

Form and Surface – the lacquerwork of Nishimura Keikou III

‘Wood warps,’ so the saying goes. It twists, it distorts, and it shrinks. If care is not taken to respect its inherent properties, things can easily go wrong. When using wooden substrates for works made from lacquer (*urushi*), this must always be borne in mind. There are methods for making substrates from materials that do not warp, the dry lacquer technique (*kanshitsu*) being a prime example. In other craft media, ceramics for example, while clay can be freely shaped according to the maker’s will, accidental outcomes often occur during firing. There is in this regard a long history of the appreciation among pottery enthusiasts of distorted shapes, kiln change (*yohen*) colour effects, and flowing glazes.

The distinctive forms of the third-generation Nishimura Keikou’s *tawame* works reveal the strength of *urushi* countering the tendency to warp of the thinly fashioned wooden forms to which it is applied. Nishimura’s approach is unusual among makers of lacquerware in its embracing of the changes in shape that occur during the hardenings in a humidity cabinet (*urushiburo*) following each of the multiple coatings of lacquer applied. Although Nishimura always has a sense of the shape he wants to create, he gives precedence to the way in which the wood naturally moves. In the expanding range of wares he makes – which includes tea caddies and other kinds of tea utensil – he increasingly aims to produce works that look and feel organic.ⁱ

Nishimura’s approach as a lacquerer is underpinned by his concern with the relationship between forms (*katachi*) and their plain *urushi* surfaces. In this essay I will explore these two principal focuses in relation to his *tawame* works. The reason he calls himself a lacquerer (*nushi*) is because he comes from a family of specialists in *uwanuri*, which is the application by flat brush (*bake*) of the uppermost coatings of *urushi*. I will begin with a biographic profile and then discuss how Nishimura came to use the *tawame* technique.

Nishimura was born in Kyoto in 1966 to a family of *uwanuri* specialists established by his grandfather. In 1985, shortly after graduating from the Department of Lacquerware of the Kyoto City Dōda Senior High School of Art (incorporated into today’s Kyoto City Senior High School of Art), he became an apprentice to Suzuki Masaya (1932-2013), who in 1992 assumed the name Suzuki Hyōsaku III. At the time Nishimura was at high school, there was a system in place whereby graduates interested in *nuri* (lacquering) became apprentices in the Suzuki Hyōsaku studio while those interested in *maki-e* (lit. sprinkled picture) decoration joined the workshop of Hattori Shunshō (1943-2018).

The first-generation Suzuki Hyōsaku (1874-1943) studied under the second-generation Kimura Hyōsai (1855-1924). The successive generations of Hyōsaku and the craftspeople who studied under them belong to what is known as the Hyō School of Kyoto lacquerers. Suzuki Masaya, the eldest son of Hyōsaku II, studied under Mizuuchi Kyōhei (1909-2001) and Hiraishi Kōshō (1910-1989) at Kyoto City Hiyoshigaoka High School (incorporated into today’s Kyoto City Senior High School of Art). He then studied under Matsuda Gonroku (1896-1986) and Rokkaku Daijō (1914-1973) at Tokyo University of the Arts. As well as being a regular contributor to the Nitten exhibition, in 1968 he founded Kyoto’s Formé group of lacquer artists. He is known for his experimental lacquerwork using substrates made of transparent acrylic.ⁱⁱ

While Nishimura was at the Hyōsaku studio he learnt all the processes of lacquerworking except how to make wood-substrates. He became independent in 1994 in order to take over the family business of *uwanuri* lacquering. He assumed the name of Keikou III in 2008. Following this, from about 2011, he started using the *tawame* technique

with which he had previously become familiar while working for Suzuki Mutsumi (1942-2009).

Suzuki Mutsumi was the younger brother of Suzuki Masaya. He was famous for pioneering the *tawame* technique to produce innovative triangular, oblong or pentangular *kutsugata* (lit. clog-shaped or déformé) forms.ⁱⁱⁱ Nishimura had known Mutsumi from before enrolling in high school because of the professional relationship his father Keikou II had with Mutsumi. The world of Kyoto lacquer production has been characterised historically by a system of division of labour with separate workshops specialising in the production of substrates using techniques such as woodturning (*bikimono*) and bentwood work (*magemono*), the application of foundation (*shitaji*) layers, the application of *urushi* coatings, and methods of surface decoration, most importantly *maki-e*. Having separate groups of craftspeople specialising in these different processes has been the key to the superior quality of Kyoto lacquerwork. Following Mutsumi's death in 2009, Nishimura, who had assisted him over the years – and in the context of Kyoto's system of division of labour – carried on Mutsumi's legacy by learning to make preparatory drawings and how to use the *tawame* technique. It is notable that the super-thin wooden substrates employed by Nishimura are made by the expert woodturner Nishimura Naoki (1949-) upon whom Mutsumi had depended.

With the benefit of extensive training from his time in the Hyōsaku studio onwards, Nishimura involves himself in every stage of production from the application of foundation layers through to *uwanuri* lacquering.^{iv} His experience of working with preparatory drawings has given him invaluable insights into Mutsumi's approach to lacquer-making at the same time as giving him the confidence to develop his own artistic voice.

