

Kainan, Wakayama

Kishu Lacquerware

Brand Highlights

- Plant-derived lacquer depletes no fossil materials and uses no harmful organic solvents
- Exclusive trading rights in the late 1700s propelled the area into an innovative center of lacquerware production, as Kishu products became accessible throughout Japan
- Our focus here is on certified traditional artisans* who use only natural materials

Kishu lacquerware hails from the city of Kainan in northern Wakayama prefecture. Together with Aizu in Fukushima and Wajima in Ishikawa, Kainan is one of the three major centers of lacquerware production in Japan.

Kishu lacquerware got its start in the late 1600s, when woodturners from present-day Shiga came to live in the Kuroe area of Kainan, drawn by its plentiful cypress wood. Lacquerers and painters of *makie* designs rendered with gold, silver, and other powders followed them. *Shibuchi* bowls, which used persimmon tannin in place of costly raw lacquer when forming the primer paste, helped to put Kishu products in the reach of commoners. In 1760 the artisans of Kuroe were granted exclusive trade rights from the domain. Fast-forward two centuries, and



Kishu lacquerware was recognized by the national government as a traditional craft in 1978.

Synthetic polymers and coatings arrived in Kainan in the 1960s, opening the floodgates for cheaper, more easily produced wares. Today 90 percent of the lacquerers here use synthetic resin and polyurethane paints in place of natural lacquer. We introduce three certified traditional artisans who, eschewing plastics, work to revive the old ways: Katsuhiko Hayashi and the father-daughter duo Toshifumi and Kumiko Tanioka.



Opposite page, top: Natsume tea caddy by traditional artisan Katsuhiko Hayashi with designs raised in relief. In this most complicated of makie techniques, the lacquer is gradually built up to make the image rise from the ground. Hayashi lavished three different types of gold on this caddy, which is used in the tea ceremony to hold matcha powdered tea. In the portrait Hayashi stands in one of the *mikan* citrus fields for which Wakayama is known—the prefecture is the leading producer of the fruit in Japan. Left: The wood grain of this low table in the studio of traditional artisan Toshifumi Tanioka has taken on a deep amber hue from years of use in spreading lacquer. **Opposite page, bottom:** Traditional artisan Kumiko Tanioka on the beach at Wakanoura. Her lidded incense burner pictured here employs the Zuiunnuri method, named after the phenomenon of iridescent clouds. To create this look, a layer of thick *roiro* reduced lacquer is applied to multiple colored base coats and then polished down to yield a glowing, shimmering effect.

Above: Those who venture along the Kishu trail leading to the Kumano Kodo pilgrimage route will be treated to this view of Kainan, taken from the Gosho no Niwa garden at Jizobuji temple. The hamlet of Kuroe lies in the valley at lower center.

*National certification as a traditional artisan is bestowed upon those who endeavor to preserve a traditional craft native to their area. Holders of this title are devoted to the study of the craft's techniques and skills, and play an active role in transmitting the vocation to the next generation.

This whimsical *katakuchi* sake flask is made from a calabash gourd cut lengthwise, dried, and layered with multiple coats of lacquer. The use of gourds and even citrus peels as a base for Kishu lacquerware finds delight in nature's shapes, no two of which are exactly alike.

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Katsuhiko Hayashi is a *makie* artisan, like his Kishubased father and grandfather before him. Among his works are sake cups and flasks fashioned out of hollowed-out gourds, as well as cups made of citrus peels. Just as is done when working with wood, he applies layer upon layer of lacquer to these all-natural materials to create a thoroughly unique piece.

Hayashi's interest in *makie* grew from around the age of 12, when he attended a lacquer-making workshop in which his father was involved. The event was filmed for television, and Hayashi was shown making his first *makie* design. The scene might have been the idea of the TV producers, or it might have been his father trying to involve him in the family business. Either way, it worked: he was hooked.

He attended a fine-arts high school in Kyoto where he focused on lacquerware, and after graduation remained in Kyoto as an apprentice to *makie* artisan Shunsho Hattori. After ten years studying under the master, Hayashi returned to Kainan.

Hayashi began crafting products from citrus peels around 2013. Lacquerers had experimented with using these as a base for their wares as far back as the Edo period (1603–1867), most likely to make resourceful use of the abundant local crop.

Plastic was introduced to Kishu in the 1960s. Its use as a base material, as well as that of synthetic resin and polyurethane paints in place of raw natural lacquer, soon became widespread among artisans here. Today, 90 percent of those producing wares in Kainan use such chemical coatings. Hayashi, however, prefers the far more temperamental raw lacquer, because it feels alive.

