

Out of touch: on the sensorial in the historical interpretation of Japanese lacquer

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Japanese lacquer has been crossing borders since the tenth or eleventh century, when it first featured among the diplomatic gifts sent from Japan to China. Subsequently, in the second half of the sixteenth century, it became an important medium of global exchange (Impey and Jörg 2005). The development of a thriving market for export wares during this period was paralleled by a dramatic expansion of the variety of luxury goods available for domestic consumption. The ubiquity of the medium led the sixteenth-century Portuguese missionary Joao Rodriguez to declare in his history of Japan that 'lacquer is a universal art throughout the kingdom', and to describe in detail its manner of production, the range of goods made from it, their durability and their cost (Cooper 1973: 312). Rodriguez was especially struck by lacquer with black and gold *maki-e* (sprinkled picture) decoration, a genre that he declared 'has something in common with painting', and, he believed, involved a technique akin to varnishing (Cooper 1973: 312). In actuality, the distinctive quality of *maki-e* designs derives from the way in which they are created by sprinkling metal particles onto still-wet lacquer, covering them with further coats of transparent lacquer and, when the surface is dry, polishing it to bring out its light-reflecting capacities (Arakawa and Okada 1978). Despite the fact that the resulting pictures have little in common with brush painting, the identification of *maki-e* with painting continues to this day.

This focus on the visuality of lacquer is not surprising given the splendour and aesthetic appeal of its décor, but might we not extend and bring greater nuance to our understanding of its history by directing attention to its sensorial qualities (Howes 2005; Rodaway 1994)? Lacquer is part of a complex social, economic, aesthetic and symbolic world whose full interpretation engages the senses of sound, smell, taste and, especially, touch. A lacquer cosmetic case, writing box or coffer for jewellery, for instance, holds secrets of the body, the hand and the heart – deep reserves of lived experience that cannot be accessed without considering how they were handled. The ownership of an early seventeenth-century document box inscribed with the name of Maria van Diemen, the wife of the governor-general of the Dutch East Indies, is not significant

solely because of its implications of power and wealth (Earle 1986: 152–5). Maria van Diemen's box was made meaningful by the gaze that she or others brought to it, but her physical interaction with it was equally important. Document boxes, wedding caskets and chests involved the user in the completion of their meaning by lifting the lid to place or remove items from within. The study of the manner in which such objects were presented as gifts, of how they were handled by their owners, and of what was placed inside them can reveal much about the intimate and gendered nature of the sensory environments specific to the time and place of their manufacture and use.

The difficulty of studying the personal experience of lacquer is one of the primary reasons why its tactile qualities tend to be glossed over in modern scholarship. Sensory experiences may be universal, but they also have local and contingent histories whose critical interpretation is difficult because their effects tend to be short-lived and subjective. It is much easier to grasp the historical significance of three-dimensional artefacts through their visual or textual representations than to try to deal with their experiential dimensions, which may require the translation of values often encoded in actions to which scholars do not have access. Since the late nineteenth century, with a few notable exceptions such as chopsticks, soup bowls and *sake* cups, lacquer has largely disappeared from the daily lives of most Japanese. As in Europe and America, where its presence has in any event always been limited to the residences of the very wealthy, the encounter with the range of lacquered articles once made in Japan is now largely confined to the museum.

But the reasons for the neglect of the sensorial dimensions of lacquer are more systemic. The senses have always suffered from negative connotations in logocentric cultures that privilege sight as the noblest of the five senses, as registered in terms such as enlightenment, insight and revelation. The identification of the eye with the rational operations of the analytical, and by implication, masculine, western mind has further marginalized sound, touch, smell and taste as meaningful modes of cultural interpretation. Touch, for instance,

is commonly coded as feminine, primitive and childlike and its affects as irrational, intuitive and emotional, and therefore unreliable and unworthy of serious consideration.

'Museumisation' has also inhibited sensorial studies. As Susan Stewart has observed, modern museums are 'so obviously – so, one might say, naturally, empires of sight that it barely occurs to us to imagine them as being organized around any other sense or senses' (Stewart 1999: 28). Artificial lighting enhances the visibility of lacquerwares, but concerns about security and environmental stability require putting them out of reach behind glass, thereby concealing their haptic properties. In most museums, lacquer boxes present an impenetrable facade, with no clues being given as to how they open and close, to the multiple compartments within them, or to the relationship between their interiors and exteriors.

This distancing is reinforced by art historical taxonomies that disregard the relationships that different kinds of lacquerware have to the body. When articles as disparate in form and function as *sake* cups and hand drums are classified by medium, period, style and artist, they acquire values they did not have when they were used. By the same token, they lose the performative dimensions that were central to their meaning when they were lifted to the lips or rested on the shoulder and tapped to produce a rhythmic beat.

