

# Traditional Japanese Craft Mediums as Ambassadors of Contemporary Cultural Exchange: One Craftsman's Expanding Encounters

Clifton MONTEITH

*Artist*

Some of the presenters before me here at this symposium have reminded me of an old saying I heard growing up as a child. It is: "Who you are, is defined by where you were, and when!"

Today I would like to present an illustration of how I have seen traditional Japanese craft mediums become ambassadors of cultural exchange. The path of a craftsman's life is defined by the experiences of environment, education, and encounters with the world. My life started in my grandmother's home that included many examples of Japanese and Chinese art and craftwork collected by my grandfather in the 1920s, mostly in Paris. These pieces being present in my early life, sparked an interest in the Far East, which seemed as distant and mysterious as my own grandfather, who died before I was born.

My Fine Arts degree was in painting, and for many years, I worked as an illustrator and designer in New York. After returning to my family home in Michigan twenty years ago I became a furniture-maker using only natural materials collected by myself directly from Nature.

My furniture became noticed enough to receive a National Endowment for the Arts Grant. From that grant came an invitation to apply for the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Fellowship. I applied and

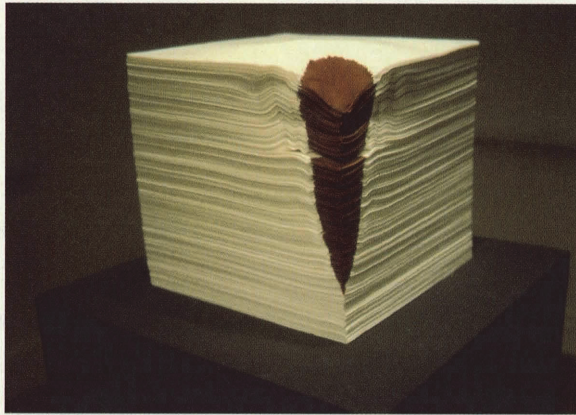




received the fellowship and spent six months in Japan, most of the time here in Kyoto. I could never have imagined how that beginning would so dramatically change my relationship with my work and the world of my fellow artists! The cross cultural ambassadors of traditional craft mediums have brought so many people together in such surprising ways. Here are some examples of how these craftspeople's paths have crossed.

### **Morikawa Hiroshi**

In 1994 I had seen and admired *kakishibu* as a strengthening, water proofing medium, as well as a dyeing agent. But seeing the work of Morikawa-san, at Gallery Gallery here in Kyoto, changed my understanding of its amazing properties.



From simple green crushed *kaki*, a wonderful medium was displayed in his work to have great strength and capacity to shrink other materials. Its characteristic properties would become an important part of my work. At first I didn't know how I would use it. Now I import *kakishibu* for my own use and many other artists and craftsmen who have seen my work and are attracted to it in the same way that I was. Seeing Morikawa-san's work and the inspiration it was for me could not have been an accident!

### **Katsumizu Kiichi**

Another meeting that was too important to be chance, was seeing, on the last day of the show, Katsumizu Kiichi's exhibit in Kyoto at Tachikichi's Studio Com Gallery. When I saw his work I knew he was an interesting artist with the same love of nature which I had! Though we could hardly communicate, he invited my wife Nancy and



I to his home in Hokkaido. There we saw the nature and materials that inspired his work. For an independent craftsman living in a distant isolated place (as we both do), it seems difficult to believe that we have been to visit him so many times and that he has spent six weeks traveling through the U.S. with us. He has become a member of the Furniture Society. We found a gallery in New York to show his work and in 2007 his work will be part of an exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

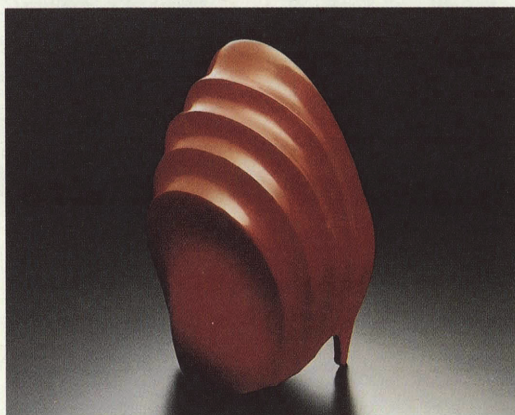
### **Kofushiwaki Tsukasa**

When in Tokyo in 1994 I was introduced to Kofushiwaki Tsukasa by the wonderful basket maker Sekijima Hisako, who took me to see the exhibit the “Domain of the Medium” at the Crafts Gallery of the National Museum of Modern Art. Hida Toyajiro, who is with us here today, was important to that wonderful exhibit. He was also very kind to me in making connections to artists here in Japan.

