

“Independence of Urushi-e”

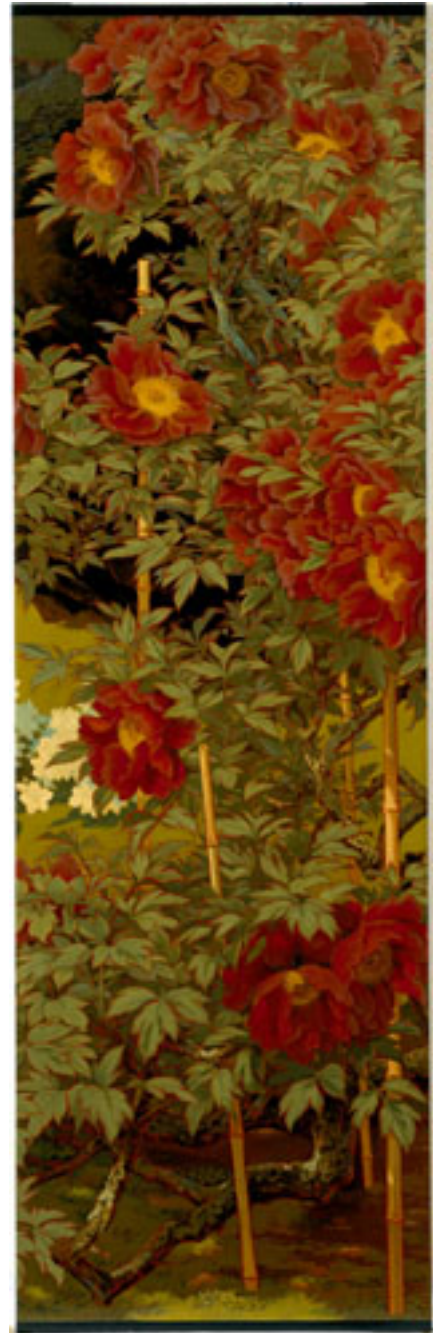
Urushi-e is an Urushi-based painting. The term applies much the same way that the term “oil painting” describes the use of oil-based paints. The reason for declaring the “independence of Urushi-e” arises from the common perception that craft-oriented maki-e, or a sprinkled picture decoration, comes to one’s mind when the term Urushi-e is mentioned. This is simply because there have been hardly any Urushi-e artworks in the past.

If examined further, one can find Urushi-e in its pure form among the fine arts, but such artworks have not succeeded in enhancing the advantages of Urushi when compared to inkbrush artworks painted on paper and silk materials. I had sixteen pieces of my Urushi-e artworks exhibited for four days at the Japan Industrial Club, beginning on November 11 (1934). The exhibit was a summation of a decade of my work. It is uncertain whether the exhibit will trigger a sensation in the artistic future in Japan, however, I feel confident about the positive feedback I’ve received. My creative works stand as artworks in an independent field. The following descriptions outline the uniqueness of my work while making comparisons to techniques in other fields of artistic endeavor.

It is particularly appropriate that Urushi-e has its origin in Japan. Urushi-e has great potential to grow as a form of fine art, given its rich local characteristics. As widely known, Urushi is a product only seen in Asia, and today Japan still produces the highest-quality Urushi.

The dried coat of Urushi lacquer withstands very strong acidity, and alkaloids will not corrode an Urushi-coated surface. Coated Urushi can be heat resistant up to approximately 572°F, 300°C as well as having moderate elasticity and strong adhesion. It is a proven scientific fact that Urushi is in a league of its own as the superior paint. When the Urushi craftworks from the era of the Han Dynasty were recently discovered, and when it was found that no significant changes occurred to their coated surfaces, the world was stunned. Urushi paints are made of transparent, amber-colored Urushi liquid mixed with the colorants that are suitable for Urushi. Available colors include red, vermilion, orange, yellow, green, blue, brown, midnight blue (dark indigo), silver gray, white and black. Mineral-based stable colors are available as well. Additionally, there are a few durable lake colors, and these colors provide ample possibilities to create an array of colors. It is easy to create fifty to sixty colors for Urushi-e. Various gold powders also go well with Urushi, and new techniques for the application of traditional maki-e (gold and silver lacquering artwork) methods should be explored as well.

