

# LAYERS OF BRILLIANCE

The Journey of Japanese Lacquer Tools

**ON VIEW:** October 29, 2016 - April 30, 2017

## Exhibition Resource Guide

This exhibition introduces a category of compelling items never before exhibited or studied in Japan or the West—Japanese lacquer makers’ tools. Dating to the early to mid-20th century, these ordinary and functional objects were used to produce everyday lacquered items. In that process they underwent a transformation and became beautiful aesthetic objects.

### EXHIBITION THEMES

#### **Mingei**

Almost a hundred years ago, the Japanese scholar Soetsu Yanagi coined the term *mingei*—everybody’s art—to draw attention to objects that were made by hand for daily use, according to the age-old traditions of Japan, Korea and other Asian countries. This exhibition is an interesting take on *mingei*, focusing on the tools used to make beautiful lacquered objects, which have become works of art in their own right after years of use. These objects also invoke such Japanese aesthetic concepts such as *sabi* (the profound beauty of the rusted and used), and *mitate* (“re-seeing” based on reuse).

#### **Transformation**

Dating to the early to mid-20th century, these humble and functional bowls, boards, tables, boxes, and hand tools were used to produce everyday lacquered items. In that process they underwent a transformation. With their myriad colorful drips and accumulated layers of viscous texture, they record the countless lacquer objects created from them.

#### **Relationship between Craftsman and their Tools**

The tools, with their brilliant drips and layers, intimately reveal the craftsman’s work habits over time including how he approached his lacquer production and how he moved and worked within his own studio. When their years of use were over, the

objects might be polished to reveal buried layers of color. Along the way, some makers altered their tools by intentionally adding carefully placed drips and wipes. Such “interventions” stem from the craftsman’s creative curiosity and, in some cases, their desire to find buyers so that the tool might begin a second life as a work of art to be collected.

### **Process**

Lacquer, a sticky sap-like substance harvested from sumac trees, is unique to Asia. To release the sap from the tree, a worker uses a special sickle to scrape off the bark and scoring tools to gouge the wood and deepen the cut. The sap is transferred from small buckets, which have been coated with oil to prevent the lacquer from sticking, to large storage barrels and mixing tubs. At this point, artisans take the lacquer through the first stages of refining, adding thickeners and colors. Finally, each day the lacquer is strained through paper or cloth, by hand with a squeezing tool. The lacquer is then applied to a surface, usually wood. Many thin layers are applied, and after each coat, the object is placed in a warm, humid cabinet to cure and dry. This laborious process results in a water-repellant and extremely durable surface that is nearly impenetrable to decay.

## **STUDENTS WILL EXPLORE**

- Japanese culture, art forms and aesthetics
- The distinction between art and craft
- The lacquer process and the transformation of tools over time into art objects



Brushes and Spatula  
Japan, twentieth century  
Wood, human or horsehair, colored lacquer  
Private Collection



Crafted Lacquer Bowl  
Japan, twentieth century  
Wood, colored lacquer  
Private Collection



Worktable with Drawers  
Japan, twentieth century  
Wood, colored lacquer, metal  
Private Collection



Worktable for Straining Colored Lacquer  
Japan, twentieth century  
Wood, colored lacquer  
Private Collection