

The Lacquerware of Japan

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EVERYBODY, of course, knows the word "Japan" as the name of a country. I suspect, though, that very few people today, whether foreign or Japanese, know that the same word can also refer to lacquer or lacquerware—that the name of the country, much the same as in the case of China, is synonymous with one of the great decorative arts of the Far East. More important still, perhaps, is the fact that the true worth of Japanese lacquerware as such tends to be forgotten nowadays, and I hope that this short survey of the glories of the past that made the word "japan" so famous will do something to remedy this state of affairs.

The liquid lacquer used in making lacquerware is obtained from the lacquer tree by tapping in much the same way as liquid rubber is drawn from the rubber tree. Used just as it is, however, it dries too quickly and has a poor luster, so it must be stirred and heated, and various substances must be added to it depending on whether it is to be used for coating articles, painting lacquer pictures, or for producing high-grade colored lacquers.

Once the lacquer used to coat an article has dried and hardened, it is extremely resistant to acids, alkalis, damp, heat, and so on. It is also an excellent insulator against heat and electricity, and has a very high adhesive power.

A lacquered surface, moreover, has a luster with a characteristic depth, and a soft, warm texture. In short, lacquer is not only strong for practical purposes but is highly pleasing aesthetically as well. I doubt whether any other paint or varnish could be found with such an ideal combination of properties.

Lacquer is produced only in Asian countries such as Japan, China, Cambodia, Burma, and Thailand. For this reason, lacquerware is a unique product of these regions. That produced in Japan is considered to be of the highest quality of all.

The first discovery by the peoples of Asia that the liquid of the lacquer tree which grew naturally in their fields and hills, could be used for coating articles and as an adhesive dates from quite ancient times. Lacquerware of a fairly high quality was being produced in China several centuries before the birth of Christ, and some of the objects dating from the latter part of the Jōmon Era (around the latter half of the second millennium *b.c.*) which have been excavated in Japan are believed to have made use of lacquer. Moreover, they are technically fairly advanced, and a more primitive use of lacquer could probably be traced back to a still earlier period. Too few pieces have survived, however, to make possible any systematic account of the development of lacquerware in early times, and one can only hope that