

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.

In the seventeenth century, competition between domains resulted in the development of many distinct regional lacquerware traditions. These produced a rich culture of unique tools and techniques associated with Japanese lacquer application. In recognition of this legacy, *kyūshitsu* was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1974.

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 influence not only the appearance of the finished product, but also functional characteristics such as durability and heat resistance.

Lacquer is a challenging medium. Its glossy 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. Lacquer must be applied in multiple—sometimes hundreds—of layers and given sufficient time to harden between each. Many techniques require the lacquer to be polished between applications as well. Meanwhile, wet lacquer must be protected from dust or other particles that may mar the finish. The entire process can take months or even years to complete.