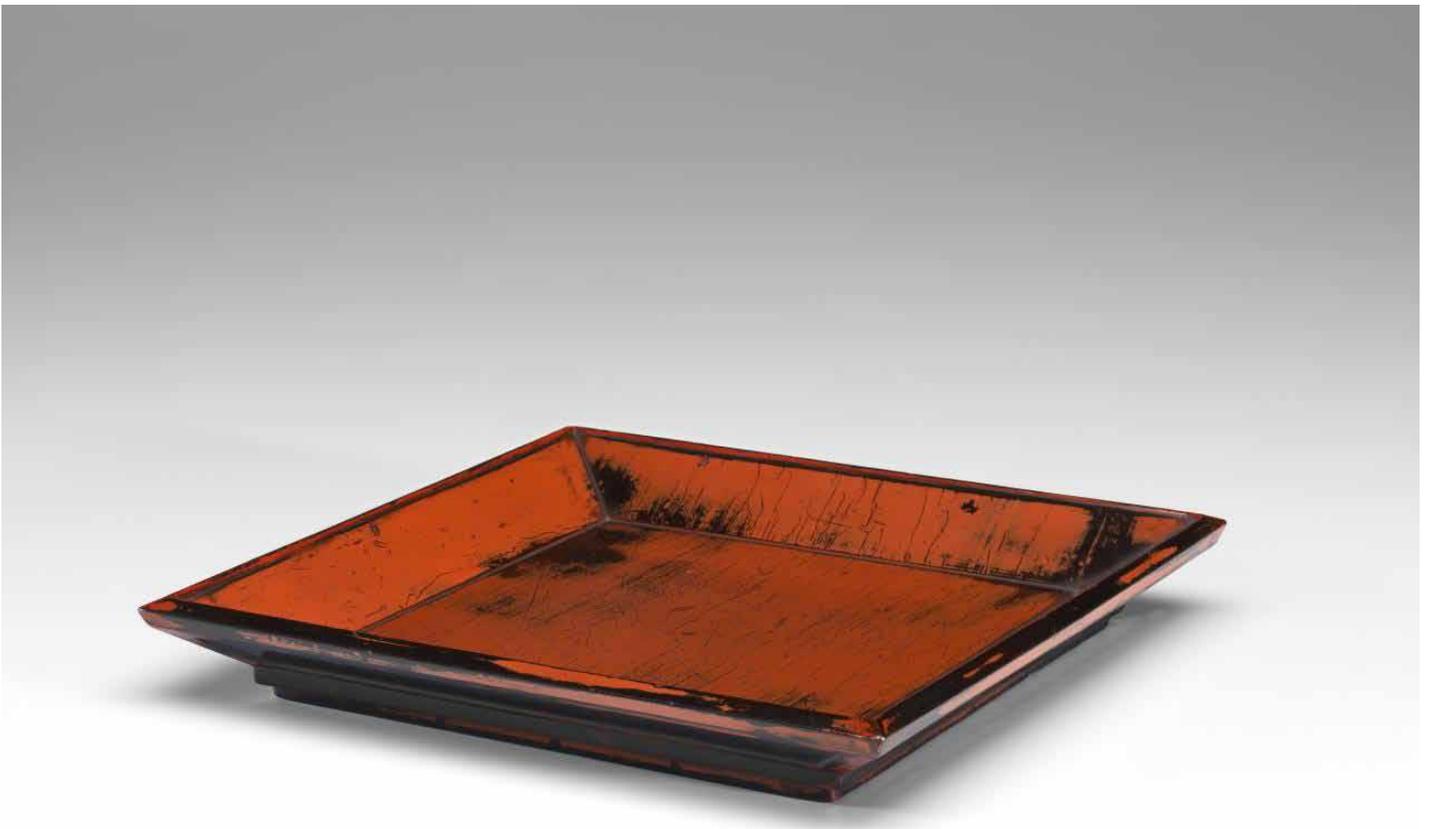


# NEGORO



THE REFINED BEAUTY AND RUSTIC AMBIENCE OF MEDIEVAL JAPAN

An Essay on Negoro Lacquer, compiled by Martin Pauli



Negoro refers to simple and elegant red lacquer objects that were produced during Japan's medieval period, between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries. Embodying the ancient sense of Japanese beauty, the minimalistic forms of Negoro lacquer ware were primarily made to be functional objects and are void of elaborate decoration. The supple shapes and naturally worn patina of red and black lacquered layers give Negoro an ambience of antiquity and elegance which has made them treasured objects throughout the ages. Since the early twentieth century Negoro wares have become highly appreciated by connoisseurs as objects of outstanding design that pursue a certain utilitarian beauty. Since ancient times the Neolithic people of Japan have used the sap of the lacquer tree (Japanese sumac, or *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*) mixed with cinnabar pigment to produce red lacquered objects for daily use. Red is considered a sacred and auspicious colour in Japan.

