

niponica

Discovering  
Japan

no.

25

# にほにか



Special Feature

## Japan's Decorative Art of *Urushi*

niponica  
 にぽにか no. 25  
 contents

*niponica* is published in Japanese and six other languages (Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian and Spanish) to introduce to the world the people and culture of Japan today. The title *niponica* is derived from "Nippon," the Japanese word for Japan.

Special Feature

Japan's Decorative Art  
 of *Urushi*



Cover: Bowl with *Echizen-nuri*  
 Photo: KATSUMI AOSHIMA

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Selection of *shikki* from various regions of Japan  
 Clockwise, from top left: set of vessels for pouring and sipping toso (medicinal sake) during New Year celebrations, with *Aizu-nuri*; stacked boxes for special occasion food items, with *Wajima-nuri*; tray with *Yamanaka-nuri*; set of five lidded bowls with *Echizen-nuri*.  
 Photo: KATSUMI AOSHIMA

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Special Feature

Japan's Decorative Art of *Urushi*

*Shikki* - representative of Japan's decorative arts.  
 These decorative items of art full of Japanese charm are known as "japan" throughout the world. Full of nature's bounty they surpass the boundaries of time to encompass everyday life.



# Beauty Created From Strength and Delicacy

In Japan, *urushi*, which is typically used for household items such as tableware and furniture, has also been widely employed in the manufacture of ritualistic and military paraphernalia, architectural and artistic structures, and musical instruments.

What kinds of values and sense of aesthetics have created and fostered the many items of *Kogei* in Japan that use *urushi*?

Mr. Murose, one of Japan’s Living National Treasures, gives us some insight.

From a conversation with: Murose Kazumi

## Urushi culture in Japan

In Japan, *urushi* collected from the *urushi* tree is used as a coating material. It is applied to a variety of objects, from household items through ritualistic paraphernalia, tools and structures.

Japanese artisans and manufacturers have produced a wide range of items that take full advantage of the special characteristics of *urushi*.

The culture of *urushi*, created by the hands of various types of artisans, is expressed through a variety of techniques, and is a feast for the eyes.

For the reader:

*Urushi* - a natural resin coating processed from sap extruded from the *urushi* tree (toxicodendron vernicifluum). It is also used as an adhesive. Unlike the lacquer used for black furniture and tableware in Europe, which was traditionally obtained by dissolving the secretions of lac insects in alcohol, *urushi* is applied in multiple layers to produce a rich, glossy and deep black with a sense of transparency.

*Kogei* - a word used to describe traditional Japanese craft (or decorative art) that unifies beauty and utility.

*Shikki* - an item of *Kogei* to which multiple layers of *urushi* have been applied. In English, such items are generally known as “lacquer ware,” but it is not lacquer that is actually used to coat these objects. Therefore, in this article, the term *shikki*, which is made up of the Japanese characters for *urushi* + ware, is used.



Writing box - a box for writing implements. Multiple techniques including *maki-e* (gold/raised lacquer work) and *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlays) are used to depict the pods and leaves of bean plants on the outside, while there is a picture of a rabbit drawn on the back of the lid.

Writing box Beans and rabbit design in *maki-e* lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay 26 x 18.4 x 14.7cm

19th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)



Combs made using the *maki-e* technique.

Top - Ornamental Comb with Sumida River in *Maki-e* Lacquer 18 x 5.5cm

Bottom - Ornamental Comb with Dragonflies in *Maki-e* Lacquer 13.7 x 7.2cm

19th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)



A *shogi* (Japanese chess) board, which used to be a standard item in a wedding dowry. Made using the *maki-e* technique, it depicts the Mitsuyoko-Kikumon - the family crest of the Arisugawa-no-Miya family (an imperial family that existed from the first half of the 17th century through the early 20th century).

*Shogi* board with a bamboo grass pattern, coated in black *urushi*, in *maki-e* 36.6 x 33.7 x 21.7cm

19th century (Hikone Castle Museum. Photograph provided by the museum.)



## Kogei items made using urushi

A box for *koma* (the pieces that are lined up and moved around the board during a Japanese chess game)

19th century (Hikone Castle Museum. Photograph provided by the museum.)



A *koto* (Japanese traditional musical instrument) decorated using both *maki-e* and *raden* techniques. An outstanding masterpiece of Japanese *urushi* art.

*Koto* with *maki-e* 152.7 x 26 cm

12th century (Kasugataisha Shrine. Photograph provided by the shrine.)



## Black that gives a feeling of light Beauty with innate contradictions

*Urushi* is a tree sap extracted from the Japanese lacquer tree (toxicodendron vernicifluum). *Urushi* is a natural coating and adhesive with a long history of use in Japan, stretching back more than 7,000 years.

The culture of *urushi* lacquering has continued since ancient times, when it was already regarded as displaying a profound sense of beauty and artistic sensibility. Later, the Nara period (8th century) heralded a new phase. *Maki-e* (*urushi* coating that uses gold or silver filings for decoration) was born - a technique that represents the Japanese art of *urushi*. In the Heian period (8th-12th centuries) *maki-e* was developed primarily in Kyoto, which was the capital at the time; and in the Kamakura period (12th-14th centuries) it established its fundamental technique. Many famous pieces were also created from the Muromachi period (14th-16th centuries) onwards, and in the Edo period (17th-19th centuries) *maki-e* reached its technical peak.

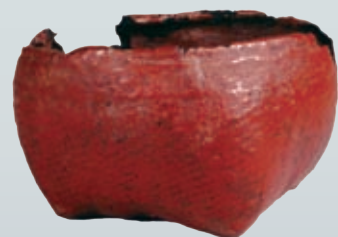
In the late 16th century Portuguese and Spanish missionaries came to Japan and took Japanese *maki-e* back to their home countries. When people saw *shikki* they were amazed at its mysterious blackness and the glow of the gold, quite unlike any paint to be found in Europe. In the 18th century it became known as "japan" and was much admired. Despite the unending depth of blackness, there was a sense of translucence in places. *Urushi*, which combined these two seemingly contradictory elements, fascinated people throughout Europe. Gradually a movement arose to imitate the *shikki* from Japan using a substitute paint; this came to be known as "japanning."

