

The Making of Urushi Lacquerware in Aizu



Urushi : lacquer, a naturally-occurring sap taken from the Urushi tree

Contents

<i>The History of Aizu Lacquerware</i>	1
<i>Marumono Process (the making of bowl-shaped lacquerware)</i>	2
<i>Itamono Process (the making of square-shaped lacquerware)</i>	3
<i>Decorating Techniques</i>	4
<i>For more information</i>	4

The History of Aizu Lacquerware

Lacquerware craft was first established in Aizu as a local industry in 1590 by Ujisato Gamo, who was the feudal lord of Aizu. He brought in lathe and lacquer painting experts from his previous domain of Hino (currently Shiga Prefecture) to teach the skills of the craft to the people of Aizu. Lacquerware craft flourished in Aizu during this time with developments ranging from the creation of lacquer tree plantations to refinement in the decorative arts of lacquerware.

During the following Edo period, the successive Aizu lord, Masayuki Hoshina, made special efforts to protect and foster the lacquer trees. Each successive Aizu lord worked to advance lacquerware craft, with the height of the industry being marked by exports of lacquerware to China and Holland. However, during the end of the Edo period, the Boshin Civil War caused the almost complete destruction of Aizu and its lacquerware industry.

The Meiji period saw the rebuilding of the lacquerware industry go hand-in-hand with the rebuilding of Aizu. By the middle of the Meiji period, Aizu had earned the reputation as one of the most famous lacquerware-producing cities in the country. The art and industry continues to grow as new technology is integrated into the 400-year old lacquerware tradition.

Marumono Process

(the making of bowl-shaped lacquerware)

Processed Wood



Wood from Zelkova and Horse Chestnut trees is cut into the approximate shape of a bowl and dried thoroughly to prevent warping.



The dried bowl is shaved on a lathe.

Foundation layer

Raw lacquer is applied to cover the grain and make the surface smooth, as well as to prevent warping. This process is called "Kigatame".



A paste of lacquer and special clay powder is applied in a process called "Shitaji" (foundation layer).



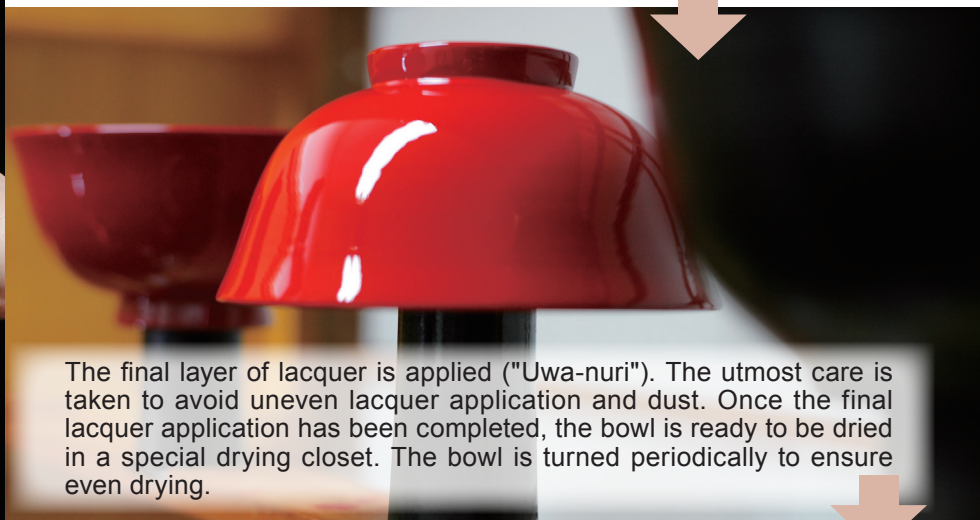
Application layer

The bowl is sanded and lacquer is applied onto the smooth surface. The lacquered bowl is sanded further to smooth the surface and prepare it for the next layer of lacquer.



The next layer of lacquer is applied in a process called "Naka-nuri".

The bowl is lightly sanded again in a process called "Naka-togi" and the surface is inspected for scratches.



