

Fig. 1. Portable *namban* altar, front view of altar top with initials of the Society of Jesus I.H.S. before treatment

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An Example of Conservation Work: A Portable *Namban* Style Altarpiece with *Makie* Design from the Nagoya Municipal Museum

This report is concerned with the process of conservation of a portable *namban* style altarpiece done at the Mejiro Institute of Urushi between June 1997 and March 1998.

What is *namban* lacquerwork?

In 1549, Francisco Javier landed in Kagoshima and started his missionary work in Japan. While propagating the Catholic religion, the Jesuits had the ritual implements decorated with a traditional Japanese technique: *makie*. Many pieces of lacquerware were brought home by the Jesuits, and can now be seen in Portugal. Very few remained in Japan, for Catholicism was banned in 1619.

Liturgical implements in lacquer technique such as portable altars, host boxes and reading stands were exported to Europe in the early years and highly appreciated. Therefore, more and more lacquered products, such as chests and cabinets, were produced and shipped abroad. The term *namban* lacquerwork is used for lacquerwork made for export as well as for domestic use, which was decorated with patterns and exotic motifs such as foreign people and dogs. A typical design of the *namban* style is a scene with animals and plants framed with geometrical patterns and scrollwork. Motifs are usually inlaid with *hiramakie* or mother-of-pearl. These technical and decorative characteristics may have derived from the popular *Koudaiji makie* style and matched the taste of the Europeans.

1. Introduction

Portable altars of this type with hinged double doors and a picture of the Virgin and Christ inside is called '*seigan*' in Japanese (colour plate XVIII.1). It is one of the typical examples of *namban* lacquerwork made in the sixteenth century in Japan. The outside of the doors shows a design of cherry blossoms, camellias and birds (colour plate XVIII.2); the inside shows wild pinks, maple trees and deer (fig. 2). The pictures are framed with designs of *namban* scrolls and geometric patterns. All the designs are applied with gold and silver *makie* and mother-of-pearl. The sides of the altar are decorated with gourds. The top of the altar is shaped like a Chinese style gable, and is decorated with religious symbols of the Jesuits: the initials I.H.S. (fig. 1), a cross and a heart with three nails. An oil painting of Christ on wood is held in place by two frames lacquered in black and one with *namban* scrolls. The measurements are 45.5 x 31.3 x 4.8 cm.

2. Present Condition

A vertical crack from the shrinkage of wood is seen on the backside of the main body and caused a difference in level (fig. 3). The structure of the altar is unsteady because of cracks also seen at the joint of the body and the top part which is shaped like a Chinese-style gable, and a lacquer coating near the cracks is lifting. There are many dents from the side to the bottom of the



△ 2

Fig. 2. Right door inside in *makie* with supplements before treatment

Fig. 3. Overall view of altar back before treatment

Fig. 4. Hinge, outer edge, right side, after treatment

Fig. 5. Hinge, left bottom, before treatment

body, some of which have been restored in Europe with white material like putty. The center of the right door is seriously damaged and coating and *makie* are inlaid in later restorations with unknown materials.

The panel of the painting is strongly warped. Dryness also added a long crack in the center which runs to the frame. Too much adhesive and animal glue has been stuffed into the crack in later restorations and now spoils the outward appearance of the piece of lacquerwork. Nails used to attach the metal hinges have become loose and prevent doors from opening smoothly. The right upper hinge is broken in two, only held with two nails (fig. 4). The left bottom hinge is also cracked in the corner. Two of the nails have been applied later, as many are missing and new ones need to be supplied (fig. 5).

3. Policy

The present policy of restoration carried out by the Agency for Cultural Affairs is, as is the general trend, conservation rather than restoration of works of art. Therefore, most restoration and conservation measures are undertaken using the same materials and techniques as were originally used for each individual item.



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△ 4



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4. Conservation

4.1 Preparatory research

The first step was to photograph and measure the item and to develop a concept for the conservation procedure. Photographs and records were also taken at each step of the conservation process, so that the condition before and after can easily be compared. A report was made later. Conservation work was concentrated on the altar, whereas the panel of Christ was left untouched. Before starting, the altar had to be taken into parts by removing the doors, the frames and the panel in order to repair the crack, make the backside even and to restore the broken hinges.

