

Lacquerware in Japan and Europe: Today and Tomorrow

Isabelle EMMERIQUE

National High School of Applied Art and Craft Art (ENSAAMA)

The origins of lacquer are without doubt Asiatic. It comes from the resin of the tree *RHUS VERNICIFERA*, a sumac that grows only in the sub-tropical zones. Neolithic utensils that were lacquered have been discovered, such as a comb of ancient Jōmon times, datable to around 5000 B.C.

* **Torihama Comb**

Japan opened up to the Chinese culture via Buddhism in the sixth century A.D. and used the *kanshitsu* technique to make portable statues. Since then, the Japanese have never stopped enhancing the old techniques inherited from China, such as *maki-e*—the sprinkling of powdered gold on the fresh lacquer—which is one of the most famous Japanese lacquer techniques of today. The field of Japanese lacquer was vast: utensils, weapons, armor, dishes, boxes, and *inro*, on which the decorations were pushed to the extreme refinement. Besides the solidity, and the resistance to acids and scratches, the Japanese took the decoration of lacquer to the highest summits.

* **Suzuribako-Edo Period**

Craftsmen mainly lacquered objects. Painting was the field of ink on paper or silk. At the end of the sixteenth century, the Europeans discovered lacquer by way of large screens called “Coromandel screens” because they were shipped from the east coast of India. Western craftsmen tried to imitate this mysterious material. From the seventeenth century, all sort of varnishes were made from oils and alcohol, arriving at vernis Martin made with copal that launched the beginning of European lacquers. This tradition lasts today and has been enriched with the chemical industry by way of synthetic cellulose and polyurethane. At the start of the twentieth century, the lacquers of Jean Dunand and Eileen Gray stand out in the Art deco period.

*** Dunand's panel on boat "le Normandie"**

*** Gray's chair recently sold in France**

After this wonderful period, the majority of lacquerers produced decorative wall panels integrating the French tradition and joining paintings, frescos, and tapestries that adorn our walls. Western objects were principally made of clay, wood, glass, and metal.

In the world of art today, the differences are mostly the same as yesterday: in Japan they continue to produce lacquered objects of high quality mostly made in Wajima, in very traditional workshops. These costly objects do not necessarily meet the demand of the new generation looking for a new style of life and are hard to sell today.

The question is: what product, what price, and what market?

The Japanese have unequaled knowledge, produce unique objects, and must face the competition of lesser quality wares from China and Vietnam. It takes an expert to appreciate the difference that generates a large spread of prices and most people cannot tell the difference. Europe, the main export market for Chinese and Vietnamese handicrafts, does not have the knowledge to judge the difference. For these reasons, Japanese lacquered objects are rarely sold in Europe and especially in France.

Thanks to initiatives of some French institutes, some Japanese manufactories were exhibited in MAISON ET OBJET (international decorative fair) in January of 2005 in Paris: their products, perfectly made, seemed very exotic, very expensive, and did not seem to be in the right market.

This question is regularly debated in Kanazawa, which has organized since 1986 the International Urushi Design Competition, which will open on November 16. Lacquerers from all over the world are invited to exhibit their works. It is interesting to see that cultural mentalities remain the same: the majority of Japanese produce volume objects—useful or not—and the French decorative panels. I had the honor this year to receive the grand prize, which is the first time it has been awarded to a

Western artist. I presented a work that I call a “bridge” between our two cultures; this work combines volume and surface at the same time. The concept was appreciated by the Japanese as way for the future. I thank the open mind of the jury who bestowed this honor upon me. In doing this, the Japanese accepted a different form of art than their own.

*** Grand prize/Isabelle EMMERIQUE**

I keep working in the French tradition using lacquer for its qualities of depth, sheen, and strength to create decorative panels, as do my peers of the association LAC (Lacquers Associates for the Creation). For the past twenty-five years, approximately twenty artists are members of this association. Most are panellists, and there are a few sculptors and jewellers or objects designers. Our common positions permit us to nurture ideas which have gone far to fight against ideas like:

- * the only real lacquer is Asiatic (*urushi*) and the others are false
- * certain craftsmen refuse to transmit their knowledge, an attitude that almost killed our craft
- * the fear of other cultures

On this last subject, we have to thanks Mr. Jean-Pierre BOUSQUET, a professor in Paris and founding president of the LAC association, for his generous contribution, as well as Mr. ONISHI Nagatoshi, a lacquer professor at Tokyo University. They initiated exchanges between Japan and France because of their friendship.

E.N.S.A.A.M.A. is now the only school that teaches the three techniques of lacquer in France: *urushi*, Europeans varnishes, and synthetic cellulose and polyurethane, which are taught on two and three dimensions. We try to show the multiple facets of lacquer. At the school I teach the “vernissages”.

*** ENSAAMA School**

The rigorous teaching and multiplicity of high quality artistic events enables us to develop better approaches to our future customers such as collectors, decorators, architect, and gallery owners.

*** Forney Exhibition**

*** Munster Museum**

We hold in France the same competition that the Japanese do for contemporary design objects, but our position as creators in two or three dimensions allows us to respond to very diverse projects: realization of gigantic projects in Russia and in U.S.A. (Midavaine workshop), concept for luxury industry (Dupont pen, Christofle silverware).

*** Dupont Pen**

*** Christofle Silverware**

So, tomorrow when ideas circulate faster and faster, what is the future for a craft which anchors in the slow, precise, and quality?

In Japan, a new age seems to have started. We would like to believe that the craftsmen and the industry would take from other cultures the fresh air necessary to renovate their art.

In France, under all circumstances, even with a marginal market, the renovation starts with a lively transmission of knowledge, active artists, and a constant demand for creative and quality work.

The secret is out: the future lies in this word CREATION. Without a creation that would dare take all the risks, without the questioning of our know-how and our traditions, without shrewd observation of the evolution of our society, no future is possible. I will conclude this speech with the wish that an ethical transmission of knowledge will be enriched by more demanding and inquiring creativity, and that industry, craftsmen, and artists will get closer together.

* The brief notations in bold type appearing in the middle of this paper refer to slides that were shown during the symposium presentation.