Conservation is also implicated in this distancing process, for stabilizing lacquer often leads to the removal of accumulations of grime attached to surfaces that were once in contact with the body or other objects. A twelfth-century red lacquer tray originally in the Kasuga Shrine (Nara) that is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) has, exceptionally, retained tangible evidence of its use in the form of faint traces of the Buddhist scrolls formerly held within it. Had these lines of dirt been removed, valuable information about its social life would have been lost (Watt and Ford 1991: 175).

Historically, 'museumisation' has been a way of controlling fear of the body, of drawing boundaries between reason and emotion, order and disorder, structure and surface. When European and American museums of Asian art were first founded in the nineteenth century, their primary aim was to bring discursive order to the material products of Asian cultures. Suppressing their original users' physical relationship to objects symbolically brought these peoples into submission. In so doing, museum founders were often giving expression to their resistance to the unfamiliar expressive values of non-western cultures that they found unsettling. Academics unconsciously perpetuate this outlook by ignoring the sensorial.

In the exhibition context, viewers are led to focus primarily on the spectacular luxury of lacquer, its distinctive sheen and abundant use of gold and silver being qualities integral to the prestige the medium has so long enjoyed both within Japan and abroad, but these light-reflecting capacities were not premised on the article remaining fixed in place. The seductive shimmer of lacquer's glossy surface depends not only on its relationship to a light source but also to its movement in space. A lacquer writing box, for instance, glows quite differently when it is immobile, displayed in the dim light of the decorative alcove of a tearoom, or when its lid catches the ambient light as it is lifted.

To understand lacquer we need to consider not only the way its glow lights up the darkness, as the writer Junichirō Tanizaki

so eloquently described in his essay *In Praise of Shadows*, but to come to grips with its feel. Why does lacquer give pleasure? In Tanizaki's view, tactile, auditory, thermal and olfactory senses are all involved: 'Ceramics', he writes, 'are heavy and cold to the touch; they clatter and clink, and being efficient conductors of heat are not the best containers for hot foods. But lacquerware is light and soft to the touch, and gives off hardly a sound. I know few greater pleasures than holding a lacquer soup bowl in my hands, and feeling the weight of the liquid and its mild warmth' (Tanizaki 1977: 14). To touch lacquer, he continues, produces a 'sensation something like that of holding a plump newborn baby' (Tanizaki 1977: 14–15). If the feel of lacquer is like caressing a child, might it not also have implications of nostalgia for a lost past?

It is dangerous, of course, to draw broad cultural conclusions about the sensual responses aroused by handling lacquer on the basis of a single writer, especially one as idiosyncratic as Tanizaki, without taking into account the particular conditions during which he was writing. His unusual attention to such matters must be seen in the context of his own personal proclivities and anxieties. Tanizaki was deeply attached to the immaterial aspects of a material culture he believed was disappearing from Japan due to western influence. When he wrote *In Praise of Shadows* in 1933, articles made of lacquer in household use were being replaced by cheaper substitutes made of synthetic materials.

Lacquer aroused in Tanizaki an emotional response by playing on his sense of its and his own Japaneseness. This response was stimulated not only by the feel of the lacquer bowl, but also by the form of social communication embodied in its handling. When Tanizaki likened holding a lacquer bowl to holding a baby he may have unconsciously had in mind that, just as one would never think about picking up a baby with one hand, Japanese etiquette demands that a soup bowl be raised to the lips with two hands around its body. Knowing how to sip soup properly from a lidded bowl – first removing the lid and placing it to one side, then lifting the bowl with two hands, shifting the bowl to the palm of the left hand in order to stir the contents with chopsticks held in the right hand, then bringing it to the lips – is suggestive of the way lacquerware has helped to choreograph the body into what Benedict Anderson called an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991). While Anderson addressed the way in which reading produced this effect, the etiquette associated with lacquerware used for food and drink also fosters the creation of a sense of group identity.

Tanizaki's comments on lacquer are widely quoted because he expressed so openly the pleasurable responses its materiality may arouse. Such views are rare in pre-modern literature, perhaps because lacquer was rendered invisible by its familiarity and handling it was second nature. As part of the disposition of things taken for granted in early modern Japan, the handling of lacquerware exemplifies Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*, the idea that society develops a cognitive map to order its world based on its physical experience, though in ways of which the participants are only dimly aware (Bourdieu 1993). This is why the normative sensorial expectations, behaviours and modes of thinking associated with the experience of living with it are not often articulated.

It might also be argued that the absence of writing about the affects of lacquer has something to do with the influence

of Buddhism, which holds that the senses are dangerous and not to be trusted. Yet Buddhist texts do offer examples of the heuristic need to rely on the senses. According to *The Lotus Sutra*, a scripture that had a profound impact on Japanese culture, devotees may accumulate merit by crafting images of the Buddha and offering it ‘flower perfume, necklaces, powdered incense, perfumed paste, burnt incense, silk banners and canopies, garments or music’ (Hurvitz 1976: 175). The magical powers ascribed to touch also underlie other Buddhist practices, such as the *kaigen* or eye-opening ceremony in which the touch of the brush and ink brings an image to life – or the grasping of coloured threads attached to an image of the Buddha Amida to ensure that, at the moment of death, one is conveyed from this world to Amida’s paradise. These examples demonstrate that it is impossible to devalue the haptic without first revealing its value.

