

Lacquer Application (*Kyūshitsu*)

Kyūshitsu is a general term referring to the lacquer application processes used in Japanese traditional crafts. It includes techniques for preparing the substrate (base object), such as lathing or bamboo weaving, but it is distinct from decorative techniques, such as painting or metal inlay.

Thanks, in part, to abundant lacquer trees (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), Japan has been producing lacquerware since at least 4,000 BCE. The tradition underwent a period of rapid growth and increased sophistication during the seventeenth century, when domain lords' efforts to foster local industry resulted in the emergence of diverse styles. Since then, a rich culture of tools and techniques evolved that are unique to Japanese lacquer application.

Kyūshitsu techniques can be loosely grouped into two methods: those in which lacquer is applied directly to a substrate, and those in which the substrate is covered with a foundation to which the subsequent layers of lacquer are applied. The two approaches can result in markedly different outcomes with regard not only to appearance, but also durability, heat resistance, and other functional characteristics of the final product. Whichever method is used, the process requires many applications of lacquer that must be allowed to harden before the next layer can be applied. This labor-intensive work can take months or even years to complete.

Lacquer is a challenging medium. Its glossy, highly durable finish is formed when a component chemical called urushiol reacts with oxygen in the air, but the reaction is vulnerable to fluctuations in temperature and humidity. Particularly before electricity made climate control possible, managing these variables so that the lacquer set properly required special expertise. Additionally, wet lacquer must be protected from dust or other particles that may adhere and mar the finish. To facilitate the process, artisans developed unique equipment like the *urushi-buro*, a dust-proof drying box made from moisture-retentive Japanese cypress or cedar that helps to maintain even humidity.

Lacquerware crafts in Ishikawa Prefecture are centered around Wajima, Yamanaka Onsen, and Kanazawa. In 1974, *kyūshitsu* was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage, and Akaji Yūsai (1906–1984) was designated a holder of the technique. Other Ishikawa artists to receive the title are Shioda Keishirō (1926–2006) in

1995 and Komori Kunie (1945–) in 2006.