

Wheels in the Stream

By Nobuo Tsuji



Yatsunashi maki-e suzuribako by Ogata Korin, national treasure, Tokyo National Museum.



Katawa-guruma raden maki-e tebako, ca. 12th century, national treasure, Tokyo National Museum.

The sap of the lacquer tree was being applied to wooden utensils and structures in China centuries before Christ. The technology quickly spread throughout East Asia, new and unique applications being developed wherever it took root. In Japan, the art of lacquer attained such a high degree of refinement that to this day the term “japan” is used by westerners as a synonym for lacquer and lacquer ware.

A uniquely Japanese technique of the art of lacquering is *maki-e* or, literally, “sprinkled picture.” After application of several layers of colored lacquer, a motif is applied with an application of clear lacquer. Fine particles of gold or silver are dusted over this final coating before the lacquer dries. In most cases the decorative effect is further enhanced with *raden* or inlays of mother-of-pearl chips.


Maki-e techniques first appeared sometime in the 8th century, but it attained a pinnacle of elegant refinement in the 12th century, around the end of the Heian period, reflecting the mature sophistication of court culture. The roughly

30-centimeter by 20-centimeter lidded cosmetics box shown above is a typical example of this period.

Depicted on the lid and the sides of the box are the great wooden wheels of an ox cart, the primary mode of transportation for the nobility of the day, set to soak in the waters of the Kamo River to prevent the wood from cracking. The flowing water is executed in *maki-e* technique while the half-circles of the wheels are traced in mother-of-pearl inlay. The elevation of a familiar everyday sight like this into an artistic motif is a common practice in traditional Japanese art. There are those, however, who claim that this particular motif of wheels in the stream also has an allegorical meaning, i.e. the wheels representing great lotus blossoms in the Pure Land pond of Buddhism.

The other example shown here is of a two-tiered case for ink stone and paper for calligraphy created by Ogata Korin (1658–1716), one of Japan’s most famous decorative artists. The motif on the lid and sides of the box is taken from the Yatsushashi segment of *Tales of Ise*, a

famous anonymous literary work of the Heian period. The *yatsushashi* refers to a simple bridge made of eight planks placed over marshy ground. In the *Tales of Ise* the handsome Fujiwara-no-Narihira on a journey sees a cluster of lovely irises blooming in the marsh when he crosses this bridge. The sight inspires him to compose a *waka* poem of nostalgic longing for the lover he has left behind in the capital.

The iris leaves are done in gold *maki-e*, the flower petals in mother-of-pearl inlay and the bridge plank are inlaid rectangles of lead. The motif is laid out so that the eyes of the viewer are carried over the lid to the side of the box for all the world as if one were viewing the irises as one crossed the bridge. Korin’s work is a masterpiece of pleasing visual asymmetric expression in which he has gone a step beyond the delicate craftsmanship of *maki-e* of the Heian period. 

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