

# A British Woman Fascinated by the Intricacies of Japanese Lacquerware

*Situated in the north of the Noto Peninsula in Ishikawa Prefecture, jutting out into the Sea of Japan, Wajima City is renowned for its Wajima Lacquerware, considered one of the leading Japanese traditional handicrafts. Of all of the lacquer-producing areas in Japan it is the only one that is designated by the government as an “Intangible Cultural Asset of Japan.”*

*The careful handwork of Wajima craftsmen produces a broad range of solid and graceful lacquerware pieces. Of all the steps involved in the production of these pieces, the process of applying the lacquer is the most complex, and there are as many as 124 steps. The quality of Wajima Lacquerware depends on the skills of its craftsmen, which have been actively cultivated throughout history.*

*The key ingredient that defines the beauty and profoundness of Wajima Lacquerware pieces is urushi (the sap of the Japanese urushi tree). As only a small amount of sap can be extracted from each tree, it is very expensive.*

*Fascinated by the intricacies of urushi lacquerware, Suzanne Ross, hailing from England, has lived in Wajima for more than 15 years and immerses herself in the arcane world of Wajima Lacquerware as an independent artist. The Real Japan explores her odyssey with this traditional Japanese art.*

## From London to Wajima

Influenced by her grandmother, a fashion designer, and her mother, a hair designer, Suzanne Ross had no hesitation about her future direction after graduating from high school, and determined to study art and design.

“My encounter with *urushi* lacquerware dates back to 1982 while I was an art school student. There was an exhibition focusing on Japan held at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. I happened to see an inkstone case and a folding screen produced in the Edo period and was captivated by them. It was like love at first sight. These works really clicked in my mind. The lacquered black on the surface, along with meticulous ornaments, was so profound that I felt as if I was being pulled into the vastness of the universe.”

Ross set her mind on going to Japan, and two years later realized her plan to discover Japanese lacquerware in spite of the fact that she did not speak a word of Japanese. Not having the faintest idea of *urushi*, she imagined that it was just

something applied on the surface, and that it would only take three months at most to master all the essential techniques of applying it. When coming to Japan, however, she was stunned by the complexity of the art.

In order to make ends meet, Ross found a job as an English teacher in Nagano Prefecture, home to Kiso lacquerware, and spent three years working there and traveling to various lacquer-producing regions in Japan. Having learned that Wajima is the most notable lacquer-producing areas in Japan, she decided to head for Wajima.

Ross contacted several lacquer workshops in Wajima directly, only to find that they had no intention of accepting any apprentices. Luckily, she was able to become a student at the Academy of Wajima Lacquerware Art, a government-subsidized institution founded for the purpose of cultivating excellent artists so that this master craft can be passed down through the generations, along with its numerous elaborate techniques. She applied for the academy, excited to start her foundation course.

However, an unexpected development was awaiting her when she returned to London briefly before entering the academy. She fell in love with an English man she had known for a while, which forced her to postpone her entrance to the academy. Although she valued her relationship with him very much, it was impossible for her to cut off her odyssey with urushi. A year later she compelled him to make the toughest decision of his life – to travel with her to Wajima or to split up. To her great relief, her boyfriend opted for the former.

Entrance to the academy was the beginning of her ordeal. Ross had two major obstacles to face. One is, of course, a language barrier. The other is an entrenched Japanese tradition of apprenticeship; skills are not something to be taught, but are to be stolen from masters through careful observation.

“Some teachers wouldn’t teach me anything and tell me to be quiet or just watch them. It was a big culture shock and I couldn’t understand why I was treated like that. I thought It was just disgraceful. “

Her passion somewhat moved some of the teachers, who were kind enough to reply to her questions in broken English. For Ross, it didn’t make any difference whether he was an advanced-level teacher or a living national treasure.

“I am particularly grateful for Oba-sensei, who is a designated as a living national treasure for his generous help. If I hadn’t met him, I might have returned to London. He greatly encouraged me to keep up with my work. When I received my graduation diploma, he warmly commented on my graduation work. I was so moved and will never forget it.”

Her individual manners without adequate understanding for Japanese customs

placing emphasis on hierarchy and group harmony led to a major incident once. Ross designed a work of "*hakomono*" (a kind of box) with a door for her graduation piece. Her request for finishing carpentry was turned down by the academy since it would cost too much. She braved it out with a teacher outside of the academy without consulting the academy, which proved to be an utter debacle. It was not appropriate for her to take her request over the academy straight to someone outside of the organization. In spite of the uproar, she managed to stick to her guns and completed her work, which is still displayed at the academy.

Having finished the foundation course, she moved on to the *Makie* Course to master one of the most common techniques for adding ornamental designs to lacquered surfaces.

Just as she had finished her five years of studies, her daughter was born. She spent the subsequent 10 years bringing her up and working as an independent artist.

## **Passion for Urushi**

Ross intends to preserve traditional lacquerware techniques through using the best materials and following the teachings of master craftsmen, but this is not her goal.

In her works there is existence between awesome respect for traditions and innovations that break out of traditions. These two characteristic seem to be in perfect harmony in her pieces as can be seen, for example, in a bowl decorated with French lace and a plate decorated with European flowers and plants.

Her enthusiasm for *urushi* sometimes leads to outpourings of critical comments about the conservative world of Wajima lacquerware. She says, "Wajima Lacquerware artists should broaden their horizons by learning a great deal from Europe, and find ways to incorporate some fine elements into the next generation of lacquerware pieces. I don't think people will appreciate lacquerware pieces for good if you keep making similar styles of works. I strongly believe that Japan should spread *urushi* abroad.

This does not mean, however, that you can produce wine glasses using *urushi*. If you have any inkling of Western wine culture, you know that there is no point producing something that you can't see inside. If you wish to promote yourself in the world, you should do thorough market research." She intends to be a bridge between parochial Japanese craftsmen and Europe with no *urushi* expertise.

Ross deplores the fact that many Japanese regard *urushi* to be so expensive that it is cumbersome to be used on a daily basis. "Lacquerware pieces should not be displayed on the shelf. The more frequently you use them, the shinier and the more beautiful they become. If you don't use them, they may crack. As long as you use them

properly, they will last for a long time, even 100 years. Considering this duration aspect, *urushi* is not expensive. I would rather my works were purchased by someone who wishes to use them every day.”

Ross lives in a house along the Wajima River, a 10-minute drive from the center of Wajima, in a farm village with a population of 100. She grows potatoes, cucumbers, tomatoes, carrots, eggplants and pumpkins and bakes her own bread. Although her house is isolated - her next door neighbor is a few-minute walk, she moved to the present house when she had her second child and needed more space. “When I moved in, this old house was deserted and I had no access to water, electricity and gas. It was so hard to live here at first, but my husband puttered around the house so that we can live comfortably now. In Europe it is natural for people to preserve old houses to live in.”

Although she has studied the finished coatings of *Makie* and built her own workshop called, “Ross Studio,” her odyssey with *urushi* seems never to end. “*Urushi* is a profound world. I have spent half of my life working on it. It is so time consuming. When I first came to Japan, I thought I would only stay here for three months or six months at most. I have been in Japan for nearly 22 years. That’s amazing, isn’t it?”