



Focus on Lacquer: Japanese Lacquer

at the National Gallery of Victoria

2006 Australia-Japan Year of Exchange

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The National Gallery of Victoria would like to acknowledge the following lenders to the exhibition: Sarah and Baillieu Myer AC, Pauline Gandel, Michiko Sukanuma, Kitamura Tatsuo and Lesley Kehoe.

In particular we would like to acknowledge support received from Sarah and Baillieu Myer for the production of this room brochure and for their continuing interest and support of the Asian collections of the NGV.

Front and back cover:

Sake bottle (detail)

Edo period, late 18th century

– early 19th century, Japan

lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)

31.8 x 23.5 cm diameter

Presented through the NGV Foundation

by Mr S. Baillieu Myer AC, Honorary Life

Benefactor, 2005 (2005.358)

Focus on Lacquer: Japanese Lacquer at the National Gallery of Victoria, an installation of twenty-two works of traditional and contemporary Japanese lacquer, celebrates one of Japan's most appreciated traditional arts as part of the 2006 Australia-Japan Year of Exchange. The works are drawn from the NGV's Asian collection and from private collections in Melbourne and Japan.

The techniques of Japanese lacquer

Lacquer is prepared from the sap of a species of the sumac tree (*Rhus verniciflua*), which is closely related to poison ivy (*Rhus toxicodendron*). The Japanese name for raw lacquer is *urushi*, from the Japanese *urushi no ki* (*Rhus verniciflua*). The latex-like sap is prepared by gently evaporating excess moisture and filtering to remove impurities, creating various grades of lacquer that are applied in layers over substrates, such as wood, bamboo, metal, leather and cane. One technique employed in creating sacred sculptures utilises layers of hemp cloth soaked in lacquer and applied over a clay or wood core.

Japanese lacquer ware is renowned for its smooth, lustrous finish and durability. These qualities derive from the characteristics of *urushi*, which hardens through the action of an inherent enzyme, causing oxidation at temperatures 20-25°C and 80-85 per cent relative humidity. This hardening through polymerisation rather than the evaporation of solvents (as is the case with shellac) results in a surface resistant to water, mild acids and alkalis, heat and scratches.

The production of lacquer ware is a time consuming and exacting process. It may take many years and sometimes more than one artist to produce a single work. For example, one artist may create the substructure and another the layers of *urushi*. Or one artist may create the entire work. The formation of the substructure determines the final overall shape of the work. Wood is the most commonly used base material for lacquer ware, which is primed with a ground of *urushi* mixed with sawdust or clay, or *urushi* may be applied to sanded wood. The lacquer is applied to the base shape in layers, each of which is dried in a humid environment before sanding and polishing. The final number of layers varies from a few to as many as a hundred, and the end result is a translucent, smooth, hard, glossy surface. This may be modified by adding coloured pigments to the layers; including powders, fragments and shapes within the layers to provide a decorative surface; and through carving or building up selected areas of layers. These techniques have been used at various times throughout the history of Japanese lacquer production to create different styles.

Styles of Japanese lacquer

The history of Japanese lacquer is marked by the development of an indigenous lacquer aesthetic and technique, interspersed with periods in which 'mutually beneficial exchanges of technical knowledge between Japan and the neighbouring cultures of China and, to some extent, Korea' (Yonemura 1979: 4) influenced the style of Japanese lacquer. The first evidence of the use of lacquer in Japan dates to the mid to late Jomon period (first millennium BC), and indicates that black and red pigments were used to colour lacquer layers in this early period. Cinnabar and iron oxide are still widely used as colourants for red and black lacquer respectively.