One thing we have to keep in mind is color development when using Urushi paints. When dried, Urushi will develop an austere tone. One cannot attain a pure white color with Urushi, even though that is easy with oil paint. When seen by itself, it is ivory white, but by comparison with other colors it is possible to increase the apparent whiteness of the color. Other colors also develop a somewhat tranquil tone, lending a certain austerity to the artwork. I think this is the reason Urushi-e fits in well as part of the interior coordination of a Japanese or Western-style room. The darkness of Urushi tone will fade gradually over time, while the brightness will increase as the Urushi coating regains its transparency.

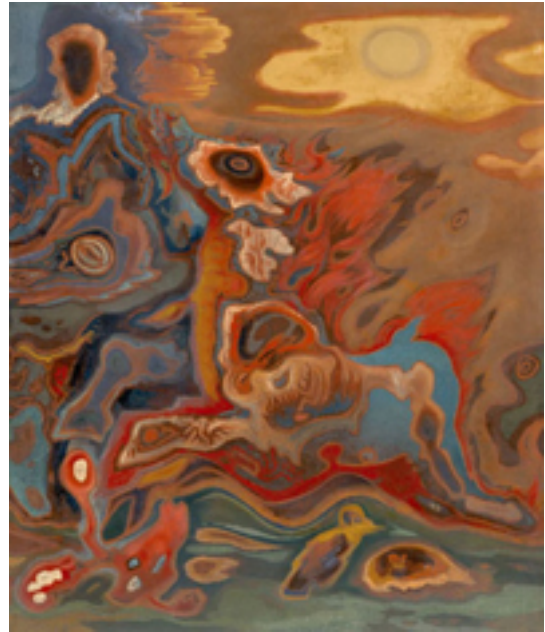




Painting techniques are rather complicated so it isn't possible to describe all of them here. Simply keep in mind that Urushi paints have thicker viscosity than oil paints do. Techniques shared with oil painting include the use of hard brushes. With Urushi-e, the finished painting is dried in a drying room. Commonly, one humidifies the interior of a shelved closet called a muro (a humidified room), which is used to achieve higher humidity. The rainy season (early summer in Japan) has the appropriate temperature and humidity for the process of drying Urushi, but the closet device can maintain a simulated condition throughout the year. The other drying method is known as high-temperature hardening. This method hardens Urushi at a temperature of approximately 212°F/100°C to 302°F/150°C, and provides a

fast drying process that forms a durable inner film. However, it cannot be used other than for artworks painted on metal sheets. In the old days, armor (used as protective gear for battles) commonly used the high-temperature hardening method, which was referred to as baked Urushi.

Subsequent to drying, there is another critical process of finishing. This process is called polishing or scraping. When the word "polishing" is mentioned, it might sound like a craftwork process. When Urushi is dried, there is a tendency for the surface to become even darker, on top of the fact that colorants tend to settle into the lower layer. Consequently, the surface has the stronger brown color of Urushi but less colorant. Polishing will remove the surface layer and smooth it out so that the original tones at the time of painting can be achieved. However, it is possible to finish without polishing. At times it can be painted to retouch the work after polishing, though this process requires considerably more technical effort.



The emphasis at this point is the eternally stable nature of Urushi-e in comparison to the instability of oil paintings. This is also a warning for fine artists who face the fate of oil painting due to its unsuitability for the Japanese climate and the use of impure colorants. Would fine artists finally find materials that pose no anxiety other than those mixed by the artists themselves? Humidity and mold would in time destroy a Japanese oil painting. How does one view the tar-colored tones of old paintings? While Urushi-e will brighten its tone as it ages, regaining the tone it had when it was first painted, the tones of other paintings will become darker and eventually lose their original images. Again, this is one of the reasons Urushi-e must thrive in the future of Japanese arts as one of the newly emerging forms of fine art. Thus the "independence of Urushi-e" must be declared.

