

# Urushi in Japanese Culture (2) *Makie* Masterpieces of My Choice

By Kazumi MUROSE

Trends in the style of *makie* (a traditional way of decorating *urushi* ware comparable to gold-relief lacquer painting) can be broadly divided into two groups – the traditional style that has continued from the Heian period (794-1192) to this day, and the diversified style that flourished in the periods of Azuchi-Momoyama (1568-1603) and Edo (1603-1867). I would like to introduce in this article four masterpieces in line with these trends.

## “*Ume Makie Tebako*”: Flowering Traditional Style

Of many masterpieces from the medieval period, one item I have a special feeling for is “*Ume Makie Tebako*” (box with plum blossom design in *makie*). This box, owned by the Mishima Taisha shrine in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture, was made in the 13th century and has been designated as a national treasure. A *tebako* is a box used to store one’s personal belongings, but “*Ume Makie Tebako*” was specially made for the gods of Mishima Taisha. It is a *shinpo* (god treasure) or an item created for the gods and given as an offering. This box has therefore been carefully preserved, and the numerous cosmetic items that were placed inside it still remain as they were. Some 800 years after its creation, the box gives us a full description of the lifestyle and esthetic standard of those times.

The surface of the box is decorated by the *ikakeji* method whereby gold powder is scattered densely over the surface. The space among large blossoming *ume* (Japanese plum) trees and wandering wild geese is dotted with Chinese characters shaped in silver plate. These characters were taken from a passage in a Chinese poem congratulating a friend on his promotion. *Taka-makie*, a type of *makie* in which *urushi* or *urushi* foundation material is used to raise designs and give a three-dimensional appearance, is used on each side of the box. This and other signs of craftsmanship show us that the basic techniques of *makie* that have continued to this day had already been perfected during this time.

Photo: Mishima Taisha



*Ume Makie Tebako*  
(national treasure)

In 1996, I was made a leader of a team responsible for making a replica of this *tebako*, and spent two years closely examining the box, down to its smallest detail. The project involved not just making a replica, but employing as closely as possible the materials and methods that were used in making the original. It was a process that enabled me to look squarely at the art of craftsmen in the Kamakura era (1192-1333), and I learned a lot. When I actually restored the methods of that period, I found that despite using almost excessively sophisticated techniques, the craftsmen did not make an ostentatious show of them, giving the box a deceptively simple, graceful look. This was an eye-opener for me. “*Ume Makie Tebako*” shows the traditional style of the early period at its best, a style that has been seamlessly handed on.

## “*Hatsune Makie Chodo*”: Traditional Style at Its Height

The year 2008 was the millennium anniversary of “*The Tale of Genji*” since completion of the literary masterpiece was first recorded in writing, and many events related to this famous ancient novel were held in Japan. There is probably no Japanese who has not heard of “*The Tale of Genji*.” Inspiring the creation of pictures of the novel’s famous scenes from early times, the tale has been a motif for various craftworks. Prominent among *urushi* ware decorated with the *Genji* motif is “*Hatsune Makie Chodo*” or *makie*-decorated furnishings, handed down to the Owari clan of the Tokugawa *shogunate* family and designated as a national treasure. These furnishings were made for the marriage of Princess Chiyo from the *shogunate* family to Tokugawa Mitsutomo, the second lord of the Owari domain. *Hatsune* is the title for the 23rd volume of “*The Tale of Genji*.” The sound of *Hatsune* is the same as that of the *kanji* characters meaning “firstborn,” and, since the story title was considered to be auspicious, it was apparently selected as a fitting motif for marriage. Of the furnishings that have been preserved, there are 47 articles in all, varying from small boxes to large shelves. What the whole original furnishings exactly consisted of is not yet clear, but it is thought many more items than have been preserved were crafted.

Princess Chiyo was only two and a half years old when she married. This means that the period for making these furnishings was two and a half years on the premise that production began as soon as the princess was born. In explaining the production of these furnishings, there are some written materials that say that “as much as two and a half years were spent,” but it would be more correct to say that production was “completed in only two and a half years.”

