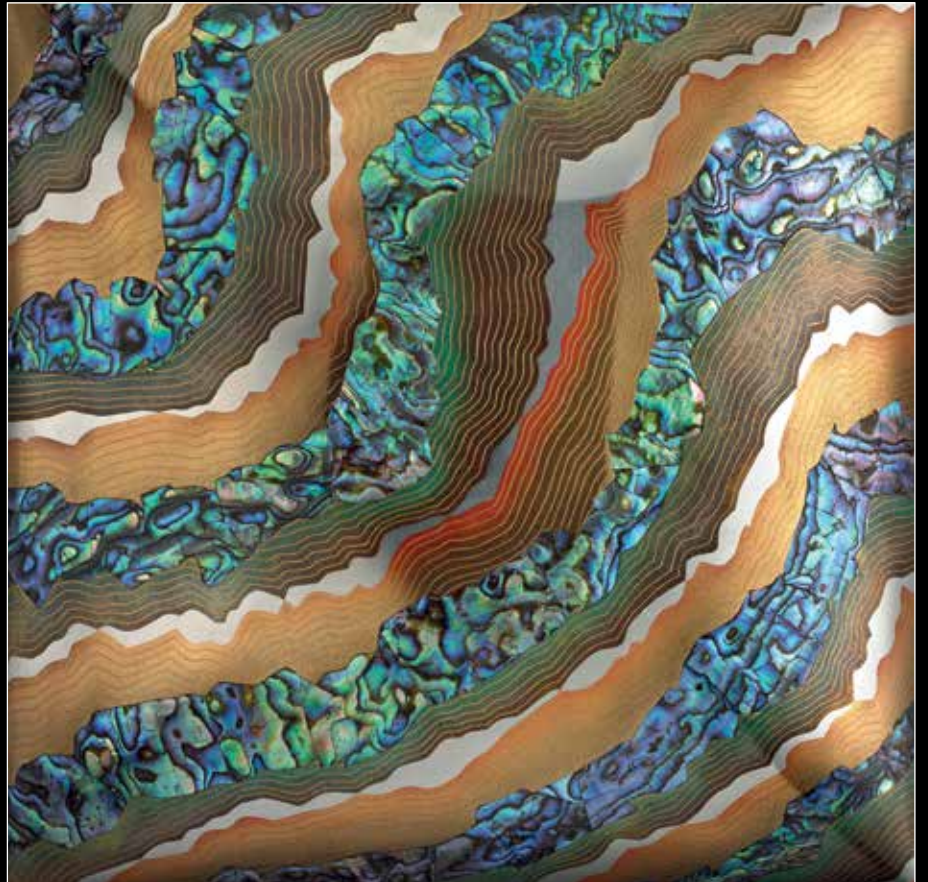
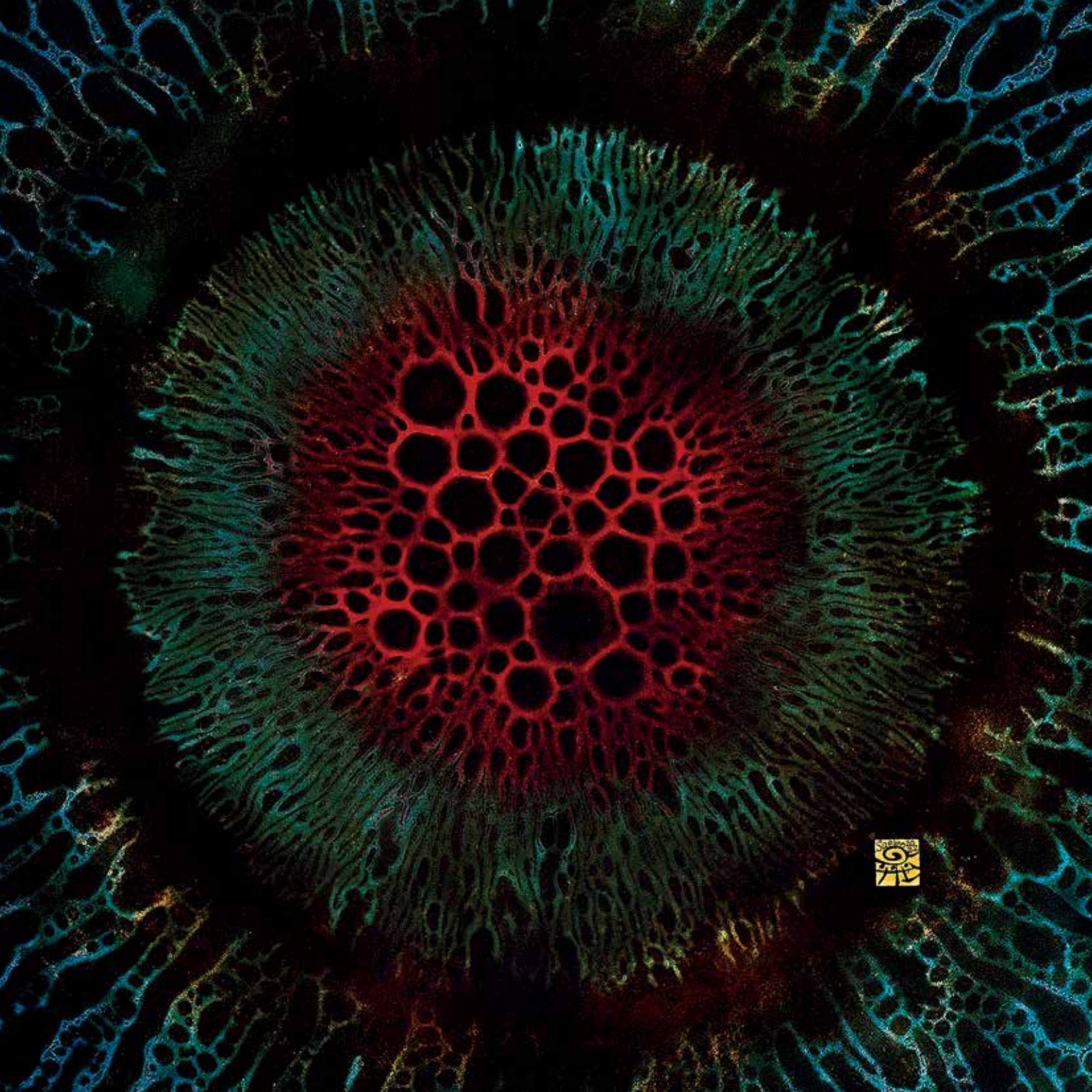