Buddhism was introduced to Japan in the mid sixth century AD and resulted in an increased demand for lacquered goods including sculptures, shrines and furniture for Buddhist temples. During the Nara period (AD 645-794) lacquer was used for domestic and sacred works, including trays, containers and Buddhist

sculptures. Techniques popular in works from this period include painted, coloured lacquers; *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay); *heidatsu* (inlaid sheets of gold and silver), and painted lacquer mixed with powdered silver and gold. Many of these techniques were imported from the Asian mainland, but a unique Japanese technique that developed at this time was *maki-e*. This included several techniques that were based on sprinkling powdered metal, mainly silver and gold alloys, onto areas or lines of wet lacquer.

Several works in the installation feature *maki-e* techniques, including *togidashi maki-e* and *takamaki-e*. *Togidashi maki-e* translates as ‘polished out sprinkled design’. In this technique metallic sprinkles, after setting in a layer of lacquer, are covered with an opaque, coloured layer of lacquer. Once hardened it is polished back with an abrasive, such as charcoal, until the metallic pattern re-emerges. This technique is used in the contemporary *inro*, created by Kitamura Tatsuo and included in the exhibition. *Takamaki-e*, meaning ‘relief sprinkled design’, involves building up areas of lacquer mixed with other materials, prior to applying metallic sprinkles. Kitamura Tatsuo expertly used this technique in a tea container decorated with raised radish and turnip leaves.

During the Heian period (AD 794–1185) a true Japanese style developed as Japan entered a period of isolation following the cessation of trade and diplomatic exchange with China and Korea in AD 894. A design typifying this Japanese character has a cloud-like effect achieved through selective application of gold powder. This design is evident in the painted illustrations for a seventeenth century illustrated version of *The Tale of Genji*, in which gold clouds float across views into the palace of Prince Genji. *Maki-e* and *raden* became the prevalent lacquer techniques during the Heian period. *Raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay) is used extensively to embellish a nineteenth century Korean chest in the exhibition.

Many of the works on display were created using the *Negoro* lacquer technique, developed in Japan during the Kamakura period (1188–1333) in response to Chinese lacquer ware, which was again available in Japan following renewed contact with China in the mid twelfth century. Military commanders (*shoguns*) replaced the aristocracy as the primary patrons of the arts at this time. The *shoguns* encouraged the establishment of Chinese *Chan* (Zen) Buddhist temples in Japan. The Chinese monks who undertook this task brought lacquer objects to use in the temples for ceremonies and for serving food. Their sturdy, sculptural shapes were emulated in Japanese *Negoro* lacquers. The name comes from the Buddhist temple *Negoro-ji*, where lacquer ware was apparently made in this style prior to the temple’s destruction by fire in the sixteenth century. The term has come to mean lacquer ware made with red colouration over black. With use the red colouration wears away irregularly to reveal the black beneath, creating a mellow, aged appearance. *Negoro* wares were later appreciated by tea ceremony connoisseurs for this combination of subtle patterning harmonising with sculptural form. These qualities are well illustrated in the group of *Negoro* lacquers in the exhibition, dating from the fourteenth to nineteenth centuries. Several of the works also illustrate less familiar *Negoro* techniques, where sections of plain red and black lacquer decorate the works, or part of the wood substrate is revealed.

A technique allied to *Negoro* lacquer that developed in Japan during the Kamakura and Muromachi (1392–1573) periods is *Kamakura-bori* ('Kamakura carving'). The style takes its name from the *shogun* capital at Kamakura. Chinese Yuan dynasty (1279–1368) carved lacquers were imported to Japan from the fourteenth century and inspired a style in which a pattern was carved directly onto the substrate and then coated with layers of red over black lacquer. Wear resulted in a pattern of raised areas of black showing through the red lacquer. Three contemporary works by Japanese artist Michiko Suganuma, who has worked in this technique since 1962, exemplify the technique of *Kamakura-bori*. Two of these works have a bamboo substrate. Examples of the steps of the *Kamakura-bori* technique are provided by the artist, which is documented in Appendix A.

