

Kakutaro Yamazaki, His Visit to the West,  
and His Influence on *Urushi* Art Education  
at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts

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## Abstract

KAKUTARO Yamazaki (1899–1984) was an innovative *urushi* (Japanese lacquer) artist who taught at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (now Tokyo University of the Arts) for two decades. Notable among his efforts to update traditional *urushi* technique was his development of colored *urushi*, which contributed to the growth of modern *urushi* art and gave his pupils opportunities for new artistic development.

A major turning point in Yamazaki's artistic career was a 1937 research trip to the West, sponsored by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. What he encountered during these travels set his own work on a new developmental course, especially in terms of design, which in turn influenced *urushi* art at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts.

Yamazaki taught at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts during the late 1920's and early 1930s, a "golden age" during which students enjoyed the tutelage of several of the greatest modern *urushi* masters—Gonroku Matsuda, Shisui Rokkaku, and Yamazaki himself—all of whom would become leading *urushi* specialists in the modern period.

Yamazaki was especially well known, both as an artist and an educator. His simple, modern designs honored tradition, but also took advantage of new multicolored *urushi* techniques. Partly through Yamazaki's influence, *urushi* art was able to make the transformation from its more traditional *makie* ("sprinkled gold") craft style to embrace designs more appropriately viewed as "fine art." The uses of *urushi* also broadened from the more traditional "container" type works (boxes, shelves, etc.) to applications like decorative panels.

Yamazaki published his experiences and observations in the West in a report titled "Recent Trends in Western Decorative Art." This gave special focus to describing decorative art in Paris, which, unlike the linear and faceted designs of movements like Bauhaus and the Austrian decorative arts, tended to find elegance in the artist's enjoyment of simplified design.

Yamazaki's report was well received, and his subsequent works took on a new direction. Pieces like "*Gibbons*" (1939, submitted to the Third Bunten Exhibition) were noticeably different from his previous works, which had cleaved to more traditional motifs in the vein of "*Small box with sprinkled gold image of Acala*" (1924). Yamazaki's new style would greatly influence later pupils, notably Setsuro Takahashi, and contributed to the development of *urushi* art education in modern Japan.

*Keywords:* 1;Kakutaro Yamazaki, 2;Colored Lacquer ware,3;Tokyo University of Fine Arts

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## Introduction

KAKUTARO Yamazaki (1899-1984), known in the modern Japanese lacquer-craft world for transcending tradition and paving the way for colored lacquer, contributed greatly to the creation of contemporary Japanese lacquer art and, through his long service at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (now Tokyo University of the Arts), to the education of many of the craftsmen who would carry that tradition forward.

Of particular note are the pictorial designs Yamazaki used on decorative panels and similar pieces. A major turning point in Yamazaki's artistic career was a research trip to the West, sponsored by the Ministry of Commerce and Industry, during 1937 and 1938. Upon his return, both his own artistic style and the urushi art education at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts began to develop in new ways. In this paper I will use the materials from Yamazaki's research travels in the West and his own reports about what he encountered to consider how his own work subsequently changed and the influence this had on modern urushi art education in Japan from then on.

### Kakutaro Yamazaki & the Tokyo School of Fine Arts

KAKUTARO Yamazaki was born on June 29th, 1899 in Higashiiwase-machi, Toyama prefecture (now Toyama city). He started school in 1906, graduated high school in 1915, and then entered the urushi (Japanese lacquer) department of Takaoka Polytechnic School (now Toyama Prefecture Takaoka Polytechnic). During his time there he earned a full scholarship to the program, which he completed in 1919. That same year he enrolled in the Urushi Arts department within Tokyo School of Fine Arts. Here, too, he studied under a scholarship, and graduated in 1924. In 1925 Yamazaki earned commendation for a work "Clothing Tray" which he had submitted to the Japan Art Association Exhibition, and that same year another work, "Pomegranate Inkstone Box" took first prize at the Paris Decorative Arts Exhibition. He also participated in the formation of the "Mukey" art society, and in 1927 he had his work "Makeup Table" selected for inclusion in the 8th Teiten (Imperial Exhibition), the first year that an Art Craft category was added. This was followed by a string of successes in each of the following years, including "Partition Screen" at the 9th exhibition in 1928, "Sprinkled Gold Stove Crest" at the 10th in 1929, and "Sideboard" at the 12th in 1931, all of which received special commendation awards.