The Magic of Lacquer





Front cover
Detail of catalogue item 1

Opposite
Detail of catalogue item 15

Back cover
Detail of catalogue items 3, 7, 8



20th ANNIVERSARY: *the magic of lacquer*

Appreciation of lacquer is a taste which has to be acquired, but which, when acquired, grows upon one, and places the best lacquer in the category of almost sacred things.

Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Things Japanese* (1890)

For 20 years I have studied and exhibited artworks produced using Japanese lacquer, *urushi*. Over that time I have met dedicated artists who are working today, and found modern and contemporary pieces, providing artistic continuity in this quintessential Japanese artform. All of which has confirmed the truth of Basil Chamberlain's observation.

Urushi, the sap of the so-called lacquer tree, has been used for thousands of years to coat and protect everyday wooden utensils, but for the past 1500 years it has been elevated to an extraordinary and unique artform by the Japanese. Initially it invoked wonder in European traders when first seen in the 16th century, as there is no equivalent material outside East Asia, which is the habitat of the lacquer tree. In addition, its production processes are so time-consuming and demanding that it can be hard to appreciate the amount of work that goes into producing a single piece of fine lacquer.

In this catalogue can be found art that exemplifies the best of that achievement. Most familiar is perhaps work in the gold *makie* technique – creating designs through the sprinkling and polishing of metallic powders on to a lacquer ground. Other works complement that technique through the addition of exquisite shell inlays, while, for some artists, the pieces are created through the carving of lacquer. Finally, we see lacquer used as *‘trompe-l’oeil’*, creating works that play with our senses in the imitation of other materials such as metal and leather.

I invite you to join me in the admiration of these amazing artworks.

Simon Pilling
East Asian Art & Interiors

01 **DAWN CLOUD**
Gyoun

by **HATTORI Shunsho** 服部峻昇
(1943 – 2018)

Heisei period, around 2000
Gold and coloured lacquers, silver leaf
and mother-of-pearl inlays, *yogai*
18.1 x 18.1 x 16 (h) cm.
Signed. Sealed wrapping cloth. Signed
and sealed *tomobako*

*“Using a traditional material, lacquer,
I want to explore the possibilities of
the material in today’s context
while executing the ancient lacquer
technique established in the
Heian era”*

Shimmering iridescence, bold
geometry, and perfect form define
the work of Kyoto master craftsman
Hattori Shunsho. This beautiful
example epitomises his unique vision
and formidable technical skills.

Entitled *Gyoun* - Dawn Cloud –
this ornamental, deep-sleeve box
celebrates the dawning of the day.
It is the mystical time before sunrise,
when the sun’s rays from below the
horizon bring back blues and
illuminate any clouds in the sky –
a magical time of day, when colours
return, and daily life renews.

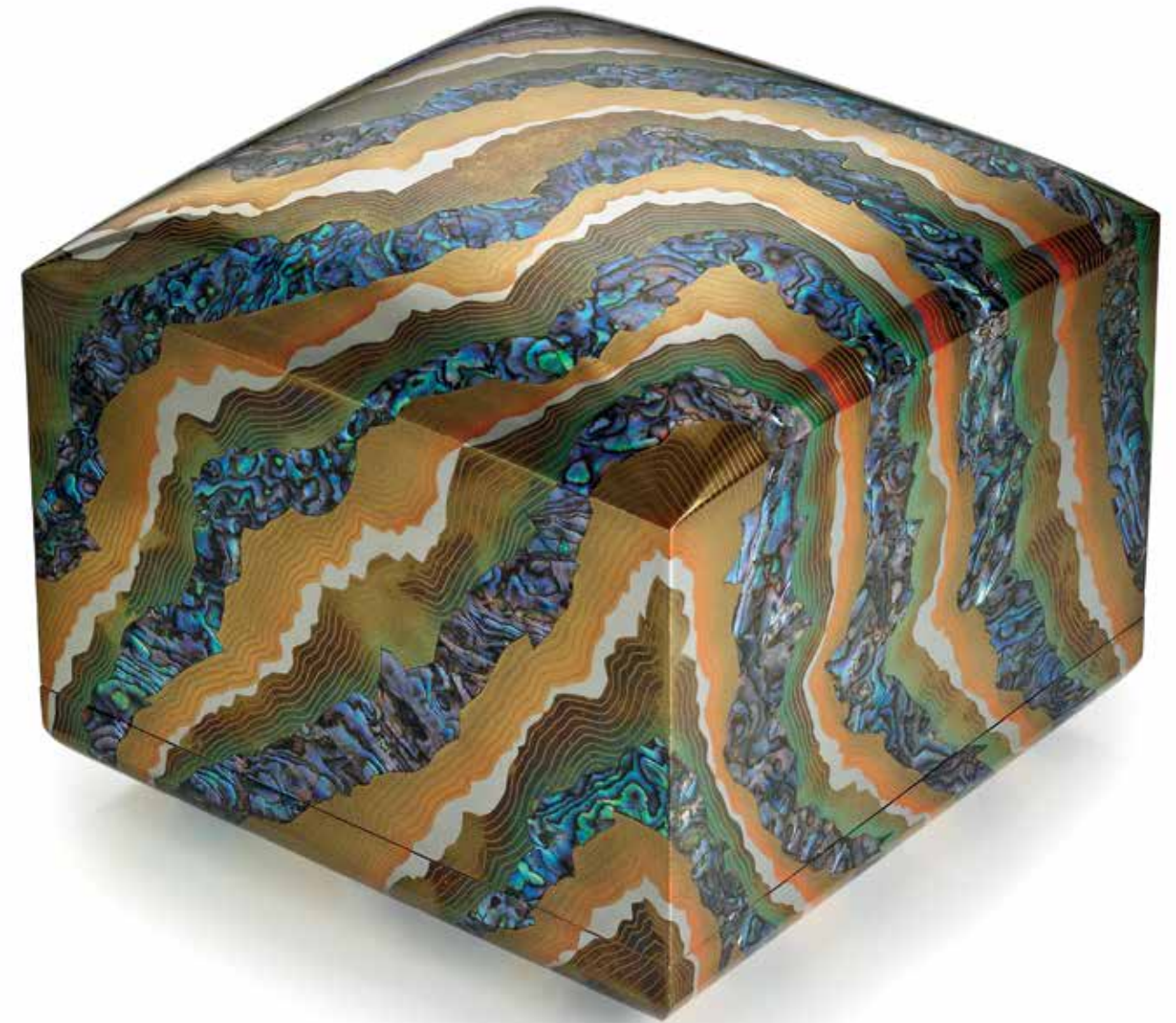
The form of the box is a domed cube,
its base receding in reflection of the
domed top. Vivid Mexican abalone
shell inlays – shimmering blues,

