Special Feature

Japan’s Decorative Art of Urushi
Selection of shikki from various regions of Japan
Clockwise, from top left: set of vessels for pouring and sipping toso (medicinal sake) during New Year celebrations, with Aizu-nuri; stacked boxes for special occasion food items, with Wajima-nuri; tray with Yamanaka-nuri; set of five lidded bowls with Echizen-nuri.

Cover: Bowl with Echizen-nuri
Photo: KATSUMI AOSHIMA
Beauty Created From Strength and Delicacy

In Japan, urushi, which is typically used for household items such as tableware and furniture, has also been widely employed in the manufacture of ritualistic and military paraphernalia, architectural and artistic structures, and musical instruments. What kinds of values and sense of aesthetics have created and fostered the many items of Kogei in Japan that use urushi?

Mr. Murose, one of Japan’s Living National Treasures, gives us some insight.

From a conversation with: Murose Kazumi

Urushi culture in Japan

In Japan, urushi collected from the arashi tree is used as a coating material. It is applied to a variety of objects, from household items through ritualistic paraphernalia, tools and structures.

Japanese artisans and manufacturers have produced a wide range of items that take full advantage of the special characteristics of urushi.

The culture of urushi, created by the hands of various types of artisans, is expressed through a variety of techniques, and is a feast for the eyes.

For the reader:
Urushi - a natural resin coating processed from sap extruded from the arashi tree (Toxicodendron vernicifluum). It is also used as an adhesive. Unlike the lacquer used for black furniture and tableware in Europe, which was traditionally obtained by dissolving the secretions of lac insects in alcohol, urushi is applied in multiple layers to produce a rich, glossy and deep black with a sense of transparency.

Kogei - a word used to describe traditional Japanese craft (or decorative art) that unifies beauty and utility. Shikki - an item of Kogei to which multiple layers of urushi have been applied. In English, such items are generally known as “lacquer ware,” but it is not lacquer that is actually used to coat these objects. Therefore, in this article, the term shikki, which is made up of the Japanese characters for urushi + ware, is used.

Kogei items made using urushi

A box for writing implements. Multiple techniques including maki-e (gold/raised lacquer work) and raden (mother-of-pearl inlays) are used to depict the pods and leaves of bean plants on the outside, while there is a picture of a rabbit drawn on the back of the lid.

Writing box - a box for writing implements. Multiple techniques including maki-e (gold/raised lacquer work) and raden (mother-of-pearl inlays) are used to depict the pods and leaves of bean plants on the outside, while there is a picture of a rabbit drawn on the back of the lid. 19th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)

Combs made using the maki-e technique.
Top - Ornamental Comb with Sumida River in Maki-e Lacquer 18 x 5.5cm 19th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)
Bottom - Ornamental Comb with Dragonflies in Maki-e Lacquer 13.7 × 7.2cm 19th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)

A box for koma (the pieces that are lined up and moved around the board during a Japanese chess game) 19th century (Hikone Castle Museum. Photograph provided by the museum.)

A shogi (Japanese chess) board, which used to be a standard item in a wedding dowry. Made using the maki-e technique, it depicts the Mitsu-Yoko-Kikumon - the family crest of the Arisugawa-no-Miya family (an imperial family that existed from the first half of the 17th century through the early 20th century).
Shogi board with a bamboo grass pattern, coated in black urushi, in maki-e 36.6 × 33.7 × 21.7cm 19th century (Hikone Castle Museum. Photograph provided by the museum.)

A koto (Japanese traditional musical instrument) decorated using both maki-e and raden techniques. An outstanding masterpiece of Japanese urushi art. Koto with maki-e 152.7 x 24 cm 12th century (Haugwarka Shrine. Photograph provided by the shrine.)

A sho (Japanese chess) board, which used to be a standard item in a wedding dowry. Made using the maki-e technique, it depicts the Mitsu-Yoko-Kikumon - the family crest of the Arisugawa-no-Miya family (an imperial family that existed from the first half of the 17th century through the early 20th century).
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Shogi board with a bamboo grass pattern, coated in black urushi, in maki-e 36.6 × 33.7 × 21.7cm 19th century (Hikone Castle Museum. Photograph provided by the museum.)
Urushi is a tree sap extracted from the Japanese lacquer tree (Toxicodendron vernicifluum). Urushi is a natural coating and adhesive with a long history of use in Japan, stretching back more than 7,000 years.

