

galvanizing aesthetics: maki-e, yakimono, and kintsugi in context

Stephanie Dunlap | Art of Japan | Fall 2020

introduction

This exhibition catalog follows the development of the Japanese aesthetic over time through the consideration of three elements unique to the archipelago: *shikki* 漆器 (lacquerware), *yakimono* 焼き物 (ceramics), and *maki-e* 蒔絵 ('sprinkled pictures'). In this regard, *maki-e* also refers to the *wabi-sabi* technique of *kintsugi* 金継ぎ ('golden joinery') and *kintsukuroi* 楽焼 ('golden repair'). It is organized in chronological order, with image credits hyperlinked in the caption following each artwork.

The elements considered in this exhibition are as follows:

- i. regional development of Japanese ***shikki*** 漆器 and ***yakimono*** 焼き物
shikki: lacquerware | *yakimono*: ceramics
- ii. ***kazari*** かざり (wonderous adornment) and the rise of ***maki-e*** 蒔絵
maki-e: 'sprinkled pictures' | *raden*: inlay with natural elements
- iii. ***kintsugi*** 金継ぎ, ***yakimono*** 焼き物, and ***raku ware*** 楽焼
kintsugi: 'golden joinery' | *kintsukuroi*: 'golden repair'

*eras at a glance*¹

Jōmon 縄文時代 | 14,000 BCE - 500 BCE

Yayoi 弥生時代 | 300 BCE - 300 CE

Kofun 古墳時代 | 300 - 538

Asuka & Hakuhō 飛鳥時代 | 538 - 710

Nara 奈良時代 | 710 - 794

Heian 平安時代 | 794 - 1185

Kamakura 鎌倉時代 | 1185 - 1333

Nanbokuchō 南北朝時代 | 1333 - 1392

Early Muromachi 室町時代 | 1392 - 1467

Late Muromachi 室町時代 | 1467 - 1573

Azuchi & Momoyama 安土桃山時代 | 1573 - 1600

Edo 江戸時代 | 1600 - 1868

Meiji 明治 | 1868 - 1912

Heisei 平成 | 1989 - 2019

Reiwa 令和 | 2019 - modern era

¹ Non-exhaustive list; eras are approximated based on cultural and historical factors.

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Jōmon | red and black lacquerware 漆器 plate



*Large lacquerware plate with cloud pattern. Red and black lacquer. 1300 - 500 BCE.
Aomori Prefectural Museum. Image: [Aomori Prefectural Museum](#)*

Jōmon | red and black lacquerware 漆器 plate

Lacquerware is about as old as Japanese culture itself. It is commonly believed among art and cultural historians that lacquerware was invented independently by the Jōmon people of Japan. This is evidenced by the sheer amount of primordial lacquerware excavated from various cultural sites across Japan, with some relics dating as far back as the Early Jōmon era, ca. 7,000 BCE.²

The term *urushi* can refer to lacquer as a material or as an artform.³ To create *urushi* as a material, sap is collected from lacquer trees and filtered several times.⁴ The amount of times the sap is filtered determines the resulting color, ranging from clear to amber-colored. Red lacquer could be made through a chemical process involving iron oxide and cinnabar.⁵ Lacquer has been used in a myriad of applications, most commonly on ceramics, wood, and textiles. *Urushi* and Jōmon era lacquerware overall is foundational to the development of lacquering techniques over time, including that of *maki-e* in the Heian era and *kintsugi wabi-sabi* lacquer repair during late Muromachi and early Momoyama.

² *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 2

³ *Urushi Lacquer in Modern Design*. Susanne Fritz. *Architonic*.

⁴ *Urushi Lacquer in Modern Design*. Susanne Fritz. *Architonic*.

⁵ *Jōmon crafts and what they were for*. Heritage of Japan.

Kofun | *yokobe* 横瓶 *with natural ash glaze, Sue ware* 須恵器



*Korean-style yokobe (recumbent bottle). Stoneware with natural ash glaze, Sue ware.
Late 6th century. Met Museum. Image: [Met Museum](#)*

Kofun | *yokobe* 横瓶 *with natural ash glaze*, *Sue ware* 須恵器

This *yokobe*, or recumbent bottle, is one of earliest known Kofun-era vessels. *Yokobe* refers to barrel-shaped, narrow-necked storage vessels.⁶ They were widespread throughout Eastern Asia at the time and were most likely used to store sake and other liquids.⁷

It is part of the Sue ware ceramic family, a type of blue or grey-colored stoneware commonly produced during the Kofun, Nara, and Heian eras. Sue ware was produced in several kilns across Japan and east Asia, but it is intrinsically tied to the Sanage kiln in Aichi prefecture in Japan.⁸ This item was fired in a Korean-style kiln at a high temperature and features a deeply poetic expression of early ash techniques significant to Sue ware.⁹ The striking contrast observed in this *yokobe* was achieved by allowing ash to fall through the kiln during firing.¹⁰

Utilitarian ceramics like this one mark the origin of Japan's use of natural ash glazes in ceramics and lacquerware. They are functional, but occupy a presence outside of any one object. The piece also depicts a dynamism that is repeatedly explored throughout Japanese culture. Overall, this *yokobe* signifies the beginning of Japan's relationship with earthen aesthetics.