It is used widely as the colour of shrines and temples, as well as of sacred offering vessels and in some instances, such as red sea brim, the colour of the ritual offering itself. The first illustrated evidence of the use of red lacquer ware is found in handscrolls, including the twelfth-century Tale of Genji 'Kashiwagi' scroll in which circular trays similar to the one in the NGV collection are shown being used by members of the imperial aristocracy. In the fourteenth-century handscroll Miraculous stories of the gods of Kasuga (Kasuga Gongen Genki-e), we see shrine priests eating from stem tables identical in appearance and age to examples in the NGV collection, and in the sixteenth-century The illustrated scroll of the sake and rice debate (Shuhanron ekotoba), we see monks using red lacquered trays, bowls and large dishes. In these depictions of monastery life and aristocratic villas Negoro utensils are clearly shown as favoured and cherished objects, alluding to demand for their production in large numbers. Square and circular trays, bowls of various sizes and large spouted

ewers were used at daily meals. Lobed cup stands, offering trays and sake bottles with foliate lids featured in temple rituals and clearly display lotus flower–inspired motifs common to Buddhist art. Stem tables were frequently used as offering stands and placed in altars of Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines.

Circular wash basins with legs were used in monastery ceremonies to catch water poured over the hands of monks in an act of purification. Large hot water pots or spouted ewers were often used as practical kitchen and serving utensils, and are still used to this day in Zen monastery dining halls to serve hot water that monks swill their bowls with, consuming every last grain of rice in adherence to Zen eating etiquette. The makers of the hot water pot and two wash basins have used a technique





that takes advantage of the objects' natural wood grain. The decorative band of warm, wood texture left visible in each object complements its smooth, sensual lacquered surface and subtly enhances its overall appearance.

Negoro lacquer derived its name from the Buddhist temple of Negoro-ji, located in the mountains of present-day Wakayama Prefecture, just south of Osaka. Established in 1243 as a temple of esoteric Buddhist practice, Negoro-ji thrived during the Kamakura, Muromachi and Azuchi-Momoyama periods and at its height of influence during the sixteenth century had a population of approximately 6000 monks, who lived in an estimated eighty monasteries and attended up to 2700 sub-temples and shrines.

Buddhist philosophies demanded that temple life and rituals were conducted in a simple and restrained manner, and from these early times of esoteric Buddhist practice red objects were regarded as auspicious and suitable to accompany a monk's everyday existence. It is believed that this combination of a simple, unadorned lifestyle and the auspicious associations with the colour red led to the production of high quality and durable lacquer utensils in and around the environs of Negoro-ji and at other workshops in the cultural centres of Japan. By the late sixteenth century Negoro-ji temple had attained great social influence, economic strength and had even embarked on the production of



firearms modelled on matchlock muskets recently introduced to Japan by the Portuguese. The always strategic and ever suspicious ruling lord of the time, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, felt threatened by the Buddhist enclave and in 1585 embarked on a campaign to subdue its power, burning all but three of its worship halls to the ground. This defining moment in Japanese history and accepted end date for the production of historical Negoro lacquer is embodied in the meal table, which bears an inscription dating it to the exact year of this devastating event. Scholars speculate that the elegant contours of the table's side openings and legs, as well as its compressed overall form that differs from other



meal tables of the sixteenth century, indicate that this rare piece was produced at a much earlier date during the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and given the inscription ‘Thirteenth year of Tenshō (1585), Murō-ji temple, Yamato no kuni’ (present-day Nara Prefecture) at the later date of 1585.

Negoro was not produced solely for visual appreciation. One pre-eminent exception, is Daikōgō (large incense container) with a visually mesmerising geometric motif covering its entire surface. Daikōgō were used in Buddhist temples to contain aromatic wood shavings that would be sprinkled into incense burners during ceremonies and at times of worship. This immaculately preserved piece displays a symmetrical motif uncharacteristic to the Japanese aesthetic, and can be attributed to the central Asian migration routes along which Buddhism travelled to Japan between the second and six centuries. Due to this elaborate decoration the Daikōgō is not strictly Negoro but Kamakura-bori, a style of decoratively carved lacquer ware produced in the Kamakura region just south of Tokyo. The object’s powerful cinnabar colour and patina of underlying coats of black lacquer, revealed due to centuries of ongoing use, has imbued the Daikōgō with an ambience and antiquity analogous to the ideals of Negoro. A similar fusion of lacquering philosophies displayed in the sixteenth-century Daikōgō and the profound ambience of Negoro continues to influence Japanese lacquer artists to



this day. The Four edged Kamakura tea caddy produced by acclaimed living national treasure Kur-oda Tatsuaki during the 1960s challenges our understanding of a four-edged object and engages in a creative dialogue between the artist's contemporary practice and the ancient techniques of both Kamakura-bori and Negoro lacquer.

