

A First Step in Japanese Lacquer

うるしのいっぽ

Planning/Editing: Tsutsumi Asakichi Urushi-ten Co., Ltd.

We have a website providing more things on urushi
but currently available in Japanese language only.

urushinoippo.com

urushi no ippo / vol.0

Urushi culture in Japan (such as *shikkoku*: the absolute jet black in lacquer" and *maki-e*: literally "sprinkled picture") has fascinated people worldwide since olden times. Probably the most popular images of "urushi" from outside Japan might be the splendid *maki-e* which lavishly decorates famous lacquered Japanese temples and shrines with gold decorative techniques. Japan is proud of its urushi culture which is known throughout the world but there remain further hidden charms in urushi. Through this booklet, we hope to inform you about the excellence and potentiality of urushi as a raw material.

Urushi is a treasure from nature. It has so many stories. We would be so happy if people all over the world would understand this fact.

Wood and urushi, hemp cloth and urushi, clay and urushi, things made of natural resources contain spirit. They have warmth and gradually change their appearance with use. Even their degradation over time produces a characteristic uniqueness, which enhances our natural attachment and use of them with care and fondness.

We believe that urushi reminds us of something important which may have been forgotten in many advanced countries nowadays.

We would like to promote further understanding of urushi, a recyclable resource worldwide and propagate more urushi trees. We would like to consider environmental issues through urushi, across borders and races. This is one of our dreams as an urushi shop.

With the aim of continuing to spread the knowledge of Japanese lacquer (urushi), we have summarized what we have been considering about for a long time.



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今年活躍しました。
運動会の優勝者に対してお祝い
今年もアワードをいただきます。

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子どもたちのおかげで、いろいろな活動ができています。
おめでとうございます。





A First Step in Japanese Lacquer

うるしのいっぽ

Although the length of stride might vary,
there has been definite progress in all areas:
makers, users, successors and so on.

Things We Can Do for Sustaining Domestic Lacquer Production Right Now

I often wonder while refining "urushi" – plant origin Asian lacquer – in the factory, what will happen if the supply of Chinese lacquer which occupies about 98% of entire consumption of urushi in Japan suddenly stops. It is definitely impossible to cover such a loss with the current domestic production. Asian lacquer culture may well disappear forever once chemical paints have replaced it. This may sound exaggerated, but we are deeply concerned.

I asked locals if they planted lacquer trees there when I visited a lacquer production area in China. They replied 'Why should we? There are still so many lacquer trees in the mountains. There are more in higher areas if we run out of them here.'

They have no concerns of crisis at all. However, most of the lacquer trees in low-lying areas have been cut down for more lucrative plants for Chinese medicine. Even in China, it is becoming harder to recruit lacquer tappers. And rising labor costs due to the economic growth subsequently lead the rise in the price of Chinese lacquer year by year. Although the current price of Chinese lacquer is considerably lower than that produced in Japan, this may not continue to be the case for very long. Could we gradually increase the production of Japanese lacquer with supplies from China before its price shoot up too much?

The Agency for Cultural Affairs (Bunkacho) has announced that they aim to use domestically produced urushi for the restoration of traditional buildings including national treasures from 2018. Though this would be a good opportunity for increasing the demand for domestic urushi, it is no use unless Japan can produce such a large amount. We cannot do very much to produce more domestic urushi now but we do realize that getting people to understand more about urushi is an important first step.

This modern world is full of cheap and convenient objects and it has become common to think that everything is disposable. When something is broken, it is easier and cheaper to just buy a new one rather than to fix and reuse it. If the current situation continues, subsequent generations will never learn how to treat things with care, feel the fond attachment to things that comes with years of use, or know the strong feelings that come from the passing on of things through generations in the family. However, urushi can provide an opportunity to learn such values. We hope that we can tell the potential and beauty of urushi to the world through this booklet.

Takuya Tsutsumi / Tsutsumi Asakichi Urushi-ten Co. Ltd.



“Education for the Heart” with Hino-wan

Kodomo-en Yurikago nursery school

At a nursery school Kodomo-en Yurikago (Headmaster: Genji Masuda, Kyogakujima) in the Chisho-in temple of the Rinzaï sect Myōshin-ji School of Zen Buddhism situated in Hinozono, Utsunomiya City, Kyoto-shi, they are developing their own education method which incorporates urushiware dishes for school lunches. I asked the deputy headmaster Ms Yuriko Kawashima who manages the nursery school what the purpose of this was.