The culture of arashi lacquering has continued since ancient times, when it was already regarded as displaying a profound sense of beauty and artistic sensibility. Later, the Nara period (8th century) heralded a new phase. Maki-e (arashi coating that uses gold or silver filings for decoration) was born - a technique that represents the Japanese art of arashi. In the Heian period (8th-12th centuries) maki-e was developed primarily in Kyoto, which was the capital at the time; and in the Kamakura period (12th-14th centuries) it established its fundamental technique. Many famous pieces were also created from the Muromachi period (14th-16th centuries) onwards, and in the Edo period (17th-19th centuries) maki-e reached its technical peak.

In the late 16th century Portuguese and Spanish missionaries came to Japan and took Japanese maki-e back to their home countries. When people saw shikki they were amazed at its mysterious blackness and the glow of the gold, quite unlike any paint to be found in Europe. In the 18th century it became known as “japan” and was much admired. Despite the unending depth of blackness, there was a sense of translucence in places. Urushi, which combined these two seemingly contradictory elements, fascinated people throughout Europe. Gradually a movement arose to imitate the shikki from Japan using a substitute paint; this came to be known as “japanning.”

In fact, arashi can only be harvested in the monsoon climatic zone. Shikki is made in a number of countries outside Japan from East Asia to Southeast Asia, but shikki from Japan boasts an unparalleled beauty. The secret lies in the characteristics of the arashi produced in Japan, which solidifies to a hard finish with a beautiful gloss, and in the attention to detail that the Japanese people pay to their craftmanship. Urushi, whose properties differ subtly from season to season, is carefully harvested and selected for use, so that the most suitable arashi is used for each process or expressive technique. Durable and beautiful shikki is made using these materials and techniques.

Decorative arashi techniques gradually matured up until the Edo period, but then the Meiji period (19th-20th centuries) saw the winds of fortune suddenly change. With the collapse of the shogunate feudal system, artisans lost their patrons and in addition, the opening up of Japan to the West saw an influx of western values that made a distinction between “fine art” and “decorative art.” In Japan, “Kogei” (Japanese craft), including shikki, had always been “fine art” of itself at the same time; however, at this juncture, Kogei became a subordinate concept of “fine art.”

Black that gives a feeling of light
Beauty with innate contradictions

Shikki has colored Japan, making everything beautiful
Yet even after this, urushi Kogei continued to survive. The skills exhibited by the urushi artisans who had served the shogunate and the imperial household were protected by “Tokyo National University of Fine Arts” (currently known as “Tokyo University of the Arts”), which was Japan’s first national institution for the training of artists; here the skills continue to be refined and are, even now, passed down to us from the highest pinnacle.

Meanwhile craftsmen from local shikki production areas (areas that were formed as a result of industry promoted by daimyo lords from each of the feudal domain in the Edo period) struggled with the change in senses of values and the wave of mechanization but continued to create products that colored lives, so that even today shikki continues to remain a part of Japanese lifestyle.

Coating everything in beauty from normal, everyday items to the finest wares, urushi culture continues to live on, together with its wares and spirit; and in recent years, there has been a reappraisal of “Kogei” in the meaning that also refers “fine art.”

The Japanese has producing shikki throughout the ages and imbued with its spirit. It has been repaired with urushi if broke and has continued to be used with care for generations. It is amazing how shikki thousands of years old dug up from deep under the ground retains its vivid color and shine.

Urushi has both acid and alkali-resistant properties, making shikki alone remain intact in Japan’s acidic soil where most things go rotten.

In spite of such strength, shikki degrades when exposed to ultraviolet rays and will return to nature’s soil over the course of several hundred years. As the problem of micro-plastics becomes apparent these days, in terms of ecological initiatives shikki has the notable quality of being an environmentally-friendly material.

The culture of urushi has been handed down using raw materials from Japan and through the spirit unique to the Japanese people. It is something unique that cannot be imitated by countries elsewhere and is no doubt something that will also be worth carefully protecting and passing on to the future.

### Typical decorative techniques

The long history of shikki and many areas famous for producing it gave rise to a wide variety of techniques. Shikki presents us with a gorgeous range of looks achieved through the addition of decorative designs after the undercoat and top coats have been applied.