During these years, Yamazaki became increasingly involved in teaching at Tokyo School of Fine Arts, as assistant professor in 1925, lecturer in 1926, and associate professor in 1928. In 1943 he became a full professor (but withdrew from teaching in 1946).

As a teacher in the Urushi Arts department of Tokyo School of Fine Arts, Yamazaki helped cultivate a great number of younger lacquer artists. The urushi-related faculty at the school during the late 1920s and early 1930s included, in addition to Yamazaki, craftsmen like Shisui Rokkaku (1867-1950) and Gonroku Matsuda (1896-1986), all of whom would be essential to any discussion of modern urushi history. Naoji Terai, who graduated in 1935 and whose sprinkled gold urushi tradition would in 1960 be designated an Important Intangible Cultural

Asset, recalls that teachers like Rokkaku, Matsuda and Yamazaki “were always there teaching us with such care and patience, sparing no effort, sometimes even crafting examples of their own for us to follow.” Matsuda’s teaching style, he says, was along the lines of “new applications of old knowledge,” while Yamazaki’s was “centered around new ideas themselves.”<sup>1)</sup>

### Yamazaki’s Gleanings from His Study Abroad

YAMAZAKI was still an associate professor in 1936 when he received a request from the Ministry of Commerce & Industry to undertake a research mission to the West. He left later that year to spend a year abroad as a research scholar working under the dual auspices of the Ministry of Commerce & Industry and the Ministry of Culture. Upon his return he prepared a report of his findings titled, “New Trends in Craft Abroad.”

According to Yamazaki himself, the purport of this mission to the West had to do with the fact that industrial arts at the time were dominated by a kind of adulation of the West, and the whole process of how exhibitions were being run was under question, namely because items being sent for exhibition by the Ministry of Commerce & Industry tended to be a melange of Japanese- and Western-style works, to the extent that there was little positive change or evolution even over the course of many exhibitions. Besides Yamazaki, these included Sanzo Wada, Toyochika Takamura, and Kado Sugita.

Yamazaki’s report was divided into detailed descriptions by country (the United States, England, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, Italy, Switzerland, and France), and also by specific craft materials, but among these he devoted a considerable number of pages to crafts in Paris, the culminating destination before his return to Japan. It would be impossible to delve into all of his observations in this short length, but certain sections do merit specific mention, one of which is his descriptions of European lacquer wares modeled on Japanese urushi. One might think that a craftsman like Yamazaki, steeped in centuries of authentic Japanese urushi tradition, would have found these European lacquer wares to be imitations hardly worthy of notice, but Yamazaki himself took a surprising view of them in his report. “There is value in any kind of change,” he wrote. “In Paris the idea of using something just because others are using it doesn’t have much sway, and people there are more interested in the idea of using things that others aren’t.”<sup>2)</sup> This was an important consideration, he felt, and while such lacquer products are treated as mere imitations in Japan, the very primitiveness of their technique suggested that they shouldn’t be regarded as imitating Japan at all, and in fact Yamazaki had to admit that they were even superior to Japanese urushi wares in terms of their basic durability.

Yamazaki also remarked on some of the differences he noticed in Parisian craft, contrasting the “short-lived powerhouses and the Austrian tendency toward multifaceted linearity”

1) ————— Editorial Committee of The Book of 100-Year History of Tokyo University of the Arts, *The Book of 100-Year History of Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music*, Vol. 3. (Volume of The Tokyo National University of Fine Arts), 2003, p. 516.