Lacquered Tableware in Everyday Use

Urushi lacquered household items used to be a regular part of everyday life in Japan. Tableware such as bowls and chopsticks, furniture, tobacco cases, sword scabbards and even alcoves were coated in Urushi, and there were Urushi craftsmen in every town. Nowadays, when we hear the term “Urushi-e,” what comes to your mind? If you are Japanese, pictures painted on Urushi soup bowls and tiered food containers may come to mind as common images. Urushi-e is a painting technique using “colored Urushi,” or Urushi mixed with colorants, and is an original decorative technique among the Urushi crafts. The oldest Urushi-e preserved today is “Tamamushi no zushi (Beetle wing shrine)” dating from around 650 AD, owned by Horyuji Temple. It is a multicolor Urushi-e, and the entire body of the piece is coated with Urushi, using the three colors of vermilion, yellow and green. Moreover, from a technical standpoint it’s among the rare types.



Matsuoka kept records of how he blended the colors in his notes.

“Urushi Artwork (Saishitsu-ga),” as created by Taiwa Matsuoka, is different from Urushi-e, or sprinkled picture decoration. It is a “painting” created with a variety of colored Urushi. Colored Urushi has emerged as a new form of fine art after endless efforts and struggles to establish an identity on a level equivalent to other fine arts such as Japanese inkbrush, watercolor and oil paintings. A piece of Urushi Artwork takes considerably longer to complete due to the unique characteristics of Urushi. To better understand Urushi Artworks, the terms associated with Urushi are described in the following:

Major Techniques and Terms of Urushi Crafts

Lacquerware

Tableware coated with Urushi lacquer. Items for everyday use such as bowls, tiered food containers and chopsticks.

Urushi craft art

Refers to artworks decorated with brilliant techniques, such as gold and silver lacquering artwork.

Characteristics of Urushi

(1) Strong adhesiveness; (2) durability when coated Urushi is dried; (3) surface luster

Decoration

Decoration adds character to an Urushi coated piece, and is achieved by painting patterns and/or figures. There are numerous decorative techniques, chief among them being gold and silver lacquering artwork.

Urushi-e

Urushi-e uses colored Urushi paints created by mixing colorants into Urushi. In Urushi-e, freestyle strokes and touches are used to give the artworks a variety of atmospheric effects.

Gold and silver lacquering artwork (Maki-e)

This is the leading and fundamental technique of Japanese lacquerware. In gold and silver lacquering artwork, patterns drawn with Urushi are sprinkled with gold and silver powder, and the art piece is finished through repeated polishing.

It was first invented in the ninth century in Japan, and techniques have been refined over hundreds of years. There are three basic types of gold and silver lacquering:

(1) **Hiramaki-e (Flat gold and silver lacquering artwork)**... Patterns are drawn with Urushi, and gold powder is sprinkled onto the patterns.

(2) **Togidashimaki-e (Polished gold and silver lacquering artwork)**... Urushi is coated over hiramaki-e, and once the coating is dried the surface is polished down to the gold-powder layer with fine-grained charcoal, achieving patterns that appear to loom up toward the surface.

(3) **Takamaki-e (Raised gold and silver lacquering artwork)**... Gold and silver lacquering artwork is painted on raised undercoat patterns.

In addition to the above, there are two types of backgrounds (spaces where patterns are not drawn) decorative gold and silver lacquering techniques:

(1) **Ikake-ji (ikake-undercoating)**... The entire surface is filled with sprinkled gold powder (gold undercoating).

(2) **Nashi-ji (pear-undercoating)**... Gold powder is sprinkled in dots, like pear skin. There are various types of Nashi-ji such as Tsumenashi-ji (filled pear-undercoating, koinashi-ji (thick pear-undercoating), awanashi-ji (thin pear-undercoating).

Raden (Mother-of-pearl work) (thick shell)

This technique is used to decorate shiny shells. Luminous shells and abalone are polished, cut into patterns and pasted with Urushi. Many craftworks employ a unique luster and the color of the shells combined with gold and silver lacquering, complementing the gold and silver tones of gold and silver lacquering. The Raden style was brought from China during the Shosoin era (from the Nara period to the Heian period, seventh through eleventh centuries). This is also called Usugai (thin shell) or Aogai (blue shell.)

Kanagai (Gold shell)

Term in contrast to blue shell (Raden). This is a decorative technique in which metal pieces are polished, cut into pattern shapes and pasted with Urushi. Designs having long, thin linear shapes are called Kirigane.