Negoro lacquers emphasise sculptural form and provide a contrast to other works in the exhibition, which illustrate a different style of lacquer ware focused on decorative technique. During the Edo period (1615–1868) the Tokugawa shogunate established firm control over the feudal lords (*daimyo*) and social order ensued. The resultant prosperity provided a broader market for lacquer ware and production spread, as did the middle-class market. The works they acquired included *inro* (medicine cases) with *netsuke* (toggles). Lacquers of great technical complexity utilising *maki-e* techniques and lavish quantities of gold were produced for the *shoguns*. The contemporary *inro* by Unryuan Kitamuro Tatsuo is indicative of this exquisite, technically complex style. It utilises *togidashi* technique in a detailed figurative composition against a luxurious background of *kinji* (heavily sprinkled powdered gold with a shiny finish).

Another very different style of Japanese lacquer associated with the late Edo period draws on paintings and woodblock prints in its decoration. The early nineteenth century writing box (*suzuribako*) is an example of this style. Areas of coloured lacquer and gold *maki-e* are used in a bold composition depicting a courtesan spitting ink at a wall to form the characters *shinobu koi* ('secret love'), while her friends look on. The subject, appropriate for the decoration of a writing box, is drawn from an eighteenth century illustrated book, *Ehon Tamakazura*, and had been depicted by the *ukiyo-e* artist Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671–1751). The lacquer artist has closely copied that image. The strong diagonal line of the composition and the accurate rendering of textile pattern and drape are reminiscent of nineteenth century woodblock prints.

Focus on Lacquer presents both traditional and contemporary works in a celebration of continuity and innovation in Japanese lacquer. The properties of *urushi* and the exacting techniques perfected by Japanese lacquer artists form a continuum from the introduction of lacquer ware to Japan in the sixth century to the present.

Reference

Yonemura, *Japanese Lacquer*, The Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, USA, 1979.



JAPANESE

Writing set

Edo period, 18th century, Japan

lacquer on wood, pigments, mother-of-pearl (*maki-e* lacquer)

23.0 x 20.5 x 4.5 cm

On loan from the Pauline Gandel collection of Japanese lacquer, Melbourne

Lacquer artists drew on imagery from *ukiyo-e* prints during the Edo period, and this writing box (*suzuribako*) exemplifies this fashion. The image of the courtesan spitting ink onto a wall to form the characters *shinobu* and *koi* is closely derived from a print by *ukiyo-e* artist Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671–1751), published in 1736. The image conveys the emotional difficulties of the life of a courtesan through the meanings of the characters. *Shinobu* means a sense of suffering and longing associated with a lost or departed love, and *koi* means passionate love.



Unryuan Kitamura Tatsuo
Japanese born 1952–
Tea container c. 2003 Japan
lacquer on wood, mother-of-pearl, gold, (*maki-e* lacquer)
7.5 x 7.5 cm diameter
Unryuan Studio collection, Wajima, Japan

Drawing on the historical precedent of the Koami family of lacquer masters, Kitamura Tatsuo has established the Unryuan Studio to produce lacquer ware in the tradition of the great masters, and incorporating innovation with technical excellence. This tea container employs three separate techniques plus inlays of mother-of-pearl. The motif of the leaves of humble plants such as daikon radish and turnip reintroduce ideas of humility and simplicity to the refined ambience of the tea ceremony.





TOSA Mitsunori

Japanese 1583–1638

The Tale of Genji

Edo period, 17th century, Japan

album: pigments and gold paint on paper

on powder gold leaf on card, 56 pages,

gold thread, silk and wood cover, glued concertina

binding

19.8 x 16.7 x 9.2 cm (closed)

19.8 x 968.6 x 4.6 cm (open)

Purchased, 1967 (1755-5)

This album by Mitsunori of the Tosa School consists of 54 scenes, each of which illustrates a chapter of *The Tale of Genji*, a novel written by the court Lady Murasaki in the late tenth century. It is a story of the loves of Prince Genji of the Heian court in Kyoto. Lady Murasaki describes in her novel a world whose inhabitants devote themselves to romantic love and the creation of beauty.