Cherish the Authentic, Wholeheartedly, and Gratefully...

Stainless steel or plastic tableware are generally used for school lunches because they are durable and safe. However, here they ‘prefer to nurture a sense of cherishing authentic objects, rather than choosing things that are just hard to break and safe’. Before they stumbled upon Hino-wan, they tried reinforced porcelain dishes or considered using Kiyomizu-yaki, a traditional ceramic craft of local Kyoto, but these ideas didn’t work out well.

Ms Kawashima explains the reasons why Hino-wan are so attractive are ‘They are made of real wood and genuine urushi. Everything is made of natural things’ and ‘They can be used for a very long time by correct maintenance’. An affection will grow by continuous use of something for a long time; thinking of repairing and keep using even if it gets broken; a heart that will cherish things. The Hino-wan were chosen in the hope that these spirits would be nurtured in the children through using them.

Using “Urushi” Bowls for School Lunches



After entering the north gate of Myōshin-ji temple, you can soon find the gate to the Chisho-in temple where the nursery school is located. Cheerful voices of children echo through the air as soon as you pass through the gate. It isn’t long before you can see them running around barefooted in the school playground. I was shown the way to the building where preparations for lunch were under way. The school lunches are prepared here and a nutritious hot meal is one of the things the children look forward to most. As this nursery school is particular about what tableware lunch is served in, urushiware called Hino-wan (lacquered bowls made in Hino) are used for the soup.

(In the photo to the left Ms Kawashima is talking about the charms of Hino-wan)

The Hino-wan are traditional urushiware made using a technique that has been passed down since olden times in the current area of Hino-cho, Gamo-gun in Shiga Prefecture. In the Edo Period (1603-1867) this area flourished as an urushiware production area and it is said that the main products of the Omi (Old name of Shiga area) Hino merchants were these Hino-wan. However, the production declined over time and faded out by the end of the Edo Period. Although once the production of Hino-wan came to an end, it was revived by Mr Koji Kitagawa, a local woodworker in 2004. With the usage of “Korin Urushi”, a highly dispersed refined lacquer processed in a patented decompressed vacuum adsorption method this extremely durable urushiware was made possible. Now this robust urushiware is not only used as tableware for school lunches in nursery schools or kindergartens but also has a role in many other places.



Children from age 0 to 6 attend this nursery school. ‘We were very surprised to see 0-year-olds seem to intuitively understand the higher quality when we hand over a Hino-wan to them. It is obvious that they immediately try to be more careful with it than the bowls they were using previously.’ It has always been said that urushiware has ‘warmth’, ‘a soothing texture’, and ‘a calming effect’. There is something comforting about it that people can feel with the five senses which is difficult to explain with words. Those infants must have felt the charms of urushi sensually.



The more we use Hino-wan, the more our fondness for them grows. Surprisingly, among all the dishes used for school lunches only Hino-wan are hand-washed by the staff every day. 'It is small things like this that are important in this world of always trying to save time,' says Ms Kawashima. Because the staff themselves are reminded of the importance of treating things with care, the message is naturally passed on to the children.

It may seem more natural to think 'Urushiware for school lunch? It is expensive and difficult to use. 'But Ms Kawashima states 'We don't think they're expensive at all'.



The first 200 bowls they purchased are re-lacquered once every nine years, and are still being used to this day. In other words, you can use them repeatedly forever if you just make sure they are re-lacquered every nine years. It will lead to food education, and also reduce waste. Considering the 'value' of them, urushiware is very reasonable.

To Our Future Generations, the Japanese Spirit that is Being Forgotten.

'We live thanks to various people, creatures and things' is one of the educational policies of Kodomo-en Yurikago. We agree with this. We receive the tree sap from urushi trees. Working as urushi refiners, we must be so grateful to the gifts of nature from which we can make a living. The spirit of *okage-sama* (an expression of thankfulness) where we treat things with care and gratitude is beginning to fade away in modern society where we can get hold of anything and everything so easily.