As mentioned earlier, one of Nishimura's two principal focuses of interest is form (*katachi*). With a thickness of only 0.3 millimetres, the wooden substrates he uses for *tawame* work are so thin that light passes through them and they can be easily flexed by hand. He starts by bending (*tawame*) a substrate and securing it by means such as binding with string. He then soaks it with *urushi* and leaves it to harden (*kijigatame*). This is followed by the repeated application of foundation layers, each of which is also followed by hardening. The tendency of the substrate to revert to its original shape is countered by the strength of the *urushi* layers applied to its surface. Nishimura has to judge from the feel of the particular piece of wood he is using the extent to which he can alter its shape. By the time all the foundation layers have been applied, his forms are stable enough to retain their shape.

With his *tawame* works, Suzuki Mutsumi used to bend the substrate until pressing on the sides would cause the bottom to swell out and alter the balance of the overall form. He sometimes made modifications at the polishing stage, on occasion even removing areas of the underlying wooden substrate. In this sense he shaped his works uncompromisingly according to his artistic intention.

Nishimura initially used the same approach as Mutsumi. But over time, as he came to accept that timber could not always be turned into the forms he wanted, he decided to strike a balance between what he was aiming for and the natural behaviour of the wood. Mutsumi sought through the use of the *tawame* technique to pioneer an alternative language of lacquerwork by manipulating what had begun as perfectly symmetrical lathe-turned wooden shapes into dynamic new forms. Nishimura, by contrast, takes a more organic approach that employs the *tawame* technique at the same time as encouraging the timber to behave according to its intrinsic properties.

Nishimura's approach to making has allowed him to develop new kinds of expression. Good examples are his gently shaped Kawatarō *natsume* (tea caddies) with their characteristically indented lids. He uses standard-shaped Kawatarō *natsume* wooden substrates, but the uneven application to their indentations of fine foundation material (*sabi*) gives

his forms a distinct feeling of energy.

As an *uwamuri* specialist, Nishimura's father had little experience of using spatulas of the kinds used for applying foundation materials. For Nishimura, by contrast, the application of foundation materials has long been an integral part of his work. Being attuned to the tendency of wood to warp and move, Nishimura not only incorporates this as an integral feature of his work but is inspired to experiment with other ways of making forms.

Nishimura imbues his Kawatarō *natsume* with a harmonious quietude by applying subtly gradated (*bokashi nuri*) red to their lids. As stated earlier, his second principal focus of interest is the quality of the plain lacquering (*nuri*) he applies to his shapes. His skill as a lacquerer can be seen in how he leaves only the slightest traces of brush marks on the surfaces of his *nuritate* (lacquering without subsequent polishing) finishes. In this respect he is as accomplished at using flat brushes as he is at working with spatulas. One can see that Nishimura has pursued his own creative agenda with Suzuki Mutsumi's example as a springboard. With his *tawame* works he coaxes his super-thin wooden substrates into shapes consolidated by the application and hardening of foundation layers. He then finishes his forms with *tame nuri* (dark caramel-coloured lacquering) in ways that reveal the grain of the underlying timber. Mindful of Mutsumi's exhortation to always use monochrome finishes, Nishimura uses gradated lacquering as a way of quietly harmonising the surface colouring of his works with their organic shapes.

This exhibition, at the suggestion of Nakacho Konishi, has been an opportunity for Nishimura to revisit his long-standing interest in tea utensils. Through his network of contacts in Kyoto, he has benefitted from handling many historical pieces of lacquer, notably by having undertaken the conservation and restoration of a *nakatsugi* tea caddy made by the renowned early-seventeenth-century lacquerer Fujishige Tōgen. It is clear that Nishimura has learnt much from his exposure to historical tea utensils, which over the centuries have developed in a proscribed range of formats to supreme levels of sophistication. The sharpness of the edges of his tea caddies and the perfection of fit between their bases and lids are a measure of the high level of Kyoto craftsmanship to which Nishimura has been heir.

This exhibition offers fascinating insights into his exploration of 'Form and Surface' through the making of tea utensils.

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- i Miyagawa, Tomomi. 'Sandai Nishimura Keikō no seisaku – taiwa to kinchō no zōkei' [The art of Nishimura Keikō III – works born of dialogue and tension], in Nishimura Keikō, *Nushi Nishimura Keikō* [The lacquerer Nishimura Keikō]. (Kyoto: imura art + books), 2023. The statements by Nishimura cited in this essay are taken from interviews conducted intermittently by the author during January and February 2024.
- ii Suzuki, Masaya. *Ryōran no Shitsugei: Suzuki Masaya Sakuhinshū* [A profusion of lacquer art: collected works of Suzuki Masaya]. (Kyoto: Futaba Shobō), 1989.
- iii Suzuki, Mutsumi. *Mutsumi Jussen* (The Lacquerware of Suzuki Mutsumi). (Tokyo: Koerance Publishing), 2004; Katayanagi, Kusafu. 'Kyō urushi sandai – Suzuki Mutsumi to sofu chichi no shigoto' [Three generations of lacquer workers – works by Suzuki Mutsumi, his father, and his grandfather]. *Kikan Ginka*, no 157, March 2009, pp. 100-124
- iv In order to guarantee the future availability of super-thin wooden substrates of the quality made by Nishimura Naoki, Nishimura has established a wooden substrate division in his workshop. In the case of *maki-e* decoration, Nishimura usually commissions external *maki-e* specialists respectively best suited to the works in question.