**Maki-e**

This is a decorative technique in which a thin brush known as a maki-e-fude is used to draw a pattern in urushi; then, before the urushi is hardened, metallic filings such as gold or silver, is sprinkled on top to bring out the design. This metallic embellishment, which beautifully brings into relief the gold and silver patterns, is a typical technique used in the urushi Kogei in Japan.

**Raden (Mother-of-Pearl)**

This is a decorative technique whereby the shiny, pearl-like layer from the inside of a shell, like the “great green turban” (Turbo Marmoratus), is thinly sliced, cut to shape and polished, and inlaid into or pasted onto the surface of the shikki. Characteristically, this creates a glittering, rainbow-hued pattern that is also used together with maki-e.

**Chinkin (Gold Inlay)**

This is a decorative technique whereby a design is engraved with a blade into an urushi-coated surface and fresh urushi is rubbed into the grooves. Then, the excess urushi is wiped off the non-engraved parts and powdered gold leaf is pressed into the grooves. This technique enables fine, delicate patterns to be drawn, as the gold powder, etc., remains along the etched lines and in the dots.

*In 1976 he completed a major in urushi from the Graduate School of Fine Arts at Tokyo University of the Arts. As well as presenting urushi both in Japan and overseas, Murose has also been involved in the conservation of important intangible cultural properties. In 1983, he opened the Murose Institute of Urushi Research and Restoration. In 2008 Murose was accredited as the holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property (“Living National Treasure”) of “Urushi” in the same year he received the Purple Ribbon Medal of Honor. His books include “Urushi no hana” (published by Kodansha; Japanese only) and “Makie Kogei: Murose Kazumi racakkuro” (published by Shobodo; Japanese and English).*
Various Shikki From Different Regions

Shikki spread initially from Kyoto to Edo and then nationwide. Here, we present examples of shikki crafted in various regions of Japan, each with its own distinctive characteristics in terms of appearance and technique.

1. **Wajima-nuri**
   - In making the base, urushi is used to glue pieces of cloth onto a wooden base. This technique is known as kago-maki and is used to make the base, known as kago.
   - This region is known for its unique technique of wet-lacquer, which is characterized by its fine, delicate finish.
   - Techniques include the use of gōro-nuri, in which a base layer of black urushi is ground down to create a smooth, glossy finish.
   - (Photograph: Wajima-nuri Shikki)

2. **Kanazawa Shikki**
   - Characterized by a simple, yet shiny, appearance that brings out the beauty of the wood grain.
   - This technique includes the use of takana, in which the urushi is used to create a unique, textured finish.
   - (Photograph: Kanazawa Shikki)

3. **Yamanaka Shikki**
   - Distinguished by its beautiful base wood grain and use of a technique known as kashoku-biki (decorative woodturning) which gives a textured design to the surface of the wooden base.
   - (Photograph: Yamanaka Shikki)

**Kagawa Shikki**

- Kagawa is known for its unique technique of kago-maki, which is characterized by its refined, elegant appearance.
- This region is known for its distinctive use of kago-maki, which is characterized by its fine, delicate finish.
- Techniques include the use of gōro-nuri, in which a base layer of black urushi is ground down to create a smooth, glossy finish.
- (Photograph: Kagawa Shikki)

**Aizu-nuri**

- Aizu-nuri is known for its depictions of Aizu-e (designs from the Aizu area) featuring plum, bamboo, and pine trees, or spinning wheels – regarded as symbols of good luck in Japan – and the hamaya, a ceremonial arrow used to drive away evil spirits.
- Aizu-nuri also uses a wealth of other techniques.
- (Photograph: Aizu-nuri Shikki)

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- (Photograph: Kagawa Shikki)
Japanese handicrafts

-Craftsmen who create shikki-

Photographs: Urushi Industry Division, Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture, Kanai Gen

Shikki - specialized production stages

Shikki go through multiple processes to become finished products: First, the urushi that will form coating is produced; then, the base for the object is created; and, finally, the base is coated with urushi. Most shikki is produced by means of a combination of individual specific processes carried out by artisans who are experts in one or other of those processes. Often, specialist artisans work together within a production area to complete a shikki item.

This article introduces the specialized handicrafts that come together to produce shikki and the regions of Japan that are best known for the respective processes.

Urushi-kaki

Detailed work produces fine urushi

Ninohe City in Iwate Prefecture is well known as an area that produces Japanese urushi. It is also home to Japan’s largest community of urushi-kaki craftsmen.