Each item of the *Hatsune* furnishings bears an image that deftly incorporates various motifs from the *Hatsune* volume, making the whole set of furnishings a good combination of scenes from the volume. An abundant amount of gold is used, with sophisticated technology used for artistic expression. The furnishings



A complete set of wedding furniture based on “Hatsune” motif, decorated with “makie” lacquer (national treasure)

are a culmination of the traditional form of *makie* that had been cultivated since the Heian period. The person responsible for creating the furnishings was Koami Chojū, a *makie* craftsman who served the Tokugawa *shogunate* – a descendant from a long line of craftsmen going back to the Muromachi period (1333-1573). From making the wooden base to painting *urushi* and creating *makie*, Chojū had to make arrangements and preparations for a huge number of items in a limited span of time. The work had to be done well with all the might of his workshop because it would reflect *shogunate* authority. I am impressed by how Chojū competently met all the challenges as head craftsman. The *Hatsune* furnishings can be called a landmark in the modern history of the traditional *makie* style.

### “Otamaya at Kodaiji”: Simple But Splendid

There is a group of artworks known as the “Kodaiji *makie*.” Kodaiji is a temple in Higashiyama, Kyoto City, built by Kitanomandokoro, the wife of 16th-century national leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi, to pray for her husband’s repose after his death. Enshrined in “Otamaya” (mausoleum) at Kodaiji are the wooden statutes of Hideyoshi and Kitanomandokoro. From the “*zushi*” (miniature shrine) doors to its interior, “Otamaya” is painted with *urushi* and decorated with magnificent *makie*, featuring mainly large patterns of Japanese silver grass. To apply this innovative, relaxed design on a lot of space, a technique was chosen whose process was simple but yielded the maximum decorative effect. The characteristics of this *makie* technique include *makippanashi* (scattering), *hikkaki* (scratching) and *e-nashiji* (producing part of patterns in the form of *nashiji*, which means pearl-like texture). Furnishings and writing instruments crafted in this way during this period are collectively called the “Kodaiji *makie*.”

The Azuchi-Momoyama period saw an unprecedented rush for new buildings, and there was apparently the need to provide adornment for large-scale architecture. One such building is “Otamaya” at Kodaiji just mentioned. Another example is the Tsukubusuma Shrine on an island in Lake Biwa, whose interior decoration is typical of *makie* of this period. Here we can see the bold patterns that are enhanced by the large expanse and the contrast in colors – the simplified method of expression brought about by the need for better productivity. All these factors combined to create a new form of beauty.

Otamaya at Kodaiji temple (important cultural property) Photo: Kodaiji



Kikori Makie Suzuri-bako (important cultural property)

### “Kikori Makie Suzuri-bako”: Innovationist

There is a group of artworks called “Rinpa” that has remained popular for their elegant designs. The Rinpa style was handed down not by family connections but by artists who respected and adopted it in their work. It has continued through the Edo period, and is still influential today. The pioneer of this style was Honami Koetsu of the Azuchi-Momoyama period. Born to a swordsmith family whose work was appraising and polishing swords, Koetsu showed exceptional talent in artifact such as calligraphy and ceramics for use in tea ceremonies.

Koetsu also created *makie* artworks, and one fine example is “Kikori Makie Suzuri-bako” (writing box decorated in *makie* and mother-of-pearl inlay with woodcutter design) owned by the MOA Museum of Art in Japan. The bold form of this box is stunning. Its dome-shaped lid is of a novel design that did not exist before Koetsu’s era. On the surface of the lid is a drawing of a woodcutter carrying a stack of wood on his back. The image was created using lead plate and thick seashells in a rugged fashion that is unthinkable in the traditional style of *makie* such as the *Hatsune* furnishings. To the question of who the depicted woodcutter is, experts have come up in recent years with an interpretation that he is Otomono Kuronushi, a poet in the Heian period deeply involved in literature in the medieval period. The box is not only innovatively designed, but reflects a high standard of education that time.

While Koetsu apparently made ceramics for tea ceremonies with his own hands, it is thought that with *urushi* ware, he focused on design and gave out instructions to craftsmen in making them. His role is somewhat similar to that of today’s art directors. That is perhaps why Koetsu was able to produce unique works, incorporating themes from traditional literature and *waka* poetry, but not being tied down by convention, as can tend to be with people who actually make things. Everything about this box – its shape, design, material and *urushi* coating – seems to speak most eloquently of Koetsu’s artistry. JS

Kazumi Murose is a holder of an important intangible cultural asset (“*makie*”). He has completed a graduate course at Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music. Active as an “*urushi*” art producer, he is also involved in the preservation and restoration of “*urushi*” art cultural assets.