In one of the album leaves illustrating Chapter 21 titled 'The maiden', a court lady is delivering an arrangement of maple leaves in a lacquer tray to Lady Murasaki, Prince Genji's wife, on behalf of Lady Akikonomu, Genji's first cousin.

Akikonomu's gift is accompanied with a poem:

Your garden quietly awaits the spring.

Permit the winds to bring a touch of autumn.

Murasaki sent back an arrangement of moss on the same tray, with a pine against stones suggesting cliffs. A poem was tied to a branch of the pine:

Fleeting, your leaves that scatter in the wind.

The pine at the cliffs is forever green with spring.



JAPANESE

Sake bottles

Muromachi period, 15th century – 16th century, Japan
lacquer on wood, (*Negoro* lacquer)

31.0 x 27.1 x 7.1cm each

Private collection, Melbourne

This magnificent pair of sake bottles is imbued with a simplicity and purity in form that is also monumental and architectonic. At the same time their modern design is also impressive. The rectangular shapes are intriguing, creating an element of surprise as to their function as sake bottles.



SUGANUMA Michiko
Japanese born 1940–
Dish–1977 Kamakura, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Kamakura-bori* lacquer)
5.8 x 30.3 x 24.6 cm
Felton Bequest, 1946 (AS3-1984)

Michiko Suganuma is a leading artist of *Kamakura-bori* (*Kamakura* wood carving and lacquering) in contemporary Japan. She was born in Tokyo and graduated from the Women's College of Arts (Hoshi Bijutsu Daigaku) in 1961. In 1962 she started intensive study of *Kamakura-bori*. Since then she has exhibited extensively in Japan and received numerous awards for her works. In 1984 she held an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.

APPENDIX

Kamakura-bori

Wood carving

The wood from the *katsura* tree is the most valued for *Kamakura* carving; it resembles the magnolia and belongs to the family of deciduous trees found mainly in China and Japan. However, artist Michiko Suganuma prefers the beautifully grained woods of the *keyaki* (elm) and *tochi* (Japanese horse chestnut). These timbers are usually stored for at least seven to ten years before they can be used. Insufficient time in storage can cause the wood to crack, chip or warp. Only one object can be carved from a wooden board of the standard size, 100.0 x 60.0 x 20.0 cm. Carving is done by hand with planes and chisels.

Lacquer coating

The carved wooden object is coated with many layers of lacquer (*urushi*). The term lacquer denotes a natural varnish obtained from the sap of a sumac tree, (*Rhus verniciflua*). Sap is collected by making scratches on the inner layers of the bark with a sickle after the outer layer has been peeled. The best time to collect is around sunrise when the tree gives out most sap. The collecting season is from June to November and different qualities of lacquer sap are produced at different times of the year. The best quality sap is produced in July and August. The milky-white oily sap, called *ki-urushi* or raw lacquer, is used for the base coating.

The lacquer coating usually consists of base, middle, upper and final coatings. The following information relates to the examples on display, provided by lacquer artist Michiko Suganuma, which illustrate the coating procedures of a red lacquered plate with a peony design carved from *katsura* wood.

The technique of *kamakura bori* lacquer

Base coating

- a. The wooden object is thoroughly cleaned with sandpaper and scratches or cracks infilled with a mixture of kneaded rice paste, wood powder and *ki-urushi* or raw lacquer.
- b. When the paste is dry the surface is polished with sandpaper followed by brushing.
- c. The wooden object is coated and sealed with raw lacquer.
- d. Following a light polishing with sandpaper a mixture of polishing powder and raw lacquer is applied to the surface with a fine brush.
- e. When dry, the lacquer surface is lightly polished with sandpaper.
- f. The ware is coated with a mixture of raw lacquer and charcoal powder. Before the coating is completely dry it is dusted with charcoal powder.
- g. When dry, sandpaper is applied to take away the charcoal powder.