Education through the use of Hino-wan at this nursery school is a wonderful effort to pass on the disappearing Japanese spirit to children who will become the leaders of the future.

It can be Repaired and the Cycle Continues Even If Gets Scratched or Broken

Hino-wan seem to have become a favorite with all the children as 'They use the bowls carefully as if they were treasure' says Ms. Kawashima. Among over 300 bowls they have, there are three bowls that are particularly special. They have a simple playful design with the bottom of the bowls lacquered vermilion with a sun painted in the middle. This is another reason why the Hino-wan have captured the children's hearts and it isn't only the children who enjoy them, the teachers have fun with them, too.



It's Safe

It goes without saying that all the materials in urushiware are natural. Moreover, urushi has natural antibacterial properties which protect children.

To Learn Good Manners

Since urushi has low heat conduction, it is easy for children to hold and they can handle the bowl with graceful manners.

To Stimulate the Five Senses

Urushiware is often said to have a warm texture like human skin and so stimulates the five senses in a way which cannot be expressed by plastic or such materials.

To Nurture the Heart

It can help nurture a spirit of treating things with care and a sense of gratitude towards nature from which the materials come because urushiware can be used for long time.

Why Urushi is Good for Children?



To Inherit a Culture

Knowledge of urushi and increasing the number of people who use urushiware will lead to propagate urushi trees and the passing down tapping and making techniques, and the tools used by subsequent generations.

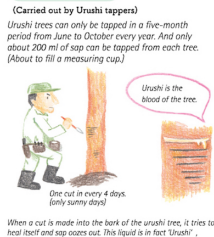


Growing Urushi



The Connections of Urushi

Tapping Urushi



Tools for Urushi Tapping

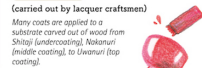
Currently only one blacksmith can make special lacquer tappers' knives in Japan left: Takappo (temporary container), Kaki-bera (collecting spatula), Urushi-kama (tapper's gauged), and Kawahagi-kama (bark scraping sickle).



Refining the Urushi



Lacquering



Distribution





A Young Urushi Tapper, to Become a Good Guidepost.

Kousuke Yamauchi, NPO Tamba Urushi

When I tried urushi tapping for the first time, I strongly felt that the technique had to be preserved. I determined to give my everything when I heard about the problems of the shortage of successors and the lack of urushi trees. Before I knew it, I was already walking the path of becoming an urushi tapper.

Urushi is tree sap and only about 200cc can be collected from a single ten to fifteen-year-old fully-grown tree. It is indeed a valuable gift from nature. The urushi tappers have the important role of tapping and collecting the urushi sap. However, even in the largest production area Joboji, Ninohe City, Iwate Prefecture has been facing problems of an aging population and a lack of successors.

Although among such circumstances, Kousuke Yamauchi (born 1987) is playing an active role in urushi tapping at Yakuno-cho, Fukuchiyama City, Kyoto Prefecture. There are high hopes for him to become a successor who will pass on the history of Tamba Urushi.

Urushi Trees Need Tender Love and Care

There are a few ways to increase the number of urushi trees. At Joboji, they grow nursery trees from seeds, whereas at Yakuno-cho they cut a part of roots and plant them in a nursery ground to get seedlings for propagation.

With either way, a lot of time, effort and experience is necessary. Even after they have been planted, they have to keep taking care of them: pest control, grass cutting and manuring before the tree becomes fully grown and the urushi is collectable in ten to fifteen years. Planting is important of course, but even more essential is to understand the difficulties to cultivate them with a lot of repetitive, time consuming work.

The season for urushi tapping is from the beginning of June to October. The total amount of Tamba urushi collected annually is only about 3 - 5 kg now but annual events which the locals and volunteers plant urushi seedlings in the hope that more urushi can be produced in future. The road to restoring Tamba Urushi has only just begun, and the tireless efforts of Mr Yamauchi will continue.



From left to right: Ms Yoshikawa (Community Reactivating Co-operator), Mr Okamoto (Master urushi tapper) and Yamauchi.



A two-year old urushi tree.