In fact, *urushi* can only be harvested in the monsoon climatic zone. *Shikki* is made in a number of countries outside Japan from East Asia to Southeast Asia, but *shikki* from Japan boasts an unparalleled beauty. The secret lies in the characteristics of the *urushi* produced in Japan, which solidifies to a hard finish with a beautiful gloss, and in the attention to detail that the Japanese people pay to their craftsmanship. *Urushi*, whose properties differ subtly from season to season, is carefully harvested and selected for use, so that the most suitable *urushi* is used for each process or expressive technique. Durable and beautiful *shikki* is made using these materials and techniques.

Decorative *urushi* techniques gradually matured up until the Edo period, but then the Meiji period (19th-20th centuries) saw the winds of fortune suddenly change. With the collapse of the shogunate feudal system, artisans lost their patrons and in addition, the opening up of Japan to the West saw an influx of western values that made a distinction between "fine art" and "decorative art." In Japan, "*Kogei*" (Japanese craft), including *shikki*, had always been "fine art" of itself at the same time; however, at this juncture, *Kogei* became a subordinate concept of "fine art."



Top - "Maki-e Cosmetic Box with Plum Blossoms Design" - a large box containing a set of cosmetic implements; the oldest relic of its type from around the 13th century (Mishima Taisha Shrine. Photograph provided by the shrine.)  
Bottom - Various exquisite cosmetic implements contained in the "Maki-e Cosmetic Box with Plum Blossoms Design"



*Rantai Shikki* - a basket woven of thinly cut bamboo and coated with *urushi* (Korekawa Archaeological Institution Photograph provided by the institution.)



Writing box with popular design of the time (created using the *maki-e* technique). A famous 12th century piece "Tebako. Design of wheels half-submerged in stream in *maki-e* lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay," representative of *urushi Kogei* of the Heian period (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)



## *Shikki* has colored Japan, making everything beautiful

Top and right - The Konjikido Golden Hall at Chuson-ji Temple. A shining building that today conveys the golden culture of Hiraizumi, which bloomed during the time of Oshu Fujiwara. Japan's first "National Treasure" which brought together the techniques of the time, such as *raden* (mother of pearl in-lays) work. (Chuson-ji Temple. Photograph provided by the temple.)

Bottom - Wedding furniture for Princess Chiyo, the eldest daughter of the third shogun, Tokugawa Iemitsu. The collection contains a total 27 exquisite items that use techniques such as *maki-e*. "Hatsune Trousseau" from around the 17th century (Tokugawa Art Museum. Photograph provided by © The Tokugawa Art Museum Image Archives / DNPartcom.)





Yet even after this, *urushi Kogei* continued to survive. The skills exhibited by the *urushi* artisans who had served the shogunate and the imperial household were protected by “Tokyo National University of Fine Arts” (currently known as “Tokyo University of the Arts”), which was Japan’s first national institution for the training of artists; here the skills continue to be refined and are, even now, passed down to us from the highest pinnacle.

Meanwhile craftsmen from local *shikki* production areas (areas that were formed as a result of industry promoted by daimyo lords from each of the feudal domain in the Edo period) struggled with the change in senses of values and the wave of mechanization but continued to create products that colored lives, so that even today *shikki* continues to remain a part of Japanese lifestyle.

Coating everything in beauty from normal, everyday items to the finest wares, *urushi* culture continues to live on, together with its wares and spirit; and in recent years, there has been a reappraisal of “*Kogei*” in the meaning that also refers “fine art.”

The Japanese has producing *shikki* throughout the ages and imbued with their spirit. It has been repaired with *urushi* if broke and has continued to be used with care for generations. It is amazing how *shikki* thousands of years old dug up from deep under the ground retains its vivid color and shine.

*Urushi* has both acid and alkali-resistant properties, making *shikki* alone remain intact in Japan’s acidic soil where most things go rotten.

In spite of such strength, *shikki* degrades when exposed to ultraviolet rays and will return to nature’s soil over the course of several hundred years. As the problem of micro-plastics becomes apparent these days, in terms of ecological initiatives *shikki* has the notable quality of being an environmentally-friendly material.

The culture of *urushi* has been handed down using raw materials from Japan and through the spirit unique to the Japanese people. It is something unique that cannot be imitated by countries elsewhere and is no doubt something that will also be worth carefully protecting and passing on to the future.

Murose Kazumi

In 1976 he completed a major in *urushi* art from the Graduate School of Fine Arts at Tokyo University of the Arts. As well as presenting works both in Japan and overseas, Murose has also been involved in the conservation of *urushi* art and cultural properties. In 1991 he opened the Mejiro Institute of *Urushi* Research and Restoration. In 2008 Murose was accredited as the holder of Important Intangible Cultural Property ( “Living National Treasure” ) of “*maki-e*” In the same year he received the Purple Ribbon Medal of Honor. His books include “*Urushi no bunka*” (published by Kadokawa; Japanese only) and “*Maki-e Urushi*: Murose Kazumi sakuhinshu” (published by Shinchosha; Japanese and English)



## Typical decorative techniques

The long history of *shikki* and many areas famous for producing it gave rise to a wide variety of techniques. *Shikki* presents us with a gorgeous range of looks achieved through the addition of decorative designs after the undercoat and top coats have been applied.

Right - Finest quality ink-stone case. The picturesque design is expressed using *maki-e*. “Writing box lacquered with metal powder, the picture on top: ivy on the brushwood-fence” c. 17th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)

Bottom left - Equestrian equipment /saddle. A sparkling, elegant design with flowers cut out of shells on a surface coated with black *urushi*. “Saddle with bush clover motif in mother-of-pearl inlay” c.17th century (Tokyo National Museum. Photograph provided by TNM Image Archives.)

Bottom right - Tool box with Phoenix pattern drawn using the *chinkin* technique. A work from the early period of *chinkin* in Japan. “Small Box with Gold Inlay Design Depicting Phoenix” c.16th century (Shirayama Hime Jinja Shrine. Photograph provided by the shrine.)

## Maki-e

This is a decorative technique in which a thin brush (known as a *maki-e-fude*) is used to draw a pattern in *urushi*; then, before the *urushi* is hardened, metallic filings such as gold or silver, is sprinkled on top to bring out the design. This metallic embellishment, which beautifully brings into relief the gold and silver patterns, is a typical technique used in the *urushi Kogei* in Japan.