⁶ *Yokobe*. British Museum.

⁷ *See image credit*. Met Museum.

⁸ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 185

⁹ *Sue and Suzu ware*. Art Research Center at Ritsumeikan University.

¹⁰ *See image credit*. Met Museum.

Nara | urn with wood ash glaze



Urn. Stoneware with wood ash glaze. 8th century. Met Museum. Image: [Met Museum](#)

This Nara urn is another early representation of Japan's rudimentary earthen aesthetic. The glossy green of the glaze was created with wood ash, which melted onto the vessel during the cave kiln firing process.¹¹ During the Kofun and Nara periods, artisans of the Sanage kiln sought to emulate the aesthetic of Tang dynasty ceramics.¹² The green glaze technique of this urn signifies this cultural interest with Tang prosperity.¹³ Over time, this rusticism will transcend to form one of the central elements of Japanese aesthetic and culture.

¹¹ *Nara era urn*. Met Museum.

¹² *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 185

¹³ *Guide: Japan Ceramics*. Japan National Tourism Organization.

Nara | *Tang era rosewood lute with mother-of-pearl inlay*



Tang-era rosewood lute with mother-of-pearl inlay. wood instrument with mother-of-pearl inlay. Cultural property of Japan. 7th century. Shōsō-in Repository, Tōdai-ji. Image: [Shōsō-in Repository](#)

Nara | *Tang era rosewood lute with mother-of-pearl inlay*

The Tang dynasty corresponds with Japan's Nara period. The collection of items at Shōsō-in were given to Japan by Chinese Emperor Shomu's late wife following his death in 749 CE.¹⁴ The Tang era Chinese pipa housed in the Shōsō-in repository signifies the origin and the development of *raden* and *maki-e*, a medium and process unique to East Asia. *Raden* refers to the inlay technique exemplified in this instrument. Analysis on the various styles of these processes is explored throughout this catalog.

Traditional pipas have four strings and are similar to lutes.¹⁵ This particular instrument is very rare because it has five strings and can be played with either three or five strings. It reflects the mastery of Chinese inlay techniques¹⁶, which predate Japanese *maki-e* development, as well as the prosperity of the Tang dynasty at the time. Today, it is widely considered to be one of the most prized relics preserved in the Shōsō-in repository at Tōdai-ji.

¹⁴ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 86

¹⁵ *Chinese cultural relics lost abroad*. Chinese Culture.

¹⁶ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 88

Heian | jar with imagery of autumn grasses, Atsumi ware 渥美



Jar with autumn grasses design, Atsumi ware. Stoneware with ash glaze and stylized motif. Registered national treasure of Japan. 11th century. Tokyo National Museum. Image: [Tokyo National Museum](#)

Heian | jar with imagery of autumn grasses, Atsumi ware 渥美

This funerary pot marks a critical period in Japanese stoneware: the creation of Atsumi and Tokoname wares in the Aichi prefecture. The urn was excavated from the Hakusan Burial Mound¹⁷ in Kanagawa prefecture.¹⁸ This item contains many signifiers of Heian era ceramics and culture. The green glaze is indicative of Tang dynasty influence and was often made using lead.¹⁹ There is use of seasonal imagery, a staple of the Japanese aesthetic,²⁰ seen in the autumn grass design that covers the urn.

This Atsumi ware urn is precious to Japan; it has been deemed so culturally significant that it is now a registered national treasure. This is in part because it was produced by one of the Six Ancient Kilns 六古窯, a categorization termed by art historian Koyama Fujio during the 20th century.²¹ The Six Ancient Kilns represent the most culturally-significant kilns of medieval Japan. This urn derived from the Atsumi and Tokoname kilns, who adopted their practices from the Sanage kiln.²²

The Six Ancient Kilns produced Bizen 備前焼, Echizen 越前焼, Seto 瀬戸焼, Shigaraki 信楽焼, and Tamba 丹波立杭焼 wares.²³ Ceramics produced from these kilns continued to be popular through the Kamakura, Muromachi, and Momoyama periods. After Momoyama, the 'old kiln' practices were all but abandoned for a new wave of ceramics, but the ancient aesthetic remained the apex of fascination and was kept alive through the continued development of Shigaraki ware.

¹⁷ *Six Ancient Kilns*. Kotobank, Japanese Encyclopedia.

¹⁸ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 185

¹⁹ *Guide: Japan Ceramics*. Japan National Tourism Organization.

²⁰ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 185

²¹ *Japanese Pottery: Six Ancient Kilns*. Britannica.

