

Woodwork - The Art of Murayama Akira



The Japanese have long had an almost spiritual connection with wood. Kurimono, items created by hollowing out pieces of wood, were the earliest form of woodwork.

Murayama Akira has used his fertile imagination and finely honed techniques to forge new ground in the art of kurimono.

In 2003, his woodwork earned him recognition as a Holder of Japan's Important Intangible Cultural Property, also known as a Living National Treasure.



Keyaki fuki-urushi rinka moriki

(keyaki platter with flower pattern and rubbed lacquer finish) (2013)



Planning

Keyaki is a hard, stiff material; more importantly, it has a beautiful grain. To create a *kurimono* piece, the artist must plan carefully so as to make efficient use of the piece of wood. So he must first have a solid idea of what he wants to make. Murayama envisions the form of a flower.



Drawing guide lines

Murayama divides the work radially into sixteenths and creates a paper pattern based on one of the sections. He will make a platter, modeled after a flower with eight petals. The thickness of the lip, the sides, and the width of the bottom are all drawn on using the pattern.



Rough carving

He starts with a hammer and gouge. Murayama already holds a picture of the completed piece in his mind's eye. He explains: "If you start changing things as you go, you can end up with quite a strange bird."



Shaping the bottom and creating the face design

He shapes the bottom with a small round carpenter's plane and carves the platter to a uniform depth using a paring chisel. Again using the paper pattern, he draws lines on the face indicating the position of the ridges. He divides the face into eight equal sections, then finishes the lines freehand.



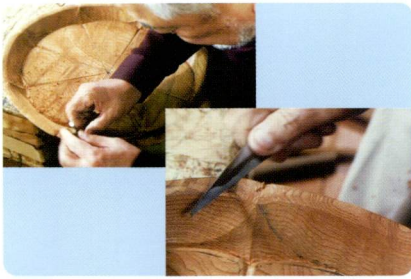
Carving the design

Murayama works the curves of the bowl face into the ridge lines along the sides. The lip is shaped with a small blade. The tip of a trowel chisel is used to make deep, narrow cuts.



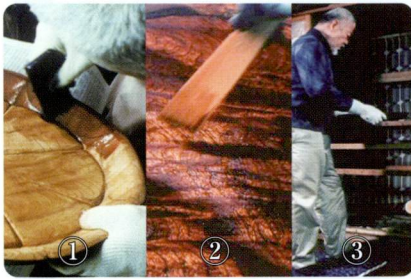
Carving the back

He slightly alters the aim of his hammer, striking the chisel in different places. This allows him to control the tip of the blade. A piece should appeal to the sense of touch. When making a thing that people will use, mechanical precision is trumped by qualities that can be seen with the eyes and felt with the fingers.



Shaping the sides and the lip

This piece is based on a traditional flower design, embellished with Murayama's signature ridge lines. The face will slope up to end at the lip. The ridge lines diverge as they move toward the upper edge, the line where inside meets outside.



Application of raw lacquer

1) *Ki-urushi*, or raw lacquer, is first brushed over the entire surface. 2) Next, using spatulas made of cypress, the lacquer is worked into the grain. 3) The piece is left overnight in a drying chamber which has been dampened with water. At the proper temperature and humidity, the lacquer will undergo a chemical change and harden.



Wet-sanding and filling with *sabi-urushi*

Murayama wet-sands the piece using several grades of water-resistant sandpaper, from coarse to extra fine. He prepares a type of primer called *sabi-urushi*. Raw lacquer is mixed with *tonoko*, a special powder that is actually pulverized whetstone. The primer fills tiny gaps in the wood grain.



Wet-sanding

Next comes more wet-sanding, with medium grade sandpaper. Murayama works patiently on the ridge lines to smooth out the curves. The once-sharp ridges have been softened, and the lines take on a lovely, warm quality.



Fuki-urushi

Murayama brushes on raw lacquer, then rubs it with cotton cloth. After the piece dries for about half a day, it is wet-sanded with extra fine sandpaper. Next, after about two hours, another coat of raw lacquer brushed on. Murayama rubs it with cloth, then puts the piece in the drying chamber for half a day. Then, after the piece is polished using charcoal powder, Murayama applies another coat of lacquer and rubs it with cloth. This process is repeated for two additional coats.