Enlarged

Some metallic filings applied to the tip of a leaf gives the impression of the leaf just beginning to change color.

## Raden (Mother-of-Pearl)

This is a decorative technique whereby the shiny, pearl-like layer from the inside of a shell, like the “great green turban” (Turbo Marmoratus), is thinly sliced, cut to shape and polished, and inlaid into or pasted onto the surface of the *shikki*. Characteristically, this creates a glittering, rainbow-hued pattern that is also used together with *maki-e*.



Enlarged



## Chinkin (Gold Inlay)

This is a decorative technique whereby a design is engraved with a blade into an *urushi*-coated surface and fresh *urushi* is rubbed into the grooves. Then, the excess *urushi* is wiped off the non-engraved parts and powdered gold leaf is pressed into the grooves. This technique enables fine, delicate patterns to be drawn, as the gold powder, etc., remains along the etched lines and in the dots.



Enlarged





# Various Shikki From Different Regions

Shikki spread initially from Kyoto to Edo and then nationwide.

Here, we present examples of *shikki* crafted in various regions of Japan, each with its own distinctive characteristics in terms of appearance and technique.

Fukui

福井

## Echizen shikki

Extremely durable *shikki* – great for practical use. The *urushi* is applied neatly and quickly, giving a characteristic elegance with a deep, unique luster.  
(Photograph: Echizen Lacquerware Cooperative)



沖縄

Okinawa

## Ryukyu Shikki

Notable for the technique known as *nuri-tate* which mainly uses glossy red or black *urushi* for a simple coated finish. This *shikki* also features patterns typical of the tropical regions.  
(Photograph: Kakuman Shikki)



Ishikawa

石川

This region boasts three areas that produce *shikki*: Yamanaka – notable for its wood base ; Wajima – known for the application technique; and Kanazawa – famous for its *maki-e* technique.

### 1 Wajima-nuri

In making the base, *urushi* is used to glue pieces of cloth onto fragile parts and the *urushi* is mixed with Wajima *ji-no-ko* (powdered diatomaceous earth containing vitreous microfossils and minerals) to create a robust form of *shikki*.  
(Photograph: Wajimanuri no Tsuda)



### 2 Kanazawa Shikki

Characterized by a gorgeous, glittering beauty that is achieved using an advanced *maki-e* technique. This is known as Kaga *maki-e* because this area was formerly called "Kaga".  
(Photograph: Kanazawa Shikki Industrial Cooperative)



### 3 Yamanaka Shikki

Distinguished by its beautiful base wood grain and use of a technique known as *kashoku-biki* (decorative woodturning) which gives a textured design to the surface of the wooden base.  
(Photograph: Yamanaka Lacquerware Cooperative Association)



Gifu

岐阜

## Hida-Shunkei

Characterized by a simple, yet shiny, amber tone that brings out the beauty of the wood grain.  
(Photograph: Tozawa Shikki)



新潟

Niigata

## Niigata Shikki

Famous for its unique techniques such as *take-nuri*, in which rust is used to exquisitely reproduce the lines and knots found in bamboo.  
(Photograph: Niigata Sikki CO., LTD)



Iwate

岩手

## Joboji-nuri

The town of Joboji-machi is also well known for producing *urushi*, so this application technique is characterized by its minimalist decoration, which allows the inherent beauty of the *urushi* to stand out.  
(Photograph: Urushi Industry Division , Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture)



Fukushima

福島

## Aizu-nuri

Famous for its depictions of Aizu-e (designs from the Aizu area) which feature plum, bamboo, and pine trees, or spinning wheels – regarded as symbols of good luck in Japan – and the *hamaya*, a ceremonial arrow used to drive away evil spirits. *Aizu-nuri* also uses a wealth of other techniques.  
(Photograph: Fukunishi Sohbei Shoten)



Kyoto

京都

## Kyo Shikki

Handed down in its original form from the Heian period (around the 8th century), this *shikki* became popular with the spread of the tea ceremony and is known for its delicacy and the inner beauty. It is characterized by its refined and elegant design.  
(Photograph: Kyoto Shikki Cooperative)



Wakayama

和歌山

## Kishu Shikki

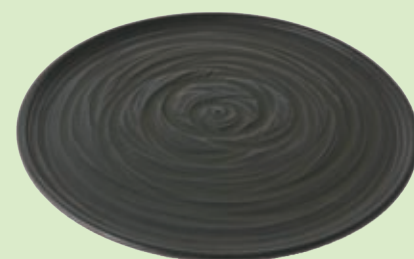
Famous for a technique known as *Negoro-nuri* wherein a red *urushi* is applied over a base layer of black *urushi* and then the coated surface is gently ground (using charcoal or similar as an abrasive) so that small glimpses of the black base-coat can just be seen in places.  
(Photograph: Kishu Lacquerware Cooperative)

香川

Kagawa

## Kagawa Shikki

Famous for its characteristic technique known as *Zokoku-nuri* in which the *urushi* is engraved with a small chisel to produce a lined pattern that creates unique shadows.  
(Photograph: ICHIWAOU-KOUGEI CO., LTD)





# Japanese handicrafts

## - Craftsmen who create *shikki* -

Photographs: Urushi Industry Division, Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture, Kanai Gen

### *Shikki* - specialized production stages

*Shikki* go through multiple processes to become finished products: First, the *urushi* that will form coating is produced; then, the base for the object is created; and, finally, the base is coated with *urushi*. Most *shikki* is produced by means of a combination of individual specific processes carried out by artisans who are experts in one or other of those processes. Often, specialist artisans work together within a production area to complete a *shikki* item.

This article introduces the specialized handicrafts that come together to produce *shikki* and the regions of Japan that are best known for the respective processes.



Top: *Urushi* Trees being scraped for *urushi*. Just under 3% of the *urushi* used in Japan is harvested domestically with around 70% of that being Joboji *urushi* from Ninohe City in Iwate Prefecture.

Right: The *urushi-kaki* craftsmen collect the *urushi* as soon as the cut is made because *urushi* has property of becoming hard when exposed to the air.

## *Urushi-kaki* (*urushi*-scraping)

### Detailed work produces fine *urushi*

Ninohe City in Iwate Prefecture is well known as an area that produces Japanese *urushi*. It is also home to Japan's largest community of *urushi-kaki* craftsmen.