Middle coating

- h. A layer of black lacquer is applied. Black lacquer is obtained by mixing refined, transparent lacquer (*kijiro-urushi*) with iron powder and black soot. The transparent lacquer of yellowish brown colour is obtained from the milky white *ki-urushi* or raw lacquer which has been stirred or heated to give out moisture.
- i. When dry, the lacquered surface is polished with wet sandpaper. These two steps should be repeated at least twice.

Upper coating

- j. Red lacquer is applied over the black lacquer. Red lacquer is obtained by mixing *kijiro-urushi* with mercury sulphide or iron oxide, usually just before coating. After the red lacquer has been applied for thirty to sixty minutes, *makamo* (water oat) powder is evenly sprinkled on the surface. This step should be repeated at least twice.
- k. When dry, particles of *makamo* powder are removed with wet sandpaper. The lacquered surface is polished with a cloth dipped in a solution of polishing powder and water, then cleaned with water and allowed to dry.

Final coating

- l. The object is finally coated with best quality lacquer. After being cleaned *susudama* powder is lightly applied to the surface to give the lacquer an aged patina. It is then polished with a dry cotton cloth. The entire lacquering procedure takes at least twenty to thirty coatings.

CHECKLIST

JAPANESE

Altar table

Edo period, 18th century, Japan
lacquer on wood, metal
(*Negoro* lacquer)
14.1 x 54.7 x 30.4 cm
Purchased from Admission
Funds, 1988 (AS4-1988)

Table

Muromachi period, c. 1530, Japan
lacquer on wood
(*Negoro* lacquer)
32.5 x 38.0 cm diameter
Purchased with funds donated
by Mr S. Baillieu Myer AC, 1983
(AS4-1983)

Cakestand

Late Edo period, 18th century,
Japan
lacquer on wood
(*Negoro* lacquer)
39.7 x 48.0 x 48.0 cm
Purchased, 1977 (AS5-1977)

Circular tray

Edo period, 18th century, Japan
lacquer on wood
(*Negoro* lacquer)
17.3 x 54.2 cm diameter
Purchased through the NGV
Foundation with the assistance of
Sir Roderick and Lady Carnegie,
Fellow, 2001 (2001.45)

Bowl

Momoyama period, 1590s, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
17.7 x 34.0 x 32.7 cm
Presented through The Art
Foundation of Victoria by
Mr S. Baillieu Myer AC, Founder
Benefactor, 1988 (AS2-1988)

Dish

Muromachi period,
15th century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
3.3 x 32.8 cm diameter
Presented through The Art
Foundation of Victoria by
Mr S. Baillieu Myer AC, Founder
Benefactor, 1989 (AS1-1989)

Lidded jar

Muromachi period, 15th century
– 16th century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
(a-b) 14.8 x 19.0 x 18.3 cm
(overall)
Purchased through The Art
Foundation of Victoria with the
assistance of Mr S. Baillieu Myer
AC, Founder Benefactor, 1986
(AS4.a-b-1986)

Basin

Nambokucho period, 14th
century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
16.5 x 33.4 x 32.7 cm
Presented through The Art
Foundation of Victoria by
Mr S. Baillieu Myer AC, Founder
Benefactor, 1985 (AS34-1985)

Sake bottle

Edo period, late 18th century
– early 19th century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
31.8 x 23.5 cm diameter
Presented through the NGV
Foundation by Mr S. Baillieu
Myer AC, Honorary Life
Benefactor, 2005 (2005.358)

Sake bottle

Muromachi period, 15th century
– 16th century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
31.0 x 27.1 x 7.1 cm
Private collection, Melbourne

Sake bottle

Muromachi period, 15th century
– 16th century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
31.0 x 27.1 x 7.1 cm
Private collection, Melbourne

Writing set

Edo period, 18th century, Japan
lacquer on wood, pigments,
mother-of-pearl (*maki-e* lacquer)
23.0 x 20.5 x 4.5 cm
On loan from the Pauline Gandel
collection of Japanese lacquer,
Melbourne