greens and purples – create the ‘blue’
sky, against which bands of cloud are
given form through fine lines of gold
makie and silver leaf inlays. Shining
light on the box, causes an
extraordinary effect of vivid, iridescent
red and green to appear within the
golden clouds – an effect achieved
through the incorporation of crushed
jewel beetle, *tamamushi*. The
movement and life that this achieves
cannot be captured by photography.
It needs to be seen through differing
viewpoints and light levels.

Hattori was born into a family based
in Kyoto’s traditional textile industry.
Surrounded by the richly ornate
designs of the time, it is perhaps not
surprising that his artistic output in
lacquer should focus on colour and
pattern. At the age of 15 he enrolled
in the lacquer arts programme of the
Kyoto Municipal Hiyoshigaoka High
School to study under Mizuuchi
Kyohei and Hiiraisshi Kosho. After
graduation his work was regularly
exhibited and awarded throughout

the 1960s. In 1970 he co-founded
the radical *Forme* group – whose
members explored technological
innovations in lacquer, incorporating
modern materials into the traditional
lacquer techniques. By 1980 Hattori’s
interests increasingly moved towards
the depiction of Nature – vibrant
abstract and geometric landscapes,
creating a body of work that would
cause some commentators to label
it Contemporary *Rinpa*. Around this
time his interest and skills in
mother-of-pearl inlay work came to
the fore. Many awards for his work
were to follow throughout his career.

Works by Hattori are now widely held
in public collections in Japan,
including both the Tokyo and Kyoto
National Museums of Modern Art,
and the Denver Art Museum USA



by **MATSUMOTO Tatsuya** 松本達弥
(b.1961)

Heisei period, 2020
Carved coloured lacquers, *choshitsu*
29.3 x 12.8 x 17.1 (h) cm.
Signed. Signed and sealed *tomobako*

Exhibited at the 67th Japanese Traditional Arts Exhibition, *Nihon Dento Kogeiten*, in 2020, this seemingly understated work is a masterclass in carved lacquer, *choshitsu*. In this work, Matsumoto has laid down alternating bands of yellow and red lacquer. Twelve bands in all, each composed of many applications of lacquer. Finally, a band of black layer has been formed.

The artist, then faced with a black box, has carved through the lacquers to create a perfect, complex, geometric patterning. The main intersection points of octagonal stars are highlighted with gold *makie* arrowheads. The plain black endpieces display a ghostly patterning that mirrors the overall design.

Choshitsu is a painstaking and lengthy process. After the preparation and seasoning of the wooden base – itself taking over a year – the application, curing and carving of the multiple lacquer layers would have entailed another two year's work.

Opening the deep-sleeve box reveals three silk-lined stacking trays in high gloss, *roiro* black.

Matsumoto was born in Zentsugi City, Kagawa Prefecture, Shikoku – an area of Japan noted for the carved lacquer technique as taught at the Kagawa *Urushi* Lacquer Ware Institute in Takamatsu. Graduating in 1986, he studied under Otomaru Kodo (Living National Treasure for the carved lacquer technique) and Otomaru Jun. For two years running – 1991 and 1992 – works by him, displayed at the *Nihon Dento Kogeiten*, were purchased by the Imperial Household. A similar work was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012.

In 2023, at the 70th Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition, his work was awarded the Japan Kōgei Association President's Prize, and in 2024 he received the government's Medal with Purple Ribbon – awarded for artistic achievement.



03 ICARUS

by **SASAKI Gakuto** 佐々木岳人
(b. 1983)

Heisei period, 2017
Dry lacquer form, *kanshitsu*, with innovative
lacquer finishes, *kawarinuri*
24.5 x 18 x 13 (h) cm.
Sealed. Sealed wrapping cloth. Signed and
sealed *tomobako*

I first saw the work of Sasaki-san in
2011 at the Wajima Lacquer Art
Museum's annual hosting of
graduation work from lacquer schools

across Japan. It was fresh, original
and intriguing, and I determined to
track him down. I found him in Tokyo,
where he had been a student at the
Tokyo University of the Arts, *Tokyo*
Gedai. In 2012 I first showed his work
in the West, and I am delighted to
again have two pieces by him.

ICARUS is a work inspired by the
Greek myth of a man who, despite
warnings, with wings constructed of
feathers and wax, flew too close to
the sun, causing the wax to melt. He
drowned in the sea below. Sasaki's

work draws on this fable. The box
appears to be fastened with two zips
and to be covered in green ostrich
skin. This structure is a typical Sasaki
optical illusion, *trompe-l'oeil*, since all
is made of imitative lacquer. The
inspiration behind the choice of
ostrich stems from the now-accepted
fact that ostriches once flew, but lost
that ability during the evolutionary
period. Opening the box reveals a
solitary ostrich feather in gold *makie*
on the base – a fall from grace.

