

Art in the Garden

Urushi: Masterpieces of Lacquerware
by Kazumi Murose,
Living National Treasure of Japan

Fall 2014



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Urushi: Masterpieces of Lacquerware by Kazumi Murose, Living National Treasure of Japan is the second in a series of three exhibitions featuring Japanese lacquer, a unique art form that is still little known outside Japan. It is also the first time the Garden has ever shown work by a Living National Treasure, and Mr. Murose's first solo exhibition in the United States.

KAZUMI MUROSE

Kazumi Murose was born in 1950, the son of an accomplished lacquer artist. His decision to take on the family trade was made at a time in Japan when most young men were eager to leave the world of tradition behind to pursue modern careers in technology and business. Nonetheless, in 1970, he entered the Tokyo University of Fine Arts to study *urushi* with the legendary Matsuda Gonroku (1896–1986).

Murose specializes in the technique of *maki-e* (sprinkled gold and silver decoration), and *raden* (inlaid shell)—two traditional techniques for the embellishment of urushi. His innovative methods in the use of this ancient and sustainable natural material have resulted in remarkable new designs

for contemporary purposes, including the limited edition objects he creates for Vertu, a Parisian firm specializing in luxury objects.

“In my work, I use not only motifs from plants and animals- but I also try to create spatial impressions of sunlight, wind and water.”

In 2008, the Japanese government recognized Kazumi Murose as a Living National Treasure, the popular expression that describes an official designation that goes only to those who hold the very highest level of skill in a traditional craft.

Living National Treasure is the popular term used to describe those designated as *Juyo Mukei Bunkazai Hojisha*, or Bearers of Intangible Cultural Assets. Beginning in 1950, the Japanese Government has awarded this honor annually to craftsmen and women who have demonstrated the highest level of accomplishment in a traditional craft. The purpose of this award is as much to preserve an art form as it is to honor an individual's accomplishment. The bearer of this designation agrees to carry on their craft and pass it on to the next generation by teaching and lecturing throughout Japan and around the world.



THE CRAFT OF URUSHI

Urushi is a natural material obtained from the sap of *rhus verniciflua* trees (sumac family). It does not dry immediately in contact with air, but hardens slowly in a humid environment to an extremely durable, waterproof finish that can be highly polished. In its raw state, urushi is toxic, presenting craftsmen with their first challenge in the training process. According to art historian, Joe Earle, “Lacquerwork is perhaps the most complex of all Japan’s traditional industries, demanding the combined skills of many specialist workers. Just to create a good black- or red-lacquer surface requires at least thirty-three stages,

including smoothing the wood base, covering it with cloth, applying powdered clay and lacquer to the cloth to hide its texture, then applying increasingly fine grades of lacquer mixed with different powders, and finally adding several applications of best-quality lacquer. As each of the twenty or even thirty coats is applied the lacquer must be given time to harden, and must then be polished with a range of substances, starting with abrasive stones and finishing with powdered staghorn and oil.” All this has to be completed before any designs are applied to the surface—including the *maki-e* gold decoration for which Murose is famous.

Traditions are not something we should keep—rather something that we continually create. Being passed on unchanged is ‘inheritance,’ while ‘tradition’ takes on a different shape. That is why the word tradition means the creation of new things... in an hundred years what we make today will be a part of tradition.

KAZUMI MUROSE



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