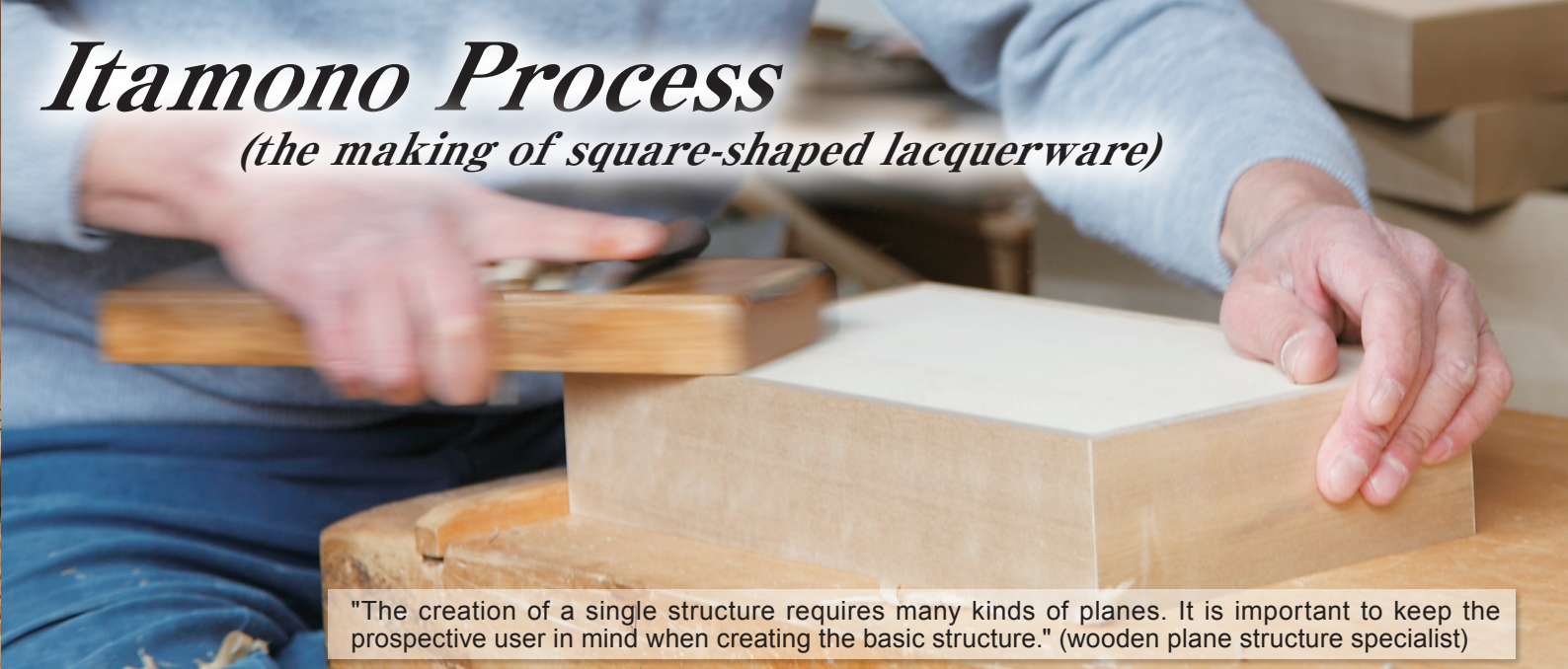
The final layer of lacquer is applied ("Uwa-nuri"). The utmost care is taken to avoid uneven lacquer application and dust. Once the final lacquer application has been completed, the bowl is ready to be dried in a special drying closet. The bowl is turned periodically to ensure even drying.

"Dust is the worst enemy in the lacquer application procedure. We are very careful with dust control. Even our own family members aren't allowed to enter the room." (bowl lacquer application specialist)



Itamono Process

(the making of square-shaped lacquerware)

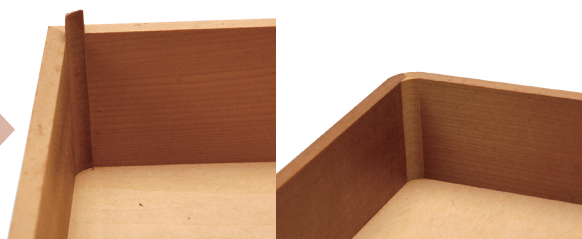


"The creation of a single structure requires many kinds of planes. It is important to keep the prospective user in mind when creating the basic structure." (wooden plane structure specialist)

Making the Shape



Wood from the Ho tree (Magnolia family) and top-quality Shina plywood is evaluated and dried thoroughly. The parts to be used in the final product are cut out and planed.