2) ————— Kakutaro Yamazaki, *Kaigai Kougei no Douko*[New Movements of Foreign Applied Arts], edited by Trade Department of the Ministry of Commerce and Industry in 1937, p. 122.

with the Parisian embrace of “gradually building quietude and a tendency to blanket all surfaces with a certain languid quality.” Parisian crafts abhorred any kind of standstill, and were “imbued with a destiny not so much as being something new as constantly striving to move toward ever-newer places.” This, Yamazaki decided, was the orientation of craft as he found it.<sup>3)</sup> If Paris could be regarded as the world’s center of craft, then Japanese export craft could, by studying Parisian craft, understand what sorts of craft products would be most appropriate to send to world markets.

### Yamazaki & His Work After Returning from the West

HAVING returned from the West, Yamazaki spent time traveling around Japan’s various export craft production regions, participating in exhibition juries, and attempting to break down mannerisms. The outbreak of the Second World War would shortly render the idea of export craft itself untenable for a time, but Yamazaki’s experiences abroad continued to influence him strongly even during that period. Where his earlier work had centered on older themes and traditional designs, for example “Fudo Image on Sprinkled Gold Leaflet Box,” (1924), he now began to draw a clear line between these and a new approach that embraced traditional technique while moving definitively toward a more pictorial design style. For the 2nd and 3rd New Bunten shows in 1938 and 1939, respectively, he presented “Urushi Screen—‘Unbridled’” and “Sprinkled Gold Screen—‘Gibbons’”, both of which showed a distinctly contemporary design sensibility. During this time Yamazaki also participated in numerous exhibition committees.

The Yuzen dye artist and pioneer Gekka Minagawa (1892-1987), best known for developing the use of pictorial techniques in his dye works, was impressed with Yamazaki’s pictorial approach, and praised works like “Dual-Panel Screen with Gibbons” in particular. “Before Yamazaki,” he said, “urushi craftsmen focused mostly on items like platters and boxes, but Yamazaki was a pioneer in bringing urushi into the realm of interior design.”<sup>4)</sup>

In an essay titled “Future Trends in Urushi Art”<sup>5)</sup> (likely penned in February 1942), Yamazaki looked back on the period of relative peace that existed between the two great wars and talked about “internationalism” in crafts and industrial arts. Namely, he had already seen signs of this in the craft circles in every country he visited during his Western travels in 1936 and 1937, and he wrote: “Even places like America and England, both champions of conventional capitalism and appearing outwardly to be committed to internationalism, also still have their own ethnic cultural outlooks and sensibilities.”<sup>6)</sup> We must be careful here to note that Yamazaki rejects viewing these outlooks and sensibilities as simply resurrecting classicism. In any country or culture there naturally are traditions to be respected and carried on, but he understood these as always accompanied by newer elements that would stand upon them and use them as stepping

3) ——— Ibid.

4) ——— Gekka Minagawa, ‘Yamazaki sennsei ni tsuite kannjitaru kotodomo’ [Things I felt for Mr. Kakutarō Yamazaki]; *Gekkan Bijon* [Monthly Vision], October issue in 1974, p. 38.

5) ——— Kakutarō Yamazaki, ‘*Kougei Dokuhon I, Kongo ni okeru shitsugei no doukou ni tsui te*’ [Readings in Applied Arts I—Future Trend in Urushi Art], Tokyo Arts & Crafts Association, 1942, pp. 108-124.

6) ——— Ibid., p. 110.

stones to further progress and development. Expressing a very clear and discerning view on the use of colors, for example, he wrote: “Simply because there was in the past some color scheme of particular note or characteristic, simply reproducing that today does nothing to imbue it with any sense of age or era.”