²² *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 185; see *Kofun yokobe with natural ash glaze, Sue ware*.

²³ *Japanese Pottery: Six Ancient Kilns*. Britannica.

Heian | *maki-e* 蒔絵 sutra box with scenes from the Lotus Sutra



Sutra box with scenes from the Lotus Sutra. Gold and silver maki-e lacquered wood. Registered national treasure of Japan. 11th century. Fujita Museum of Art. Image: [Fujita Museum of Art](#)

Heian | *maki-e* 蒔絵 *sutra box with scenes from the Lotus Sutra*

The Heian era marked the apex of Mahayana Buddhism and Lotus Sutra worship. This *sutra box* was most likely commissioned by a Heian aristocrat to hold the *sutra* of its namesake, an eight scroll *sutra* dedicated to Mahayana Buddhism worship and ideals.²⁴ It features two scenes from the Lotus Sutra on all five panels of the *sutra box* with gold and silver *maki-e* relief on lacquered wood.²⁵

The Lotus Sutra *maki-e* *sutra box* is indicative of the traditional *hiramaki-e* style that was achieved and mastered by Heian-era artisans. *Maki-e* originated as *kazari* ('wonderous adornment')²⁶ to decorate personal items for royal families and the military elite.²⁷ This is evidenced by the relative flatness of the motif compared to other *maki-e* techniques. This is also derivative of cultural and historical factors, as *hiramaki-e* was the first of three classic *maki-e* techniques produced during the Heian era. These techniques are *hiramaki-e* 平蒔絵, *togidashi maki-e* 研出蒔絵, and *takamaki-e* 高蒔絵.

²⁴ See image credit. Fujita Museum.

²⁵ See image credit. Fujita Museum.

²⁶ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 142

²⁷ *Traditional Art Maki-e, Lacquer Ware of Royalty*. Japan Info.

Heian | *maki-e* 蒔絵 *cosmetic box with mother-of-pearl inlay*



Tebako (cosmetic box) with maki-e. Lacquered wood, gold, and mother-of-pearl inlay. Registered national treasure of Japan. 12th century. Tokyo National Museum. Image: [Tokyo National Museum](#)

Heian | *maki-e* 蒔絵 *cosmetic box with mother-of-pearl inlay*

Heian was a historical period marked by the exorbitant wealth of the aristocratic class. In Heian-era Japan, *maki-e* flourished as a symbol of the wealth and prosperity of the elite. This *tebako*, or cosmetic box, exemplifies the *togidashi maki-e* process that was derived from the popularity of traditional *hiramaki-e* at the height of the Heian period.

This *tebako* was achieved using a lacquered wood base with aogin *togidashi maki-e*, *raden* mother-of-pearl inlay, and openwork silver fittings.²⁸ *Togidashi maki-e* refers to one of the three classifications of *maki-e*. It is distinguished by the process of burnishing the surface after the initial design is set.²⁹ Aogin is a blue-gold color made by mixing gold and silver pigments with *urushi*.³⁰

The *raden* carriage wheels were made using thin shell inlay. To make thin shell *raden* inlay³¹, designs are first cut from natural shell materials with a small, sharp blade. *Urushi* is applied to the cut outs and then the inlay is attached to the decorated item. An additional layer of lacquer is applied and then the item is polished to expose the design. Additional *maki-e* is applied and then the surface is burnished to complete the process.

Though the definitive answer remains unknown, art and cultural historians alike have many informed theories and insights about the rich imagery of this exquisite relic. The box was likely used to store writing materials or sutra scrolls. The imagery depicts a swell of carriage wheels submerged in the Kamogawa River to keep the wheels from drying out.³² This is a recurring theme throughout the Heian period. The carriage wheel motif is also resonant of Pure Land Buddhism, which permeated Japan during the Heian era.³³ Art historian Etō Shun argues that this imagery may be intended to invoke allusion to Anita's Pure Land, citing the scriptural passage "lotus flowers in the pond, big as carriage wheels" as the basis of this plausible explanation.³⁴

²⁸ *Toiletry Case with Cart Wheels in Stream*. National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan.

²⁹ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 181

³⁰ *Toiletry Case with Cart Wheels in Stream*. National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan.

³¹ *Raden*. Gallery Japan.

³² *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 181

³³ *Toiletry Case with Cart Wheels in Stream*. National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan.

³⁴ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 181

Kamakura | *maki-e* 蒔絵 saddle with mother-of-pearl inlay



Samurai saddle with imagery of cherry blossoms and autumn rain. Gold maki-e lacquered chestnut and mother-of-pearl inlay. Registered national treasure of Japan. 13th century. Image: [Met Museum](#)

Kamakura | *maki-e* 蒔絵 *saddle with mother-of-pearl inlay*

Kamakura is often referred to as the Age of the Samurai.³⁵ It is a moment in Japanese history that is almost entirely defined by clan wars and the elite military class of Japan. It is a far cry from the romanticized Heian period of yesteryear. This saddle and others from Kamakura are registered national treasures of Japan.