When I saw Kofushiwaki’s work, I knew there was more to urushi than just a shiny surface. The organic structural strength of this work was inspiring! I knew I wanted to know more about urushi, but it was almost time to return home and I did not get to meet Kofushiwaki-san then. But Kofushiwaki had a Gotoh Memorial Foundation Fellowship to New York City and I was able to meet him there and have him come to my studio in Michigan for my first hands on introduction to urushi.

### **Kurimoto Natsuki**

Before I left Kyoto in 1994, I was introduced to Kurimoto Natsuki by the architect Ikegami Toshiroh.





I was very impressed by the scale of some of his urushi work as well as his varied technical skill. Kurimoto-sensei wrote out a note for me to take to Kato Urushi dealers to buy my first tubes of the magic medium! At the time I never imagined that I would have the opportunity to return to study urushi with Kurimoto via the help of the Japan Foundation. Also at that time, I never would have dreamed that his whole family would be visiting my home in Michigan and he would be working in my studio!

### **Wendy Maruyama**

Wendy Maruyama, a good friend and Department Chairman for the Furniture Design program at San Diego State University, also came to Japan on a Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Fellowship. She studied urushi with Onishi Nagatoshi at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts. Wendy has also developed an exchange program between her university and the wood working school Takumi Juku in Takayama. She has also used urushi in her furniture work.

### **Shasha Higby**

Shasha Higby is an internationally famous dance performance artist who builds dramatic costumes and travels the world always pointing out the urushi medium used in some of the costume parts.



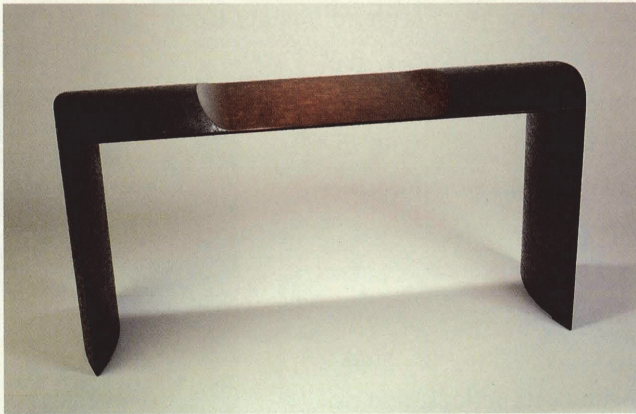
She also came to Kyoto and studied with Kurimoto-sensei, and was instrumental in getting an exhibition of urushi work by Fujita Toshiaki, Matsushima Sakurako, and Kurimoto Natsuki, at the San Francisco Craft Museum.



Because the artists were able to travel to the U.S. for the exhibit, Shasha was also able to get the Asian Art Museum to arrange for a demonstration of urushi techniques by these three artists. The support from the Japan Foundation was very important to these events. Kurimoto and his family, who have become good friends of Shasha's, were able to visit she and her husband, Albert, in their California home.

### **Michael Hurwitz**

Michael Hurwitz is a friend who is a furniture maker in Philadelphia and also spent time in Kyoto at Jurinsha wood working school when he had a Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Fellowship. After marrying his Japanese wife, Mami, he returned to Japan to learn about urushi lacquer, especially Tsugurunuri, and traveled to Hirasaki with the assistance of a Japan Foundation grant.



There he developed a relationship with Kubo Uji. He has built his furniture in Philadelphia, shipped it to Kubo-san, who does the urushi work for him, and then the furniture is returned to the U.S.

### **Jake Antonelli**

I first met Jake Antonelli as a student when I was doing a design critique for the graduate students at Rhode Island School of Design. Now he is an assistant to Michael Hurwitz and has developed an interest in urushi lacquer.

His work using urushi lacquer is being shown in U.S. galleries and was recently featured in American Craft Magazine.





### Andrew Curle

Andrew Curle is a Canadian wood turner. Andrew was introduced to me by Wendy Maruyama, who met him at a Furniture Society Conference. He wanted to know about urushi and she gave him my e-mail address. That introduction began a two-year correspondence every day with my explaining all that I had learned here in Kyoto.

Andrew started assisting me with some of my big projects by visiting my studio in the U.S. for extended periods, and my taking pieces I had started to his home in far northern Canada for him to have urushi work to do. Then my wife, Nancy, and I brought him to Japan and introduced him to all the urushi workers we could find. Following that tour of Japan, he was able to come and study with Kurimoto-sensei at Kyoto Geidai.



### Oya Kazunari

Oya Kazunari was a student at Kyoto Geidai when I started studying urushi in 1999 and has become a good friend and fellow artist traveler. Nancy and I took him with us on our Japan tour when we brought Andrew Curle to visit urushi craftsmen.



