

Mother-of-Pearl Inlay (*Raden*)

Raden is a lacquerware decorative technique in which mother of pearl is embedded in the surface lacquer. The technique was introduced from China in the eighth century, and Japanese artists used it to ornament everything from small household items to military equipment and great works of architecture.

Raden uses the iridescent layer on the inside of certain mollusk shells, called “mother of pearl” or “nacre.” Many species, including abalones and pearl oysters, produce nacre appropriate for *raden*, although the color and quality varies. Mother of pearl is extracted by grinding down both sides of the shell until a thin wafer remains. Pieces between 0.1 and 2 millimeters are called *atsugai* (“thick shell”), and those under the 0.1-millimeter cutoff are called *usugai* (“thin shell”). The thickness determines how the pieces are used. Small flakes of nacre can be pulverized into an iridescent powder called *mijingai* (“shell particles”).

The shapes needed for an artist’s envisioned design are cut from the mother of pearl using a scroll saw, precision knife, punch templates, or acid etching; then they are applied to the piece of lacquerware. Artists generally use inlay techniques with thicker shell pieces, while thinner ones can be more easily affixed by brushing them with lacquer and sticking them to the surface. A final coat of lacquer is applied before the piece is burnished to a smooth, polished surface.

Raden was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1999.