The techniques employed in this box
– particularly the zips – have become
Sasaki's unique motifs. The zips are
painstakingly formed using individually
cast lacquer teeth that are inlaid one
by one into black, lacquer-soaked
cloth. The zip tags, displaying the
work's name, are flexible and finished
in gold *makie*. The box's riser,
revealed when the lid is lifted,
displays an opened zip.

Optical illusion has a long history in
Japanese art, particularly through
lacquer's ability to imitate a range of
material and surfaces – from wood
and ceramic to rusting metal. The
reaction it invokes – *aware* (awaa-ray)
– a feeling of playfulness, surprise
and amusement – has long been
central to Japanese art.

Sasaki now teaches in the *urushi*
school at the Tokyo Gedai. His
commercial production is very low,
exhibiting only every 4-5 years.



04 MIRAGE II

by **SASAKI Gakuto** 佐々木岳人
(b. 1983)

Heisei period, 2021
Dry lacquer form, *kanshitsu*, with innovative
lacquer finishes, *kawarinuri*
31 x 16 x 7.5 (h) cm.
Sealed. Sealed wrapping cloth. Signed and
sealed *tomobako*

This work of Sasaki Gakuto invites the viewer to suspend preconceptions. At first sight the appearance is familiar – a high-grade, tooled leather box, with double zip fastenings. Touch it, however, and it is immediately apparent that the eye has been deceived. There is no leather, tooling, or metal zips. All is recreated in lacquer. Lifting the lid exposes a riser decorated with

mother-of-pearl, raden, inlays in replication of the exterior metal zip, and an interior base of multi-coloured *raden nashiji*.

Sasaki explains:

In this work, deceptive elements are hidden in the function, texture, and form of the box. My aim is that when someone tries to open the box, they will feel as if they have been looking at a mirage. The pattern on the top of the lid is inspired by a Chinese folk tale in which smoke emitted by a giant clam creates a mirage. In this work, the shell is depicted as a stitch pattern, reminiscent of a modern radio wave (WiFi) symbol

For the Western viewer the question can be ‘why go to the trouble?’ Here our equivalent artistic tradition is seen

in ‘*trompe-l’oeil*’ paintings (lit. deceive the eye) – a playfulness to intrigue and amuse. In Japanese lacquer art there is a similarly rich tradition, dating back to at least the 18th century, of using lacquer in replication of materials. The 19th-century artist, Shibata Zeshin, perfected such techniques. Sasaki-san is continuing this important tradition, bringing his work directly in line with contemporary values to question our current fascination with luxury goods.

Sasaki-san is fascinated by the concept of fine quality craft and the essential role that this plays in our daily lives. Focusing on a luxury item and recreating the work in lacquer, he questions our definitions of luxury, intrigues our vision and displays consummate skill in the creation of a fine quality work of art.

‘Fine quality’ always adds joy to our life and makes our life more colourful. I am hoping that great stories will be composed by using my works, and I will keep striving for this purpose. Craft work made by hand can be a turning point for us to consider what can be a truly wealthy life with fine quality in this society of mass consumption



05 ORNAMENTAL BOX

by **YAMADA Rakuzen II**
(1915 –?)

Showa period, 1950s/60s
Gold and coloured lacquers with ceramic inlays
21.3 x 33.5 x 16.7 (h) cm.
Signed. Signed and sealed *tomobako*

An exuberant celebration of the visual power of geometry and repetition – a chequerboard of eight planes, each defined by a grouping of nine square, glazed porcelain inlays in a range of blues, greens and turquoise. The design discipline originates from the ceramic inlays, set into visually receding tonal planes of lacquer decoration. A further defining rhythm is established through contrasting eight grounds of variegated maroon and brown lacquer finish, delineated through subtle gold *makie* crosses. It is a work which repays quiet contemplation.

The use of ceramic inlays is associated with lacquerware of the *Rinpa* School from the 17th century, and continued into 20th-century collaborations between Kyoto craftsmen. The ceramic craftsman who produced the pieces in this work is not known, but it would not have been Rakuzen.

Rakuzen II, real name Toyo, had been born in the coastal town of Tsuruga, north of Kyoto, but was adopted by a Kyoto *makie* family – the Iseya – led by Yamada Rakuzen I (1874-1939). In 1930 he entered the Kyoto Municipal School of Arts & Craft, graduating in 1933. His work was regularly exhibited in Japan, including the *Nitten*, and received numerous prizes.

He succeeded to lead the family business in 1954, taking the name Rakuzen II. In 1957 his work won the Grand Gold Prix at the World Craft Exhibition, held in New York's Museum of Contemporary Crafts (today's Museum of Arts and Design).

Work by Rakuzen II was included in the seminal 1998 exhibition *CRAFTS REFORMING IN KYOTO: A Struggle Between Tradition and Renovation*, held at the National Museums of Modern Art in Kyoto and Tokyo.



06 INCENSE TRAY

kobon

by **YOSHIDA Baido**
(1896 -1986)

Taisho/early Showa period, 1920s/30s
Carved red lacquer, *tsuishu*
39.5 x 15.1 x 3 (h) cm.
Original silk pouch
Signed. Signed and sealed lacquered *tomobako*

This boldly carved, standing *shishi* lion, set above rocks and foliage, and surrounded by scattering clouds, presents a fearsome image. The *shishi* is an important guardian in both Buddhism and Shintoism, and is frequently seen in statues flanking the entrance to temples and shrines. On the reverse of this foliate-cornered tray runs an Egyptian key pattern – a common decorative motif found on work of this period. The carving of the work is deep and precise, indicating a base working surface built up of around 100 layers.

The art of carving lacquer was developed in Song period China around the 12th century. When first imported to Japan in the 14th century its methods amazed the Japanese. Believing that they could not match such perfection, the immediate Japanese response was to invent the technique of *kamakura-bori*, in which the design would be carved in wood and then be given a simple over-coating of lacquer.