Lacquer’s remarkable transformative power may help to explain why it became, first in China and later in Japan, as Andrew Watsky so eloquently put it, ‘the material of the sacred’ (Watsky 2005: 143). Lacquer is a substance that exists in two states, liquid and solid. While we know today that the purified sap of the *Rhus verniciflua* tree contains a kind of natural plastic that polymerizes when exposed to oxygen under humid conditions, in the pre-modern world this chemical process was not understood; lacquer’s potential to move between a liquid and solid state was consequently invested with magical properties. Lacquer was, quite literally, a medium for getting in touch with the divine. This attribute, together with the astonishing durability of objects covered with it, helps to explain why since ancient times it was used for grave goods, Buddhist images and ritual paraphernalia.

Sensorial values inflected by Buddhism also inform the symbolic value ascribed to the touch of Negoro-style lacquerware, so named after a temple in modern-day Wakayama Prefecture (Arakawa and Okada 1979). Red wares with black undercoat have been used since medieval times in temples and shrines for ritual serving utensils, tables, trays, and containers for scriptures. Because they were made with only a thin finish of lacquer mixed with cinnabar or iron oxide over a black-lacquered wooden base, the red coating often wore away through repeated handling, exposing the black lacquer beneath in irregular patches. For Buddhists, the material world was understood to be transient and insubstantial, and articles such as cracked and mended ceramics or worn Negoro lacquers served to point to this truth by reminding their owners of their own mortality. The writings of influential Japanese tea masters whose thinking was deeply informed by Zen Buddhism helped to carry out this aestheticization of the process of damage and decay. Their outlook is embodied in the well-known adage attributed to the fifteenth-century Zen master Murata Jukō that ‘the moon is not pleasing unless partially obscured by a cloud’, a metaphorical expression of the superiority of imperfection over perfection (Haga 1989: 197).

Sensory experiences may be universal but the metaphysical meanings ascribed to them have local and highly contingent histories. The ability to read the material and symbolic code of tea that made physical degradation culturally valuable was not within everyone’s grasp. In seventeenth-century Japan, only some saw beyond external appearances to the beauty revealed within, and Europeans had no appreciation of the traces of

time on a worn Negoro ware table, ewer or tray. Engelbert Kaempfer, a German physician who was in Japan in the 1690s, observed that red lacquer tableware ‘rinsed with warm water and then dried with a cloth ... will keep ... its clean shine ... and look like new even after many years of daily use’ (Kaempfer 1999: 266). In other words, for Kaempfer, the attractions of Negoro ware were in inverse relation to those promoted by Murata Jukō. He valued lacquer’s state of material perfection: the fact that it defied time by remaining in a state true to its moment of creation.

Changing responses to the rough and the smooth are also implicated in the valorization of touch. Because it does not occur naturally, smoothness was a desirable attribute of luxury goods in the medieval and early modern eras. In his history of Japan, Joao Rodriguez proclaimed of lacquer that, ‘the Japanese stand supreme in this art’. One reason for this was that, ‘they are so skillful that they can make a lacquered object look as if it were made of smooth shiny ivory’ (Cooper 1973: 312). To bring out the glossy smoothness in lacquer required time-consuming and highly skilled craftsmanship, something that modern technology can accomplish with ease. Yet, as Roland Barthes has observed, ‘smoothness is always an attribute of perfection because its opposite reveals a technical and typically human operation of assembling’ (Barthes 2000: 88). Although he was extolling the beauty of a French Citroen automobile, this characterization could be applied to lacquer as well. When layers and layers of lacquer are applied to a wooden bowl or box, the angular joints and sharp lathe marks of the underlying wooden support are concealed, transforming the finished product into a softly curved, seamless unit.

To investigate lacquer from the perspective of touch has much in common with the Buddhist parable about blind men exploring an elephant with their hands. One touches its tail and declares the elephant is like a rope, another, who touches its leg, declares the elephant is like a tree trunk, and so forth. This parable about the dangers of partial knowledge serves as a reminder that it is impossible to understand lacquer solely through touch. However, thinking about the sensorial can throw into relief previously unaddressed questions about the implications of working with lacquer, the gendered experience of living with it, the complex interactions of its production and consumption, and the metaphysical meanings ascribed both to its durability and to signs of wear. Lacquer is a magical medium that has a plurality of geographies and histories that are inextricably bound up with the subtle and ever shifting communicative power of touch.

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