

A SPOTLIGHT ON URUSHI



Arbre à laque (Toxicodendron Vernicifluum), © Feathercollector | Dreamstime.com

WHAT IS URUSHI ?

It used to be admitted that natural lacquer, known as Urushi in Japan, was brought into the country by Chinese works. Yet, this theory had to be revised following the extraction of a 12 000-year-old fossilized branch of Urushi tree at Torihama Shell Mound, Fukui Prefecture, Japan. This discovery got then reinforced by the finding of a 9 000-year-old red lacquerware at Hokkaido's Kakinoshima B Site, which is believed to be the world's oldest. Legends exist on how the material was first discovered; among them, a story describing how the observation of bees using the sap of that particular tree as an adhesive for building hives raised curiosity and interest for craft use.

Archaeological digs also revealed artefacts with black or red Urushi coating as part of Jomon period pottery lacquerware. This demonstrates that early humans used Urushi not only for its resistance and practical usage, but also for its decorative aspect. It also confirms that their techniques were already quite advanced, needing to mix pigments with lacquer to obtain colored Urushi.

Urushi, commonly called Japanese lacquer, is a natural substance stemmed from the sap of lacquer trees species native to Asia, the *Rhus Vernacifera* tree.

The sap helps the tree heal when it has been hurt. The bark of the tree is partially scarred and incised to collect a white resinous substance, which when in contact with the air turns to a maroon liquid. It is mainly extracted from June to November, but the urushiol or water content of the Urushi sap will vary depending on when it has been collected.



*Tapping Japanese lacquer urushi trees (*Toxicodendron Vernicifluum*) in Okukuji area in Japan, © Magdalena Kozar | Dreamstime.com*

It is mainly extracted from June to November, but the urushiol or water content of the Urushi sap will vary depending on when it has been collected. The average annual production of a tree is less than 200 grams, and it takes more than 10 years after the tree has been planted before Urushi can be collected.

At first, Urushi sap is rather light and bright while in contact with air, it turns into a greyish-milky colour. It must thereafter be filtered to remove impurities, being then called ki-urushi or raw urushi. A process called 'nayashi' is used in the refining process, in which the lacquer is stirred to make it homogeneous. The lacquer, after being refined, becomes translucent and has an amber hue. Various mineral pigments are then kneaded into the lacquer to create colours. A black lacquer may be created by either adding pine smoke or by using a chemical reaction with iron; in that later case, it does not contain pigments and will create a transparent black.

Urushi has no form of itself, it is used as a covering material or, sometimes, as an adhesive to repair cracks. It might be applied on a wide range of substrates such as wood, paper, leather, metals, and more recently on polymer plastics or polyethylene.

The lacquer is applied on a foundation layer. Between each coating of thin layer there is the hardening and the sharpening while having been polished the surface becomes like mirror. Urushi sap doesn't dry or harden by the usual way of evaporation, it instead implies a reaction that is provoked by oxygen and air moisture.

Exceptionally strong, resilient, and durable, as demonstrated by the excavated items which were kept buried in the ground for thousand years, Urushi carries a natural beauty and a reflective luster. Besides, working with lacquer is rather challenging and requires remarkable skills, precision, and rigour.



P.L.R.Lidded Bowl and Stand, lacquer 1700–1733; silver 1727–1738 Wood lacquered with red and brown pigments; gold powder; silver-gilt mounts The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.DH.74
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URUSHI IN EUROPE

Today, in contrast to the Far East, the word lacquer is often described by Western societies as a transparent substance containing solvent, a rather negative interpretation of the material. However, this has not always been the case; lacquer artefacts being highly valued by the European aristocracy for centuries.

Urushi artefacts came to Europe through common trade routes and were straightaway sought after by local merchants. It all started in 1543, when the Portuguese, first Europeans to arrive in Japan, were accidentally shipwrecked on the island of Tanegashima in the south-west of the archipel following a severe typhoon. Soon thereafter, they were followed by Spanish Jesuit missionaries.

Lacquer trade was quickly organised and exports for European markets interestingly combined Western forms with Japanese or more likely Chinese or Indian decoration. The name of those artefacts was Nanban, which means southern barbarian in Japanese, a reference to the first Europeans arriving from the south of Japan. Among the items created for the exportation were mainly coffers and chest adorned with mother-of-pearls.