4.2 Disassembly

Separating the altar into its component parts has originally begun by removing the metal hinges. However, as the copper nails holding the hinges were bent open inside the main frame, the oil painting of Christ and the frame were taken out before removing the hinges. An excessive amount of animal glue and adhesives covering the outer frame had to be removed first.

Animal glue, which struck the inner and outer frame, was softened with warm water and cut away with a very thin blade. The greatest care was taken not to peel off the lacquer coating together with the glue covering it. Once the glue was removed, the panel of Christ came off easily since it had not been glued. At this point an under-panel was discovered. This panel was blackened with charcoal, and held in place by the outer frame. The under-panel and the outer frame were also fixed to the main body with excessive animal glue, which was removed in the same way as before.

It was found, that the reverse side of the under-panel was decorated with a *makie* and mother-of-pearl design unrelated to the rest of the altar. The under-panel had once been broken in two and had been joined together with animal glue. However, the two halves were rejoined with a thin strip of wood in between using much animal glue, and the design was not aligned. The glue and wooden strip used for the restoration were kept. The panels and frames were successfully taken out. This cleared the way for the nails to be straightened and pulled out, thus removing the hinges and the doors.

4.3 Cleaning

After all the basic parts were disassembled, each part was carefully cleaned. A cotton cloth very slightly dampened with water not to scratch the surface was used to wipe away oil stains and dust on the lacquer coating. If the cloth is too wet, moisture may seep through the cracks and weaken the foundation. If the cloth is too dry, dust particles may cause additional scratches on the surface. Cleaning was done except for the previously restored areas of the *makie* design. Lifting and flaking areas were held down with thin strips of *washi* paper and starch to avoid breaking off during the cleaning process.

4.4 Resetting the mother-of-pearl

Since the mother-of-pearl inlay had originally been applied with animal glue, they were reset with the same material. Pressure was applied evenly, and any excessive glue was wiped off. After they were dried, a hairline space between the original lacquer surface and the mother-of-pearl was sealed with *sabi urushi* to protect the mother-of-pearl from relifting and to prevent a seeping through of lacquer during the following process.

4.5 *Urushi gatame*

After the mother-of-pearl inlay was firmly reset, *urushi gatame* was done, a process which is of great importance in conservation work. Lacquer surfaces develop cracks by shrinkage of wooden bodies and exposure to ultra-violet light over a long period of time. Generally speaking, a lacquer surface of about 200 years of age has microscopic cracks; after 300 years or more, they become visible to the eye. The technique of *urushi gatame* aims at preventing further damage of the lacquer surface by seeping natural lacquer into the cracks, and brings back flexibility to the coating. If any other resin is used, the surface becomes unnaturally stiff and causes a cracking of the coating. Natural lacquer is wiped off immediately after it is applied to the surface and seeped into the cracks, leaving the cracks filled. This technique usually needs a week or more to dry the lacquer well.

4.6 Holding down the lifted coating

After the application of *urushi gatame* areas, where lifting pieces had been lightly held down with starch and *washi* paper, were restored. Thinned *mugi urushi* was applied between the lifting pieces and the base, then pressure was evenly applied with pressure distributing plates. Excess *mugi urushi* that was forced out was wiped off. Pressure was reapplied and left for four to five days. It takes a longer time in humid seasons.

4.7 Restoring cracking areas

Cracked areas were set with *mugi urushi* in the same way as the process above. The backside of the altar, where a deep crack was making the surface uneven, was restored by pressuring the surface with a clamp.

4.8 Reassembling the frames

The inner frame had been disassembled into four bars. The top and the bottom wood which were bent were straightened and bonded. Since they had also been carved thinner than the left and the right ones in the previous restoration, four woods were carefully joined in the proper position. The panel underneath, which had once been broken and glued together, was re-separated into two halves and joined together realigned with *mugi urushi*. The outer frame was installed around the inner one. The outer frame and the backside were fixed firmly with wooden nails.