One Kyoto family, however, pursued achieving the real thing, adopting the name *Tsuishu* (meaning ‘layered red’) *Youzei* (conflating the names of two famous Chinese lacquerists *Youmo* and *Chousei*). The family was to produce work for the Ashikaga and Tokugawa shoguns, and continued working into the 20th century, when the work of the 20th-generational head was credited with revitalising and modernising this art form.

Carved lacquer is a reductive process, first requiring the artist to create sufficient depth of lacquer to enable the carving. A single layer of applied lacquer is similar to a coat of thinned paint, so to create the thickness of this piece up to 100 layers would have been applied. Each layer had to ‘cure’ for at least 24 hours before polishing and then applying the next layer. It is therefore a painstaking process even before the demanding process of carving to reveal a design can begin. The finished piece has the characteristic weight of solid lacquer.

Born in Komatsu City, Ishikawa Prefecture, Baido first studied wood carving under Murakami Kurosaku, before going on to master the carved lacquer technique. In 1932 his work was selected for the first time for the 13th *Teiten* (Imperial Art Exhibition) and thereafter was regularly selected for the *Shin-Bunten* and *Nitten* exhibitions, receiving the Special Selection Award in 1947 and the Asakura Prize in 1952. From 1955 he was active in the Japan Traditional Art Crafts Exhibition, becoming a full member of the Japan *Kōgei* Association.



07 **WRITING BOX**
suzuribako

by **KUDO Takashi** (b. 1946)

Heisei period, 2004
Gold *makie*, mother-of-pearl & eggshell inlays
26.3 x 22.2 x 4.3 (h) cm.
Signed. Signed & sealed *tomobako*

This beautiful, delicate design entitled *Sagisō no densetsu* – the Legend of Egret Orchids, illustrates a tragic Japanese folktale dating from its violent Warring States, *sengoku*, period (1467-1600). It is said that a misunderstanding had arisen between the Lord of Setagaya Castle and his concubine – Tokiwa-hime. In

desperation she composed a loving letter, dispatching it to her Lord tied to the leg of an egret. Sadly, the bird was shot down in flight by arrow, but where the bird fell, beautiful flowers resembling the bird grew up. (illus. below) To this day the *sagiso*, the flying egret orchid, is the official flower of Tokyo's Setagaya Ward.

The design of this *suzuribako* captures the unfolding stages of the folktale. The egret is depicted in fine, granular gold *makie*. To its left leg is tied the concubine's letter. But around the bird swirl strong winds carrying dislodged feathers against a golden ground, alluding to the bird's shooting

and descent. Opening up between the clouds is a vivid green, grassy earth of shimmering abalone shell inlays, from which emerge the egret orchids, meticulously created in minute eggshell inlay.

Studying under his father, a *makie* artist, Kudo Takashi has shown his work regularly since being first accepted into the *Nihon Dento Kogeiten* in 1975. This work was exhibited in a group show at the Wako Department Store, Ginza in 2004. He is a member of the Japan *Kogei* Association.



08 **WRITING BOX**
suzuribako

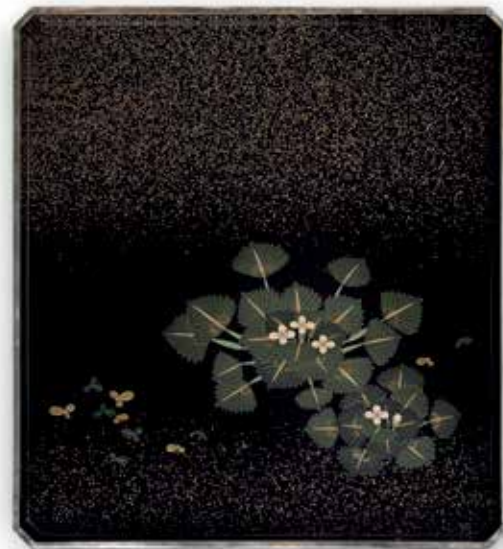
by **SENZAN**

Showa period, 1950s/60s
Gold & coloured *makie*
Silver fittings
26.5 x 24 x 5.5 (h) cm.
Signed and sealed *tomobako*

The *namazu*, catfish, has been central to Japanese mythology since at least the 16th century. According to the legend, the creature lives beneath the Japanese Islands. Normally restrained by the thunder god, Takemikazuchi, the giant catfish occasionally manages to wriggle free, and its thrashings cause the earthquakes that Japan regularly experiences.

Set against a brilliant black *roiro* ground, the image of a *namazu* is perfectly captured by a range of innovative lacquer techniques. Framing the picture is a scattering of flower petals. Opening the box reveals the plants from which these petals have fallen – the *shiso*, perilla plant, sharply delineated in gold and coloured *makie*. While the *shiso* leaf is a common flavouring ingredient in

Japanese cuisine, the consumption of catfish is rare. Exactly what the artist's vision in connecting these two elements in his design is unclear. The technical quality of the work is very fine, and the writing set is complete, with ink-stick holder, paper knife and punch with delicate silver bindings, and two brushes.



09 FOUR DISHES

by **KOMATSU Yoshimitsu** (1903-93)

Showa period, c.1930s
Red & black lacquers
17 (dia.) x 2 (h) cm.
Signed

Against a high-gloss, perfect black *roiro* ground, bold plant designs in red *rinpa*-style bring these dishes alive. The lacquer technique used – *botan-shibo nuri*, withered peonies – involves building up an irregular thick, viscous, black lacquer background to the plant designs, which is then over-lacquered in red, before polishing back. It imparts vitality and depth to the images.