They weren't the only Europeans to establish trade in Japan. In the early 17th century, the Dutch arrived and began trading through the Dutch East India Company (known as the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie or VOC). And, in 1613, they were followed by the English East Asia Company, which set up the English Factory. With a growing demand in Europe, production increased. In a letter from November 1617 and written by William Adams, also described as 'the first Englishman in Japan' to Richard Wickham at the English Factory, Adams refers to a lacquer maker or makeman (makie-man) who stated that the commission would be made within a short time, having fifty men working day and night for it. This letter, preserved at the British Library in London, confirms that undertaking was, at this time, impressive.

Several cabinets were exported with decoration showing landscapes in gold on a black lacquer ground. A decorative technique known as Maki-e, which means “sprinkled picture decoration.” To create those pictures, gold or silver powder is sprinkled before Urushi dries out.

But after 1639, things changed when the shogun Tokugawa Ieyasu adopted edicts that came to be called the Sakoku edict, which means “closed country.” At this time, Japanese were not permitted to travel abroad. The Spanish and Portuguese were banned from trading in Japan, and the Dutch remained the only European to have the right to trade, although they were confined to the artificial island of Deshima. According to recent research, the closure must be nuanced as Japan developed relations with neighbouring countries. Nevertheless, for 200 years, the only Europeans authorised to trade with Japan were the Dutch.

Despite supply constraints, the demand for Urushi or Japanese artefacts remained high in Europe. And lacquerwares continued to arrive through the Dutch trade, as well as through China. These products were highly regarded in Asia and were often used as diplomatic gifts among other luxury goods, such as Chinese porcelain. Examples of gifts sent by the King of Siam to the French King are described in the book published in 1686, “Relation de l’ambassade de Mr le Chevalier de Chaumont à la cour du roi de Siam”. The Chevalier de Chaumont mentioned a particularly important quantity of artefacts in what he called Japanese varnish. Among them were caskets, boxes, cabinets, and tables, which might be similar to what we know as a cabaret. They were covered in red or black varnish, and some of them were decorated with gold or silver.



As was the case for porcelain, craftsmen in Europe tried to imitate the Asian varnish. During the 18th century, treatises were written to explain methods. One example is the treatise on varnishes written by Filippo Bonanni, “Trattato sopra la vernice”, published in 1720 and soon translated into English and France.

Several workshops produced imitations of Asian lacquer, as did the famous craftsmen known as the French Martin Brothers. They mainly produced for the royal court at Versailles, and their name was eventually given to this varnish, known as “verniss Martin”. Among their clients was the famous cabinetmaker Bernard II van Risenburgh (French, after 1696 - about 1766, master before 1730).

Bernard II van Risenburgh , corner Cupboard, about 1740

White oak veneered with amaranth, cherry, and sycamore maple, set with panels of black Japanese lacquer on Japanese arborvitae, and painted with European lacquer; gilt bronze mounts; brass and iron hardware and lock; sarrancolin marble tops, 99.4 × 88.3 × 61.3 cm (39 1/8 × 34 3/4 × 24 1/8 in.). The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 72.DA.44.2

During this closure period, exportation declined slowly until the arrival into Tokyo bay's harbour of four ships led by the US Commodore Matthew Perry. This event helped reopen the trade with the Occident, which was further reinforced by the participations of Japan at World's Fairs. The Japanese goods had a profound impact on western artists and were at the origin of the artistic movement called “ Japonisme ”.

URUSHI AND THE JAPANESE FINE CRAFTS

Japanese have always praised Urushi for its resistance to water, heat, mold, and insects. The material was indeed first used to harden and protect underlayers, convenient to any surface, from textile to metal, through pottery and leather. It can be found on a variety of luxury goods, such as cabinets, calligraphy boxes, tableware, even on samurai armour. Aside from artefacts, Urushi has also long been used in architecture to protect and embellish the wood of temples.

The dry lacquer technique, known as Kanshitsu, consists of layers of cloth impregnated and covered with Urushi, gradually replacing bronze throughout the Japanese Buddhist sculpture art scene. Interestingly, the substance was also used in the repair of ceramics, as, contrary to western restoration, those were and still are designed to be visible, illustrating the aesthetic approach of beauty in imperfection.