During the Kamakura era, saddles and other crafts of war were ornamented with *raden*, a regional inlay technique, using naturally iridescent materials like mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, and abalone.³⁶ These precious materials are carefully inlaid to wooden or lacquered surfaces in a tremendous act of *kazari*.

In the case of this particular saddle, the wooden chestnut base has been covered with an even and deep black lacquer. Once this step was completed, the designs were carefully inscribed into the lacquered base surface to achieve the symmetrical design. Together, the cherry blossoms and autumn rain motifs invoke classic elements of Japanese thematic aesthetics. Cherry blossoms in particular have been used to decorate saddles since the medieval period.³⁷ After the design is applied, the creators of this saddle skillfully shaped curved inlay details are carved to shape from *yakogai* shell (a species of snail indigenous to Japan) and set into the surface design with painstaking precision.

³⁵ See image credit. Met Museum.

³⁶ *Raden*. Gallery Japan.

³⁷ See image credit. Met Museum.

Early Muromachi | large jar with natural ash glaze,
early Shigaraki ware 信楽焼



Large jar with natural ash glaze, Shigaraki ware. Stoneware with feldspar and natural ash glaze. Shigaraki kiln. Early 15th century. Miho Museum. Image: [Miho Museum](#)

Shigaraki ware originated as an evolution of the Sue ware produced during the Heian era. Political and economic decline prompted kilns to abandon luxury for the more lucrative practice of producing inexpensive utilitarian items for townspeople.³⁸ Among these items were jars, bowls, mortars, storage vessels, and funerary urns.³⁹

The varying textures encompassed in the realm of Shigaraki ware is elemental. The reactions from the chemical process sandy clay base during the firing process creates a dramatically rich patina on the surface of each vessel.⁴⁰ This early Shigaraki vessel has a particularly profound and satisfying natural surface.

³⁸ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 280

³⁹ *As to Shigaraki*. The Shigaraki Ceramics Cultural Park.

⁴⁰ *Distinctive patina*. Art Research Center at Ritsumeikan University.

Muromachi | *Seto 瀬戸焼 or Mino 美濃焼 ware tea bowl*
with takamaki-e 高蒔絵 and kintsugi 金継ぎ



*Seto or Mino ware tea bowl. Stoneware with iron and ash glaze, kintsugi repair. Early 15th century.
National Museum of Asian Art. Image: [National Museum of Asian Art](#)*

Muromachi | Seto 瀬戸焼 or Mino 美濃焼 ware tea bowl with *takamaki-e* 高蒔絵 and *kintsugi* 金継ぎ

As the medieval Sue and Suzu wares were in decline, Mino, Seto, and Bizen wares came to fruition during the late Kamakura and early Muromachi periods.⁴¹ This is an example of a Seto or Mino ware tea bowl from the early 15th century. Seto ware is also one of the Six Ancient Kilns of Japanese *yakimono*.⁴² The patina of this Mino or Seto ware differs from Shigaraki ware because of the incorporation of an iron wash into the natural ash glaze technique. The foot of the bowl is left unglazed.⁴³

This tea bowl was repaired by different owners; one repair is made using *kintsukuroi* and the other is made with a black lacquer base with immaculate *takamaki-e* relief of miniature cherry blossoms. It is striking because it showcases the delicate intricacy of the growing popularity of *wabi-sabi*, the cultural belief that emphasizes the beauty of the imperfect.⁴⁴ This is the foundational element of the Japanese tea ceremony. Different owners repaired this tea bowl with highly-stylized *takamaki-e* and *kintsugi*, respectively. *Kintsukuroi* and *kintsugi* are discussed later on in the analysis on the Raku ware from the Edo period.

⁴¹ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 280

⁴² *Japanese Pottery: Six Ancient Kilns*. Britannica.

⁴³ See image credit. National Museum of Asian Art.

⁴⁴ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 280

Late Muromachi | large jar, Shigaraki ware 信楽焼



*Large stoneware jar, Shigaraki ware. Unknown kiln. Early 16th century.
NGV Australia. Image: [NGV Australia](#).*

Late Muromachi | *large jar, Shigaraki ware* 信楽焼

This is an exceptional Shigaraki jar from the early 16th century during the late Muromachi period in Japan. The base of the vessel's rust color is achieved from the high temperatures that are a mainstay of the Shigaraki firing process. The clay is left intentionally vulnerable to the elements as the vessel is exposed to open flame. Liquefied ash fuses to the body with lyrical force. Feldspar granules enrich the texture of the ovoid jar with playful and dynamic rusticism.

