

Urushi in Japanese Culture (4th & last)

Present of *Urushi & Myself*

By Kazumi MUROSE

Modernization of Japan & *Urushi*

Diversified lifestyles of Japanese people have undergone great changes since the Meiji era (1868-1912) when their country developed from feudal to modern society. In the vortex of modernization, craftwork came to bear a portion of the nation's export industry, taking advantage of such opportunities as the exhibition of products at an international exposition, and mass production of *urushi*-ware began to take place.

While *urushi* articles were being produced in large quantity, creative activities as art producers started expanding to the field of craftwork as part of education in art at a time when the school education system was being established during the era.

In the world of *urushi* craftwork, Shisui Rokkaku (1867-1950) may be cited as one of the trailblazers. Rokkaku, who was in the first class of graduates from the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (the present Tokyo University of the Arts), conducted many surveys of art objects together with writer/curator Tenshin Okakura and campaigned to protect them as cultural assets. While engaging in the surveys, he was also active in production of *urushi*-ware replicas and creative work to strengthen research on the techniques of *urushi* artifacts. The great volume of information he left for posterity was proof of creative action linking the past with the present age and laid the foundation for activities to safeguard cultural assets.

My *Urushi* Mentors

In talking about important persons connected to creative activities of *urushi* work at present, I cannot exclude Gonroku Matsuda (1896-1986). He was admitted in 1914 to the Tokyo School of Fine Arts where Rokkaku was a professor. He worked for a while at Rokkaku's studio after graduation. During the time he was with Rokkaku, Matsuda took part in the repair of *urushi*-ware unearthed in the Lelang district of Korea and felt with his body the significance of studying the classics. He made use of the study in his creative work and thus developed his production style. Furthermore, he visited abroad and perceived the importance of new designs. At the same time, he reached a conclusion conversely that Japan must incorporate the good quality of the country's classic designs in sending out information on *urushi*-ware to the rest of the world. Matsuda also joined others in decorating the interior of the Emperor's Room in the National Diet building and aggressively challenged the possibility of using *urushi* for interior decoration. Emerging from the variety of experiences he had, his creative works never cease to fascinate us even today. He should be called the father of modern *urushi* art.

When I was admitted to Tokyo University of the Arts (then known as Tokyo University of Fine Arts and Music), Matsuda had already retired from teaching, but I was blessed with having the opportunities of receiving a great deal of guidance from him personally. He was one of my *urushi* mentors and the effect of his tutorship is still deeply rooted in my pursuit of *urushi* art.

Yoshikuni Taguchi (1923-1998), one of the very few disciples of Matsuda, was the teacher from whom I received direct guidance while in school. Taguchi took over the task of preserving and repairing cultural assets, as taught by Matsuda, while at the same time creating *makie* (which has fine metal substances scattered over sketched designs before *urushi* becomes solid). Taguchi was a tutor who concretely enlightened me about what he had learned from Matsuda. Taguchi came up with unprecedentedly novel designs in displaying expressions through his works and employed *makie* and *kirigai* (decoration with cut seashells), among others. Taguchi was recognized as a "holder of important intangible cultural heritage" in *makie*, as was Matsuda.

It was from my father, Shunji Murose (1911-1989), that I comprehensively learned the basic techniques of *urushi* art expressions. I learned a wide spectrum of skills such as ways to use various kinds of *urushi* tools, the technique of using *kanshitsu* (*urushi*-glued layers of hemp cloth laminated on a product prototype), *makie*, *raden* (design in mother-of-pearl inlay), and *chinkin* (gold-inlay engraving). Particularly, expertise on the characteristics of *urushi* sap and their effective use are the assets I have obtained from my father's wide-ranging experience in *urushi* art. Many *urushi* artists came to see my father. In addition to Matsuda and Taguchi mentioned above, they included Shunka Honma (1894-1991), Shozan Takano (1889-1976) and Mashiki Masumura, and

Photos: Arrow Art Works



Author's work: "Makie/raden" decorations on a harp & partially enlarged view (right)

thanks to them, I was blessed with a lot of expert tutors in *urushi* art even after my graduation from school and was able to equip myself with the foundation of *urushi* work and techniques.

