

Edo Lacquerer

Yasuhide Nakajima

Sustaining the lacquering techniques that have been passed down for 11 generations, He also continually blazes new trails with the true Edo native's taste for new things.

Personally extending his sales network, striving to popularize Edo lacquerware

Chuo-ku is the very heart of Tokyo. It is home to Nihonbashi, lined with major corporations, and to the world-famous Ginza shopping district, but also to the far homelier districts that lie across the Sumida River. There, you'll find rows of two-story houses and shops, open waterways, and wide-open skies, imbued with the air of Edo.

The lacquerware store, Urushigei Nakajima, is part of this side of Chuo-ku. It was founded 300 years ago in Nihonbashi. It custom-made the lacquered furniture and accessories that feudal lords commissioned for their daughters' dowries; the artisans' skills had to be at the highest level to fashion such items. 11th-generation owner Yasuhide Nakajima, a certified Traditional Craftspeople of Tokyo, carries on the Edo shikki (Lacquerware)

tradition today.

After completing his studies, Mr. Nakajima worked at Yamagataya in Tsukiji for three years, learning the art of lacquer. "My mentor taught me everything from the characteristics of lacquer to the basics of business," Mr. Nakajima recounts. "He is a great benefactor. After that, I did a lot of cold-calling at Kappabashi kitchen-ware shops and made a lot of lacquer serving stands for sushi restaurants. Some people think that craftsmen just have to keep their skills up, but I disagree. You have to keep developing new work and adapting to the changes of the times."

With his father, Mr. Nakajima mostly made large pieces - chests of drawers and so on - but as times changed, he shifted to smaller items like tableware and combs. He is innovative about tools,

too. "Medical rubber gloves are handy - thin, so you can do intricate work, and they don't leave fingerprints, so the lacquer dries fast. Some people insist on working without gloves till their hands are completely black, but I think they could be more flexible," he says.

Elsewhere in Japan, the lacquer craft features a division of labor between painting, polishing, and so on, but in the Edo tradition, a single artisan completes the entire process from start to finish. The process has many steps. Lacquer needs several days to dry after each application. It can take some months to complete an order. "Lacquering is like raising a child. If you don't keep a close eye on it, it won't dry properly. The more effort you put into it, the better it becomes, like a living thing. Chemical paints dry fast, but



Mr. Nakajima makes a variety of items, including bowls, chopsticks, and combs. He also does exhibits at department store events, to grow the appreciation of Edo lacquerware.

lacquer is more interesting. It is said to have antiseptic, waterproof, insect-repellent and antibacterial properties, and it is beautiful to see it develop a gloss over time," says Mr. Nakajima. Today, he is carefully finishing a piece that will soon enter someone's home like a bride. It is as if he were raising his own child.

Applying lacquer is like raising a child



"I have been truly blessed with everyone from the masters in my years of training, to my business partners and customers."



Left: Straining the lacquer to remove dust and dirt
Right: The comb is painted with *negoro* lacquer, in which a base coat of black lacquer is overlaid with a coat of red lacquer, that is then polished to reveal the black pattern beneath.

Profile ● Born in 1943. 11th-generation Urushigei Nakajima. Certified as a Traditional Craftspeople of Tokyo, 2013

1-4-12, Tsukuda, Chuo-ku, Tokyo