*Urushi-kaki* craftsmen collect *urushi* to serve as coating material for *shikki*. *Urushi-kaki* is the process of horizontally slashing the bark of an *urushi* tree with an *urushi*-scraping plane and then using a scrape to collect the sap which accumulates through the tree's efforts to heal the wounds. A single craftsman watches over as many as 400 trees a year and collects *urushi* from them.

*Urushi-kaki* is carried out from June through late October. In each season, the craftsmen identify and collect *urushi* with subtly different properties. This is because *urushi* dries differently and differs in content depending on when it is harvested. For example, *urushi* collected in June and July is moist but dries rapidly, making it suitable for lustering. The peak time of year for collecting *urushi* is August, when *urushi* of the highest quality with the maximum content of *Urushiol* (the main component of *urushi*), can be harvested as the summer climate makes *urushi* less moist. *Urushi* is collected about once every five days, depending on climatic and vegetative conditions, and on how well the tree appears to have recovered. In October, *urushi-kaki* ends with the scraping out of any remaining



sap in the trees.

That is the basic method for collecting *urushi*, but it only enables collection of about 200 g per year from a single tree. In order to harvest a larger quantity and higher quality of *urushi*, the craftsman has to ascertain the state of a tree and decide where and how far apart to place the horizontal cuts.

After the harvested *urushi* is stirred to homogenize its ingredients, it goes through a process to evaporate out the moisture in order for it to become refined *urushi*. Then, it is delivered to *urushi* wholesalers who pass it on to the craftsmen who will apply the *urushi* as coating.



From right: sickle; scraper; plane; *takappo* (cask for storing harvested *urushi*) These are specialized tools for use in *urushi-kaki*. Only a few craftsmen in Japan make them.

### Joboji, Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture

*Urushi* production area. *Urushi* from Joboji is essential for repairing national treasures and important cultural properties. It has even been used in the restoration of such notable edifices as Nikko Toshogu Shrine and Kinkaku-ji Temple.







1. *Ara-biki*
2. *Naka-biki*
3. *Shiage*
4. From block to finished article.



## Kiji-zukuri (wood base-making)

A preoccupation with paying careful attention to the base creates stronger *shikki*.

*Kiji-zukuri* is work of creating a *shikki* base out of wood. Craftsmen called "*kiji-shi*" (wood carver) shape each base to order.

*Kiji-zukuri* uses rough-cut "blocks" of wood that have been dried over periods ranging from several months to a number of years. A block is set in a lathe to be ground into a rough, initial shape in a process called *ara-biki*. In the *ara-biki* stage, the block is shaved down to a thickness that is a little greater than the intended size of the finished product to allow for later shrinkage of the wood due to further evaporation of any residual moisture. Soon after it has been shaved down, the object is immediately dried to reduce the moisture content. This is a sequence of processes that must be carried out repeatedly to prevent the wood changing. Even after wood has been cut, it stays alive and breathes. So, this drying sequence is critical for preventing the *kiji* (wood base), which is processed in to thin

slabs, becoming distorted or deformed due to moisture absorbed from the atmosphere.

The next step is an intermediate process, called *naka-biki*, in which the rough-cut *kiji* is further shaved with a plane to approximate the shape of the finished article. The wood base is not all planed at once; instead the *kiji-shi* waits for the wood to dry and planes the block a little at a time, occasionally checking with a template to determine how far it has been shaved. Once *kiji* has taken shape, the *kiji-shi* substitutes a blade for the plane, to carry out the finishing process known as *shiage*. Delicately shaving *kiji* with the blade makes the surface smooth in no time.

*Kiji-shi* create *kiji* with no irregularities in size or thickness. Moreover, the wood is strong, having been properly dried several times. *Kiji-shi* are well aware that it is this *kiji-zukuri* that determines the luster of the *urushi* to be applied later, and the finish.

Left: *Kiji* have been thoroughly dried.  
Right: The tools affect the results, so *kiji-shi* personally make all of their tools.



**Kiji-shi  
Yamada Mako**

Ms. Yamada is the only female *kiji-shi* working as a traditional craftswoman for Yamanaka *shikki* (Ishikawa Prefecture), which is known as "Yamanaka for *kiji*." In recent years, an increase in the number of women working in the *shikki* industry has been observed.



1. Applying *urushi* to fragile parts. This photograph shows *kiji-katame* (wood base hardening), a process for reinforcing joints and easily chipped parts with *urushi*.



2. Pasting pieces of cloth steeped in *urushi* on *kiji*. The photograph shows *nuno-kise* (covering wood base with cloth), a process for reinforcing fragile parts such as rims.



3. Applying a base coat of *urushi* mixed with *ji-no-ko* (ground earth) made of diatomaceous earth from nearby Mount Komine to *kiji* in order to smooth over the gaps between the edges of the cloth.



4. Leaving the base layer of *urushi* to dry and then polishing it with a grindstone. *Nushi* use grindstones of different roughness, according to the base coat of *urushi*. The process of rubbing on the base coat and polishing is repeated three times, with three granularity levels of powder, from coarse through fine to even finer.



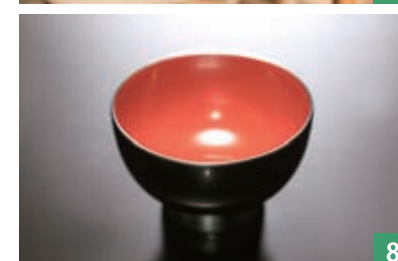
5. Before application, wrapping the *urushi* in Japanese paper and straining it to achieve a smooth lacquer.



6. Applying *urushi*, and monitoring its state.



7. As the *urushi* hardens while absorbing moisture, it is left to dry in a space where humidity and temperature are controlled.



8. Repeating the drying and coating processes are finally applying the finish coat in a special dirt-and-dust-proof room to complete the *shikki*.



Left: An *urushi-hake* (lacquering brush) has bristles of human hair from which the oil has been extracted.  
Right: Diatomaceous earth from Mount Komine is baked and ground into powder to be used as *ji-no-ko* (ground earth) for *Wajima-nuri*.



## Urushi-nuri (lacquering)

Deep knowledge about *urushi* gives *shikki* a beautiful luster.