Urushi-kaki craftsmen collect urushi to serve as coating material for shikki. Urushi-kaki is the process of horizontally slashing the bark of an urushi tree with an urushi-scraping plane and then using a scrape to collect the sap which accumulates through the tree’s efforts to heal the wounds. A single craftsman watches over as many as 400 trees a year and collects urushi from them.

Urushi-kaki is carried out from June through late October. In each season, the craftsmen identify and collect urushi with subtly different properties. This is because urushi dries differently and differs in content depending on when it is harvested. For example, urushi collected in June and July is moist but dries rapidly, making it suitable for lustering. The peak time of year for collecting urushi is August, when urushi of the highest quality with the maximum content of Urushiol (the main component of urushi), can be harvested as the summer climate makes urushi less moist. Urushi is collected about once every five days, depending on climatic and vegetative conditions, and on how well the tree appears to have recovered. In October, urushi-kaki ends with the scraping out of any remaining sap in the trees.

That is the basic method for collecting urushi, but it only enables collection of about 200 g per year from a single tree. In order to harvest a larger quantity and higher quality of urushi, the craftsman has to ascertain the state of a tree and decide where and how far apart to place the horizontal cuts.

After the harvested urushi is stirred to homogenize its ingredients, it goes through a process to evaporate out the moisture in order for it to become refined urushi. Then, it is delivered to urushi wholesalers who pass it on to the craftsmen who will apply the urushi as coating.

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Kiji-zukuri
(wood base-making)

A preoccupation with paying careful attention to the base creates stronger shikki.

Kiji-zukuri is work of creating a shikki (wood base) out of wood. Craftsmen called “kiji-shi” (wood carver) shape each base to order.

Kiji-zukuri uses rough-cut “blocks” of wood that have been dried over periods ranging from several months to a number of years. A block is set in a lathe to be ground into a rough, initial shape in a process called ara-biki. In the ara-biki stage, the block is shaved down to a thickness suitable for a rough, initial shape in a process called ara-biki. In the ara-biki stage, the block is shaved down to a thickness suitable for shaping the finished article. The wood base is not all planed at once; instead the kiji-shi substitutes a blade for the plane, to carry out the roughing. Once the wood has taken shape, the kiji-shi substitutes a blade for the plane, to carry out the refining process known as naka-biki, in which the rough-cut kiji has been shaved down to a thickness that is a little greater than the intended size of the finished product to allow for later shrinkage of the wood due to further evaporation of any residual moisture. Soon after it has been shaved down, the object is immediately dried to reduce the moisture content. This is a sequence of processes that must be carried out repeatedly to prevent the wood changing. Even after wood has been cut, it stays alive and breathes. So, this drying sequence is critical for preventing the kiji (wood base), which is processed in to thin slabs, becoming distorted or deformed due to moisture absorbed from the atmosphere.

The next step is an intermediate process, called naka-biki, in which the rough-cut kiji is further shaved with a plane to approximate the shape of the finished article. The wood base is not all planed at once; instead the kiji-shi waits for the wood to dry and planes the block a little at a time, occasionally checking with a template to determine how far it has been shaved. Once kiji has taken shape, the kiji-shi substitutes a blade for the plane, to carry out the finishing process known as shiaga. Delicately shaving kiji with the blade makes the surface smooth in no time. Kiji-shi create kiji with no irregularities in size or thickness. Moreover, the wood is strong, having been properly dried several times. Kiji-shi are well aware that it is this kiji-zukuri that determines the luster of the urushi to be applied later, and the finish.

1. Applying urushi to fragile parts.
2. Painting pieces of cloth dipped in urushi on kiji. The photograph shows a pre-cut layer of urushi to aid in the application of urushi.
3. Applying a base coat of urushi made with ji-no-ko (ground earth) mixed with various reagents, according to the base coat of urushi. The process of rubbing on the base coat and polishing is repeated three times, with three granularity levels of powder, from coarse through fine to even finer.
4. Leaving the base layer of urushi to dry and then polishing it with a grater. Each grater uses grindstones of different roughness, according to the base coat of urushi. The process of rubbing on the base coat and polishing is repeated three times, with three granularity levels of powder, from coarse through fine to even finer.
5. Before application, wrapping the urushi in Japanese paper and straining it to achieve a smooth lacquer.
6. Applying urushi, and monitoring its state.
7. As the urushi hardens while absorbing moisture, it is left to dry in a space where humidity and temperature are controlled.
8. Repeating the drying and coating processes until the finish coat in a special dirt-and-dust-proof room is completed.