The parts are assembled into a box-shape and "Sumigi" (slender wooden stakes) are placed in the four corners in order to secure the structure. The box is planed to create rounded corners and edges.



A basic three-tiered box structure is completed once the lid and the bottom of each tier are fitted with "San" (slender wooden pieces) in order to keep all the pieces on top of each other.

Foundation layer

An undercoat of raw lacquer is applied to cover the grain. This process is called "Kigatame".



A paste of lacquer and special clay powder is applied in order to strengthen the structure. This process is called "Shitaji". The box is carefully sanded to prepare for the next application of lacquer.



Application layer

"Naka-nuri" is the second application of lacquer, after which the box is sanded again.



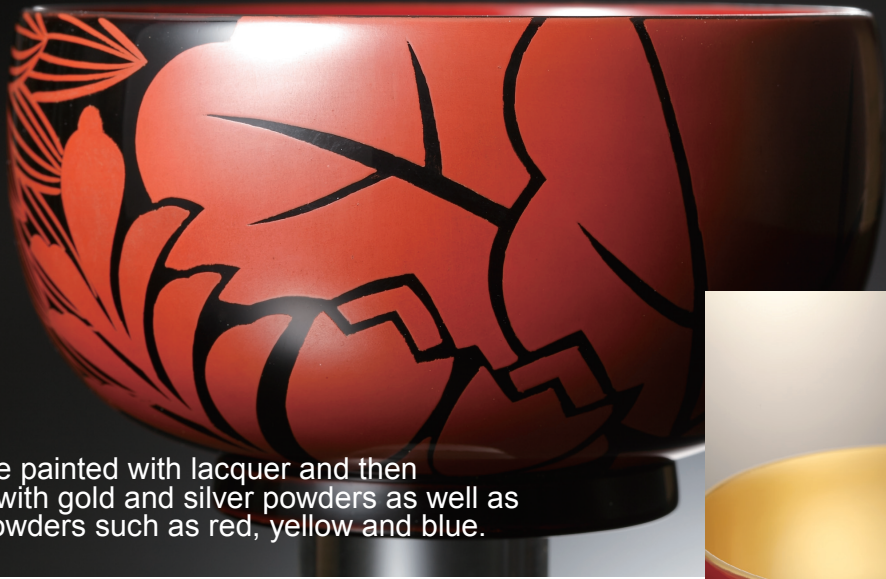
Lacquer is applied for the third and final time ("Uwa-nuri").



The three-tiered box is now finished.

Decorating Techniques

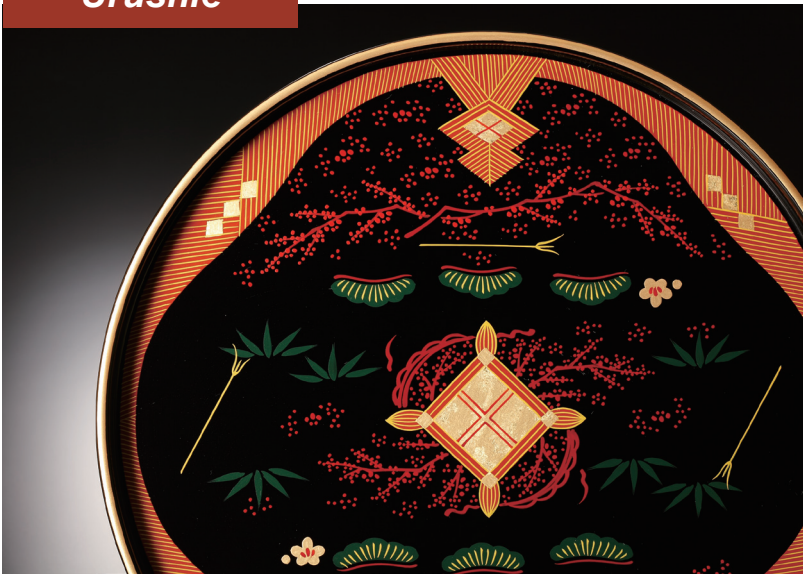
Makie



Patterns are painted with lacquer and then embossed with gold and silver powders as well as coloured powders such as red, yellow and blue.



Urushie



Various designs and patterns are painted using a brush and coloured lacquer (a mixture of lacquer and coloured powder).

Chinkin

The surface is engraved with a fine-edged knife and gold foil is embedded into the groove.



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