

The Japanese Traditional Craft and My Life

By *Ochiai Naoko*

As a daughter of a western-style tableware maker, it was not until my husband was transferred to New York in the early '80s that I first added Japanese traditional crafted items such as lacquer ware and crockery to my party table. There were not so many Japanese restaurants in New York at that time. Naturally, when I invited guests to my home they were extremely curious, and wanted to know what kind of lifestyle Japanese people led. People were particularly interested to try the food, and as it was placed before them, they would exclaim in delight "How delicious," or "Marvelous!" However, I came to realize that this was pure flattery, as very often it was barely touched, and got left behind on the plate.

I wondered if there might be an easier way – a way for me to serve my guests with food they could enjoy, and help them to learn a little bit about Japan, while still being easy for me to prepare and serve. The result: a blending of the awareness of Japanese aesthetics and tradition appealing to

all five senses, while serving the western-style food with western table manners my guests were accustomed to – what I call my "United Table" style was born.

This was not just merely a matter of switching from western dinner plates to Japanese dishes; it was about fostering a dialogue of cross-cultural comparison such as the aesthetic differences of the East and the West, or differences between Western and Japanese table settings. Japanese dishes are served on individual small trays or portable tables. This gave me an opportunity to reacquire myself with the beauty and craftsmanship of the traditional Japanese lacquer ware and ceramics that I had always taken for granted.

First, let's consider the rules of western-style table setting. (1) The positioning of the cutlery on the table must be symmetrical on the left and the right of the plate, the design of each of which is the same as the next guest, and the design should be the same for each guest. It is



permitted, however, to have a different design of plate for each course. (2) At the family dinner table, each person serves him or herself from a larger plate or dish and then passes it around. (3) Western-style tableware is generally made from extremely hard materials such as bone china. Only the cutlery and glasses may be picked up and brought to the lips. (4) Plates or bowls do not have lids, they are all flat. (5) Flowers and ingredients may change with the seasons, but there is no seasonal tableware.

On the other hand, the characteristics of Japanese-style place settings are as follows. (1) Each dish is served individually, and arranged on individual place settings. The crockery may differ in design from guest to guest. (2) Japanese aesthetics favor asymmetry, variation in height or texture, rhythm and harmony; the eye should be drawn from left to right. (3) Japanese tableware can be made of a variety of materials; bowls and plates are small, making them easy to pick up. The sensation on contact with the mouth is very important. (4) Chopsticks made of wood, bamboo or other natural plant materials are preferable. (5) There are some items which have lids; bowl-shaped crockery is often used. (6) In order to enjoy the passing of the seasons, tableware changes accordingly.

It was my intention to unite Japanese attention to detail and western rationality, not fusing the two so that neither can be recognized, but maintaining the individual identity of each, to bring out the best of both systems.

On top of the table cloth, I placed cloth made from silk crepe (*chirimen*), indigo dyed cotton (*aizome*) or *Nishijin* brocade as a table runner. I used a *Rantai* lacquered basket of Kurume for the flowers and a lacquered or wooden tray for each place setting. For a salad or bread bowl, I chose *nanasun* (21cm-diameter) plates or smaller *meimei* plates made of the *Kutani*, *Arita* or *Mino* ceramic art. The hors d'œuvre or soup was served in a lacquer bowl with a lid which also helps to maintain the temperature. Instead of large serving bowls or platters, I used boxes, either lacquer layered *jubako* or traditionally crafted *kiridame* of polished wood. For main courses, however, I preferred to use western-style dinner plates for meat and fish. For wine or other drinks, I chose wine glasses or goblets with a stem which are pleasant to use and look decorative. Nowadays this kind of table design almost goes without mention, but



at that time everyone was amazed at the originality. This freshness has been maintained over the years and still retains an up-to-date feeling of design.

This experience encouraged me to start work as a table setting designer and lifestyle coordinator after returning to Japan. My perspective has shifted to reevaluating all aspects of Japanese traditions and everyday life, not only with regard to lacquer ware, ceramics and textiles. The more I traveled to lacquer-producing areas to learn more, the more fascinated I became with the lacquer product known as *japan* – with their beauty and versatility of use – and I became concerned that I only knew a little. Why had people stopped using this beautiful traditional tableware in their everyday lives? I wondered why the pleasure gained from creating exquisite combinations was not being fully appreciated, and came to realize that I had a lot of work to do as a table setting designer. I strove to be a line of communication between the consumer and producer, expressing the hopes and desires of the user to the producer and vice versa. I am proud of my work as an advisor, bringing traditional skills into the forefront of everyday life without leaving them dormant as a mere tradition. “Helping people to discover the wonder of traditional crafts” is my mission, and I hope to continue my work as a local traditional industry producer. JS

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