Oya-san has been to our home in Michigan several times and we have taken him to Canada to meet Andrew Curle and to Minneapolis to introduce he and his work to the art students at the Minneapolis College of Art and Design.

His great work and delightful personal nature share with many people his joy of craftsmanship and makes him an ideal ambassador for Japanese craftsmanship! He is now a craftsman for the Kohseki Company here in Kyoto and was working on the recently completed Imperial Guesthouse on the palace grounds. Nancy and I are planning to take Oya-san with us to a collaboration symposium of craftsmen in New Zealand in 2007. The ripples go out into the world from so many here in Kyoto!

### **Nhat Tran**

Nhat Tran is one of my most recent long distance urushi correspondents. She is a painter, originally from Vietnam, but now is an American citizen. She is a wonderful artist with works collected by major U.S. museums including the Smithsonian in Washington, D.C.



Being disappointed with the durability of the Vietnamese lacquer, a furniture maker friend of mine suggested that she contact me. Another long distance e-mail correspondence about urushi began.

Nhat and her Belgian philosophy professor husband, Andre, have been to my studio in Michigan, and my wife, Nancy and I have been to her studio in Indiana. Her urushi work in the U.S. has received outstanding recognition. She recently was awarded a commission for a huge mural project of two- and three-dimensional panels over thirteen meters long for the Indianapolis International Airport. It will be the largest urushi lacquer project ever done in the U.S.! Nhat Tran is here with me today, on her first trip to Japan, and will be doing some serious urushi shopping in Kyoto!



## Alsion Croney and Matthew Mosher of the Rhode Island School of Design

Two students I had in a furniture-making workshop this summer have begged me to start another urushi by e-mail adventure. They are students in Rhode Island, very far from my home in Michigan, but their reason for wanting to work with urushi is to look for the “earth friendly” sustainable resource that injures no person and is a blessing to all!” I had to say yes and we have begun!

While in Japan for my urushi study in 1999, I started the Kanshitsu forms that would become the gold reflectors for a series of lanterns. The twigs were collected from the Uji river banks and some also came from Kameoka. They became the beginning of my new experiments with urushi for structural purposes in my work. Upon my return to the U.S., I had an exhibition of my urushi and *kakishibu* lanterns.



The exhibition at the Midland Art Museum in Michigan was well received and led to several significant commissions. People enjoyed the glowing color of the *kakishibu* and the skin-like feeling of the tightness brought to the surfaces by the *kakishibu*.

For three years, culminating in an exhibit at the Wacoal Ginza Art Space in Tokyo, I worked on a research project and collaboration with felt artist, Jorie Johnson, an American who makes her home and keeps a studio here in Kyoto. I explained to her that protein catalyzed urushi. She suggested we try urushi with wool felt





because of its high protein content.

It worked well and we produced this series of organic bowls and flat panels of wool felt hardened with urushi and joined with urushi hardened *hyotan* gourds for the hanging wall vases. When I am home in my far northern Michigan isolated studio, I often consider the wave of influence, inspiration, and innovation that has come from all the craftsmen who have shared their work with one another. What wonderful relationships have grown across huge distances, cultures, and mediums. All are ambassadors to one another!

I feel that the medium itself is not the message, though it should be appropriate for the message of our work. The message that: the earth, and Nature itself, must be remembered in all our work and life, is being recognized by many people today! Globalization can have so many disastrous side effects! But the cultural exchange based upon the traditional craft mediums can bring people together in a sustainable way. The opportunities provided by the Japan-U.S. Friendship Commission Fellowships and the Japan Foundation are so important to this work!

I am just an independent craftsman, inspired by these wonderful media I have studied here in Japan, but I realize that there is an optimistic wave of influence that goes from our work out into the world. It is an influence the world is hungry to have.

I am reminded so clearly of my first visit to Kawai Kanjirō's house and studio here in Kyoto and imagine him sitting at his desk writing his poem, "Who is moving this hand of mine?"

We all have endowed each other and as Kawai also observed, "We never work alone!"

## Conclusion

After considering all the conversations during the symposium, it is even more obvious to me that the craftspersons of the world need to support each other. This is especially true in the United States with ever decreasing support by governments for the work of craftsmen. Even though Japan's government is much more supportive of craftwork than in the U.S., the trend away from governmental support seems to be affecting even Japan's culture. Exhibits like the ones at Shōsōin that bring the



cultural educational experience to the country, are a special treasure of Japan! And as I always include the exhibit on my schedule when in Japan, I wonder if such cultural memory can ever come to my own country, with the declining focus of the government on cultural support for the arts. It is my hope that Japan will not let go of its continued support for their artists and craftsmen in exchange for some short-term economic criteria. In my view from the West, the cultural contributions of these aesthetic treasures are some of the best ambassadors that any country can have.