

CRAFTWORK FOR PRAYER

By Chigako SASAKI

Marco Polo once chronicled in "The Travels of Marco Polo" that gold was produced everywhere in an island nation in the East and that a palace was wholly covered by pure gold. It is said Zipangu he mentioned as the island country that enticed longing for a visit to the East was Japan. How did this legend of gold come about?

Gold & Buddhist Fine Art

There was a deep relationship between the development of Buddhism and the thriving use of gold in Japan. The introduction of Buddhism from China led to techniques for making Buddha images and Buddhist altar fittings to find their way to Japan, making temple construction flourish. It was believed that Lord Buddha, the object of religious faith, emitted golden light and the Pure Land where Buddha lived gleamed in a golden color, while people wished to embody the Pure Land and come closer to Buddha. Just as blue and red were considered important colors for holy places in the Christian religion, gold was held to be a sacred color in Buddhism. Metal Buddha images and furnishings for Buddhist altars were given gold plating while gold

coating was applied to all parts of those created from plain wood to give a brilliant gold color for the appearance of Heaven.

While the emperor erected temples in various parts of the country, he issued an official notice to noble families and powerful clans recommending they build temples to house Buddha images with Buddhist scriptures and worship Buddha, according to a document recorded in 685. Powerful men vied with one another to build golden, majestic halls to keep their own images of Buddha and worshiped Buddha. Before long, such worship halls were brought indoors and transformed into family Buddhist altar rooms. For about 500 years from the Nara period (710-794) to the Kamakura period (1185-1333), demand for things related to Buddhism such as Buddha images, Buddhist altar fittings and temple

construction accelerated the development of craftwork. Were the scenes of these mental images of golden and majestic Buddhist temples what Marco Polo heard or learned in information conveyed to him concerning the golden island nation?

Emergence of Family Buddhist Altars

Christianity was introduced to Japan in the 15th century, but fearing its impact on control of the country, the Tokugawa *Shogunate* in Edo (present Tokyo) laid down a national policy of suppressing the Christian religion in 1640 by initiating a "system of religious sect confirmation." Under its mechanism, each household had to receive certification from the Buddhist sect of a temple it belonged to showing that its members were followers of that denomination. To prove they were adherents of Buddhism, Japanese families placed at home *zushi* (box-shaped altars). Originally, the *zushi* box was a small container with double doors used to lay a miniature Buddha image. Some boxes were decorated by *raden* mother-of-pearl inlays and *makie* gold-relief lacquerware and shipped to Europe as sacred boxes to keep holy icons.

The household Buddhist altar is traditional craftwork providing space for family members to worship Lord Buddha. The altar is a copy of the sanctum of the head temple of a sect to which family members adhere and the principal Buddhist image that is the object of reverence is preserved there.

On the other hand, memorial tablets displaying the posthumous Buddhist names of family ancestors are usually placed together with the principal Buddhist image. Ancestor worship was not originally included in Buddhism but the altar became united with the lineage-based "family" concept by having the souls of successive ancestors honored on the altar. It may be said that this development penetrated into the everyday life of ordinary people. Demand for altars

Photo: Nanao Buddhist Altar Cooperative



Nanao household Buddhist altar

unfolded and altar-making craftsmen surfaced in various parts of the country. The production system gradually became complete. Some 30 districts still remain active today as successor sites for altar production. About half the key manufacturing places established themselves as production locations at least 100 years ago. Approximately 6,000 craftsmen are engaged in the output of altars at present.

Altar Production Techniques

Household altars are known as comprehensive art, embracing craft techniques of the country. The manufacture of family altars thrived as local industry by putting cutting-edge technology of each era together. The altar-making process is roughly divided into seven stages – woodwork, palace-like shaping, woodcarving, coating, gilding, decoration with *makie* lacquerware and metal fittings – before final assembly.

A wood joiner makes a wooden base for the main body of a family altar. The main body is a small *zushi* measuring 70 cm wide and 170 cm tall and equipped with double collapsible interior and exterior doors made to open to left and right. A “palace craftsman” installs a platform called *shumidan* inside on which the principal Buddha image sits, and puts in place a temple-like miniature “palace” with several pillars. A lacquerware specialist does groundwork coating for the woodwork completed thus far by painting it with layers of *urushi* lacquer. On the other hand, a gilder in a task performed only in the altar-making occupation pastes gold leaf on the inside of the doors and *zushi*. Then a *makie* artisan draws patterns such as a picture of Buddha and the beauties of nature. A carver takes charge of fashioning tiny pieces of wood that adorn doors and *ranma* – a carved wooden panel used as a decorative transom. Using copper sheets and brass as well as a specialty tool, a metal-fitting master beats out metal fixtures that decorate inner pillars and doors.

These tasks started out as a cottage industry but were divided into specialized kinds of work based on stages of the process involved in order to enhance



Mini-sized hexagonal household Buddhist altar

productivity along with the expansion of demand. Generation after generation of families succeeded to their predecessors in their respective professions. A whole town dotted with worksites functioned as if the entire community was an assembly line. A close quality examination was conducted mutually at each stage of work because, in order to fully exhibit the skill of a craftsman, a flawless job had to be done in the preceding stage. The rigorous quality control system nurtured a craftsmanship mentality that has been handed down to present artisans to produce craftwork such as fine and magnificent household altars.

Current Family Altar Industry

Nonetheless, the cost of manufacturing traditional family altars – representing the accumulation of skills of a number of artisans – has risen. There are some areas where the traditional production system has been shaken by companies that rely on low personnel expenses and manufacture parts abroad to reduce production costs.

There has been a sign of decline in demand for traditional altars due to the concentration of people in big cities and a trend toward living in small housing that leaves not much space for household altars. The golden Pure Land inside a household altar gives people a sense of incongruity in present life space. People in urban areas show a tendency to favor small *karaki* altars that fully use the grain of *karaki* or tropical wood such as ebony and rosewood as part of product design. Also, “new-style altars” designed in contemporary furniture fashion are sought after mainly by young generations

Photos: Kanazawa Buddhist Altar Commerce & Industry Cooperative



Mini-sized cucumber-shaped household Buddhist altar

living in modern apartments. In contrast to the days when Japan exported sacred boxes for worshipping a holy icon to Europe, some people have come to import family altars featuring wood-inlaid work done by Italian craftsmen.

Under difficult circumstances, today’s craftsmen turn out high-grade household altars displaying the cream of traditional techniques to differentiate them from low-priced imported products while groping their way to produce sophisticated small-size altars designed to blend in with present *modus vivendi*. They also are directing their outstanding skills to “laundering” of altars to be refreshed through dismantlement and repair. Japanese households have had their altars – consumer durables – cleaned once every several decades for successive inheritance by family members. Although many people’s motive for purchasing altars is to worship the souls of their family members who deceased recently, there are families that still adhere to the practice of retaining large and magnificent household altars, safeguarding the principal Buddhist image for worship and passing them to family members from generation to generation.

Anyone who sits in front a household altar and puts the palms of his or her hands together in prayer recalls his or her departed kin and pictures the realm of Buddhist enlightenment in the heart. It might be said that Buddhist altar craftsmen are held up by the pride of producing “traditional craftwork for prayer” not to serve simply as an implement for people’s living but rather for them to press the palms and fingers of both hands together and bow in pious sentiment in front of the altar. **JS**

Chigako Sasaki is assistant manager, the Japan Traditional Craft Center, since November 2008. She joined the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries in 1982 and was named to head its Liaison & Research Section in 1997.