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Gifts of Gold: The Art of Japanese Lacquer Boxes Rewall Panels

Fairfield University Art Museum

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Forms in Black and Red

The principal colors of Japanese lacquer are glossy black and vermilion red, used in the decoration of eating utensils, containers, furniture, and architectural elements. These finishes are achieved by mixing lampblack or iron filings (for black) and cinnabar or iron oxide (for red) with the raw lacquer, which is applied in many layers and often polished to a high shine. When devoid of other decoration, the simplicity and strength of the forms beneath the lacquer coating take primary focus, revealing the skill of the carver who prepared the underlying wood.

In many such lacquers, signs of age and use were greatly appreciated, especially by practitioners of the Japanese tea ceremony. In the *Nobleman's Meal Table*, the oldest object in this exhibition, the red lacquer of the table surface has worn through to expose the black lacquer beneath. The *Negoro Natsume Tea Caddy* employs the same restrained aesthetic, a style named for the Buddhist temple that originally manufactured these wares. The use of red and black also evokes Chinese lacquer antecedents, where, like in Japan, red is an auspicious color.

Seasonal and Auspicious Motifs

Flowers and plants of the four seasons form a main decorative motif of lacquerwares. Often codified into specific plant groupings (such as the “three friends of winter” or “seven autumn grasses”), these traditional motifs transcend media and appear in lacquerwares, textiles, ceramics and paintings throughout Japanese history. Boxes could display motifs from two or more seasons, as seen in the 17th-century *Trousseau Box*, or reference a specific time of year through a single motif, like the *Tea Caddy with Maples Leaves*. Other plants evoke ideal character traits; for instance, bamboo symbolizes resilience in the face of adversity, and pine, endurance and steadfastness.

Auspicious animal motifs, like cranes and tortoises, convey wishes of longevity, felicity, and good fortune, making lacquer boxes decorated in this way particularly suited for giving as gifts on important occasions. Family crests are another important motif, whether as markers of identity on wedding sets, or as abstracted designs, as in the *Tea Caddy with Plum Blossoms*. Brilliantly rendered in gold and precious metals through various techniques of “sprinkled picture” (*maki-e*) decoration, these are luxury arts of the highest order, signaling both the giver and the owner’s taste and status.

Literary and Poetic Associations

Lacquer boxes, in both function and decoration, abound with references to classical Japanese literature, poetry and visual arts.

Writing boxes, literally “inkstone boxes” (*suzuribako*), store the tools for calligraphy and literary composition: inkstone, water dropper, and brushes. Other boxes in various shapes and sizes provided storage for documents, scroll paintings, or decorated poem cards (*shikishi*). Viewed and used during literary activities, the designs of some lacquer boxes playfully reference the act or products of writing: a set of document and writing boxes seen here has a design of poem cards scattered across their surface, and a motif of open and closed books decorates another box.

Figural compositions and motifs from famous literary works, like the *Tale of Genji*, the early-11th-century epic court romance, also appear frequently on lacquerwares: a medicine container (*inrō*), worn suspended from a man’s belt, displays tiny poem cards with scenes and chapter titles from the *Tale of Genji*. Other motifs, like the willow, bridge, and waterwheels of the miniature poem card boxes, simultaneously evoke a “real” place – the Uji bridge near Kyoto – the poetic and literary theme of Uji, and the long artistic tradition of visual representations of the Uji bridge. Indeed, pictorial lacquer decoration and painting are closely related arts; some artists worked in both media, while others adapted designs from painting to lacquer or vice-versa.

The ability to produce one’s own poetry and calligraphy, the knowledge of classical poetic and literary themes, and ownership of the finely crafted objects depicting them, signaled one’s cultured education, discerning taste, and social status.

The Harvesting, Preparation, and Application of Lacquer

Lacquer (*urushi*) is derived from the sap of the lacquer tree (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), which is harvested from June through October by making small incisions through the bark and collecting the sap. The quality of the resulting lacquer depends on factors such as the age of the tree, climate conditions, time of harvest, and location of the incisions. As a relative of poison ivy, lacquer is very toxic; harvesters and craftspeople handling the substance must be sensitized to avoid reactions.

After harvest, the lacquer is refined by filtering out impurities, and processed by heating to eliminate water and adding oils and coloring agents. It is also separated into different grades for various applications; in objects destined for *maki-e* decoration, various lower grade lacquers form the multiple preparatory coatings of the wood base, while higher grades are reserved for the final coats to achieve a completely smooth finish. This process is shown on the board by Kyoto-based lacquer artist Yūji Okada displayed here.

After each layer, the object must cure – a process of polymerization, not drying - in a special humidifying chamber (*furo*). After curing, the object is polished, and ready for another layer. After the final finishing layers are complete, the object can be passed to a *maki-e* artist for decoration.



Utagawa Hiroshige III (Japanese, 1842–1894), *Harvesting Lacquer in Mikawa Province* from the series *Dai Nippon Bussan Zue (Products of Greater Japan)*, 1877, color woodblock print. Image courtesy of The Lavenberg Collection of Japanese Prints

The writing box and tea caddy in the adjacent case demonstrate various techniques of lacquer decoration.

maki-e 蒔絵 (“sprinkled picture”): A general term for a set of lacquer decoration techniques achieved by sprinkling fine metal powders, often through a tube with a screen, onto wet lacquer to create a design. Three main techniques are below.

hiramaki-e 平蒔絵 (“flat sprinkled picture”): Designs are painted in wet lacquer onto the surface, then tiny metallic particles are sprinkled on, which adhere to the lacquer. When dry, the design is covered with transparent lacquer and polished. Despite the name “flat,” *hiramaki-e* designs are ever so slightly raised from the surface.

takamaki-e 高蒔絵 (“raised sprinkled picture”): Designs are created in low relief by building up layers of lacquer, often mixed with fine clay or other materials, upon which the metal powders are sprinkled.

togidashi maki-e 研出蒔絵 (“burnished down sprinkled picture”): Designs are painted with lacquer on the prepared object, then metal powders are sprinkled on. Then the entire surface is covered with black lacquer, covering the metals. When hardened, the object is burnished to reveal the design from within, creating a completely smooth surface. The most time consuming and technically difficult of the *maki-e* techniques.

kirikane 切金 (“cut gold”): Thin gold leaf cut into tiny shapes (usually squares or triangles) and applied to the wet lacquer.

nashiji 梨地 (“pear skin”): A term for the red-hued ground created by applying tinted lacquer and sprinkling irregularly shaped fine gold particles, covered with transparent lacquer. So-called because it mimics the skin of Asian pear (*nashi*). When used in design elements rather than ground, for example to depict flower petals or leaves, it is called “pictorial pear-skin” (*e-nashiji*).

raden 螺鈿: Use of mother of pearl (shell) for decoration, either inlaid or thinly applied onto the lacquer.

roiro 蠟色: High-quality black lacquer applied in multiple finishing layers, each layer polished before the next is applied, resulting in a very glossy black finish.

zōgan 象嵌 (inlay): The technique of inlaying different material (metal, shell, ceramic) into the lacquer for texture.