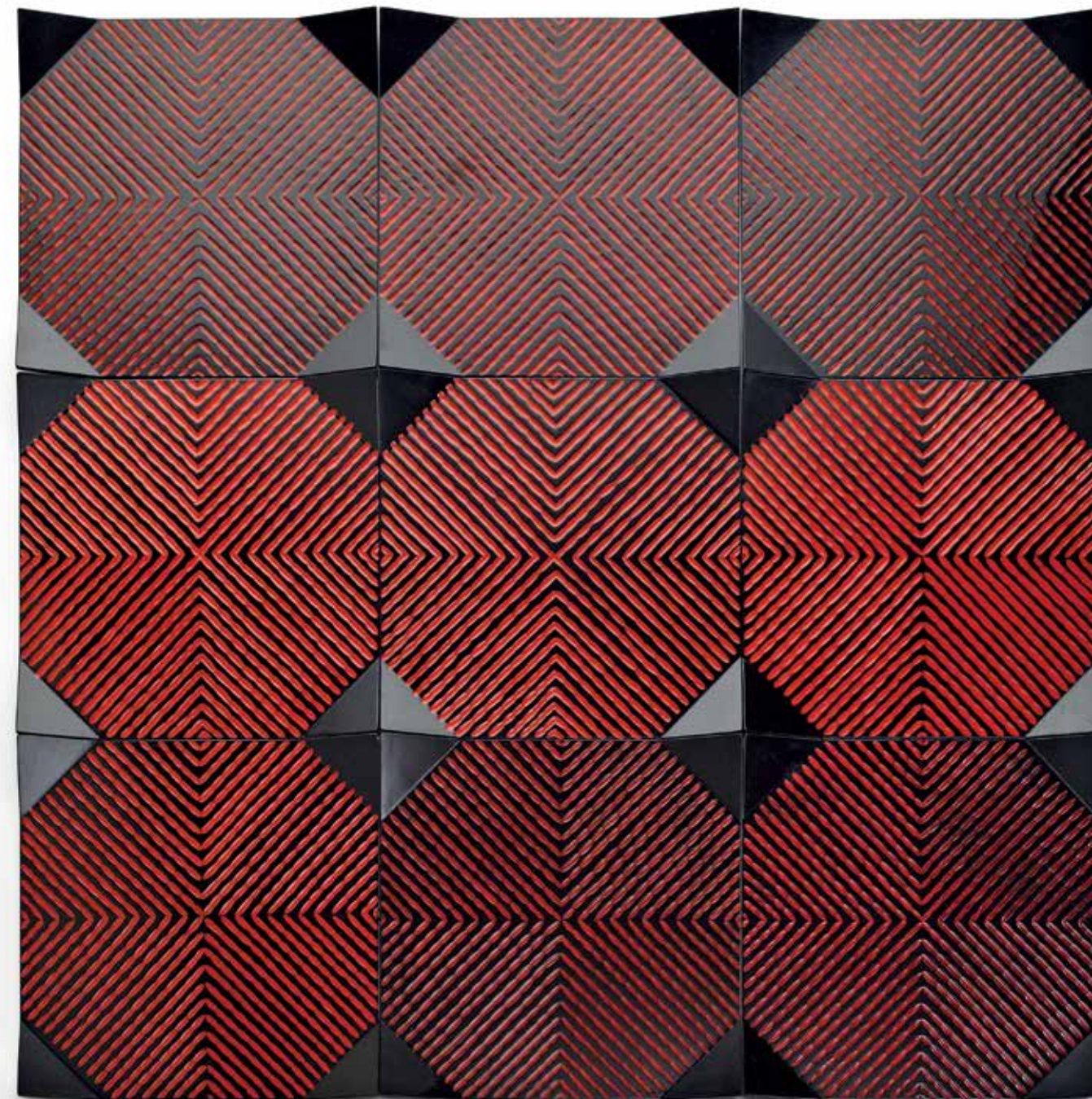
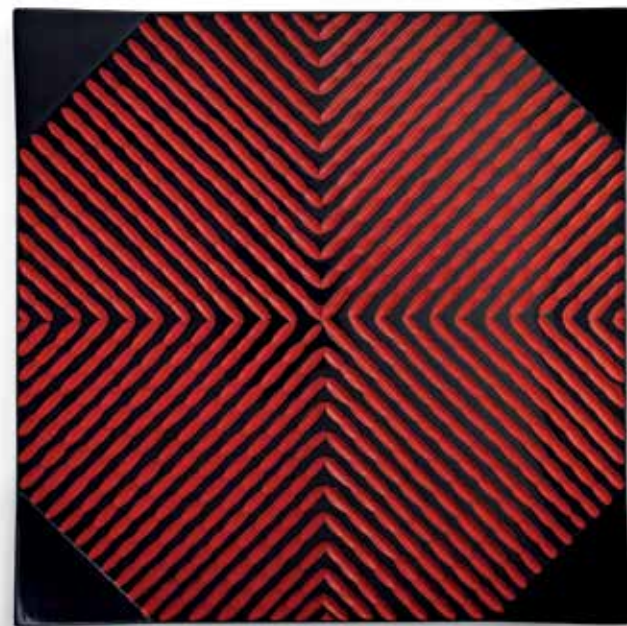
Born in Kanazawa City, Komatsu studied under Uematsu Hōbi. In 1927 his work was selected for inclusion in the 8th *Teiten* (Imperial Art Exhibition), and in 1938 he received the Special Selection Award at the 2nd *Shin-Bunten*. After the war, his work was regularly shown at the *Nitten* exhibitions, receiving the Special Selection Award in 1946, and the Minister of Education Award in 1968. In 1977 he was designated as a Holder of an Important Intangible Cultural Property of Ishikawa Prefecture. Serving as a Councillor of the *Nitten*, his work was seen as featuring a modern sense of design and original decorative motifs, that brought fresh energy to the lacquer art world.



10 FOOD TRAY SET

Showa period, 1960/70s
Black and red lacquer
Each 33 x 33 cm.
Inscribed *tomobako*

A spectacular set of ten *kaiseki* trays, entitled *Kokushusen tsuma-oshiki* – *oshiki* tray with incised vermillion lines and characteristic *tsuma* (side) folded design. Working with a plain black lacquered surface the artist has carved a simple, bold geometric design, lacquered in a bright red. Each tray would provide a diner with a set course of the meal – either in individual lacquer containers or with the food placed directly on to the surface. A feast for the senses.