Fig. 6. Altar back: glueing with *mugi urushi*



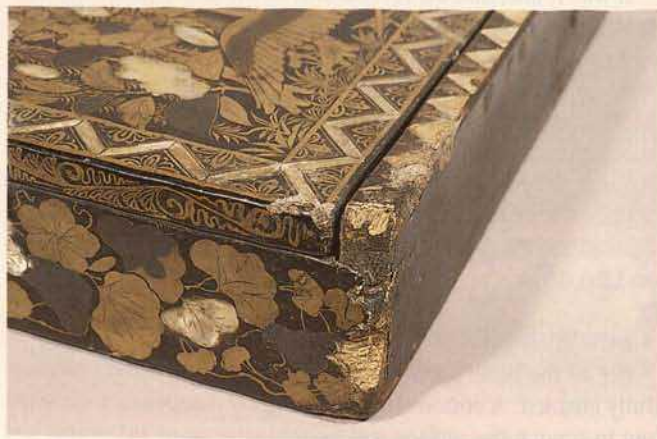


1 Overall view of the front of the portable *namban* altar after treatment

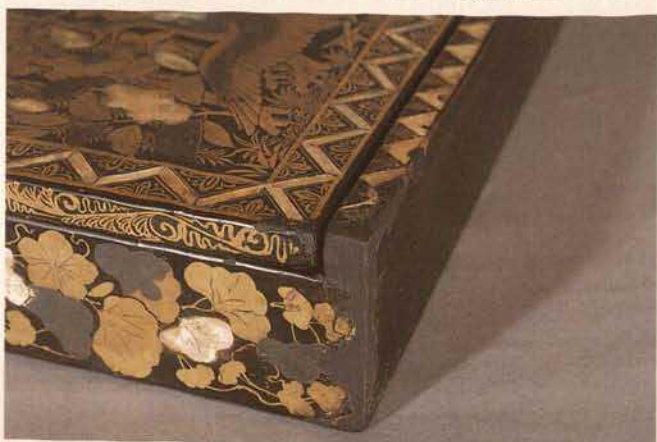
2 Overall view of the portable *namban* altar before treatment



3 Outer edge, left side below, fault, before treatment



4 Outer edge, left side below, after treatment with *kiwasabi*



4.9 Filling in *kokuso*

Chipped and dented areas were filled with several coats of *kokuso* of different consistencies and set just under the original surface (colour plate XVIII.3, 4). This is to show that the area was conserved rather than restored. White putty-like material used in the previous restoration was removed and replaced with *kokuso* (figs. 7, 8).

4.10 *Kiwasabi*

After the materials filled in the cracks and underneath the lifting areas were fully dried, very little *sabi urushi* was applied around the restored areas to prevent the re-cracking and to make a smooth surface.

4.11 Fixing and fittings

Bent hinges were straightened, and the right upper hinge, which had been broken in two, was reinforced with a thin metal plate from the back. New nails were applied to the missing places and in place of the nails of the previous restoration.

4.12 Reassembly

Finally, the parts were assembled. However, because so much animal glue covering the frames and the panel underneath was removed, an empty space of 3 mm remained between the main body and the panel underneath. To compensate the lack of glue, a thin wooden support was installed behind the panel underneath. The oil painting was put back into the main body joined together with the frames.

4.13 Photographs and records

After all the conservation work was finished, photographs were taken under the same condition as before the work, records were arranged in order and pictures taken during the work were attached to the report.



Fig. 7. Back side, upper left, fault within the wood before treatment

Fig. 8. Back side, upper left: application of *kokuso*, condition after treatment

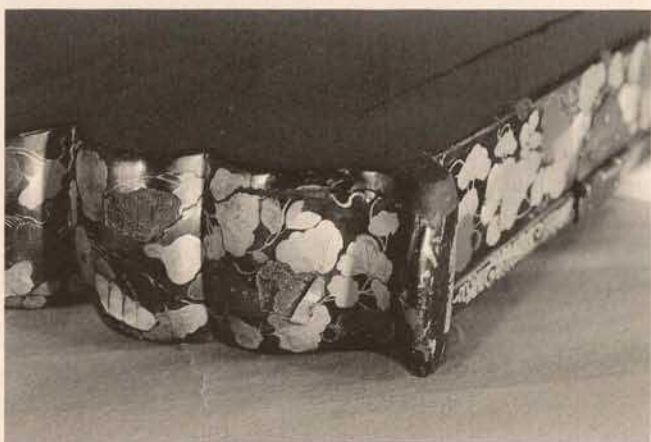


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