

# In a Wajima Workshop

Photo and essay by Michael E. Stanley

Quiet absorbs all here. The sounds of the town's traffic and the faint growl of the surf have faded utterly.

The room in which I now sit is silent except for the occasional sibilant murmur of its simmering teakettle and the barest scratchy whisper of a graving tool biting into brittle black lacquer. Tiny bright winking chips, dark like the thick, low storm clouds that scud over the choppy leaden waters of the Japan Sea on this late spring day, noiselessly fall away from the sharp-angled iron edge and disappear.

The burin's moving touch scores lines, now thin, now broad, that curve and cross and with each addition draw themselves farther from the random. Outlines of a bird and a twig and flower buds appear and seem to weave themselves together. Deft touches of the burin's edge add an eye and feathers and all the minuscule lines and points of texture, all in a severe monotone of black on black, as through sketched in charcoal on marble of midnight shade. At last the fingers that grasp the burin hesitate, holding its sharp edge just above the shiny lacquer, questioning the completeness of each cut, each line. They lift it away from the gleaming black surface. The cutting is finished.

Other hands take the piece and without the merest hesitation swab the lines with wet raw lacquer, rubbing it in and wiping away the excess in a single rhythm. Wet with lacquer, the fine lines of the carving have faded into their shiny background. But then comes color: gold and silver and green and white and red, brilliant, fine-ground pigments, each hue in turn laid over its special part of the design and then carefully rubbed in. The bird and its perch come to life as a few tiny, bright flecks of gold and silver leaf are pressed

into place. The piece is then lifted, turned, carefully examined, and gently laid atop the many others that have preceded it this morning.

This work is done as it always has been done in small *tatami*-floored workshops behind which the artisans live. The work is unhurried, it cannot be hurried. The husband and wife who sit before me in this small room washed with *shoji*-filtered sunlight have done this work nearly every day of their adult lives. They are not rich, but neither are they poor. Each piece they make, he carving, she coloring, is both a contentment and a goad. This is the way of their craft. For generations, the lacquerers in this town of Wajima on the edge of the Japan Sea have shared the same life, the same way. And each day, hundreds of pairs of hands still apply themselves to wood and wet, raw lacquer and gold leaf and fine pigment.

With profuse apologies—as custom requires—I rise to leave. The old couple pause for a moment, smiling and nodding. They return to their work as their young daughter escorts me to the door. She smiles and bids me to come again. I look back at her parents, who are deep in the mysteries of their lacquer. Sliding open the door, I step out into the spring day, knowing the season but unsure of the year. Or the century.

*Michael E. Stanley, born in California in 1947, studied cultural anthropology and archaeology, and is a photographer based in Japan since 1979.*