The finished piece

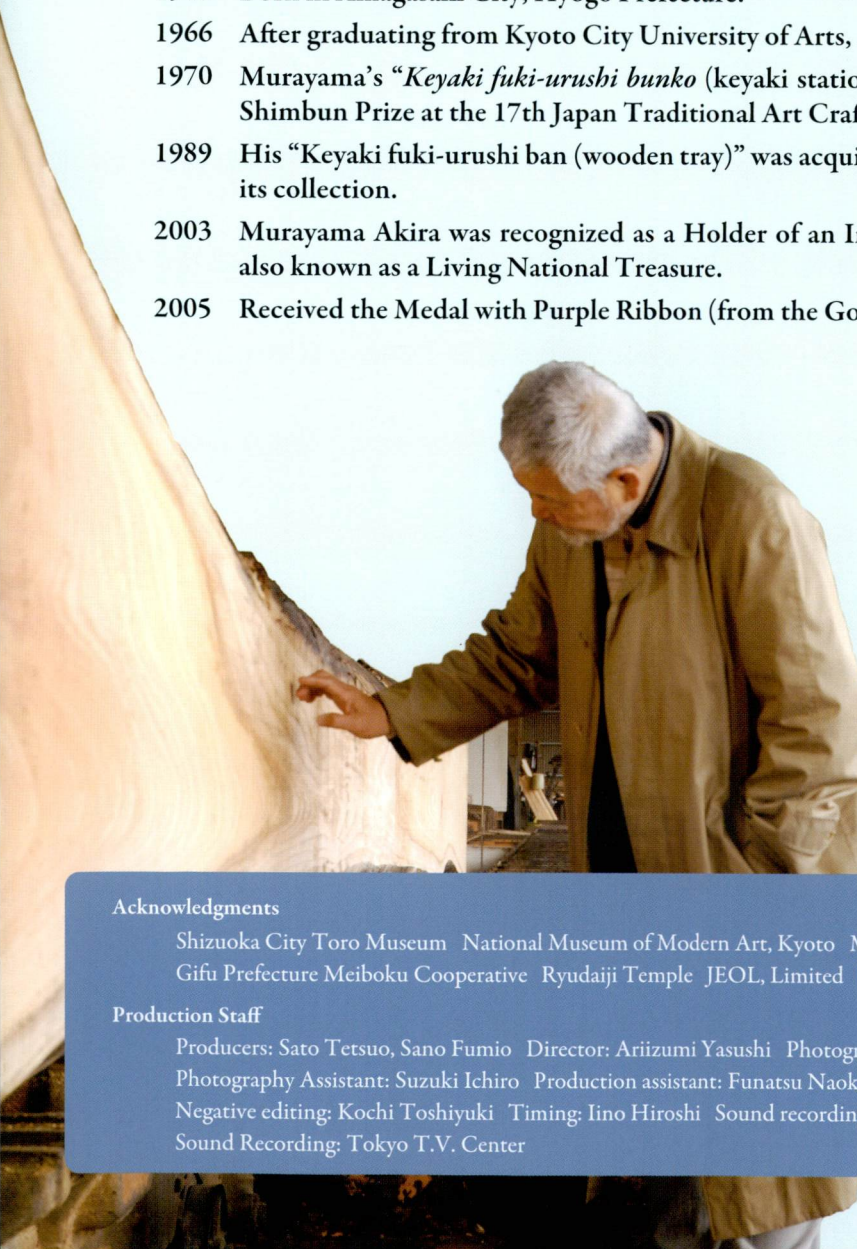
Title: "*Keyaki fuki-urushi rinka mori-ki* (keyaki platter with flower pattern and rubbed lacquer finish)".

Through his mastery of traditional techniques, Murayama has given this ancient Japanese keyaki tree a new life.



Murayama Akira

- 1944 Born in Amagasaki City, Hyogo Prefecture.
- 1966 After graduating from Kyoto City University of Arts, Murayama studied under Kuroda Tatsuaki.
- 1970 Murayama's "Keyaki fuki-urushi bunko (keyaki stationery box with rubbed lacquer finish)" won the Asahi Shimbun Prize at the 17th Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition.
- 1989 His "Keyaki fuki-urushi ban (wooden tray)" was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in London for its collection.
- 2003 Murayama Akira was recognized as a Holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Property (Woodwork), also known as a Living National Treasure.
- 2005 Received the Medal with Purple Ribbon (from the Gov't of Japan).



"Trees can live way longer than humans. They may be 400, 500 years old. Then humans come along and just cut them down. For money, or because they stand in the way of a road. But if we consider that trees are living things, I feel they should be treated with the proper respect."

Acknowledgments

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