In the field of art, lacquer is classified as a "craft". During the Meiji period (1868-1912), the notion of craft emerged as a result of the exchange with the West and two distinct words were created: bijutsu for plastic arts and kogeï for crafts. To highlight artistic qualities of some specific works, the expression bijutsu kogeï, meaning fine craft, was invented.

A change occurred in lacquer creation between the middle of the Taisho period (1912-1926) and the beginning of the Showa period (1926-1989) when it began to be used by people who were not originally craftsmen, but artists.

A fourth category was created for artistic crafts at the Eight Imperial Fine Arts Academy Exhibition in 1927. The Shinsho Bijutsu Kogeï Kai (or Shinsho Arts and Crafts Association) was founded during the post-war period, and traditional crafts exhibitions were starting to be held. The founding artists of this association and those exhibitions were the first to introduce new lacquer works to the public.

But the turning point occurred in the 1950s, when the first lacquer sculpture without any utilitarian characteristics was exhibited. It was created by Takahashi Setsuro and was unveiled in Tokyo in 1953 at the second exhibition of the Association for Creative Arts and Crafts held at Wako department store. It was titled Moonlight. As Andreas Marks, the curator of the Japanese and Korean art at the Minneapolis Institute of Art, emphasised, it was only in the late 1980s that a group of artists challenged the practice. They explored experimental forms using unconventional materials as underlayers such as foam materials which are being introduced into the forming process since the mid-1960s; an essential element in the discussion of the figurative expression of lacquer.

TAKESHI IGAWA

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Zoom on Wings of Waves V



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When viewing a polished lacquer board, viewers feel as if there was a space behind the lacquered surface, especially visible with polished black lacquers.

Takeshi Igawa frequently uses Styrofoam as the substrate, allowing him to create innovative and singular shapes. The material is easy to mould so that large shapes can be formed beyond imagination. He used it for the first time in 2003 for his first solo exhibition. It is true that the process of cutting does not require specific knowledge, contrary to what is required for woodworking. However, Styrofoam might sometimes need to be strengthened with wood or metal. Besides, it happens to be more challenging to apply a cloth on a Styrofoam underlayer than on a wooden one.

In his creation process, Takeshi first focuses on lines before determining their respective edges. Time is then spent on perfecting the carved shape to “fully express the beauty of lacquer once lines and surfaces perfectly harmonise”. His shapes break with traditional lacquer work, while applied colours remain within the tradition of Urushi.



Special Form of Sky IV, Urushi, textile, Styrofoam, wood, 2011, 9 x 107,5 x 26,3 cm

Playing with shapes, exploiting the natural virtues of lacquer, its deep lustre, and mastering fundamental polishing methods is what pushes Takeshi into his own art boundaries and beyond. His work might be seen as the combination of sculptor's preoccupations with the eye of a painter working on light and shadows.

Takeshi's sculptures run some parallels to nature. More specifically they are based on the concept of infinity of the sky and the sea that the artist expresses both physically and spiritually. It is not an accurate representation; instead, he captures the essence of those concepts and reveals their fluctuating characteristics by associating lines, forms, and light. Reflection from a mirror-like surface of water, light breaking through the sky and waves engendered by the wind are at the centre of Takeshi's creations and are represented through the highly polished lacquer-surfaces, the shine, the mirror effect, and the infinite range of reflections it creates.

The sharp angles, opposed to the softness of curves, and vast areas of intense red or black all participate to ultimately create artworks with deep reflections, sensual illuminations, and impenetrable shadows. Takeshi's sculptures come to life as they interact with the light; the polished lacquer surface reflecting light while capturing its surroundings. Takeshi Igawa's sculptures carry elegance and simplicity to immerse the viewer into Japanese aesthetic.

Born in 1980, Takeshi Igawa is an esteemed successor of ancient Japanese Urushi pioneers and is regarded as one of the leading exponents of the new wave of Japanese lacquer artists. His artworks found their way into the most highly regarded collections in Japan and abroad such as the collection of the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA). He is currently an associate professor at the prestigious Saga University in Kyushu.