Zogan (Encrustation)

Decorations of lacquer-ware. This is a technique used to encrust balls, coral, agate, dyed horn and ceramic pieces on Urushi surfaces as decorations on gold-relief.

Mitsuda-e (Litharge painting)

A type of oil painting drawn on a Urushi surface. Colorants are mixed with oil, and litharge (a natural form of lead oxide) is used as a drying agent. Accordingly, this technique is called litharge painting.

Choshitsu (Sculpted Urushi)

This technique is used to sculpt patterns on the Urushi layer created by applying several hundred coats of Urushi. Other Japanese terms for sculpted Urushi include Tsuikoku (black depository) and Tsuishu (vermilion deposition). Kamakurabori (Kamakura sculpture) is a style simulated with this technique, and sculpted wood is painted with Urushi.

Urushi coating

This decorative technique gives a craftwork durability and luster on the surface, using the characteristics of Urushi. Different terms are used depending on techniques, purpose of the craftworks, origin of artworks, etc. (i.e., Tame-nuri, Shin-nuri, Roiro-nuri, Kawar-inuri, Saya-nuri, Negoro-nuri)

Zonsei

This is a Chinese Urushi craft technique. Patterns are carved with a line engraver on an Urushi surface, and the carved lines are filled with colored Urushi such as vermilion, yellow, green and black. It is also called Tenshitsu

Kinma

This technique is used to carve lines with a knife into a Urushi -coated surface, fill concaved lines with a firm mixture of vermilion, yellow and green colored Urushi, and polish to smooth out the surface. Line patterns of brilliant vermilion, yellow and green will appear to loom up toward the finished surface.

Citations for Terms

-“Kinse no Maki-e (Gold and silver lacquering artwork in the Modern Era, in Japanese),” Akio Haino, Chukoshinsho, Chuokoron-shinsha, Inc., Tokyo, Japan

- “Urushi ni Kansuru Chosahokokusho (Research Report on Urushi, in Japanese), Japan Urushi Craft Association, Japan Special Forest Product Promotion Association

Urushi Grown Only in Southeast Asia

In the seventeenth century massive amounts of Asian ceramics and Urushi products were exported to Europe with the establishment of the East India Trading Company and extensive Oriental trading. Chinese ceramic products were called “china,” and Urushi products were called “Japan.” Supposedly, during the same period more Chinese Urushi products were exported than those of Japanese origin. The fact that Japanese Urushi products were called Japan indicates the distinctions made by European royal and noble families to cherish and admire Japanese Urushi products.



In recent years the demand for Urushi products has been somewhat flat compared to the demand for ceramic products. It is hoped that the splendor of Urushi can be rediscovered, and that the magnificence of Urushi-e will be re-introduced. Urushi is extracted from Urushi trees. Wild Urushi trees used to grow only in Asia, specifically in the region of Southeast Asia including Japan, China, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Laos and Burma. There are tens of different Urushi species, and the trees, flowers and extracts differ according to the regions in which they're grown. Japanese Urushi extract is milky white when fresh, but it is chemically blackened by adding colorant such as iron. As it ages, Urushi may change to a faded black. On the other hand, Urushi extract in southern regions is naturally jet black. Natural southern Urushi does not change its jet-black color for hundreds of years.

Colored Urushi Exists Only with Artificial Creation

Natural Urushi extract taken from Urushi trees is called inrush or natural Urushi, and it is milky white. Kijiro-Urushi, or base Urushi, is the refined dry form of natural Urushi. Base Urushi is semi-transparent and yellowish brown. Colored Urushi is made by mixing mineral colorants into the base Urushi.

Not all colorants result in color development. Because Urushi triggers specific chemical reactions, the types of colors attained from color development have been limited. Colorants vary according to the historical periods, and the current types of colored Urushi are typically manufactured through chemical means.

Red:

Vermilion Urushi In the old days, natural vermilion sand powder was used. Artificially produced red includes mercury sulphide, mercury red (dull red), true red (Japanese flag red), washed red (pinkish yellow red color

defined for the admiration of God and the Sun in old days), Chinese red. Bengara (Rusty red) Urushi In the old days, hematite was used. In the chemical version it is produced with Fe_2O_3 iron oxide. Also called bengara.

