

Gōbara Lacquerware

Hiruzen is home to Gōbara lacquerware (*gōbara-shikki*), a form of the art distinguished by carving and lacquering methods that retain and show off the natural beauty of the woodgrain in the finished work.

The history of lacquerware production in Hiruzen dates back around 600 years. Unlike the distinctive pieces made here today, the area's historical lacquerware resembled that of other regions, with opaque black or red finishes. The coatings, however, were relatively thin, using less lacquer and making the pieces less expensive than lacquerware produced elsewhere. This made Hiruzen lacquerware an affordable souvenir for pilgrims traveling to Mt. Daisen and the surrounding area.

At the peak of the craft's popularity in the Edo period (1603–1867), around 400,000 pieces of lacquerware were manufactured in Hiruzen each year. Less than a century later, however, regional lacquerware production was nearly extinguished by World War II. Challenging postwar economic conditions led to a diminished demand for luxury items, and many craftspeople with the necessary skills perished in the conflict. There was also a shortage of materials—particularly lacquer—due to heavy wartime use for military applications like protecting boat hulls.

For several decades, no lacquerware was made. Then, Hiruzen artisans resurrected the craft in the 1980s, using existing samples and written sources to recreate the process. They aspired to make modern lacquerware that was nonetheless true to its heritage and the character of its locale. To connect the modern incarnation to its ancestral tradition, today's artisans continue to seek out the same materials used in the past. In addition, they are planting lacquer trees and engaging in educational outreach to secure the tradition's future.

Everything that goes into a piece of Gōbara lacquerware is produced in Hiruzen. The wood comes from wild chestnut trees that grow in the surrounding mountains. In general, lumber destined for conventional red and black lacquerware production is cut lengthwise, a method that yields a greater number of bases but sacrifices the figural effect of the woodgrain. Since the wood is destined to be coated with pigment, efficiency is prioritized. In the making of Gōbara lacquerware, however, the trunk is cut crosswise into disks. This limits the number of bases that can be obtained from a single tree as well as the possible size of a finished piece, but the beauty of the growth rings is left intact. Hiruzen artisans show off these elegant concentric circles to full effect in their lacquering.

The base disks are carved into bowls, plates, and other items using chisels forged by the artisan. Circular pieces are carved with the assistance of a lathe. After each piece is sanded, a base layer of lacquer is applied and allowed to dry.

Lacquer is sap harvested from lacquer trees (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*). After a trough is cut into the bark, the few hundred milliliters of sap that ooze out are painstakingly collected for processing. The sap's natural color is a deep reddish-brown;

the bright crimson and stark black finishes of standard lacquerware are achieved by adding pigments. The lacquer sap found in Hiruzen has a particularly high concentration of urushiol, the compound that makes lacquer hard. This gives Gōbara lacquerware its deep luster and excellent durability.

Once the base layer of lacquer has dried, each piece is sanded with diatomaceous earth—also locally sourced—which contains high amounts of abrasive silica. This buffing allows subsequent layers of lacquer to adhere better to the base, resulting in a stronger piece that will be less vulnerable to chipping.

Additional layers of lacquer are applied and set to dry in a special humidity-controlled chamber. These steps are repeated until the desired depth of color is achieved. It takes significant skill to manage this lengthy process without smudging the malleable lacquer, or allowing dust or other debris to mar its brilliant finish. The drying process demands a delicate balance of time, temperature, and humidity, and so requires an experienced eye.

Gōbara lacquerware grows more lustrous with use. Each piece will achieve its greatest beauty through service, and Hiruzen's craftsmen express the hope that their works will be a regular part of the owner's everyday life.