To produce Negoro lacquer ware, the wooden shapes are lathed or assembled from flat or carved pieces of strong Keyaki (Japanese Zelkova). Once the structure is created its edges are strengthened with cloth, then the surface is coated and smoothed with numerous coats of base lacquer. Three coats of black lacquer follow, and finally one coat of red cinnabar pigmented lacquer is applied with a spatula to leave distinctive lines that trace movements of the maker's hand. The finished object radiates with a luminous red surface that we can clearly see in the contemporary Negoro-influenced



pieces on display.

The true essence of Negoro, however, is found in its antiquity and the generations of affectionate use that imbues these objects with the esoteric Japanese spirit wabi (the aesthetic of beauty found in imperfection), and sabi (an affection for the old and faded). With regular use the wearing and reduction of the outer red coating gradually reveals the black lacquer beneath, creating an ever changing beauty that can only result from continual use and the passage of time. Cracks, wear, damage, splits, texturing and irregularities all enhance the harmonious sophistication of a Negoro object's surface. This natural evolution of beauty, similar to the maturing of the human spirit with age, epitomises the Japanese spirit and stems from the belief that the respectful use of an object for its proper function enhances its appearance and status.

### **Themes connected to Negoro Lacquer**

#### **Wabi**

What can we say, beyond mentioning that although these lacquer pieces usually are red, and show traces of the underlying black, sometimes they are black and show traces of red. One can go further, and say that lovers of Negoro share a „wabi“ aesthetic. That is, lovers of Negoro find beauty not in the display of cunning craftsmanship, and not in the ostentatious, but in the simple, the austere, the unadorned - or to be more exact, they find beauty where traces of black appear beneath the worn red surface, an adornment that is „natural“ the product of time. In short, „wabi“ is an aesthetic of poverty, an aesthetic that values the simple, the worn, the mellow. It is an aesthetic that finds beauty not only in the smooth face of a beauty queen, but in the wrinkled face of her grandmother.. Anyone who prefers worn jeans to brand-new jeans knows the beauty of „wabi“

#### **Yô no Bi**

Yô no bi' is an expression from the Japanese folk craft tradition and means 'beauty through use'. It is perfectly represented by Negoro lacquer.

#### **Mottainai**

Mottainai, [mottainai]) is a Japanese term conveying a sense of regret concerning waste. The expression „Mottainai!“ can be uttered alone as an exclamation when something useful, such as food or time, is wasted, meaning roughly „what a waste!“ or „Don't waste. In addition to its primary sense of „wastefulness“, the word is also used to mean „impious; irreverent“ or „more than one deserves“.

Mottainai is an old Buddhist word, which has ties „with the Shinto idea that objects have souls. Mottainai has been referred to as a tradition, a cultural practice, and an idea which is still present in Japanese culture, which has become an international concept.. Mottainai in Japanese refers to more than just physical waste (resources). It is even used to refer to thought patterns that give rise to wasteful action. Grammatically, it can be used in Japanese as an exclamation („mottainai!“) or as an adjective phrase („it feels mottainai“). There is no plural form. The collection of mottainai things could be called mottainai koto. As an exclamation („mottainai!“) it means roughly „what a waste!“ or „Don't waste. An English equivalent is the saying „waste not, want not.“ A more elaborate meaning conveys a sense of value and worthiness and may be translated as „do not destroy (or lay waste to) that which is worthy. However, mottainai is an example of a word, like sukiyaki and sushi, that cannot easily or accurately be translated directly into other languages.

### **Kōgei**

In Japan today, 'kōgei' craft refers to works made by both artists and artisans, and the creations are considered as art or as manufactured products. In other words, there are kōgei that are created by artists and those manufactured by artisans. It is perhaps not wrong to say that kōgei of Japan established its own identity through the synthesis of these two trends. In both, the creators ought to understand the essence of the involved materials and techniques, in order to best exploit the nature of the various media in their finished works. What this means is that the materials for the makers' works are predetermined – such as clay for ceramics and metals for metal works – and that in conceiving of images or ideas, whether making objet d'art or manufactured products, the medium was already there.

Therefore in the case of Japanese kōgei, the materials handled by the makers in fashioning images and ideas are not choices to be made, but instead, are exclusive to the process of harnessing the nature of the materials into art objects or manufactured products. This enforced intimacy with materials has led to the development of the utmost skill in production levels and sophistication of expression in creating craft objects in Japan. When considering the works made by artists, it has become questionable whether such works can be simply categorized as 'crafts,' the English term traditionally used to translate kōgei. Due to what the word 'craft' can bring to mind – ranging from exhibited works and utilitarian vessels to fence posts on a farm – the term cannot be accurately defined as craft, especially with works created by artists producing kōgei which are rich in individual expression.