11 TEA CUP *yunomi*

by **HAYASHI Shotaro** 林正太郎
(b.1947)

Reiwa period, 2024
Shino stoneware
10 (dia) x 12.5 (h) cm.
Sealed wrapping cloth
Signed & sealed *tomobako*

Entitled *Rikyu Kokushi Shino Hanmon Gakugata Kodai* – Rikyū black and purple Shino teacup with speckled pattern and mountain-shaped tall foot – this spectacular *yunomi* shows why Hayashi Shotaro is considered a master of contemporary *shino* ceramics. Exaggerated crystalline glazes on the carved body of the piece ensure visual excitement and a satisfying tactile quality to enhance the experience of everyday tea drinking.

Born in Toki City, Gifu Prefecture, Shotaro's extraordinary talent and originality was recognised early on – winning the highest award at the Gifu Prefectural Art Exhibition in 1968, the year following his high school graduation.

Following a seven-year apprenticeship under his older brother Kotaro, in 1974 he established his own kiln in Shimoishicho, Toki City, where he remains based. In 2012 he was awarded the status of Gifu Prefecture Important Intangible Cultural Property.



FIVE SMALL PLATES

by **HAYASHI Shotaro** 林正太郎
(b.1947)

Heisei period, 1990s/2000s
Shino stoneware
Irregular 15 (dia) x 2.7 (h) cm.
Individual sealed wrapping cloths
Signed. Signed & sealed compartmentalised *tomobako*

Entitled *Manyosai mei-mei zara*
– Rainbow-coloured individual plate
for serving – these five small food
dishes display a mix of soft pinks,

yellows and blues on a textured
ground, evoking images of
landscape. The glazing technique,
termed *manyoshi*, is unique to
this artist.

Shino-ware's characteristics stem
from the prolonged and inefficient
firing process in moist,
semi-subterranean kilns. Glazes often
fail to melt completely in the low
temperatures, and either thicken or
crawl on the surface, but also result
in subtle colouration. This tendency
is often encouraged by deliberately

irrigating the kilns. *Shino*-ware in the
Gifu region has a rich history dating
back to the 16th century. Shotaro,
coming from a family of potters, has
studied precedents closely and is
credited with bringing the tradition
into a contemporary expression.
Widely exhibited, awards for his work
include five-times winner of Best of
Show at the Asahi Ceramics
Exhibition, and all three major awards
at the Mino Ceramics Exhibition – the
Mino Ceramics Award, the Shoroku
Award and the Kobei Award.



BOTTLE

tokkuri

Edo period, 18th century
 Karatsu stoneware
 9 (dia) x 26 (h) cm.
 Lacquered, collector's storage box

A beautiful, haunting piece with incised decoration and wide brush strokes of white slip, *hakeme*. A diagonal stroke of dark glaze has been quickly applied across the form. The whole is topped by a red lacquered stopper in the shape of a peony flower. The waisted form is perfect for its use.

Karatsu-ware takes its name from the port in Kyushu that was the main entry and exit point for early communication between Japan and Korea. Following Hideyoshi's war campaigns of the 1590s against Korea, many Korean potters – initially prisoners and, later, artisan immigrants – established the *karatsu*-ware tradition. The work was simple and primarily for everyday use. It is *karatsu*-ware's very simplicity and irregularity that continues to endear it to the Japanese psyche.



RICE BASIN & SPOON

ohitsu & shamoji

Edo period, 19th century
 Gold & silver *makie* on a deep maroon ground
 25 (dia.) x 19.5 (h) cm.

A spectacular rice container for use in a *kaiseki* dinner. The quality of, primarily, the *takamakie* technique is exceptional for such a piece. The underside of the lid displays a family crest – the triple yin-yang symbol, *mitsudomoe* – of the Okabe daimyo clan from Izumi (current Saitama Prefecture).

The design is of scrolling vine leaves spreading across the vessel, highlighted with gold *kirikane* flakes, suggesting dew drops on the leaves. Darting through the design are finely detailed birds drawn in gold and silver *makie*. Inside the bowl, with a rich *nashiji* finish, is a scattering of golden leaves. The scrolling vine design continues on the serving spoon, with the bowl of the spoon finished in *nashiji*.

15 COSMOS 1

by **ANDO Saeko** 安藤彩英子
(b.1968)

Reiwa period, 2022
Lacquer painting, *son mai*
40 (dia) x 2) cm.
Sealed

16 COSMOS 3

by **ANDO Saeko** 安藤彩英子
(b.1968)

Reiwa period, 2022
Lacquer painting, *son mai*
40 (dia) x 2) cm.
Sealed

I first saw the work of Saeko Ando in 2014. She had contacted me to ask if I might be interested to exhibit her art in the West. I was, since her sincerity and unique approach to fusing the traditional Vietnamese *son mai* lacquer technique with her own innate Japanese sensibilities produced some stunning work. Based in Hoi An, her work continues to evolve in original and exciting ways. Her words describing these latest pieces convey an irrepressible passion for her work:

Cosmos is a series born from a meditative openness to both the world around and the world within—a quiet surrender to the intricate, shifting energies that animate Hoi An's natural landscape. When I embarked on these paintings, I

deliberately set aside all preparatory sketches and rational planning, trusting instead to intuition and in the subtle dialogue that unfolds each day between myself and my environment. Painting becomes an act of deep listening.

Through this process, patterns emerge almost unconsciously – swirling forms reminiscent of distant galaxies, delicate lines echoing the veins of leaves, seedpods, or branching streams of life. Sometimes what surfaces seems unmistakably

cosmic, sometimes intricately botanical—always, a bridge between the vast and the intimate.

My hope is for each viewer to step into the works not as exterior observers but as a participant in discovery. The Cosmos paintings resist fixed narratives; rather, they serve as portals—mirrors inviting each person to enter with their own associations, stories, and daydreams. I wish for these paintings to become spaces of contemplation, places where the grandeur of the universe

and the richness of the natural world unfold according to the rhythm and imagination of whoever gazes into them.

