Summit on July 7, 2008.

Seizing this occasion as the best opportunity to appeal to the world the beauty of Wajima ware and expand overseas sales channels, the Wajima Lacquerware Commerce & Industry Cooperative Society opened a mail-order website (<http://www.kanazawarakuza.com/wajima/>) in English and Japanese in time for the G-8 summit. Replicas of the Wajima lacquerware cups used at the summit dinner, decorated with alphabet letters designated by customers, are sold via the Internet to those anywhere in the world.

These efforts were reported throughout the world by overseas media that covered the summit, including the Associated Press and Thomson Reuters.

Wajima Ware Suited to Today’s Lifestyle, Living Space

In addition to cultivating overseas markets, the industry is actively working to produce items suitable for today’s lifestyle and living space. For example, woodworking company Kirimoto has used a technique called *makiji*, which increases the surface hardness of lacquerware, to develop products that can be used with metal cutlery. The technique allows the use of Wajima ware as everyday tableware, and the company is trying to develop sales channels for the new products. Collaboration between the company and Louis Vuitton, the world-famous brand, has led to commercial production of an elegant accessory case.

There are many other businesses working on new product development by taking advantage of a fund established by the central and prefectural governments and local financial institutions as well as a support system funded by investment proceeds from the previously mentioned fund for post-quake reconstruction.

Conclusion

The prefectural government plans to cooperate with the Wajima lacquerware industry for its revitalization by exploiting overseas markets and promoting the development of products with new functions and designs which meet the new needs of today’s consumers. It also hopes to introduce Wajima ware to people around the world. For inquiries, please contact: soda@pref.ishikawa.lg.jp **JS**

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