This jar helps pull together two aspects of Japanese aesthetic and culture: *wabi-sabi* and the forces of nature.⁴⁵ *Wabi-sabi* emerged during the Muromachi and Momoyama periods along with the rise of Zen Buddhism and Shinto nature worship.⁴⁶ The philosophy of *wabi-sabi* is integral to the Japanese tea ceremony that developed during the same historical periods.

⁴⁵ See image credit. NGV Australia.

⁴⁶ See image credit. NGV Australia.

Early Momoyama | large jar, Shigaraki ware 信楽焼



*Large jar, Shigaraki ware. Stoneware with natural ash glaze. Late 16th century.
Private Collection. Image: [Christie's](#)*

This is a more rustic example of Momoyama period Shigaraki ware. Again, the red coloring seen on the base of the vessel is indicative of high temperature firing known to the Shigaraki process. Similar to the Kofun era *yokobe*, the dynamic contrast of natural materials is executed by streams of ash glaze that were distributed during firing and fused to the side.

Momoyama | *Kōdai-ji style maki-e* 高台寺蒔絵 writing box



*Stationery Box in Kōdai-ji style maki-e. Gold and silver maki-e lacquered wood.
Early 17th century. Met Museum. Image: [Met Museum](#)*

Momoyama | *Kōdai-ji style maki-e* 高台寺蒔絵 *writing box*

This is an example of a *maki-e* writing box with *Kōdai-ji style maki-e* from the Momoyama period. *Kōdai-ji maki-e* is defined by this period of time and is a highly specified version of traditional *hiramaki-e*. *Kōdai-ji maki-e* is linked to the Toyotomi family of the Momoyama era.⁴⁷ It is distinguished mostly by the thematic elements and design details. The base of the object is lacquered wood. Flat *hiramaki-e* is applied over black lacquer with distinctive, relatively simple design work.

The name *Kōdai-ji* refers to the namesake temple in Kyoto that houses the memorial shrine of prominent military leader Toyotomi Hideyoshi.⁴⁸ The interior of the *Kōdai-ji* shrine is composed entirely of *maki-e* lacquered surfaces with stylized natural motifs.⁴⁹ The classic Japanese motif of autumn grasses is prominent, and are featured alongside the crest of the Toyotomi family.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See image credit. Met Museum.

⁴⁸ *Kōdai-ji Makie Lacquer: Gems of Momoyama Culture*. Kyoto National Museum.

⁴⁹ See image credit. Met Museum.

⁵⁰ *Kōdai-ji Makie Lacquer: Gems of Momoyama Culture*. Kyoto National Museum.

Edo | *white tea bowl with kintsugi 金継ぎ, Satsuma ware 薩摩焼*



Tea bowl, Satsuma ware. Stoneware with clear, crackled glaze and kintsugi gold lacquer repairs. 17th century. National Museum of Asian Art. Image: [National Museum of Asian Art](#) | [Smithsonian](#)

Satsuma ware is emblematic of Japan's introduction to Western influence during the Edo period. It was one of the most profitable ceramic exports during the late Edo and Meiji eras. This Satsuma ware and the following Raku ware are two examples of Edo era tea bowls that have been repaired using the *kintsukuroi* process. Additional analysis on *kintsugi* and *kintsukuroi* is continued on the next page.

Edo | *black Raku ware 楽焼 with kintsukuroi 金繕い*



*Raku ware 楽焼 tea bowl. Earthenware with thick black glaze and kintsugi gold lacquer repairs.
Unknown kiln. 18-19th century. National Museum of Asian Art. Image: [National Museum of Asian Art](#)*

Edo | *black Raku ware* 楽焼 *with kintsukuroi* 金繕い

Where the defining characteristic of Shigaraki ware is the result of its high temperature firing process, Raku ware is made using a prolonged *low* temperature firing method. Feldspar is not created during the Raku ware process because the high temperatures of Shigaraki are needed to induce the appropriate chemical reaction. The resulting textures are of marvelous contrast. The smooth surface of Raku ware is often deeply soothing and overpowering.

Kintsukuroi is an application of the *wabi-sabi* philosophy. The lacquer for *kintsukuroi* ('golden repair', also referred to as *kintsugi*, or 'golden joinery') is created when gold pigments are mixed with *urushi* to create a strong polymer paste. This golden lacquer is applied to broken ceramics with elegance and precision. The act of *kintsugi* celebrates the *wabi-sabi* belief in the beauty of imperfection.

Edo | *maki-e* 蒔絵 writing box by Ogata Kōrin



Writing Box with Eight Bridges by Ogata Kōrin. Gold and silver *maki-e* lacquered wood. 18th century. Registered national treasure of Japan. Image: [Tokyo National Museum](#)

Ogata Kōrin was born into a merchant family in Kyoto and went on to become one of the most prominent artists of the Edo period.⁵¹ He studied at the Rinpa School. Ogata Kōrin is known for his distinct style, which is rooted in tradition but remains outside of the status quo. He is credited for his efforts to bring arts out of the realm of the elite and into the hands of the working class of Japan.⁵²

This writing box depicts chapter nine of the *Tales of Ise* entitled 'Eight Bridges'.⁵³ This was a scene regularly depicted by Ogata Kōrin.⁵⁴ The object features a black lacquered base, an established staple of the *maki-e* process, with *maki-e* and *raden* inlay. The *raden* iris blossoms are made from abalone using thick shell *raden* inlay technique.⁵⁵ The method for this process is discussed in the following item, Ogata Kōrin's *maki-e* inrō.

