

Maki-e

Maki-e is a technique used to create designs on lacquerware by adding metallic powders, such as gold dust, to soft, freshly applied lacquer. The term—which means “sprinkled picture”—can also refer to the pieces decorated this way. It is one of the most common decorative techniques used in Japanese lacquerware.

Maki-e designs first began to appear on Japanese lacquerware in the eighth century. Over the next several centuries, the technique spread across the country. It was applied to both large-scale decorative works, such as screens and Buddhist altars, and to smaller household items, like hair ornaments and writing boxes. The expensive materials and specialized skills required to produce *maki-e* meant that for most of the craft’s history, only the elite could afford it. However, with the emergence of a wealthy merchant class in the eighteenth century, commoners also began to patronize *maki-e* artists. This influx of new clients led to a broadening of the art form’s applications and range of expressions. In the mid-nineteenth century, Japan lifted many of its restrictions on international trade, leading to increased exports and artistic exchange. In this climate, *maki-e* continued to evolve and its use gained international recognition not only in the applied arts, but also in creative art.

The techniques used to create *maki-e* works are grouped into three styles. All lacquerware is created by building up layer after layer of lacquer (the sap of the lacquer tree). In *togidashi* (burnished) *maki-e*, the metallic design is applied in the middle of the layering process and covered by subsequent coats of lacquer. Once the piece has hardened, it is polished down to reveal the design, flush with the surrounding lacquer. In *hira* (flat) *maki-e*, the artist brushes a design in lacquer on top of a finished piece. Metallic dust is sprinkled over the design, and it adheres only to the wet lacquer. Only a small amount of lacquer is used, which leaves the design more or less flush with the surface. By contrast, *taka* (raised) *maki-e* is created by purposefully raising the design. Beginning with a smooth surface, the artist builds up certain areas with layers of lacquer mixed with charcoal or clay dust. This creates an image in high relief, to which the metallic powder is then applied.

Along with gold and silver, a variety of other metals and alloys are used to achieve different color gradations. For example, *aokin*, a mix of gold and silver, produces a

lighter gold color, while *shakudō*, a blend of gold and copper, produces a reddish bronze that can develop a blackish-purple patina over time. In addition, powders with grains of different sizes create varying textures and degrees of luster.

Artists have developed several specialized tools to manipulate the lacquer and metallic powders used in *maki-e*, which are expensive and easily scattered. Two of the most important are the *funzutsu* (a bamboo tube with silk or gauze covering one end that is used to sprinkle powders evenly) and the *tsumeban* (a small thumb-mounted palette for liquid lacquer). Delicate brushes are used to sweep away excess powder without disturbing the design.

Several other decorative techniques are often used in tandem with *maki-e* in Ishikawa crafts. These include *hyōmon* (the application of cut metal shapes rather than powders), *rankaku* (decoration with crushed eggshell), *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay), and *chinkin* (incised gold inlay). Many lacquerware pieces at the Ishikawa Prefectural Museum of Art display a combination of these techniques.

Maki-e was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1955, and the first Holder of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage for *maki-e* was Ishikawa native Matsuda Gonroku (1896–1986). Three other Ishikawa residents have also become holders of *maki-e* heritage: Ōba Shōgyo (1916–2012) in 1982, Terai Naoji (1912–1998) in 1985, and Nakano Kōichi (1947–) in 2010.