Picnic set

Muromachi period/Momoyama
period, 15th century – 16th
century, Japan
lacquer on wood, pigments, gold,
silver 27.0 x 24.0 x 15.0 cm
On loan from the Pauline Gandel
collection of Japanese lacquer,
Melbourne

SUGANUMA Michiko
Japanese born 1940–
Dish
1977 Kamakura, Japan
lacquer on wood
(*Kamakura bori* lacquer)
5.8 x 30.3 x 24.6 cm
Felton Bequest, 1984 (AS3-1984)

Tea leaves container
2003 Japan
lacquer on bamboo
(a-b) 7.1 x 6.9 cm diameter (overall)
Lillian Ernestine Lobb Bequest,
2004 (2004.51.a-b)

Incense container
2003 Japan
lacquer on bamboo
(a-b) 3.5 x 6.3 cm diameter (overall)
Lillian Ernestine Lobb Bequest,
2004 (2004.52.a-b)

Unryuan Kitamura Tatsuo
Japanese born 1952–
*Inro depicting the Sarei Festival
at Toyokuni Shrine*
c. 1998 Japan
lacquer on wood, gold (*maki-e*
lacquer)
9.9 x 5.1 cm
Unryuan Studio collection,
Wajima, Japan

Tea container
c. 2003 Japan
lacquer on wood, abalone, mother-
of-pearl, gold (*maki-e* lacquer)
7.5 x 7.5 cm diameter
Unryuan Studio collection,
Wajima, Japan

Incense container
2004 Japan
lacquer on wood, pigments, gold
(*maki-e* lacquer)
8.2 x 6.7 x 6.2 cm
Unryuan Studio collection,
Wajima, Japan

Jizo Bosatsu
Kamakura period, 1186–1333,
Japan
wood, lacquer, gold paint, pigment,
metal, glass
(a-d) 102.5 x 36.3 x 36.3 cm
(overall)
Felton Bequest, 1957 (1736.a-d-D4)

TOSA Mitsunori
Japanese 1583–1638
The Tale of Genji
Edo period, 17th century, Japan
album: pigments and gold paint
on paper on powder gold leaf on
card, 56 pages, gold thread, silk
and wood cover, glued concertina
binding
19.8 x 16.7 x 9.2 cm (closed)
19.8 x 968.6 x 4.6 cm (open)
Purchased, 1967 (1755-5)

KOREAN
Cabinet
Choson dynasty, 19th century,
Korea
lacquer on wood, mother-of-pearl,
brass, paper
(a-d) 173.9 x 104.0 x 50.5 cm
(overall) (closed)
Gift of Mrs F. Rutherford, 1975
(AS34.a-d-1975)

Exhibition dates
25 March – 16 July 2006

NGV International
180 St Kilda Road
Melbourne, Vic. 3004
www.ngv.vic.gov

Published by the Council of Trustees
of the National Gallery of Victoria
PO Box 7259, Vic. 8004, Australia.
© National Gallery of Victoria 2006
This brochure is copyright. Apart from
any fair dealing for purposes of private
study, research, criticism or review, as
permitted under the *Copyright Act 1968*,
no part may be reproduced by any
process without written permission.
Enquiries should be made to the
publisher.

Brochure text: Carol Cains
Appendix text: Michiko Suganuma
and Kumiko Sakata
Editing: Janet Westwood
Catalogue Design: Mischa Brus
Exhibition Design: Cate Hall
Publications Officer: Judy Shelverton
Photography: Photographic Services
CTP and printing: The Craftsman Press

Front and back cover:
Sake bottle
Edo period, late 18th century – early
19th century, Japan
lacquer on wood (*Negoro* lacquer)
31.8 x 23.5 cm diameter
Presented through the NGV Foundation
by Mr S. Baillieu Myer AC, Honorary Life
Benefactor, 2005 (2005.358)