Hence when discussing kōgei, particularly of contemporary artists, instead of using the Western

concept of 'craft,' the established translation of 'kōgei,' I propose to leave the term in Romanized form kōgei, as I have essentially in this essay. This, for example, follows words such as 'manga' and 'karaoke,' which have now been incorporated into the English lexicon. I feel that such terms serve to better signify some distinct aspects of Japanese culture. This can also apply to a popular Japanese word, 'dentō, commonly translated in English as "tradition." The term 'tradition' in English is partially defined as, "the transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way." In Japanese, this is closer in definition to that of denshō, which is about 'transmission,' such as in the passing down of folk stories and oral traditions. When discussing skills and techniques, the term denshō is important but it cannot embody the concepts of tradition associated with artists, their creativity, and artistry. When the widely used Japanese terms dentō and kōgei are combined as 'dentō kōgei', and translated into English as 'traditional crafts,' they merely become words that imply age.

For artists, when contemplating dentō kōgei, they are not simply thinking of the transmission of a tradition, but are seeking to individualize and enhance their creations by instilling them with their own creative spirit and expression. In the art world today, it seems that creation is occurring separate from pondering the resoluteness of various materials, resulting in the diminished importance of materials in objects. In recent years, the wide interest in Japanese kōgei is perhaps due to the strong



sense of the materials used in the works, which are expressions that were driven by the materials themselves, transformed into myriad shapes and textures by artists. Placing value on works that can harness the essence of materials, one can perhaps say that Japanese kōgei strives to investigate the intrinsic nature of materials.

The artists represented in this show, 'Heritage: Contemporary Japanese Ceramics and Metalwork,' are key figures related to 'dentō kōgei' in Japan today. By observing their works that epitomize the pinnacle of the genre, it is my hope that visitors will appreciate kōgei while contemplating the significance of the materials in the works.

### **Mark Rothko**

Negoro lacquer is often compared by art collectors and art specialists to the paintings of Mark Rothko. Mark Rothko born Markus Yakovlevich Rothkowitz (September 25, 1903 – February 25, 1970), was an American painter of Russian descent. Although Rothko himself refused to adhere to any art movement, he is generally identified as an abstract expressionist. With Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, he is one of the most famous postwar American artists.



### **Kurosawa Akira**

The Film director Kurosawa Akira was also a known collector of Negoro and he frequently exhibited masterpieces such as ritual sake bottles „heishi“ circular trays „bon“ and trays with angled corners „ô-shiki“. In the film „Thrones of Blood“ a large number of Negoro were featured in a banquet scene. At Kurosawa’s home Negoro trays and plates were often used when people from the film industry gathered there.

### **Museum of Modern Art**

Kazumi Murose, urushi artist and a Living National Treasure was contracted to produce a Negoro lacquer door for the MOA Museum of Modern Art.

### **Symbolic of the Colors Red & Black**

**Red:** Activity, dynamism, vitality, energy, determination love, strength, temperament, passion fire, danger, warning, blood, rage, blood, happiness, wealth

**Black:** Power, sexuality, sophistication, formality, elegance, wealth, mystery, fear, evil, unhappiness,





### **Negoro Fountain Pen**

Type of Pen:	Negoro-Dera
Material:	Ebonite & Urushi
Urushi:	Ko-Negoro-Nuri
Size Cap:	25 x 150 mm
Barrel Size:	Incl. 18 Kt. Gold Nib 16 x 150 mm
Manufactured by:	Manu Propria Pens - Martin Pauli, Switzerland



### **Negoro Fountain Pen**

Type of Pen:	Miyabi Shibui
Material:	Ebonite & Urushi
Urushi:	Ko-Negoro-Nuri
Size Cap:	16 x 70 mm
Barrel Size:	Incl. 18 Kt. Gold Nib 14 x 115 mm
Manufactured by:	Manu Propria Pens - Martin Pauli, Switzerland



### **Negoro Fountain Pen**

Type of Pen:	Miyabi Futô
Material:	Ebonite & Urushi
Urushi:	Ko-Negoro-Nuri
Size Cap:	21 x 75 mm
Barrel Size:	Incl. 18 Kt. Gold Nib 20 x 115 mm
Manufactured by:	Manu Propria Pens - Martin Pauli, Switzerland



### **Negoro Fountain Pen**

Type of Pen: Bô  
Material: Ebonite & Urushi  
Urushi: Ko-Negoro-Nuri  
Barrel Size: 16 x 115 mm - 17 x 130 mm - 18 x 155 mm  
Manufactured by: Manu Propria Pens - Martin Pauli, Switzerland



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