Kiji
Left: Kiji have been thoroughly dried. Right: The tools affect the results, so kiji-shi personally make all of their tools.

Nushi
Tsuda Tetsuji (Wajimanuri no Tsuda) — traditional Wajima-nuri craftsman. Tsuda and his son Shinichiro Tsuda, also a traditional Wajima-nuri craftsman, are preserving and passing on traditional techniques.

Urushi-nuri
(lacquering)

Deep knowledge about urushi gives shikki a beautiful luster.

Urushi-nuri - the work of coating shikki - is carried out by craftsmen called nushi (lacquerers). The nature of the coating process varies by production area. In the case of Wajima-nuri, there are as many as 20 steps in the coating process alone.

Wajima-nuri ware is known for being extremely robust. The secret lies in the various reinforcing techniques used. Wajima-nuri makes shikki tougher by reinforcing joints and easily chipped parts. Wajima-nuri shikki articles are coated with filtered top-quality urushi and are finished using several kinds of brushes. Some go to market as they are; others are decorated.

Wajima-nuri craftsman. Tsuda and his son Shinichiro Tsuda, also a traditional Wajima-nuri craftsman, are preserving and passing on traditional techniques.
Shikki are protected by a coating of urushi, which allows us to use them over generations by handling them with care and restoring them.

Kawai Natsumi is fascinated by the robust properties of urushi, and works as a professional restorer - mainly on urushi items. Kawai started down this path because she questioned the worth of producing something that generated a lot of waste. She feels that, as opposed to creating items, Kawai started down this path because she was interested in the robust properties of urushi, and works as a professional restorer - mainly on urushi items. Kawai started down this path because she questioned the worth of producing something that generates a lot of waste. She feels that, as opposed to creating items, she is more interested in restoring them.

Kawai says: “Shikki are long-cherished objects, so I repair them with a view to their being useful for decades to come.” Often, clients who come to her for repair services bring in inherited items that are 30–100, or even more than 150 years old – which means that those clients are personally attached to them. She discusses the repair plan with the clients and sometimes they decide to simply retain the unique texture of the aged object. She restores objects so that clients can keep on using them.

“When you’ve been engaged in restoration over many years, you learn how to ‘save the damage’ work.” I try to get ahead of things and work on spots where damage might be expected to occur.” Conditions vary constantly as both the wood and the urushi breathe, but doing restoration work develops restorers’ observation skills and improves their techniques. Urushi restoration is a series of discoveries, she notes, and it has never been a hardship. While it may be difficult to restore objects made of cheap low-quality materials, Kawai feels a sense of reward upon seeing the client’s expression of delight.

“Prolonging your time with something by having it fixed gives you a sense of security and seems to serve as a kind of therapy. I feel that I have acquired a technique of looking at things positively – even breakages.”

Restorations tend to bring about attitudinal changes in both restorers and those who use the restored objects. These changes are also passed to the next generation who will use shikki.

Restoration of Cultural Property - Handing On the Cultural and Technical Baton to the Next Generation

Restoration of cultural properties differs from that for everyday items. A major point of difference is that one does not “over-restore” the item, or “touch it too much.”

“For everyday items, you restore and re-coat depending on how bad the damage is but, in restoring a cultural property, you need to preserve its current condition, which includes leaving the damage itself,” says Matsumoto Tatsuya, an urushi artist who has been restoring cultural property for 25 years. That’s because the damage is evidence of the passage of time. Matsumoto looks at how much the urushi has degraded and carries out only the degree of restoration work that he considers necessary “at present” – otherwise, he leaves the work to the next generation of restorers.

If a property has sustained more severe damage due to a natural disaster such as an earthquake, then a chemical analysis team is brought in to enable the restoration work to be conducted based on more detailed data. In such a case, the most important thing is mutual understanding among people from different fields.

“Of course technique and know-how are required in restoration work, but we can also learn a variety of information from damaged sections to be recorded for posterity; and, it is important to decide whether or not appropriate restoration is carried out.”