*Urushi-nuri* - the work of coating *shikki* - is carried out by craftsmen called *nushi* (lacquerer). The nature of the coating process varies by production area. In the case of *Wajima-nuri*, there are as many as 20 steps in the coating process alone.

*Wajima-nuri* ware is known for being extremely robust. The secret lies in the various reinforcing techniques used. *Wajima-nuri* makes *shikki* tougher by reinforcing joints and easily chipped parts.

*Wajima-nuri shikki* articles are coated with filtered top-quality *urushi* and are finished using several kinds of brushes. Some go to market as they are; others are decorated.



**Nushi  
Tsuda Tetsuji** (Wajimanuri no Tsuda)

Traditional *Wajima-nuri* craftsman. Tsuda and his son Shinichiro Tsuda, also a traditional *Wajima-nuri* craftsman, are preserving and passing on traditional techniques.



# The Japanese Spirit Has Been Inherited

## Urushi Restorers

*Shikki* have been used in repaired form since olden times. Here we introduce two specialists in the craft of restoring objects with *urushi*.



Right: *Maki-e* from Kodai-ji temple under restoration and flakey *urushi* coating on an object being repaired in the workshop. Using a spatula, an *urushi* base is applied to the part that is flaking and then any irregularities are smoothed out.

### Connections created by *urushi* as seen in the restoration of everyday items

*Shikki* are protected by a coating of *urushi*, which allows us to use them over generations by handling them with care and restoring them.

Kawai Natsumi is fascinated by the robust properties of *urushi*, and works as a professional restorer - mainly on *urushi* items. Kawai started down this path because she questioned the worth of producing something that generates a lot of waste. She feels that, as opposed to creating *shikki*, restoring them is worthwhile because it is work aimed at giving the items a new lease on life.

Kawai says: “*Shikki* are long-cherished objects, so I repair them with a view to their being useful for decades to come.” Often, clients who come to her for repair services bring in inherited items that are 30-100, or even more than 150 years old - which means that those clients are personally attached to them. She discusses the repair plan with the clients and sometimes they decide to simply retain the unique texture of the aged object. She restores objects so that clients can keep on using them.

“When you’ve been engaged in restoration over many years, you learn how the ‘laws of damage’ work. I try to get ahead of things and work on spots where damage might be expected to occur.” Conditions vary constantly as both the wood and the *urushi* breathe, but doing restoration work develops restorers’ observation skills and improves their techniques. *Urushi* restoration is a series of discoveries, she notes, and it has never been a hardship. While it may be difficult to restore objects made of cheap low-quality materials, Kawai feels a sense of reward upon seeing the client’s expression of delight.

“Prolonging your time with something by having it fixed gives you a sense of security and seems to serve as a kind of therapy. I feel that I have acquired a technique of looking at things positively - even breakages.”

Restorations tend to bring about attitudinal changes in both restorers and those who use the restored objects. These changes are also passed to the next generation who will use *shikki*.



Restoration being carried out using *urushi*  
The most appropriate method of repair is selected depending on the condition of the object.



A hanging scroll box repaired using the *ware-naoshi* method in which *urushi* is employed to stick the broken parts back together. *Urushi* is also used as a finish coating after the parts are adhered.

Kawai Natsumi  
Professional restorer/*urushi* artisan  
Kawai works in the three locations of Kyoto, Tokyo and Tottori, as a professional restorer, primarily using *urushi* and *kintsugi* (*urushi* mixed with gold and silver). She has restored more than 800 articles, ranging from everyday items to antiques.



### Restoration of Cultural Property - Handing On the Cultural and Technical Baton to the Next Generation

Restoration of cultural properties differs from that for everyday items. A major point of difference is that one does not “over-restore” the item, or “touch it too much.”

“For everyday items, you restore and re-coat depending on how bad the damage is but, in restoring a cultural property, you need to preserve its current condition, which includes leaving the damage itself,” says Matsumoto Tatsuya, an *urushi* artist who has been restoring cultural property for 25 years. That’s because the damage is evidence of the passage of time. Matsumoto looks at how much the *urushi* has degraded and carries out only the degree of restoration work that he considers necessary “at present” - otherwise, he leaves the work to the next generation of restorers.

If a property has sustained more severe damage due to a natural disaster such as an earthquake, then a chemical analysis team is brought in to enable the restoration work to be conducted based on more detailed data. In such a case, the most important thing is mutual understanding among people from different fields.

“Of course technique and know-how are required in restoration work, but we can also learn a variety of information from damaged sections to be recorded for posterity; and, it is important to decide whether or not appropriate restoration is carried out.”

It is necessary to clarify the background to the work’s creation and the context in which the pattern was drawn, and to use your imagination, and then to select the best restoration technique at that point. Consequently, it takes several decades to develop highly skilled human resources. Often, the necessary skills are acquired through experience in on-site restorations. “It takes a lot of skill to handle *urushi* so we urgently need to set up training establishments for developing human resources - as we must pass on this culture,” Matsumoto says passionately. At present the restoration of cultural property is carried out in individual facilities and workshops, which means that the number of restorations available per year is limited. To protect the precious culture of *urushi*, Matsumoto wishes it to be increased, even by one.

Decorative artwork of *urushi* encompasses the culture and techniques of the past. Matsumoto is working to restore cultural property so that they can be handed down from the past to the present and on to the future.