Katsuhiko Hayashi











Top: These finely dimpled sake cups owe their unique texture to citrus peel. The pulp is removed and the peel soaked in warm water for two days to draw out its oils. Then it is dried for half a year before lacquering. Thickskinned varieties work best.

Above left: Katsuhiko Hayashi at work on a piece in his Funoo studio. "I want the things I make to be used. The natural luster of lacquer improves over time, with use. And you can't enjoy the texture of a piece without actually taking it up in your hands," he says.

Above right: Small and large cups made from gourds glisten with their lacquered black sheen. As each one is a different size and depth, they don't stack neatly—but therein lies their appeal. They are as versatile as they are one of a kind.

Third row: Hayashi applies lacquer to the inside of a citrus-peel cup using a handmade brush. The inside of the cup will receive a total of ten coats, hardening the material and enhancing its thermostability. The outside is coated just three times so that the texture of the peel remains. Each application must be dried and polished before the next, so the work demands patience. The result of the painstaking process is an original cup with a brilliant luster that belies just how tough it is. Bottom: This detail of a finely rendered *makie* piece by Hayashi shows the nuanced effects he achieves with gold and silver powders. For many lacquerers, the art of *makie* becomes a natural extension of their work.





Kumiko Tanioka

Kumiko Tanioka is the first woman in Kishu to earn the nationally certified title of traditional artisan. She also represents the fifth generation of Tanioka Lacquerware, founded in 1883 by a woodturner who came to Kishu for its abundant wood and eventually added lacquer work to his trade.

The family workshop was on the second floor of her childhood home, so Tanioka grew up watching artisans come and go each day. All of her friends came from lacquerer families. She herself, however, was not interested in work that meant staying indoors most of the time.

Her view shifted in college, when a friend asked her about lacquerware. She realized she didn't know enough about the history or techniques of her hometown tradition to explain them. After getting her master's degree in economics she returned to Kainan, where she participated in a program set up to train successors in the lacquerware trade. She spent three months in the workshop of a *makie* expert and was fascinated. For the next ten years she apprenticed at various studios while holding down a teaching job at a cram school.

She earned her certificate as a traditional artisan just as the base of the local industry was floundering. "I worked hard to become a traditional artisan. With so many veterans in the field stepping down, I knew that something had to be done to preserve the craft—if only for the sake of those who had come before me," she says.

Tanioka considers herself an artisan, not an artist. She takes pride in filling orders for multiple quantities of the same item, each piece in the set as beautifully rendered as the next. Her work features on the tables of upscale restaurants in Tokyo's Akasaka district, and most of her *tsubo* pots are purchased by foreigners.







Opposite page: A Negoro-nuri pot by Tanioka Lacquerware. In this style, which is one of the foundational techniques of Kishu lacquerware, layers of vermilion are applied over base layers of black. When the top coats are rubbed away—either by long years of use or by the hand of the artisan—the contrasting beauty of both colors is revealed. The style is said to have originated at Negoro Temple in Wakayama, where monks used to make their own lacquered trays and bowls, layering the two colors. After years of use the red would wear down in places, a look that caught on as an attractive design. The effect is sometimes likened to the sky at dawn, when clouds are lit from below.

Top left: Traditional artisan Kumiko Tanioka in her hometown. "I don't want people to equate Kishu lacquerware with synthetic pieces," she declares. Top right: Softly curving lines meld in this simple form uniting round and lozenge-shaped vases. The piece looks striking in a contemporary space. Above, left and right: As the vermilion top coats are rubbed with Suruga charcoal, a superb polishing material made from the wood-oil tree, the black lacquer beneath is revealed. No two pieces are the same. Left: A makie detail by Tanioka, who found her path to lacquer work through her fascination with this art form. She is one lacquer artisan to keep an eye on.



Wood substrate

Wood is turned on a lathe to create the base for the lacquered piece. At Tanioka Lacquerware, Kishu cypress is used.



Surface smoothing

Irregularities in the wood surface are chiseled out and filled in with a mixture of raw lacquer, rice flour, and sawdust.



Primer coat

A paste made of water and fired-clay or shale powder is kneaded, then mixed with raw lacquer and applied to the surface.



Base to middle coats

The piece is painted with lacquer. After each coating it is placed in a humiditycontrolled drying chamber to harden.



Base coat polish

Suruga charcoal is used to remove brush marks from the hardened lacquer film and to polish the surface.

Why lacquerware?