A Unique Texture that Can Only be Expressed by Urushi

Keikou Nishimura, lacquer craftsman

Urushi is normally applied with brushes made of human hair. They leave captivating gentle textures to the finish that cannot be expressed by the spray coats of chemical paints. As his pieces have multiple curves, Mr Nishimura changes the angle of the pieces frequently while urushi coats are setting. This process called *kaeshi* prevents the urushi coats from running and ensures a flawless finish.

One of the main features of urushi is that will set somewhat plump and softer than when it was still wet, rather moist and transparent texture. The works of lacquer craftsmen are truly made up of conversing with natural urushi.

(Mr Nishimura is not a Hino-wan maker)



From Tree Sap to Urushi for Coating Tsutsumi Asakichi Urushi-ten

The quality of urushi, sap from trees differs with each batch. Ascertaining these qualities and reefing according to the customers' requirements or the environment in which they will be lacquering are the work of the refiner. There are various processes from the inspection of raw material (*arami urushi*), straining (for refined raw urushi), *nyajushi* and *kurome* (urushi for coating), blending (controlling luster, curing time and viscosity) and toning. The quality of urushi films are always checked as well to make sure they meet the requirements and all data is recorded for future reference.

Urushi doesn't exactly 'dry' but 'sets' as a result of a chemical reaction with moisture in the air. Because both temperature and humidity effect the quality of urushi, various types of urushi are refined with careful consideration and adjustments made according to the weather and season.



Education Through Urushi, and Succession to the Next Generation

Mejiro Urushi Gakusha (The Mejiro School of Urushi)

Mr. Kazumi Murose, a living national treasure and representative for the Mejiro Urushi Gakusha founded by Mejiro Shitsugei Bunkasai Kenkyujo (Mejiro Lacquer Art Cultural Properties Research Institute) in Shinjuku-ku, Tokyo, and his eldest son Tomoya talk about activities and education through urushi here.

This school has two main purposes. Firstly, a place where experts come to hold study sessions with various subjects, and enhance their expertise. Secondly, to convey the charm of urushi to those who do not know about it. In order to pursue this second purpose, the school holds workshops for children. They bring the bowls to their lips to feel the unique and soft texture or show them the beauty of urushi by letting them try the decorative technique of Maki-e (sprinkling picture) themselves. Because urushi can cause skin rashes, most hands-on workshops use chemical paints. But Tomoya explained "There is no point in using fakes. Even more so because they are children, they should experience with the authentic." "It is by using authentic things that you learn" is the policy of this school.

Making Mistakes by Using Authentic Pieces



Education does not come from just succeeding. It is most important to teach children living in this modern life in which most things are durable or disposable are more popular when things will be damaged by dropping or treat them roughly. Children will be shocked enough once they experience something like this, and they will not treat things so roughly again.



Mr Kazumi Murose (right) and Tomoya (left) are encouraging the succession of urushi culture in this school.

*The event was held with approval of parents who had been informed of the associated risks.

So, they will learn to treat things with care,' says Mr Murose. 'Even if a child breaks a one-hundred-dollar bowl, it means that with that one-hundred-dollar sacrifice the child would have learnt to care for things for the rest of his or her life. Even better, because urushi is a such a fabulous material it can be repaired.' Using urushi can not only educate children to learn good manners but also help nurture their hearts to 'care for things'. This is the power that is hidden in urushi.

'It is difficult to convey to many people at once, but we try to use our position as a school to give children unique and fulfilling experiences. We hope that even a small part of the experience stays in the children's memories' Tomoya explained. Mejiro Urushi Gakusha will continue such efforts.

After the 'First Step'

We are sure that everybody who uses urushi becomes inspired and senses its greatness and might even sometimes end up feeling enchanted by it. We can let more people know of the efforts like those made at Kodomo-en Yurikago introduced at the beginning of this booklet. From the tappers, shops, crafts people, wholesalers, retailers, to the consumers, each of us who love urushi can convey the beauty of it to those around us. It may not seem significant, but it is necessary. As the first step, we published this booklet in 2016.

From brand-new shiny bowls to worn down, well used ones, each has its own character and story. The more you use them, the more you come to love them. Urushi is a wonderful material that reminds us of feelings such as these. We will be very happy if this booklet stimulates interest on urushi a little for those who are yet to discover the charms of it.

Takuya Tsutsumi