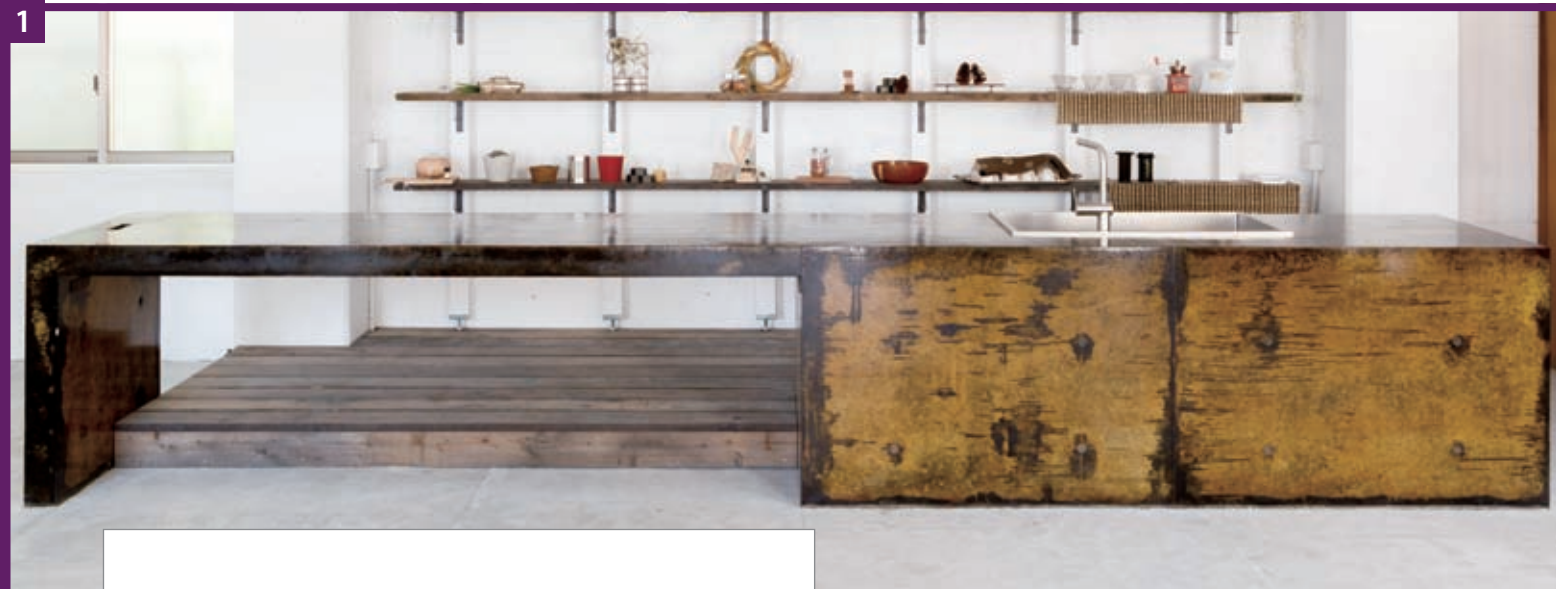
Carefully scrutinizing the state of the damage makes the base structure visible. Restoring cultural properties offers a unique opportunity to observe the sophisticated techniques used by our predecessors - techniques that usually coated with *urushi*.

Matsumoto Tatsuya  
*Urushi* artist  
A full member of the Japan Kogei Association, Matsumoto works at restoring *urushi* cultural properties. He is also involved in the Rescue Programme for Cultural Properties.



Photograph: Kanai Gen





## Tradition and innovation New forms of the decorative art of *urushi*

The world of *urushi* continues to experience expanding its potential as activity moves beyond traditional materials, products, and even applications. See new forms of *urushi* art created through fusion with the latest technology and other fields.

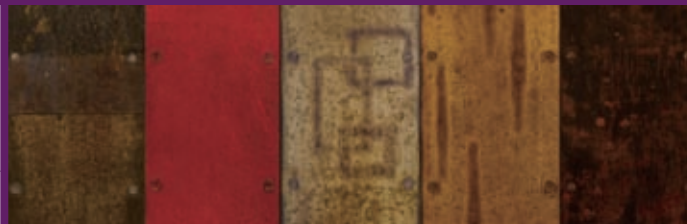
### 1 *Urushi* + incombustible materials

New technology has been developed for applying *urushi* to the surfaces of incombustible materials such as concrete. The company developed this technology independently to allow the application of *urushi* to surfaces other than those of wood and paper and to successfully impart natural warmth and visual variety to, normally inorganic, cold incombustible materials. The *urushi* coating also has excellent durability, waterproofness and antibiotic properties, so it is suitable for use in restaurants decoration. This technology produces an artistic building material that not only expands the application potential of *urushi*, but also opens new windows of opportunity in construction. (Cooperation: Heisei Corporation)

▲ An island kitchen unit made of concrete coated with *urushi*.



▲ *Urushi* can be directly applied to the surfaces or to incombustible panels.



▲ Coated surfaces have an organic texture.

### 2 *Urushi* + limestone

Smartphone cases individually hand-painted by *shikki* artisans from the Echizen area (Fukui Prefecture). The body of the case uses a new limestone-based material called "LIMEX." LIMEX is environment-friendly in that it can be processed into a paper substitute with minimal consumption of water or timber and into a plastic substitute with fewer petroleum-derived materials. Currently, development of a tableware application is underway. (Cooperation: "Traditional Crafts' Future Project", Keio University Graduate School of Media Design)



Patterns on the surfaces of the cases are inspired by local culinary such as soba noodles and traditional craft products such as eyeglasses of Sabae City, Fukui Prefecture (home of Echizen *shikki*) and the neighboring Echizen area.



### 3 *Urushi* + 3D printers

*Shikki* produced by painting silicon onto a 3D printed mold, coating the resultant silicon mold with *urushi*, and then peeling off the *urushi*. This innovative artistic technique of *urushi* allows us to enjoy the luster and intrinsic beauty of *urushi*. New, never before seen *urushi* art. Using the latest technology, *shikki* need not be limited by constraints such as shapes and thickness and have extremely thin, free-form 3D surfaces. (Cooperation: Kakuda Yota; Photograph: Yuu Kawakami, "SHIZUKU")

\* A 3D printer is a machine that builds up layers of a material such as resin based on design data to make a three-dimensional object.



### 4 *Urushi* + outdoor goods

*Urushi* mugs with leather carry-strings at the bottom, designed to be hung from the waist or on a rucksack for easy transport. Taking advantage of the *shikki* characteristics of excellent robustness, waterproofness, and antibiotic properties as well as its ultra-lightweight, these mugs are ideal for use in outdoors situations, beyond conventional applications. Being stackable, they help to save space when packing for camping trips. Artisans of *Aizu-nuri* (Fukushima Prefecture) produce each item by hand. (Cooperation: Sekibikodo Co., Ltd., "NODATE mug")

### 5 *Urushi* + *washi*

Slippers, book covers, bags etc. made of *washi* (Japanese traditional paper) printed with refined *urushi* patterns. By applying a special process to strong *washi* independently developed, by the company, *urushi* printing technology that was formerly applicable only to deerskin can also be applied to *washi* – enabling reproduction of beautiful, refined patterns. There is a wide variety of *urushi* patterns ranging from classic Japanese to contemporary designer styles. Skilled craftsmen print each sheet by hand. (Cooperation: Onao Co., Ltd., "SIWA x URUSHI")





## Incorporating *urushi-nuri* into everyday life

Many *shikki* that look modern and have up-to-date functions have been created.