To the uninitiated, lacquerware can look just like plastic. This perception typically prompts the question, "Why is it so expensive?" Even among Japanese, who see and use lacquered bowls and trays regularly, there are many who are unaware of just how time-consuming and labor-intensive the art of lacquering is.

The craft process shown above for an item of Negoro-nuri lacquerware is in fact a condensed version of all that is involved. A piece is coated, allowed to harden, and polished repeatedly. It takes a seasoned artisan to accomplish the dozens of tasks involved. The higher price reflects this.

But why all the fuss—is it really worth it? The answer lies in the stellar properties of lacquer as a coating and the beauty of its lustrous coat. Made from the sap of tall deciduous trees of the cashew family, this all-natural varnish creates a hard, durable film that repels water, heat, salt, acids, and alkalis. It can even withstand nitrohydrochloric acid, which dissolves gold. Natural lacquer also has superior antiseptic and antibacterial qualities. Lacquered items several thousand years old have been excavated intact, their sheen unblemished. Its only vulnerabilities are extremely dry conditions and the UV rays in direct sunlight.

The dewy look of lacquer is owed to its molecular pliability. Indeed, the surface has a silky, almost wet quality. Note the feel of a lacquered cup when you bring it to your lips, and compare its texture to that of plastic. Viewed under high magnification, the surface of hardened lacquer has an uneven grain structure. That "give" accounts for its plump feel and soft luster.

It seems contradictory that a material rivaling epoxy resin in terms of sheer toughness and durability should feel so soft to the touch. No other coating boasts this combination of qualities. That, essentially, is the enduring appeal of this all-natural wonder material.





Above: The raw lacquer that is essential to Kishu lacquerware. Left: The handles of these brushes used by traditional artisan Toshifumi Tanioka shine with their long years of use in lacquering.

Tajima Lacquer in Kainan refines natural sap and colors it. The shop carries lacquers harvested in Japan,

China, Vietnam, and Myanmar. By far the most lacquer used in Japan today comes from China—40 tons are imported annually. In contrast, just 800 kilograms of sap are collected domestically each year. The main component of both Japanese and Chinese lacquer is urushiol, an oily mixture of organic compounds. Vietnamese sap, by contrast, mainly contains laccol, while the main component of lacquer from Myanmar is thitsiol. The surface durability and clarity of urushiol and non-urushiol lacquers differ.

Raw lacquer is not a material that lends itself to convenience or efficient harvesting. Only 200 grams of sap can be collected from a tree that's been cultivated for 10 to 15 years. Cuts are made in the trunk by hand, and the sap is collected as it slowly seeps out. The trade-off, of course, is that once it is harvested and processed, natural lacquer yields a coating that remains durable and beautiful for thousands of years.



Polishing

The surface is polished

underneath. This is the

classic look of Negoro-

down in places to

nuri lacquerware.

reveal the black

Vermilion coat

Raw lacquer reduced 95 percent is called *roiro*. This thick, translucent coating is blended with vermilion pigment for the top layers.



Finishing

A long final polishing process yields a mirror-like sheen, bringing out the full luster of the multiple lacquer coatings.



Completion!

Made entirely of natural materials, the finished piece comes with a stand and is packed in a wooden box—a lovely gift.



Above, right, and far right: Toshifumi Tanioka, Kumiko's father, is the fourth-generation proprietor of Tanioka Lacquerware. Each day before he sets to work on a new coating, he first strains the lacquer to remove any dust or other impurities—the surface of each coating must be rendered absolutely clear.

Lacquer itself has no natural color, so Tanioka blends pigments to yield the desired hue. A number of lacquered clay and wooden objects from prehistoric Jomon times have been excavated in Japan. The basic colors used then, too, were vermilion and black.

Raw lacquer hardens through a chemical reaction between laccase, an enzyme present in the sap, and the oil urushiol, the sap's main component. At an adequate





These elegant chopsticks by Katsuhiko Hayashi showcase a variety of techniques, including Negoro-nuri and *makie*. Each pair is the result of many patient layerings of lacquer, and their varied designs speak to Hayashi's skills as an artist. Thanks to the antibacterial properties of natural lacquer, the chopsticks require only a quick rinse in water after use.

> **Opposite page:** The wall behind the head councilman's seat in Kainan City Hall is graced by a Negoro-nuri panel made by Toshifumi and Kumiko Tanioka. The work brings a bright warm accent to the understated browns and grays of the modernist chamber. Other commissioned works by the two are found at the reception desk and in the hallways of the building, which was completed in 2017.

