

## Wajima Lacquer Museum

The Wajima Lacquer Museum showcases the heritage of lacquerware in Wajima and the craft's tradition of collaboration. The museum was established by a cooperative of lacquer artisans to help keep important lacquerware pieces in Wajima, and to explain the history and the process of Wajima lacquerware to the public. Visitors can see antique and contemporary works from local artisans and learn about how Wajima lacquerware is made.

### *Learn about the process*

More than 100 steps are required to make one piece of Wajima lacquerware. Displays at the Wajima Lacquer Museum show each step of the process. At the entrance to the museum, visitors can watch a video of the lacquer process provided in five languages.

A large display of 133 bowls breaks down every phase in the making of a lacquered bowl, from the initial carving and polishing of the wood, through the application of the lacquer to the final decoration. Displays of tools and large photographs help visitors understand the steps. A separate room is devoted to historical examples of fine lacquerware dating from the mid-nineteenth century and seasonal exhibitions. The museum is above a store that sells contemporary Wajima lacquerware from some 60 different makers.

### *An ancient art*

Lacquer is the sap of the Japanese sumac tree (urushi; *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*), which grows in the forests around Wajima. Cypress, zelkova, and Japanese ash trees also grow in the area. The wood of these trees is durable but easy to work and is used for carving or turning objects to be lacquered. Examples of lacquerware (*nuri*) found at archaeological sites in Ishikawa Prefecture suggest that the history of lacquering in Japan dates back to as early as the Jomon period (14,000–300 BCE).

### *The Wajima difference*

Wajima lacquer is known for its durability and is distinguished by its use of locally occurring diatomaceous earth (*jinoko*: a type of sedimentary rock that can be crumbled into a fine powder). This is mixed with urushi to create a durable base coat. Artisans in Wajima also apply a layer of cloth to reinforce fragile areas, such as the thin edges of dishes and bowls, creating pieces that can last for hundreds of years. Up to 30 layers of

lacquer may be applied to build a smooth, glossy surface. Each layer is applied by hand, then dried in a dust-free environment for around 24 hours. The whole process, from start to finish, can take several months.

Some examples of Wajima lacquerware date from the sixteenth century. Wajima's lacquerware industry developed quickly, supported by a high demand for lacquerware items in Kyoto and Osaka. The lacquer artisans of Wajima divided the labor into separate production stages, which meant they could produce a large volume of quality pieces at competitive prices. The work supported a whole community of specialists, from forest workers and woodworkers to lacquer painters and decorative artists.

Today, different artisans still specialize in specific steps of the process. The *nushiya* (who applies the lacquer) performs the role of project manager, from consulting with the client and commissioning other artisans, to delivering the finished product.