Why not incorporate decorative items of *urushi* art into your contemporary everyday lifestyle ?



### Kanazawa decorative paulownia wood art Handy tray

Tray with a hollowed-out section to neatly nestle cookies, Japanese sweets, vases small accessories, etc. Perfect for everyday use with a rustic texture and simple structure that goes with any interior decor.

(Iwamoto Kiyoshi Shouten: "Chokotto Tray" made using the *Fuki-urushi* technique)



Echizen *shikki*

### *Urushi* bowl that you will want to use every day

Fine particle *urushi* is applied to make this bowl extra durable. It may look like a regular bowl but it is extra resistant to breaking and scratching.  
(j cocomo Co., Ltd. : "Fudan" Fuku-wan)



Kawatsura *shikki* etc.

### Easy-scoop dishware

Warping and straightening of the inside of the cup makes it easier to scoop out food without spilling. Infants to adults - anyone can use it. Dishware that helps you "eat by yourself" - handcrafted by artisans from around Japan.  
(aeru company)



### Chopstick rests in a changeable shape

A set of five chopstick rests that link together to form a "ring." The individual rests are fan-shaped and will firmly support your chopsticks.  
(WAJIMA KIRIMOTO: Chopstick Rests "Ring" )



## Modern Designs

Kagawa *shikki*

### Colorful spoons and forks

Colorful *urushi* spoons and forks made of light wood that is perfect for everyday use. The *urushi* coating makes the tips of the cutlery smooth to the touch. They feel good on the tongue, so you can use them without any discomfort.  
(tao.Co., Ltd.)



Aizu *nuri*

### Easy-grip *urushi* bowl

Bowls with a universal design that have a groove cut into the base where you can place your finger, making them safe to carry even if you have a weak grip. As the bowl is made using *urushi*, it does not get hot to the touch.  
(Rakuzen LLC : Rakuzen Bowl)



## Modern Functions



# Zoni

Traditional Japanese cuisine  
with a wide range of regional variants

Photos: Shutterstock.com ,Yoshizawa Naho/Aflo

*Zoni* is a soup made with such ingredients as *mochi* (rice dumplings), carrots, and white radishes. This traditional Japanese dish is mainly served at New Year.

It is said to have originated as a dish made from offerings to the Shinto deities and Buddhas on New Year's Eve, which were then cooked and eaten after sunrise on New Year's Day. In the Edo period (17th-19th centuries), *zoni* became popular among the common people and its role changed to that of a lucky dish used when praying for a safe year.

*Zoni* is customarily eaten in every part of Japan except Okinawa. However, there is wide variation by region in the soup, shape of *mochi*, and ingredients used.

In eastern Japan, square *mochi* are popular, whereas in Kyoto, which is believed to be the birthplace of *zoni*, and other western Japan regions influenced by Kyoto, round *mochi* are preferred because the round shape is said to bring good fortune. Cooking methods differ, too; square *mochi* are usually roasted while round ones are normally

boiled before being added to the soup.

The most popular recipe is clear soup called *sumashi* which uses stock made from *katsuobushi* (bonito flakes), kelp, etc. as a base with soy sauce and salt for seasoning. Next is *awase miso* soup, in which several types of *miso* (fermented soy beans) are used to add flavor. Then comes *shiro miso* soup that uses white *miso*. Besides *mochi*, added ingredients include spinach and carrots, as well as yuzu and parsley for aroma. However, these also vary by region.

These *zoni* variants, each strongly reflecting the character of the local area, are usually served in *shikki*, which are lined up on the table and likewise display distinctive regional characteristics. *Zoni* with colorful ingredients making their charming appearances in *shikki* conveys pleasant warmth to both hand and palate.

*Zoni* has a variety of appearances, depending on the region. This food culture seems to have something in common with the culture of *shikki*.



In most areas, including Tokyo, *zoni* with *sumashi* soup (left) is popular. In the Kansai region, including Kyoto, *zoni* with a white *miso* soup (right) is preferred.

Next page: Top - *Zoni* cooked with *sumashi* soup and topped with square *mochi*  
Bottom - *Zoni* cooked with white *miso* soup and topped with round *mochi*







Hirosaki is a town located in the western part of Aomori Prefecture. It is the northernmost castle town in the Tsugaru region on the main island of Japan which has prospered as the nucleus of politics, economics and culture.

Hirosaki City is famous throughout Japan for the Hirosaki *Neputa* Festival, which, in August each year, attracts large numbers of domestic and foreign tourists. The Hirosaki *Neputa* is a festival with a long history that was designated in 1980 as an important intangible folk culture asset of Japan. It is a real spectacle with fan-shaped lantern floats, decorated with different pictures on the front and back, being paraded to an accompaniment of spirited shouting through the town, creating a blaze of light. The *Kodomo Neputa* also adds excitement to the festival. Children hold *Kingyo Neputa* (goldfish-shaped lanterns) in their hands and walk with small lantern floats. It looks very cute and brings smiles to onlookers' faces.

Another feature of Hirosaki is that it is the production area for *Tsugaru-nuri*. *Tsugaru-nuri* displays unique patterns achieved through repeated application and polishing of *urushi*. Among the many different types of Japanese *shikki*, it is famed for the amount of hard work entailed in its production – one item sometimes taking around six months to complete. *Kara-nuri*, a representative type of *Tsugaru-nuri*, shows beautiful fault lines of colored *urushi* and presents a sense of depth created by the multiple layers of *urushi* coating. The city has facilities that are worth a visit, such as the Hirosaki Sightseeing Information Center where you can see *Tsugaru-nuri*, and Tsugaruhan Neputa Village for hands-on experiences.



Set of *Tsugaru-nuri* stacked boxes. *Tsugaru-nuri* is characterized by unique patterns, including the *kara-nuri* shown in the photograph.



A tea chest containing a full set for making green tea, with the *Nanako-nuri* technique applied. One of the techniques used in *Tsugaru-nuri* is *Nanako-nuri* in which *shikki* are sprinkled with rapeseed, coated in colored *urushi* and then polished.

