

## *Kirikane*

*Kirikane* is a decorative technique in which extremely thin pieces of metal foil, usually gold or silver, are cut and applied to wood or another substrate (base object) to form minute and intricate patterns. Originally, *kirikane* was principally used to decorate the robes and armor of Buddhist statuary. The technique came to Japan from mainland Asia during the Asuka period (552–645), but reached its peak between the eighth and early fourteenth centuries.

During the Edo period (1603–1867), *kirikane* was largely replaced by the use of gold paint, which was faster and easier to apply. *Kirikane* fell out of use to the degree that at one point, the skills to apply it were preserved only by Higashi-Honganji and Nishi-Honganji Temples in Kyoto. After World War II, the craft was revived when it spread beyond the religious realm as a way of decorating objects such as tea utensils and other works of art.

Gold foil is delicate enough to be torn by a stray breath, so *kirikane* artisans strengthen it by layering several sheets together. The sheets are handled with tweezers made of bamboo, a material that does not stick to the foil or conduct potentially damaging sparks of static electricity. Each sheet is briefly laid on a bed of hot ash, which heats the gold just enough to bond to the other sheets when they are stacked together and pressed. Once the multilayered gold foil is thick enough, the artisan transfers it to a deerskin cutting stand and uses a bamboo knife to cut strips thinner than a human hair. The deerskin holds the thin strips in place while also letting them be lifted away without sticking.

A special glue is used to affix the strips to the substrate. The glue is a mix of *funori*, a seaweed-based adhesive, and *nikawa*, an adhesive made from animal skin. The artisan works with a brush in each hand to apply the strips. One has a tip moistened with water. The artisan curls the end of a foil strip around the tip to lift it from the cutting stand. The other brush is moistened with a mixture of glue and water. The artisan uses it to simultaneously guide the foil strip onto the substrate and attach it to the surface.

Only three people have ever been designated as Holders of Important Intangible Cultural Heritage for *kirikane*. Ishikawa Prefecture was home to one of them, Nishide Daizō (1913–1995), who was designated in 1985. He encountered *kirikane* while

studying the restoration of Buddhist art, and through intensive study he taught himself the technique. Nishide then incorporated *kirikane* into his own woodworking. The museum has several of his works in its collection, including a series of stylized animal-shaped vessels completely covered in multicolored gold lines and flower petals applied using the *kirikane* technique.

*Kirikane* was designated an Important Intangible Cultural Heritage in 1981.