





A New Standard from Yamanaka Onsen

Kaga Lacquerware, Ishikawa

Ensnconced in this mountainous hot-spring town, the woodturners and *makie* lacquer artists of Yamanaka Onsen have long pursued perfection.

Opposite page: Fountain pens by *makie* artist Mushu Yamazaki. Multiple coats of lacquer were polished down to portray *karashishi* lions, shells, and other good-luck symbols, turning a writing instrument into a luxury article of understated elegance.

Right: A stylish sake cup of Japanese horse chestnut by woodturner and lacquerware artist Takehito Nakajima. Sake cups are typically tiny, but Nakajima made this one easy to grasp. Its solid foot adds height and stability while the overall shape begs for a festive occasion.





An elegant bowl emerges beneath his hands as Takehito Nakajima works a piece of wood with tools he has made himself. Turners in Yamánaka typically use wood that is cut crosswise against the grain, which results in more durable wares.





A cypress bridge spans the Daijoji River in Yamanaka. The healing waters of this hot-spring area were known to travelers long before the first lodgings were built in the late 12th or early 13th century, and became still more celebrated after Matsuo Basho (1644–1694) lauded them in his classic *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*. In the center of town are Kikunoyu, a refined example of traditional bathhouse architecture, and the Yamanaka-za, a theater decorated with the *makie* paintings of the town's artisans.

The organic beauty of lacquerware

The lacquerware tradition in Yamanaka Onsen began some 400 years ago, when a community of woodworkers settled in this hot-spring area—drawn by the curative waters, perhaps, but also by the dense forests available to them.

These woodturners used lathes to cut, sand, face, and otherwise shape wood into bowls and trays that they then lacquered themselves. Today close to 60 turners carry on their craft here, along with the lacquer artisans and traders who settled in the area later.

It's not uncommon for those encountering wooden lacquerware for the first time to be taken aback by the material's light feel and smooth finish. The combination strikes some observers as less like high-quality wood and more like plastic.

So what, exactly, is the appeal of lacquerware?

The main raw material of lacquer is sap collected from trees of the sumac family. The key component of varnish gathered in Japan is urushiol, a high-molecular compound, allergenic oil, and skin irritant.

As if handling this substance alone weren't troublesome enough, in order to dry the varnish its naturally occurring enzyme laccase must undergo oxidized polycondensation, a process requiring a steady temperature of 20–25°C and a humidity factor of 60 to 80 percent. A wooden chamber known as a *muro* is used to this end.

Once it dries, however, natural lacquer is incredibly tough. It is resistant to water, heat, salt, alkali, and acid, and impervious even to nitrohydrochloric acid, a substance that can melt metal. A 2,000-year-old piece submerged in muddy water was found with its shine still in place. What's more, a lacquer finish is both germ-resistant and antiseptic.



Lacquerware is also ecological. The bark of a varnish tree is cut and its sap collected drop by drop. Using traditional methods, only about 200 grams of sap can be recovered from a tree that has been growing for 15 years. Imagine! A raw material that will last more than 1,000 years can be recovered in 15.

Lacquer imparts a translucent effect to the surface it coats. When people first found the hardened sap in the forest, their instinct was to use it as an adhesive. It was later adapted as varnish once its beauty and protective properties were discovered.

A vermilion-lacquered comb from the prehistoric Jomon era, discovered in Fukui prefecture, has shown that lacquering techniques, as well as our quest for artistic expression, were well in place as early as 6,000 years ago.

Right: Marks on the trunk of a Japanese lacquer tree show where it has been tapped.





Page top, clockwise from left:

A deep bowl made of *tochi* (Japanese horse chestnut) by Takehito Nakajima.

Mushu Yamazaki used the *shishiai* layering technique on this personal seal holder to depict a battle between a giant squid and sperm whale.

An ultrathin sake cup by Nakajima demonstrates woodturning prowess at its finest—the only weight felt in the hand is that of the sake itself. Flowering white clover is rendered in brilliant gold *makie* by Yamazaki.

Another of Nakajima's sake cups showcases *tochi*'s gorgeous fiddleback grain.

Page bottom:

The flounder-shaped plate "Karei" by Yamazaki is an intricately detailed modern piece featuring not only *makie* but also the *kanshitsu* technique, in which multiple layers of hemp cloth are lacquered over a mold.

Woodturning and painting techniques



Above, from top:
Mushu Yamazaki at work.
Takehito Nakajima.
Raw varnish has the thickness of honey.
Mushu Yamazaki.

The artisans Takehito Nakajima and Mushu Yamazaki, heirs to Yamanaka's legacy of woodworking and lacquerware, work at the forefront of these crafts today.

Nakajima is one of the top woodturners in Japan. He works with entirely with tools he has made himself, and does lacquering as well.

In Yamanaka, no clamps or other metal fittings are used to hold wood in the electric lathe—the piece is simply set into a wooden frame that protects it from scratches or other damage. This makes it easy to change the turning direction at any moment so that an entire bowl can be shaped in just a few minutes. Once the lathing is finished, the piece can be quickly removed and the next one set in place. Nakajima reports that a turner from overseas took one look at his setup and remarked, “That’s crazy! Doesn’t it scare you to work that way?” In fact, he explains, it’s a clever way to bring out the inherent suppleness of the wood.

Everything Nakajima makes is magnificent, but his sake cups have special appeal. As their design is carefully considered right down to the texture and touch of the piece on one’s lips, these works of art are a sublime way to savor sake. Nakajima’s mastery is evident in the feather-lightness of his vessels as well as their ultrathin walls. His recent works feature translucent lacquer with the gloss of marble, a new form of expression.

Yamazaki, whose works are sought after by collectors the world over, is, equally, one of the top lacquer painters in the country.

In the decorative art form of *makie* lacquer painting, designs are built up three-dimensionally, often sprinkled with gold or silver powder. Beyond artistic talent, patience and an abiding affection for each piece are requisite. As only the slightest bit of lacquer can be applied before it is set to dry and the next coat begun, the process is long and labor-intensive.

Yamazaki takes on restoration projects, too, preserving masterpieces and other antiques in exquisite form for future generations. His painstaking care, extending even to parts that are hidden, can at times only be confirmed with a magnifying glass. It is no exaggeration to place his trailblazing work in *makie* in league with that of the great Edo-period master Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891).