I submitted my work to the Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition, a public event held by the state, while I was in the university's graduate school. With the selection of my product as one of prize-winning exhibits as a beginning, I launched my activities as a creator of *urushi* artifacts. Needless to say, my association with the field of preservation of *urushi*-ware as cultural assets that I began in my 20s became an important chance for me to study the classics. Besides the primary purpose of retaining *urushi* products as cultural assets to be handed over to the next generation, it allowed me to fathom a great deal of technique and information on materials through outstanding products completed in the past and entrusted to my care for an extended period of time. For me, not only humans but also products are teachers and I have learned many things from these unspoken tutors.

Creative & Preservation/Restoration Activities

Production of replicas of cultural assets is a direct extension of activities designed to care for and restore such assets. Its objective is to serve as substitutes for original cultural assets at general exhibitions because damaged authentic items have few opportunities to be on display, thus leading to the safeguarding of cultural assets. Therefore, it is important to carry out a thorough survey of original products, ranging from their wooden bases to *urushi* coatings to added decorations, and create artificial products utilizing the techniques and materials that are as close to those of the original artifacts as possible.

An example is the national treasure "*Ume Makie Tebako*" (box with plum blossom design in *makie*) of the Kamakura era (1185-1333) preserved in the Mishima Taisha shrine in Mishima, Shizuoka Prefecture. In 1995, I was asked to preserve and restore the *tebako* and its contents, and to produce replicas of the originals. In so doing, I was able to savor the difficulty and importance of preservation/repair and replica production.

In undertaking the task of reproduction particularly, it took me a year to survey and an additional two and a half years to produce a likeness of the genuine *tebako*. Since the purpose of creating a replica was to utilize the techniques and materials as closely as possible to those applied for the authentic product, I could not absolutely press forward unless I reached a final judgment on doubtful points found in the course of the survey. "*Ume Makie Tebako*" included all complicated techniques of art and design that continue to exist to this day: *kin-ikakeji* (a kind of *makie* with heavily sprinkled gold powder), *ginpyomon* (decor with patterns of thin silver plates), *takamakie* (raised patterns of *makie*), *togidashi-makie* (polished patterns of *makie*), and *hiramakie* (flat patterns of *makie*). Because of the sophisticated skillfulness, I carried out a detailed survey using permeable and fluorescent X-rays to find answers to questionable points. I was able to come close to tracing the art, design and production skills that were available 800 years ago by steadily continuing to draw sketches and reproduce patterns faithfully. The completed replica is on display at the Mishima Taisha shrine as a replacement for the original box. It served a useful purpose for the preservation of *urushi* craftwork as cultural assets and, at the same time, it gave me crucial experience as a task touching the starting point of creative art and design techniques.



Author's work: "Makie/raden" decorations on an octagon-shaped box Photo: Arrow Art Works

Transfer of Skills in Urushi Art

Craftsmanship for *urushi*-ware in Japan at present is being handed down in the only form of its kind in the world, including skills believed to have come from the Chinese mainland, the Korean Peninsula and the Southeast Asian region and those which came into being in their own Japanese originality. Skills of *urushi* work have a history of more than 1,000 years and many *urushi* craftworks, each with high artistic value representing the period of their production, have been passed down to the present together with intangible art and design techniques necessary for the making of *urushi*-ware.

Passing on techniques from generation to generation is especially vulnerable to disappearance because they are invisible. However, Japan enacted a law ahead of the rest of the world in 1954 to protect intangible cultural assets in addition to tangible cultural assets. It is no exaggeration to say that the reason Japan has been able to maintain and hand down highly developed techniques was the result of the legislation. Presently, 57 people in the field of craftwork are recognized by the state as holders of intangible cultural assets. Nine persons in the area of *urushi* products retain such recognition in *makie*, *raden*, *chinkin*, *kinma* (*urushi*-ware with lined patterns engraved in vermilion and other colors) and *kyushitsu* (decoration work on a base where *urushi* is simply coated). As one of them, I was designated last year as a holder of important intangible cultural assets in the field of *makie*.

I am involved in the production of a wide array of products, ranging from vessels such as small incense containers and bowls to shelves, desks and the surface of a wall. By adding such techniques as *raden* and *hyomon* (patterns of thin gold and silver plates) to the *makie* art and design technique to increase variations in the quality of materials, I try to keep it in mind to make products that possess a sense of modern times and that are rich in colorful expressions not confined to black and gold alone.

I expect to connect the unique world of beauty in Japan from the present generation to the next generation by continuing to create art and design expressions as well as preserving cultural assets in the future.

I have touched on the charms of *urushi*, its material, history, preservation as cultural assets and production in four installments. I will find myself fortunate if readers recognize anew the world of *urushi* art that has been portrayed as a "mystery of the Orient." JS

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