It is necessary to clarify the background to the work’s creation and the context in which the pattern was drawn, and to use your imagination, and then to select the best restoration technique at that point. Consequently, it takes several decades to develop highly skilled human resources. Often, the necessary skills are acquired through experience in on-site restorations. “It takes a lot of skill to handle urushi so we urgently need to set up training establishments for developing human resources - as we must pass on this culture,” Matsumoto says passionately. At present the restoration of cultural property is carried out in individual facilities and workshops, which means that the number of restorations available per year is limited. To protect the precious culture of urushi, Matsumoto wishes it to be increased, even by one.

Decorative artwork of urushi encompasses the culture and techniques of the past. Matsumoto is working to restore cultural property so that they can be handed down from the past to the present and on to the future.
New technology has been developed for applying urushi to the surfaces of incombustible materials such as concrete. The company developed this technology independently to allow the application of urushi to surfaces other than those of wood and paper and to successfully impart natural warmth and visual variety to, normally inorganic, cold incombustible materials. The urushi coating also has excellent durability, waterproofness and antibiotic properties, so it is suitable for use in restaurants decoration. This technology produces an artistic building material that not only expands the application potential of urushi, but also opens new windows of opportunity in construction. (Cooperation: Heisei Corporation)

Urushi + 3D printers
Shikki produced by painting silicon onto a 3D printed mold, coating the resultant silicon mold with urushi, and then peeling off the urushi. This innovative artistic technique of urushi allows us to enjoy the luster and intrinsic beauty of urushi. New, never before seen urushi art. Using the latest technology, shikki need not be limited by constraints such as shapes and thickness and have extremely thin, free-form 3D surfaces. (Cooperation: Kakuda Yota; Photograph: Yuu Kawakami, “SHIZURI")

Urushi + outdoor goods
Urushi mugs with leather carry-strings at the bottom, designed to be hung from the waist or on a rucksack for easy transport. Taking advantage of the shikki characteristics of excellent robustness, waterproofness, and antibiotic properties as well as its ultra-lightweight, these mugs are ideal for use in outdoors situations, beyond conventional applications. Being stackable, they help to save space when packing for camping trips. Artisans of Aizu-nuri (Fukushima Prefecture) produce each item by hand. (Cooperation: Sekibikodo Co., Ltd., “NODATE mug”)

Urushi + washi
Slippers, book covers, bags etc. made of washi (Japanese traditional paper) printed with refined urushi patterns. By applying a special process to strong washi independently developed, by the company, urushi printing technology that was formerly applicable only to deerskin can also be applied to washi – enabling reproduction of beautiful, refined patterns. There is a wide variety of urushi patterns ranging from classic Japanese to contemporary designer styles. Skilled craftsmen print each sheet by hand. (Cooperation: Onao Co., Ltd., “SIWA x URUSHI")

Tradition and innovation
New forms of the decorative art of urushi

The world of urushi continues to experience expanding its potential as activity moves beyond traditional materials, products, and even applications. See new forms of urushi art created through fusion with the latest technology and other fields.

1 Urushi + incombustible materials

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2 Urushi + limestone

Smartphone cases individually hand-painted by shikki artisans from the Echizen area (Fukui Prefecture). The body of the case uses a new limestone-based material called “LIMEX.” LIMEX is environment-friendly in that it can be processed into a paper substitute with minimal consumption of water or timber and into a plastic substitute with fewer petroleum-derived materials. Currently, development of a tableware application is underway. (Cooperation: “Traditional Crafts Future Project”, Keio University Graduate School of Media Design)

3 Urushi + 3D printers

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5 Urushi + washi

Slippers, book covers, bags etc. made of washi (Japanese traditional paper) printed with refined urushi patterns. By applying a special process to strong washi independently developed, by the company, urushi printing technology that was formerly applicable only to deerskin can also be applied to washi – enabling reproduction of beautiful, refined patterns. There is a wide variety of urushi patterns ranging from classic Japanese to contemporary designer styles. Skilled craftsmen print each sheet by hand. (Cooperation: Onao Co., Ltd., “SIWA x URUSHI")
Incorporating *urushi-nuri* into everyday life

Many *shikki* that look modern and have up-to-date functions have been created. Why not incorporate decorative items of *urushi* art into your contemporary everyday lifestyle?

