

Japanese Lacquer

Origins and Production

Origins

- There has been much debate over exactly when and where lacquer originated, but most books trace it back to China and Korea
- These Asian artists and craftsmen used lacquer before the start of written history
- Archaeologists have, for example, found lacquered bowls from China that were created 4,000 years ago, during the Neolithic period
- By the 6th century CE, lacquer had become popular in Japan
- Between the 8th and 12th centuries, Japan lacquering reached its height during the “Age of Lacquerware”

Uses

- Thousands of years ago, lacquer was used to attach arrowheads to spears; and on combs, and other daily utensils
- Because it forms a hard, protective coating, lacquer was once used to cover objects like musical instruments, weapons, furniture, and coffins
- During the Age of Lacquerware, though, many different and creative styles of lacquer decorations evolved

Production

- The first step in the lacquering process is extracting a creamy-gray sap from the trunk of the lacquer tree
- The sap is strained, and special kinds of dyes are added to make different colors of lacquer
- The actual lacquering process can take a very long time, and will be ruined if the conditions are not just right
- First, the object that is going to be lacquered needs to be constructed very carefully so it does not break inside the lacquer
- Then, very thin coats of lacquer are applied one at a time
- Lastly, additional decorations are added to the lacquered surface



Right Usually, in Japan, between five and ten horizontal cuts are made on the side of the tree so that the grey sap can ooze out



Left Here, a spigot has been attached to the point of a V-shaped incision that is leaking sap