

Raden - The Art of Shosai KITAMURA

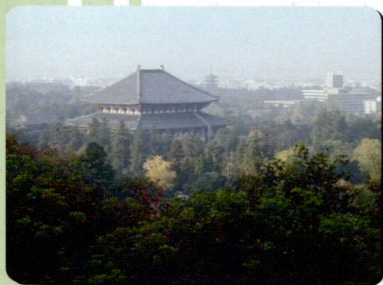
This film documents the processes whereby Shosai KITAMURA, a Holder of *Raden*, an Important Intangible Cultural Property, uses shell pieces to craft a mother-of-pearl inlaid box with bird-of-luck and peony-arabesque designs, applying the traditional Japanese handcraft technique called *raden* (mother-of-pearl inlay).

First the wooden substrate of the box is made, and reinforced with cloth and coated repeatedly with lacquer. The coated box is then decorated with shell. The art of shell decoration is called *raden*. In the film, we watch Shosai Kitamura, eagerly engaged in his painstaking, intricate work, as he talks about the world of traditional handcrafts, its spirit and techniques.



Prologue

Shosai Kitamura is a Holder of the art of *raden* or mother-of-pearl inlay, an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Japan. He chose to master the art of *raden* because he was so attracted by the bright, mysterious radiance of seashell. Using his highly refined skills, based on traditional techniques, Kitamura never fails to make shell come to life in his works.



Nara Todaiji Temple

Daybreak over the city of Nara, the ancient capital of Japan. Kitamura's studio lies along Ichijodori street, facing the Shomu imperial mausoleum, near the Todaiji temple.



Raden masterwork by Kitamura

By making an exhaustive study of classical works, Kitamura has mastered the techniques of the ancients. In his *raden* works, Kitamura not only draws upon his wide knowledge and experience in traditional techniques, but also expresses himself as a modern craftsman. His love of the beauty of shell is clearly reflected in his works.



Motif of a work by Kitamura

As he walks through the streets of Nara, over the grounds of its temples and shrines, Kitamura thinks about shell motifs. This is a box with scenes of Kasugano, depicted as *maki-e* or sprinkled picture, tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl inlay. Its design was also conceived by Kitamura as he was walking.



Interview with Kitamura

Says Kitamura:
“It’s very difficult to bring out the mysterious coloring and radiance of shell in a work. But it’s also a pleasure. That’s why the raden technique is so fascinating.”



Drafting a design drawing for a new work

Searching for a design concept for a new work, Kitamura says: “The *raden* technique, which was brought to Japan from China in the 8th century, is at the foundation of arts and crafts in Japan. As the subtitle for this new work I will use “Tempyo no Haru (Spring in Tempyo Era).” I will use the *kebori* or hairline engraving technique to depict a pheasant, the national bird of Japan, and a peony, known as the king of flowers in China.”



Preparing the wood base

Kitamura begins work on the wood base, which will make up the substrate of the new piece. This base is created by overlapping sheets of regular, grained cypress, each 1 millimeter thick. In this method of preparing wood base, folds are made on the inside of the sheets so that the piece can be bent into shape as desired. One advantage of this technique is that no clay model or mold has to be made.



Pasting cloth on the wood base, then coating it with lacquer

For reinforcement, cloth is pasted over the finished wood with a fine lacquer produced in Iwate Prefecture. This base is worked still more, then coated repeatedly with lacquer. By using fine lacquer produced in Japan, a sturdy but light work, beautiful in appearance, can be crafted.



Turban shell processing

Turban shell is selected as one of the source shells for *raden*. Thick turban shell, obtained in the Amami/Okinawa district of the southern Japanese archipelago, gives off a beautiful radiance. The portions of it used in *raden* are cut out and ground, polished and made suitable for use as *raden* materials.



Cutting shell with design patterns

Raw material turban shell and mother-of-pearl shell are selected to match the contours of the design, and the design is pasted on the rear side of the turban shell. Intricate shapes such as flowers or bird feathers are cut out with a fret saw, which calls for very delicate workmanship. Yet in cutting such shell, Kitamura’s fret saw moves very smoothly, like a brush drawing a picture.