Yellow:

Yellow Urushi Natural orpiment or chemically produced arsenic sulfide. Others include chrome yellow and cadmium yellow.

Green:

Green Urushi In the old days, this consisted of a mixture of orpiment and indigo. Blue Urushi powder made with arsenic sulfide and midnight blue or indigo wax, or an oil-based version called blue light is used. Others include chromium green. Also called blue Urushi.

Brown:

Urumi Made with black Urushi and vermilion or bengara red.

Black:

Black Urushi In the old days, this was made from the essence of sesame or cole seed oil. It can be produced using pitch made by burning pine roots or resin. Iron powder is also used as the colorant.



Colors other than listed above are all canceled out when mixed with Urushi and will not develop. For that reason white color has been defined as an impossible color to attain. If white color was desired, considerable effort had to be made, such as using litharge painting techniques. However, litharge painting is a type of oil painting, so it is possible to attain a variety of colors (including white). Unfortunately, litharge painting barely blends in on the Urushi surface the way that Urushi-e does, and this is a serious disadvantage. For that reason the use of litharge painting has faded out over time. Entering the mid-1920s, white Urushi production was made possible through the use of titanium dioxide. White colorants

for white Urushi dyed in various colors are called lake colorants. Matsuoka states, “The discovery of white colorants in fact made Urushi-e possible,” but he further states, “It is not suitable to use lake colorant as a base, since lake colorant tends to fade.

Colored Urushi is made just before its use by mixing colorant(s) with base Urushi and is manually kneaded for the amount to be used. When colored Urushi is stored after being mixed for a period of time, it may have a chemical reaction and occasionally it can change to a substance that will not dry. For this reason colored Urushi is not commercially sold in a tube form the way that oil paints are. In terms of colors, Urushi also has specific characteristics that complicate the work process of “Urushi-e.” Nonetheless, the deeply austere and rich tones of colored Urushi are its uniquely fascinating appeal, which is not attainable by oil paints.



Wondrous Characteristics of Urushi



When dried, Urushi becomes amazingly durable and will not liquefy easily. It is highly resistant to benzene, alcohol, acid, sodium and electricity. Matsuoka’s claim that “Urushi will last for hundreds of years” points to this durability. The strong durability of Urushi is attained when dried, but bear in mind that it needs to be dried. The Urushi drying process, however, requires rather troublesome conditions.

Under normal ambient conditions, Urushi dries at $32^{\circ} \sim 104^{\circ}F$, and it will not dry below $32^{\circ}F$. When the ambient temperature is above $104^{\circ}F$, the drying process will stop but will resume at a temperature above $176^{\circ}F$. Under normal circumstances it will dry in five to six hours, but that varies according to the position and condition of the Urushi-coated surface. In other words, the drying process will vary day to day, and from season to season. Because succeeding

processes cannot be resumed until the Urushi is dried, Urushi-e cannot be painted at a pace equal to that of oils.

With Urushi having the unconventional drying temperature path, there is a method of drying and hardening Urushi efficiently and quickly. This method is called high-temperature hardening. When exposed to a temperature of 212° to 248°F or above, Urushi will dry easily, and the process promotes superior durability. This is the method that was applied to armors, armets and harnesses in the old days. The other method is the humid temperature method. The Urushi piece is left to dry in a special room with 80% – 90% humidity. If the humidity is too high the Urushi will shrink, so the humidity must be carefully controlled. Matsuoka employed the high-temperature method. He discusses this method, saying, “Even if mineral-base colored Urushi is used, some colors may change with heat, so distinctions must be made for the same color whether high-temperature hardening or the humid temperature method is used.” This is another indication of the delicate characteristics of Urushi and the difficulty in handling it.

Polishing as an Essential Process

Urushi is known for its process of repeated drying, but the important process of polishing must not be overlooked. In fact, Urushi coating and polishing are equal in importance. With the repeated processing of coating, drying and polishing, a flat, mirror-like surface can be achieved. Generally, undercoats are polished with a polishing stone, and fine-grained charcoal is used to polish the top coat. Matsuoka indicates, “When Urushi is dried, there is a tendency for the surface to become even darker, on top of the fact that colorants tend to settle into the lower layer. Consequently, the surface has the stronger brown color of Urushi but less colorant. Polishing will remove the surface layer and smooth it out so that the original tones at the time of painting can be achieved.” Additionally, Urushi becomes more transparent with age. According to Matsuoka, “Urushi-e will brighten its tone as it ages and maintain its original tones,” which is a fascinating characteristic of Urushi-e. By wiping off the surface with a dry cloth, Urushi-e will maintain its beauty year after year.



