

Lacquer Today

By Iseki Masaaki



Genfukei, humanity's innate memories of the distant past, Tanaka Nobuyuki

lain. Lacquer crafts have an overly long history of fixed techniques, and because other countries have never stimulated the form or aesthetics, new experimentation in terms of form has conversely lagged. In other words, because fixed notions regarding lacquerware were overly strong, the possibilities of new uses for urushi have been minimized.

However, young artists have in recent years tended to take a fresh view of lacquer while at the same time preserving traditional techniques. This might be called a new test of the definition of lacquer. Moreover, the result is not merely decorative lacquerware in imitation of previous techniques, nor is it an illusion that lacquerware becomes pure art in the mode of modern art based on Western aesthetics. Lacquer materials and techniques offer a means of personal expression that would not otherwise be possible, and what we are seeing is the appearance of young artists who are attempting to create new theories of lacquer form in a modern context.

No traditional Japanese craft material is as Japanese as *urushi* (lacquer). What I refer to here by "Japanese" does not refer to the fact that lacquer is derived from trees that are only grown in Japan and China or other physical reasons, but because the qualitative sensibility expressed with lacquer fits in quite well with the Japanese perception of beauty. Just as "japan" means lacquer in English, it is well known that during our long history a number of local production sites developed lacquerware based on indigenous techniques and expressions. Wajima, Aizu, and Tsugaru are typical examples.

Most production is devoted to eating utensils, but at times lacquered items have been used in a manner giving it a value higher than porce-



Spicule, Yoshida Miyuki, 1994



Right: Hana no Hibiki. Left: Hana no Konseki. Both by Kurosawa Chiharu, 1994

Although the lacquering process does not change, these artists use not only wood, but metal, plastic, or paper, as they try to utilize the special texture of lacquer, tree sap, to the fullest.

The "Lacquer Today" show held in Yokohama this past July was an interesting introduction to these new experiments. The 12 young artists who participated are still in the trial and error stage, but they are all striving to become creators of new Japanese crafts as they express themselves with lacquer. Of further interest and differing from ceramic artists who are similarly under-

taking new quests, they are not connected in any way to established lacquerware production areas, but merely discovered lacquer as a material in terms of form. The proof may be that as a material, lacquer has the same universality as oil paints.

Although I cannot provide details on all 12 artists here, I would like to offer some brief introductions.

Kurosawa Chiharu paints many shades of lacquer on iron sheets which are then affixed with foil that is scraped to bring out the iron's base color. Tanaka Nobuyuki's piece is a semi-three dimen-

sional work of blended lacquer, flax, and soil directly applied and hardened. Along with Yoshida Miyuki, whose abstract model derives from a new lacquer drying technique, and Tone Madoka, who paradoxically expresses the qualitative sensibilities of ceramics through the use of lacquer, they all concentrate on lacquer in their new individual pursuits. ■

Iseki Masaaki, an art critic mainly in the field of history of Japanese and Western modern art, is a professor at Meisei University in Tokyo.