At the heart of these works is my use of Vietnamese son ta natural lacquer—one of the world's most enigmatic and revered materials. Son ta fascinates me for its remarkable clarity and transformative capacity – initially dark and opaque, it becomes increasingly translucent as time and nature perform their silent alchemy. In Cosmos this evolving transparency

unveils intricate patterns—evocations of galaxies, plant veins, and the mysterious order of living matter—inviting viewers to journey freely between the micro and macro realms.

My work honours centuries of Vietnamese craftsmanship, while incorporating son mai painting techniques born after the establishment of École des Beaux-Arts de l'Indochine 100 years ago and my own original methods developed through decades of experimentation. Working with

successive layers of lacquer and other materials, careful sanding and polishing causes colours and textures to be gradually exposed, creating surfaces that shimmer in shifting light—alive, ever-changing, and never identical from one moment to the next.

The works are a poetic testament to impermanence, or utsuroi, – an aesthetic deeply cherished in Japan.

17 FLOWER VASE SET

Taisho/Showa period, 1920s/30s
Cloisonné, *shippo-yaki*
15 (dia) x 36.5 (h) cm.
Silver bindings
Collector's compartmentalised box

A pair of matched vases with contrasting designs of plum blossom. This flower is frequently mentioned in Japanese poetry as an optimistic harbinger of Spring – the first plant to break through the depths of a snowbound winter – and is admired for its elegance and purity. All these characteristics have been captured by the unknown artist of these pieces.

With a colour palette restricted to the red and white blossoms and the evocation of snow, there is great elegance to these works, both in their overall form and *cloisonné* decoration. Use of wires to form the *cloisons* is restricted to showing each flower's central stamen, and partial outline of

the petals. The effect, particularly on the white against a red ground piece, is an evocation of soft snowfall, contrasting the textured depth of the red ground.

The art of *cloisonné* in Japan only came to the fore in the late 19th-century Meiji period. The newly acquired technical skills were particularly admired in the International Arts Expositions of the period that did so much to establish the recently opened-up Japan's standing in the West. As with lacquer, special emphasis was placed on the final polishing, using a range of material including charcoal and ground deer horn.



by **SUZUKI Goro** 鈴木五郎 (b.1941)

Showa period, 1970s
Oribe stoneware
 28.8 (dia) x 5.8 (h) cm.
 Signed. Signed *tomobako*

I live and work in the Oribe tradition and in the traditional area of old Oribe, but I rebel against my strict training in traditional ceramics.

Plovers, *chidori*, symbolic of endurance and survival against the odds, are quickly sketched out in iron glaze. They swoop between crashing waves of thick, green copper glaze. It is an early work by this acclaimed ceramicist, working in the traditional 16th-century *oribe* style of Mino stoneware.

Credited with reviving the Momoyama-period artform and bringing it into the modern era, Suzuki's career has been marked by regular exhibitions and awards for an increasingly avant-garde output, receiving the prestigious Japan Ceramic Society Prize in 2002.

Born in Toyota City in Aichi Prefecture, and now working out of Fujioka in the Seto area, works by him are widely held in both western and Japanese museum collections, including the Metropolitan in New York, Minneapolis Institute of Art, LACMA and the MFA, Boston.



LARGE JAR *tsubo*

by **ISEZAKI So** 伊勢崎創 (b.1968)

Reiwa period, 2024
Bizen stoneware
 Irreg.29 (dia) x 42 (h) cm.
 Sealed wrapping cloth
 Signed. Signed and sealed *tomobako*

Elegant curves sweep around this signature vessel by *bizen* potter Isezaki So. Initially formed on the wheel, the shape is then flattened into a triangular form and carved to create an artwork unique to this artist, the nephew of *Bizen*'s current Living National Treasure Isezaki Jun.

Bizen ware, originating in the 12th century, is never actively glazed, and relies on the natural wood ash formed during the firing process to define its surface character. Subject to long firings – up to two weeks – and high temperatures, the body takes on an ironlike hardness, and colours ranging from yellows to rich purple-red, depending on how direct is the exposure to the flames. Burning red pine ash, *akamatsu*, melts on to the surface to create the textured 'sesame seed' effect, *goma*.

Isezaki's work is widely and regularly exhibited and awarded at the *Nihon Dento Kogei*.



by **YAMATO Yasuo** 大和保男
(b. 1933)

Showa period, 1977
Hagi stoneware
37.5 (dia) x 3 (h) cm.
Sealed wrapping cloth
Signed. Signed *tomobako*

This large, octagonal platter, decorated with a single, beautiful stem of orchid is the work of legendary *hagi* potter, Yamato Yasuo. His father, Yamato Harunobu Shoroku, was the 11th generation head of a family famed for their tea-ceremony ware. Established in the early 17th century in modern Yamaguchi prefecture in far-western Honshu, the *hagi* tradition grew from trade influences that had introduced new Korean ceramic styles and techniques. The simple, understated style was attractive to the local *daimyo* seeking tea-ceremony wares, who developed the local industry through their sponsorship of the kilns.

Like many potters of his generation, Yasuo initially rebelled against the strict and conservative tradition and joined the radical *Sodeisha* group that had been founded in 1948 to challenge the very notion of functional work. However, he was to remain true to the *hagi* tradition while infusing his

work with innovation. His works have been widely exhibited, including with *Sodeisha*. In 1959 he received First Prize at the *Nitten* and, in 1975 achieved First Prize at the *Nihon Dento Kogei Ten*.

This work was shown in 1977 at his solo exhibition in Shimonoseki. (A handwritten cloth slip records that it was bought for 300,000 yen). It is illustrated in the accompanying catalogue, in which the forward by Yuzuru Okada, director of the Tokyo's National Museum of Modern Art observed that '*his works exude ingenuity and possibility, newness and conservatism, all intertwined... a sense of masterful authority that no one else could emulate*'.

In 1988 Yasuo was designated an Intangible Property for *Hagi*, and work by him is widely held in museum collections in Japan and internationally, including within the Ise Shrine and the Imperial Household.





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