*Nishiki-nuri* tray – a variation of *Nanako-nuri* in which a pattern is added to the base.

A Castle Town in  
the Tsugaru Region with  
a History of Some 400 Years

# Hirosaki

Cooperation: Hirosaki City Office, Tsugaruhan Neputa Village  
Photographs: Hirosaki Tourism and Convention Bureau, Kanai Gen,  
Sakuragaoka Nursery School, Otsuka Tomonori, Higashida Yuji / Aflo  
and amanaimages







Hirosaki Castle's keep, the only surviving keep (watchtower built in the center of a castle) in the Tohoku region, located in northeast of Japan's main island.

Mention of Hirosaki normally brings to mind a snowy, northern district, but there are many things to see at any time of year. In particular, Hirosaki Castle conveys the special beauty of each of the seasons.

Hirosaki Castle, built in the Edo period (17th century), is currently open to the public as Hirosaki Park. Some enduring castle structures, including the keep and the turret, have been designated as important national cultural assets of Japan, while the ruins have been designated as a national historic site. Bustling crowds can be seen here every year for the Hirosaki Cherry Blossom Festival, which features 2,600 cherry trees in full bloom, leading to it being selected as a famous place for cherry blossoms. In the autumn, the area is colored with red and yellow leaves

and, in winter, you can see Hirosaki Castle illuminated and decked in snow.

Hirosaki promotes itself as a “town symbolized by a castle, cherry blossoms and apples.” In some places, you can see scenery typical of an apple-growing locality. A cool drive through the orchards along the Apple Road opens up a vista that you are sure to enjoy, including the sight of Mount Iwaki in the distance. The mountain, with a road comprising as many as 69 bends, and the apple trees really work together to present a wonderful view that you will not see anywhere else. If you want to taste apples, visit the Iwakisan-kanko-ringo Orchards where you can pick and eat the fruit fresh from the tree.



Hirosaki Park with Hirosaki Castle changes appearance beautifully with each season for example, the red and yellow leaves in autumn.



Apple orchards spread out at the foot of Mt. Iwaki which can be seen from Hirosaki Castle.



Top: The former Hirosaki City Library. Until around 1931 it was used as the municipal library. Currently, it is used to display old folk documents, etc.  
Right: Western-style Villa in Fujita Memorial Garden owned by Fujita Kenichi, a Hirosaki businessman. Here, in the Western Villa, surrounded by an Edo-style Japanese garden, you can sample and compare the various types of apple pie.



Besides Hirosaki Castle, the city also boasts a number of Shinto shrines, Buddhist temples, and old streets that tell of its traditional past, as well as western style architecture from the Meiji period through the Taisho period (late 17th century-early 20th century). It really is a treasure trove of cultural properties and buildings. Among them are places like the Western-style Villa in the Fujita Memorial Garden where you can enjoy a meal. The café in the building offers several kinds of apple pie, a specialty of Hirosaki, and a beautiful view of the garden.

After a light tea, you might wish to experience some local cuisine from the Tsugaru region. Specialties include *ke-no-shiru* (soup made with kelp stock and vegetables) and *kayaki-miso* (shellfish and fermented soy beans cooked on a shell). Each local specialty is imbued with the wisdom of northern regions – do not waste food collected in a short period of time to survive the long winter. The dishes taste mellow and warm up the body from its core. *Igamenchi* is a dish in which squid is flattened and minced, then rolled into patties with vegetables and fried. Once you start eating it, your appetite will be aroused.

Why not rediscover the beauty of Japan's four seasons in Hirosaki – a city where you can enjoy food and culture amid streets full of atmosphere.

1. *Ke-no-shiru* – a soup made with lots of vegetables, such as finely chopped carrots and white radishes, and flavored with *miso* or soy sauce.
2. *Kayaki-miso* (shellfish and fermented soy beans cooked on a shell) is a local dish that, along with *ke-no-shiru*, is a time-honored favorite. The dish is made by placing the ingredients in a scallop shell, simmering in *miso* and finally, pouring over beaten egg.
3. *Igamenchi* is a fried dish made with left-overs that puts the Japanese precept of *mottainai* (respecting everything and abhorring waste) to good use.



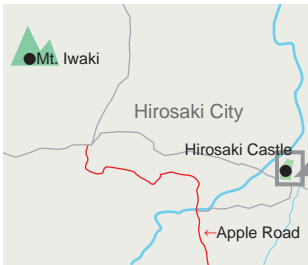
## Map of Hirosaki Area

### ● Access

Approx. 75 minutes from Haneda Airport to Aomori Airport. From Aomori Airport to Hirosaki Station bus terminal takes about 55 minutes by bus.

### ● Contact information

Hirosaki City Tourist Information Office  
Phone: +81-172-26-3600  
Hirosaki Sightseeing Information Center  
Phone: +81-172-37-5501  
Tsugaruhan Neputa Village  
Phone: +81-172-39-1511







## Koshu Inden

Photos: FUJIMAKI hyakkaten (GINZA) Cooperation: Inden Yamamoto

*Inden* are decorative leather goods that feature patterns drawn with *urushi* on deerskin.

It has been claimed that the first *inden* were made in the Kan'ei years (1624-1643) of the Edo period. Beautiful, decorative leather gifted to the then Japanese government by India inspired local artisans to create decorative leather that would be unique to Japan.

Today, the legacy of *inden* as a traditional decorative art is only carried on in the area around Kofu City in Yamanashi Prefecture. Formerly, this area was called "Koshu," which is why the *inden* crafted there is called "Koshu *Inden*." The unique process that uses *urushi* for decoration, which originated in Koshu, attracted people's attention at the time.

Traditionally, *Koshu Inden* was used in the manufacture of armor and helmets, as well as pouches; today, it is also used for purses, bags and the like. Deerskin products have great strength and durability. The more they are used, the more their appearance and texture change, and their appeal increases along with the patterns of the *urushi*.

Designs reminiscent of Japan's four seasons, such as small cherry blossoms, waves and dragonflies, are traditional classics, but recently, images of characters from anime and computer games have begun to appear, with the variety of patterns increasing in line with the times.

Why not try it out and feel the beauty of Japan in the lovely shadows created by the unique three-dimensional patterns on the surface of the deerskin?

niponica

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