

Namban Style Lacquer

Lacquerware was one of the luxury goods purchased by the first Europeans in Japan. Japanese craftsmen manufactured western-use objects - such as coffers and writing desks, and Christian objects - such as lecterns, etc., treated and embellished with urushi lacquer. Adapting to European tastes, works were decorated with maki-e gold powder and mother of pearl inlays. Plant and flower motives accompanied by birds or animals are the usual repertory.



Urushi Lacquer

Urushi lacquer is a Japanese art whose raw material is the sap obtained from the namesake tree. Layers of sap are applied on a wooden base with consolidation and polishing intervals in between. The result is a black shiny surface with a gentle texture.

Golden motives created with gold particles (maki-e technique) and mother of pearl inlays (*raden* technique) liven up the surface.

EXHIBITION
29 OCTOBER 2015
28 FEBRUARY 2016

FREE ADMISSION

Museum of Navarre. Chapel
Santo Domingo, 47
31001. Pamplona

OPENING HOURS

Tuesday-Saturday
10 am to 2 pm and 5 pm to 7 pm
Sundays and public holidays
11 am to 2 pm

南蛮

Namban lacquer

JAPANESE
SHINE IN
NAVARRE

Namban Period (1543-1639)

The development of navigation first connected Japan with Europe in 1543. First the Portuguese and then the Spanish reached the Japanese archipelago and came into contact with its people. Christian faith was having its fair share of success, whilst different items, e.g. fire weapons, exotic animals, dishes, etc. were spreading in society, until this relationship was cut short in 1639. The Tokugawa government closed the harbours of the country for foreigners - until the 19th century!

During this period, called Nanban (literally, "Southern barbarians" - the first Europeans arriving in Japan from the archipelago's southernmost sea), Japan witnessed a cultural fusion that was reflected in art, fashion, gastronomy and even language.



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Namban Lacquerware in Navarre

A large number of Namban lacquer items has been found in Navarre - the biggest concentration in Spain. Some are due to the Jesuits, while others were purchased by Navarre-born officials in America.

Most of these works reached Navarre in the 17th century as donations to convents and parishes, and were treated as treasures and used for very special purposes because of their beauty and artistic quality. Some were transformed into reliquaries and other into eucharist tabernacles for Maundy Thursday. Singled out as something sacred, they have been respectfully preserved till the present day.

Routes connecting Japan with Spain and its American Viceroyalties (17th c.)

A large number of Namban lacquer items became tradable goods. Most of these luxury items reached Manila (Philippines) and then Mexico, where they landed on the hands of the well-to-do of the Viceroyalties, and ultimately to the harbour of Seville.

Other items reached Spain along the route of the Portuguese, via Goa (India), which was also an important Jesuit enclave.

Viceregal American Art under the influence of Namban lacquer

By the mid-17th century the success of Namban lacquerware prompted the development of other arts seeking to emulate it. A new hybrid art emerged in New Spain, known as "enconchado" - oil painting on wood panels with mother of pearl inlays like Namban lacquerware.

Another art that flourished clearly influenced by Namban lacquer is Pasto varnish, of pre-Columbian origin, made with the vegetable resin of the mopa-mopa tree. Extremely thin semi-transparent layers of the resin are applied in different colours, and even with silver foil in between layers. Two exceptional examples of this type of art are present in Navarre

Conservation and restoration

Japanese *urushi* lacquer is very resistant to water, solvents, acids, heat or scratches - but it degrades irretrievably if exposed to sunlight and its UV radiation

For conservation purposes, owners must be aware of the enormous damage that exposure to sunlight causes to the surface and keep objects in a dark place. Gentle cleaning routines are important, using a dry soft cloth - without rubbing.

The responsibility of restoring lacquered items is in the hands of experts trained in this discipline. For this purpose, the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties of Tokyo (Tobunken) relies on experts who collaborate with restorers from all over the world, disseminating this age-old technique and the most adequate manner to recover their splendour.