**Modern Designs**

**Modern Functions**

**Colorful spoons and forks**

Kagawa *shikki*

Colorful *urushi* spoons and forks made of light wood that is perfect for everyday use. The *urushi* coating makes the tips of the cutlery smooth to the touch. They feel good on the tongue, so you can use them without any discomfort.

(Toa Co., Ltd.)

**Chopstick rests in a changeable shape**

**Kagawa shikki**

A set of five chopstick rests that link together to form a “ring.” The individual rests are fan-shaped and will firmly support your chopsticks.

(Toa Co., Ltd.: Chopstick Rests “Ring”)

**Handy tray**

Kanazawa decorative paulownia wood art

Handy tray

Tray with a hollowed-out section to neatly nestle cookies, Japanese sweets, vases small accessories, etc. Perfect for everyday use with a rustic texture and simple structure that goes with any interior decor.

(Iwamoto Kiyoshi Shouten: “Chokotto Tray” made using the Fuki-*urushi* technique)

**Easy-scoop dishware**

**Kawatsura shikki**

Warping and straightening of the inside of the cup makes it easier to scoop out food without spilling. Infants to adults – anyone can use it. Dishware that helps you “eat by yourself!” – handcrafted by artisans from around Japan.

(aeru company)

**Easy-grip *urushi* bowl**

**Aizu nuri**

Bows with a universal design that have a groove cut into the base where you can place your finger, making them safe to carry even if you have a weak grip. As the bowl is made using *urushi*, it does not get hot to the touch.

(Rakuzen LLC: Rakuzen Bowl)

**Urushi bowl that you will want to use every day**

**Echizen shikki**

Fine particle *urushi* is applied to make this bowl extra durable. It may look like a regular bowl but it is extra resistant to breaking and scratching.

(jcocomo Co., Ltd.: "Fudan" Fuku-awan)

**Chopstick rests in a changeable shape**

**Chopstick rests**

Echizen *shikki*

A set of five chopstick rests that link together to form a “ring.” The individual rests are fan-shaped and will firmly support your chopsticks.

(Wajima Kirimoto: Chopstick Rests “Ring”)

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**Zoni**

Traditional Japanese cuisine with a wide range of regional variants

*Photos: Shutterstock.com, Yoshizawa Naho/Aflo*

Zoni is a soup made with such ingredients as mochi (rice dumplings), carrots, and white radishes. This traditional Japanese dish is mainly served at New Year.

It is said to have originated as a dish made from offerings to the Shinto deities and Buddhas on New Year’s Eve, which were then cooked and eaten after sunrise on New Year’s Day. In the Edo period (17th-19th centuries), zoni became popular among the common people and its role changed to that of a lucky dish used when praying for a safe year.

Zoni is customarily eaten in every part of Japan except Okinawa. However, there is wide variation by region in the soup, shape of mochi, and ingredients used.

In eastern Japan, square mochi are popular, whereas in Kyoto, which is believed to be the birthplace of zoni, and other western Japan regions influenced by Kyoto, round mochi are preferred because the round shape is said to bring good fortune. Cooking methods differ, too; square mochi are usually roasted while round ones are normally boiled before being added to the soup.

The most popular recipe is clear soup called sumashi which uses stock made from katsuobushi (bonito flakes), kelp, etc. as a base with soy sauce and salt for seasoning. Next is awase miso soup, in which several types of miso (fermented soy beans) are used to add flavor. Then comes shiro miso soup that uses white miso. Besides mochi, added ingredients include spinach and carrots, as well as yuzu and parsley for aroma. However, these also vary by region.

These zoni variants, each strongly reflecting the character of the local area, are usually served in shikki, which are lined up on the table and likewise display distinctive regional characteristics. Zoni with colorful ingredients making their charming appearances in shikki conveys pleasant warmth to both hand and palate.

Zoni has a variety of appearances, depending on the region. This food culture seems to have something in common with the culture of shikki.
Hirosaki is a town located in the western part of Aomori Prefecture. It is the northernmost castle town in the Tsugaru region on the main island of Japan which has prospered as the nucleus of politics, economics and culture. Hirosaki City is famous throughout Japan for the Hirosaki Neputa Festival, which, in August each year, attracts large numbers of domestic and foreign tourists. The Hirosaki Neputa is a festival with a long history that was designated in 1980 as an important intangible folk culture asset of Japan. It is a real spectacle with fan-shaped lantern floats, decorated with different pictures on the front and back, being paraded to an accompaniment of spirited shouting through the town, creating a blaze of light. The Kodomo Neputa also adds excitement to the festival. Children hold Kinryo Neputa (goldfish-shaped lanterns) in their hands and walk with small lantern floats. It looks very cute and brings smiles to onlookers’ faces.