⁵¹ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 332

⁵² *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo. p. 332

⁵³ *Writing Box with Eight Bridges*. National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan.

⁵⁴ *Iris at Yatsunashi (Eight Bridges)* by Ogata Kōrin. Met Museum.

⁵⁵ *Writing Box with Eight Bridges*. National Institutes for Cultural Heritage, Japan.

Edo | *maki-e* 蒔絵 *inrō* 印籠 by Ogata Kōrin



Inrō with Design of Bridge and Heron Standing on One Leg by Ogata Kōrin. Gold maki-e lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay. 18th century. Private collection. Image: [MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale](#)

The approach Ogata Kōrin took to create this inrō is relatively similar to that observed in the *raden* Samurai saddles of the Kamakura era. The base of the object is submerged in black lacquer.⁵⁶ Flat *hiramaki-e* relief is delicately applied to the lacquered base to produce the billowing golden linework. The body of the heron and the bridge depicted on the opposing side of the inrō are made with mother-of-pearl tesserae. The legs of the heron are made with an unknown metal alloy, possibly pewter, and the grid on the opposing side is composed of gilded metal strips.⁵⁷

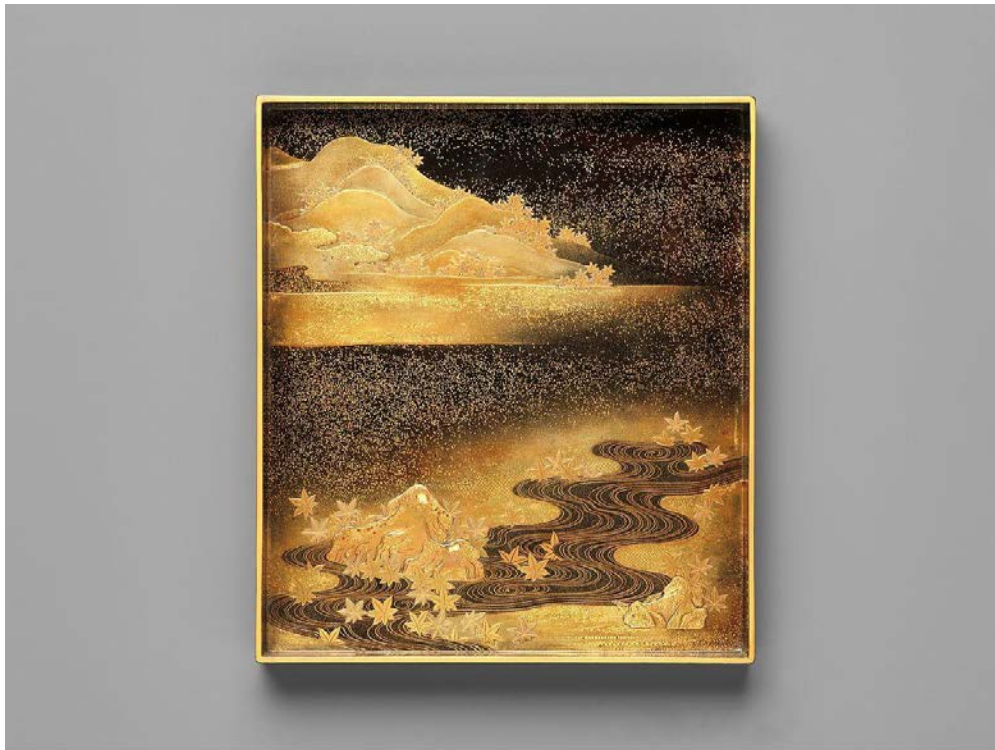
The raden inlay is flat and relatively obtuse, and appears to emulate the process of thick shell raden inlay (as opposed to the thin shell inlay seen in the Heian era carriage wheel cosmetic box and Ogata Kōrin's *maki-e* writing box with Eight Bridges). With thick shell raden, shell tesserae are first cut with a scroll saw. A design is then carved into a cured lacquered surface and is set with an additional layer of lacquer. The new layer is polished down to expose the inlay and additional *maki-e* is applied. After this, the entire surface is burnished to complete the process.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ See image credit. MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale.

⁵⁷ See image credit. MAO Museo d'Arte Orientale.

⁵⁸ *Maki-e*. Gallery Japan.