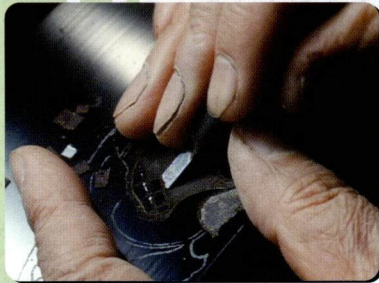


螺鈿玉帶箱 一正倉院宝物一



Treasures in the Shosoin

Kitamura's father, Taitsu, also flourished as a lacquerer. Here we see a reproduction by Taitsu of a belt box with mother-of-pearl inlay, one of the treasures in the Shosoin. And this is a reproduction of a lacquered koto with *maki-e* and *raden*, housed in the Kasuga Taisha shrine. It was made jointly by Shosai Kitamura and his father.



Lacquer coating and *jisage*

Kitamura keeps putting fresh coats of lacquer on this work. When the lacquer dries, an outline of the design is drawn on the work and the inside of this outline is cut out. This process is called *jisage*.



Filing down the inlaid shell

Turban shell in the shape of a peony is laid into the cutout portions. The rear surface of the shell is scraped or filed to match the curvature of the work, then finely adjusted repeatedly. Next, a highly adhesive lacquer mixed with paste made of wheat powder is used to adhere the shell to the body. The body surface is then filed down until it reaches a uniform height.



Tortoiseshell inlay

Tortoiseshell or the shells of sea turtles are also used. Says Kitamura, "Tortoise shell was used in the Nara period to bring out the radiance of *raden*. In this piece also, I want to use finely-cut tortoiseshell to emphasize the feeling of the material."



Charcoal polishing, lacquering, peeling

The lacquer-coated surface is polished with charcoal to remove undulations. It is polished until the shell and lacquer are at the same height, then the whole surface is covered with yet another coat of lacquer. When this lacquer has dried to a suitable hardness, the film of lacquer covering the design is peeled off, revealing the brilliance of the shell.



Maki-e

Gold powder is sprinkled over this work, which was coated with lacquer and decorated with shell in a peony-arabesque design. The art of sprinkling gold powder on lacquered surfaces as decoration was born in Japan. To ensure that the sprinkled gold powder stays in place, still another lacquer coating is applied.



Kebori

In the processing of crafting *raden*, what demands the greatest concentration is the crucial stage of *kebori* or hairline engraving. *Kebori* is required for drawing a peony-arabesque design on turban shell so that the contours of flower petals and leaf veins can be seen. In the case of the birds made of mother-of-pearl shell, the shell is pasted temporarily to a small wood block for *kebori*, then laid into the work.



Interview with Kitamura

Says Kitamura,
“ All the traditional *raden* works I have seen project an image of grace and dignity. Yet it is extremely difficult to create such an image with material that shines like shell.”



Additional decoration and finishing

The shell surface is coarsened minutely, and gold powder and vermilion pigment, among other things, are applied. When color is added to the flower-holding bird at the center of the piece, the bird comes to life. Kitamura's work, a mother-of-pearl inlaid box with bird-of-luck and peony-arabesque design, is now completed. It reflects all that he has learned from the classical tradition, coupled with his own creative imagination.

Profile of Shosai KITAMURA

Born in 1938, his real name is Ken'ichi Kitamura. After studying lacquer arts at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, he apprenticed himself to his father, Taitsu Kitamura. While devoting himself to lacquerware conservation and restoration, Kitamura also flourished as an original creator of lacquerwork. He has displayed his works, based mostly on thick shell *raden* techniques, at exhibitions of Japanese traditional arts & crafts, where he has won prizes and wide recognition. In 1994, he was Recognized as a Holder of the Lacquerware Restoration Technique and in 1999, a Holder of *Raden*, an Important Intangible Cultural Property.