Another feature of Hirosaki is that it is the production area for Tsugaru-nuri. Tsugaru-nuri displays unique patterns achieved through repeated application and polishing of urushi. Among the many different types of Japanese shikki, it is famed for the amount of hard work entailed in its production – one item sometimes taking around six months to complete. Kara-nuri, a representative type of Tsugaru-nuri, shows beautiful fault lines of colored urushi and presents a sense of depth created by the multiple layers of urushi coating. The city has facilities that are worth a visit, such as the Hirosaki Sightseeing Information Center where you can see Tsugaru-nuri, and Tsugaruhan Neputa Village for hands-on experiences.

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Mention of Hirosaki normally brings to mind a snowy, northern district, but there are many things to see at any time of year. In particular, Hirosaki Castle conveys the special beauty of each of the seasons.

Hirosaki Castle, built in the Edo period (17th century), is currently open to the public as Hirosaki Park. Some enduring castle structures, including the keep and the turret, have been designated as important national cultural assets of Japan, while the ruins have been designated as a national historic site. Bustling crowds can be seen here every year for the Hirosaki Cherry Blossom Festival, which features 2,600 cherry trees in full bloom, leading to it being selected as a famous place for cherry blossoms. In the autumn, the area is colored with red and yellow leaves and, in winter, you can see Hirosaki Castle illuminated and decked in snow.

Hirosaki promotes itself as a “town symbolized by a castle, cherry blossoms and apples.” In some places, you can see scenery typical of an apple-growing locality. A cool drive through the orchards along the Apple Road opens up a vista that you are sure to enjoy, including the sight of Mount Iwaki in the distance. The mountain, with its traditional past, as well as western style architecture. Besides Hirosaki Castle, the city also boasts a number of Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and old streets that tell of its traditional past, as well as western style architecture from the Meiji period through the Taisho period (late 19th century-early 20th century). It really is a treasure trove of cultural properties and buildings. Among them are places like the Western-style Villa in the Fujita Memorial Garden where you can enjoy a meal. The café in the building offers several kinds of apple pie, a specialty of Hirosaki, and a beautiful view of the garden.

After a light tea, you might wish to experience some of northern regions – do not waste food collected in a left-overs that puts the Japanese precept of respecting everything and abhorring waste (mottainai) to good use.

Why not rediscover the beauty of Japan’s four seasons in Hirosaki - a city where you can enjoy food and culture amid streets full of atmosphere.

Map of Hirosaki Area

- **Access**
  Approx. 75 minutes from Haneda Airport to Aomori Airport. From Aomori Airport to Hirosaki Station bus terminal takes about 55 minutes by bus.

- **Contact information**
  Hiroshima City Tourist Information Office
  Phone: +81-172-26-3600
  Hiroshima Sightseeing Information Center
  Phone: +81-172-37-5501
  Tsugaruhan Neputa Village
  Phone: +81-172-39-1511
Inden are decorative leather goods that feature patterns drawn with urushi on deerskin.

It has been claimed that the first inden were made in the Kan’ei years (1624-1643) of the Edo period. Beautiful, decorative leather gifted to the then Japanese government by India inspired local artisans to create decorative leather that would be unique to Japan.

Today, the legacy of inden as a traditional decorative art is only carried on in the area around Kofu City in Yamanashi Prefecture. Formerly, this area was called “Koshu,” which is why the inden crafted there is called “Koshu Inden.” The unique process that uses urushi for decoration, which originated in Koshu, attracted people’s attention at the time.

Traditionally, Koshu Inden was used in the manufacture of armor and helmets, as well as pouches; today, it is also used for purses, bags and the like. Deerskin products have great strength and durability. The more they are used, the more their appearance and texture change, and their appeal increases along with the patterns of the urushi.

Designs reminiscent of Japan’s four seasons, such as small cherry blossoms, waves and dragonflies, are traditional classics, but recently, images of characters from anime and computer games have begun to appear, with the variety of patterns increasing in line with the times.

Why not try it out and feel the beauty of Japan in the lovely shadows created by the unique three-dimensional patterns on the surface of the deerskin?