Meiji | *Shishiai togidashi maki-e* 肉合研出蒔絵
and *takamaki-e* 高蒔絵 *writing box*



Suzuri-bako 硯箱 with Screen, Robe Rack, and Shell-Matching Game Set. Gold and silver lacquered wood with *takamaki-e*, *hiramaki-e*, and *togidashi maki-e*. Image: [Met Museum](#)

Meiji | *Shishiai togidashi maki-e* 肉合研出蒔絵 and *takamaki-e* 高蒔絵 *writing box*

This *Suzuri-bako* 硯箱 (‘writing box’) from the Meiji era is a stunning modern rendition of the 17th century Japanese painted screen called *Tagasode* (or ‘Whose Sleeves?’).⁵⁹ Every element within the composition is intentional. The game set and shells symbolize a happy marriage.⁶⁰ The kimono features the *Eight Bridge* motif from the *Tales of Ise* that is also utilized in the previous *maki-e* writing box by Ogata Kōrin.⁶¹

This writing box is composed of a combination of the three traditional *maki-e* processes: *hiramaki-e*, *takamaki-e*, and *togidashi maki-e*. This item appears to be made with a specific type of *togidashi maki-e* called *Shishiai togidashi maki-e* 肉合研出蒔絵, which became popular during the late Meiji era and continued throughout Edo. It is by far the most complicated of the various *maki-e* processes and consists of a combination of both raised (*takimaki-e*) and burnished (*togidashi*) *maki-e*.⁶² Additional *urushi* and charcoal powder are applied to create the high relief, then the relief is burnished and smoothed into a homogenous composition.⁶³

The combination of these techniques contribute a marvelous sense of depth and realism to the imagery. It could be said that this level of realism is somewhat indicative of the Western influence that began to permeate Japan during the Meiji era.⁶⁴ Many were drawn to this influence, while others rejected it. This is an example of the incorporation of such influence, while the following item represents the desire to preserve traditional Japanese culture and aesthetic.

⁵⁹ *Tagasode* (“Whose Sleeves?”). 17th century. Met Museum.

⁶⁰ See image credit. Met Museum.

⁶¹ See image credit. Met Museum.

⁶² *Maki-e*. Gallery Japan.

⁶³ *Techniques Supporting Namiki*. Namiki & Pilot Corporation.

⁶⁴ *History of Art in Japan*. Tsuji Nobuo, p. 358

Meiji | *togidashi maki-e* 研出蒔絵 *writing box and stand*



Early Showa Period writing box and stand, with a spring and autumn at the River Oi design in maki-e by Zo-o. Mitsui Memorial Museum. Image: [The Japan Times](#)

As Japan's political influence shifted and the state-sanctioned embargos on the Western world were lifted, the country was inundated by Western influence. That meant different things for different people; some embraced it and others rejected it. The Mitsui clan was one of the richest merchant families at this time, and they believed it to be their duty to protect and support Japanese culture during the Meiji Era.⁶⁵ The clan purchased this exquisite *maki-e* work, among many others, as a way to do so. The Misui family focused the majority of their philanthropy on the work of Kyoto-based artists, preserving their culture for generations to come.⁶⁶ To this day, this writing box and stand remain part of their namesake museum's permanent collection.

⁶⁵ *Splendor of Kyo Maki-e: Zohiko Urushi Art and Mitsui Family*. Mike Hamilton. *The Japan Times*.

⁶⁶ *Splendor of Kyo Maki-e: Zohiko Urushi Art and Mitsui Family*. Mike Hamilton. *The Japan Times*.

Heisei | large jar, contemporary Shigaraki ware 信楽焼



Large jar by Kôyama Kiyoko, contemporary Shigaraki ware. Stoneware with natural ash glaze. Shigaraki kiln. 2000. Private collection. Image: Less Than Perfect

Shigaraki ware is one of the oldest surviving production methods of *yakimono*. In 1976 the Japanese government declared Shigaraki ware a Traditional Handicraft of Japan.⁶⁷ This vessel is one of many Shigaraki wares made by Kôyama Kiyoko in 2000. Kiyoko fired her wares in the wood-burning cave kilns of Shigaraki prefecture in Japan.

Her work represents a modern revival to the great history of Shigaraki ware. Kiyoko's Shigaraki ware is traditional in approach, but her stylized modernity offers a new take on an ancient form.

⁶⁷ *As to Shigaraki*. The Shigaraki Ceramics Cultural Park.