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“Urushi-e” in the Modern Era

“Urushi-e” Highlighted in France in the same period of Matsuoka’s Career

There is an urushi craft artist named Masaru Hamanaka, who moved to Paris when he was young and carried out his artistic activities there. In 1937 his artwork on a two-meter by four-meter screen exhibited at the French Fine and Craft Art Hall of the World Expo, in Paris, earned a grand prix award, the highest honor. His works were highly regarded and were featured in a special edition of the international art magazine *Illustration*. Considering the political atmosphere at the time, the fact that the edition was devoted to a Japanese artist from the enemy country of Japan indicates how well the artworks of Masaru Hamanaka were regarded at the time. He is a renowned urushi artist from that era, along with Tsuguharu Fujita.



European artists seemed to be inspired by the unique atmosphere of “urushi.” Many engaged in urushi arts, while replicas of urushi crafts and furniture simulated with urushi wares were produced, and reportedly accessories with eggshell applications were popular in those days. The French urushi artist Jean Dunant (1887–1942) was close to Masaru Hamanaka, and had an active artistic life. His wide range of artworks included portraits that had not been seen in Japanese urushi artworks.

Lacquer Painting Gains Popularity in China

Since the time when Matsuoka was challenging “Urushi Artwork” during the Taisho and Showa periods (1912–1988), the time has changed and quality colorant products for saishitsu have been readily available. There have been artistic activities to establish urushi-e as an art field in various regions, such as China and Vietnam.

In the book titled “Urushi – Uruwashi no Asia (Urushi – Delightful Asia, in Japanese)” (by Nagatoshi Onishi, published by NEC Creative), it is stated that urushi paintings have become very popular in China. In Japan it is called “urushi-e,” but in China it is called “lacquer painting (drawing media).” The Fujian Craft and Fine Art School in Xiamen has a lacquering art department (appropriately called the Lacquering Department), and a large mural lacquer artwork done by the school is reportedly displayed at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. Lacquer painting is expressed more in a fine-art format, using urushi techniques to bring out texture and color of materials. Instead of drawing a picture using urushi techniques alone, urushi art techniques are employed as part of the quest for artistic expression.



Contemporary Vietnamese Fine Art “Urushi Painting”

Urushi trees also grow in Vietnam, and various urushi wares have been produced in that country. Surprisingly, there is no oil painting (Western-style fine arts) department at Hanoi Art College, and contemporary fine arts in

Vietnam are definitely defined in “lacquer paintings.” In the Urushi book cited earlier it is stated, “Lacquer paintings is the fine art of Asia, and a culture of Vietnam.” This statement may surprise many. Vietnam came under the rule of France in 1884, and that period of rule lasted until about 1940. The influence of French taste is evident in Vietnamese lacquer paintings. Unique techniques for contemporary expression have emerged, and brand-new fine arts have been developed.

Urushi Art Gaining Artistic Freedom in Japan



Urushi has versatile uses not only for urushi ware or urushi-e but also for other forms of art such as sculpting and molding, where it functions without much complication. In Japan the performance of urushi has been reviewed from progressive points of view, and urushi artists have developed creative individual expressions. As Matsuoka predicted, “I have done it, and for the future I believe there will be new artists with their own creativities that surpass my works.” Branches of urushi arts have been expanding with free expressions not bound by the convention of fine arts.

Not limited to urushi-e, urushi crafts have thrived in various areas such as Spain, Portugal, France, the U.S. and Brazil. Urushi is moving forward toward a new age in a quest to explore and cultivate the beauty of urushi as a leading traditional culture in Japan. Should the saishitsu fine artworks of Taiwa Matsuoka be the catalyst for interest cultivated among many people, it would be his greatest honor as an artist who devoted his life to pioneering in saishitsu fine art.

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