Heisei | contemporary Raku ware 楽焼 with natural glaze

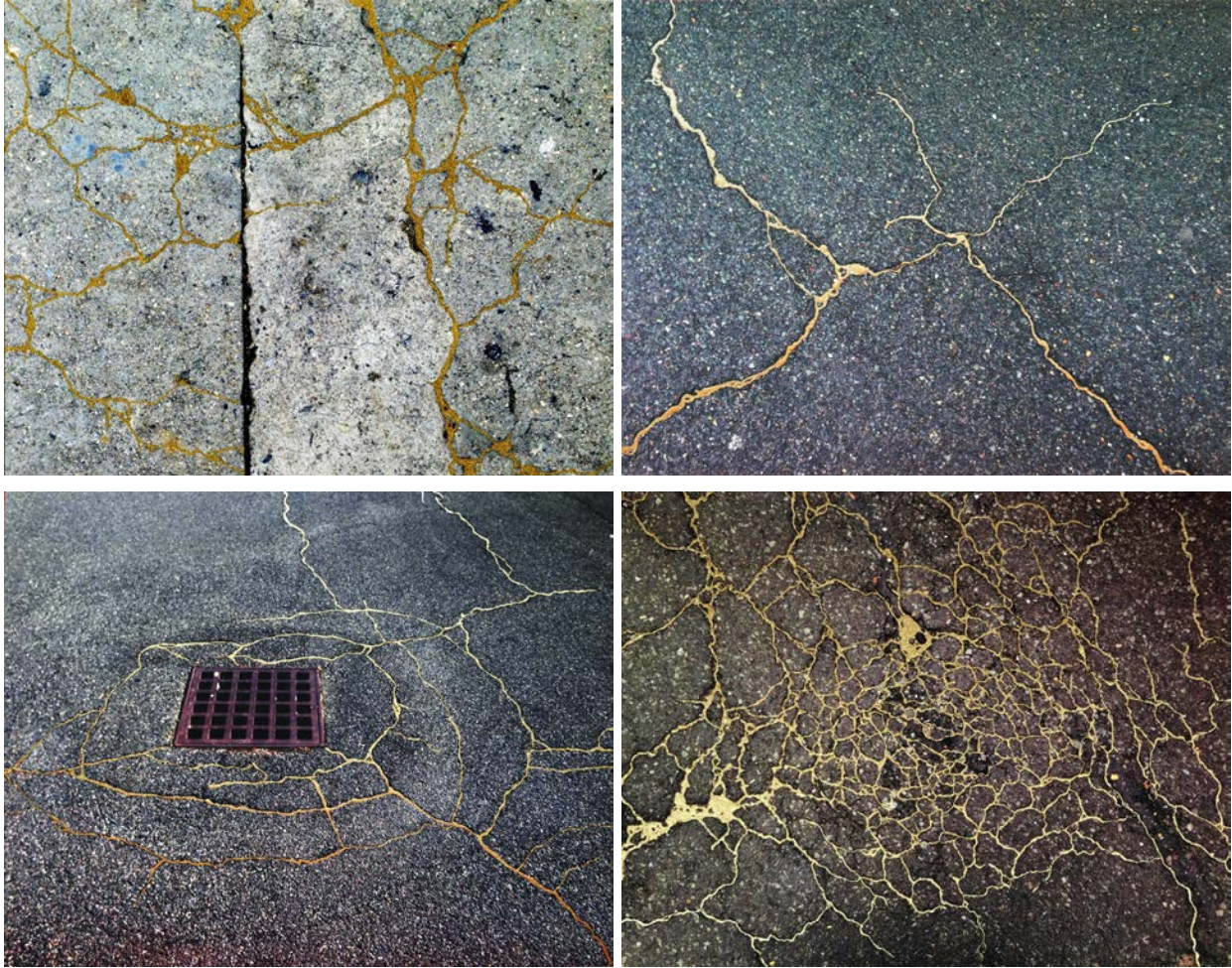


*contemporary Raku ware with natural ash glaze by Mike Fronske. earthen-ware ceramic.
Unknown kiln, unknown material. 2004. Images: Stephanie Dunlap*

This modern Raku ware tea bowl was made by Mike Fronske of Flagstaff, Arizona. It was made in 2004 as a wedding favor at the artist's wedding and was given to me by my parents.

This contemporary Raku exemplifies many of the rustic qualities typical of Japanese earthenware. The piece is most likely in the Shigaraki bizen ware family, based on the texture of the base material and the clear gloss glaze technique. Throughlines of traditional Japanese earthenware aesthetics can be seen in the duality of its nature; it is quiet and deafening; soft and hard; matte and smooth. This Raku tea bowl represents its maker's masterful understanding of bizen ware aesthetics; the simplicity itself speaks volumes.

Reiwa | *street kintsukuroi* 金繕い by Rachel Sussman



Sidewalk Kintsukuroi, gold lacquer and asphalt, public installation. 2017 - 2020.

Images: [Rachel Sussman](#) | [Colossal](#)

Rachel Sussman's *Sidewalk Kintsukuroi* represents a contemporary take on the ancient process of kintsugi. Sussman utilizes cracks in pavement as the beneficiaries of *kintsukuroi*, or 'golden repair'. By addressing these often overlooked imperfections as spaces of beauty, Sussman represents an element of *kazari* that is true to form in the rhetoric of *wabi-sabi* and the philosophical origins of kintsugi.

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