Yamazaki assumed full professorship at Tokyo School of Fine Arts, but in the wake of reforms to the school that took place from late May and into June that year, on March 30th he was asked to retire. There is a well-known comment by Yamazaki to the effect that “giving me the sack was like loosing a tiger into a field.” One of Yamazaki’s contemporaries, dyer Yoshitaro Kamakura, remarked similarly that after the Second World War the Japanese craft world “had been freed into the world by the hand of the Americans.” Its faith shaken, there was some question about what would happen to the craft departments in art schools that were in the position of teaching in this direction, but Yamazaki was clear that he was now in a position that required him to continue acting like the proverbial tiger in the field, and in doing so he helped prepare the foundations for Japanese craft to climb up onto the world stage.<sup>7)</sup>

The art critic Shuzo Yasui, originally an art writer for the Mainichi News and later director of both the Sakata City Art Museum and the Shimodate Museum of Art, has said that Yamazaki’s aims included “adding contemporary colors to conventional urushi’s limited color palette” and “discarding classical designs to imbue urushi with a pictorial decorativeness that could resonate with modern people, and above all with the world abroad.”<sup>8)</sup> Naturally this use of decorative colored urushi met with fierce criticism right out of the gate, with some rejecting its decorative pictorial qualities entirely. Some even called it “non-patternism” for its rejection of hallowed traditional motifs. But Yamazaki remained steadfast in defending his approach, explaining that “contemporary urushi art at its very foundations should be expressing the feelings and sensibilities of modern people,” and we can see this attitude developed clearly in the works he would submit to later Nitten exhibitions.

“Unbridled” (1938), a work we might regard as a celebrating Yamazaki’s return from abroad, caused considerable sensation when he presented it to the 2nd Bunten Exhibition. The white running around the three horses and surrounded in turn by the brown background imbued the image with a sense of rhythm that supports the dynamic rush of the orange, white, and red horses. Such a design represented an entirely new and modern sense of expression, but the complexity of the technique it shows, from the layered application of colored lacquer and clear-coating to the polishing of the surface to bring out the whole, also contributed significantly to its deep appeal. Its conciseness alone is refreshing and invigorating.

Yamazaki continued to absorb and digest this kind of concision as he developing himself and his technique, culminating in the aforementioned “Gibbons”. This is considered a masterpiece of Yamazaki’s middle period, and indeed one of the finest pieces among his entire body of work, and undoubtedly it helped him earn him a seat on the Bunten examining committee

7) ——— Yoshitaro Kamakura, ‘Houshun, Yamazaki Kakutarou Sensei ni tsuite’ [About Mr. Kakutarou Yamazaki in Sprouting Green Spring], *Japan Art News*, Vol. 42, March 1957, p. 17.

8) ——— Shuzo Yasui, ‘Gendai urushi kougei to Yamazaki san’ [Modern Lacquer Art & Mr. Yamazaki], *Gekkan Bijon* [Monthly Vision], October issue in 1974, p. 33.

the next year in 1939. This picture is characterized by an even greater clarity and boldness than the horses in the earlier “Unbridled.” The great tree branch curves expansively across the yellow background of both panels, and while the under-layer is black, Yamazaki has applied dry urushi powder to bring out the yellow, creating opacity and an expression of space. The gibbon on the left grips a branch. On the right are two more gibbons, one moving, the other still. The shapes forming the branches and the gibbons come together to build just the right rhythm, and the straight and curved lines are superbly balanced. Rather than covering the entire surface in busy imagery, this composition allows the space to “breathe.”

“Rabbits”, which Yamazaki did the following year, shows an entirely different character still. Depicting the rabbits’ bodies with soft realism, Yamazaki directly challenges to the conventional urushi tendency of avoiding overly raw realism.

By 1941 Yamazaki was moving on again to new challenges, but the deadlock of Second Sino-Japanese war and the outbreak of the Pacific War were contributed to the rationing of materials. As if to reflect the state of affairs he saw around him, he created “Resting Wings”, which depicted a pair of eagles. In this work he sealed away the “human emotion” he had talked about during his time in Paris, banishing any kind of lyricism and reflecting only a tension-fraught core. Once the hostilities had ceased, however, Yamazaki returned to his former relaxed, expansive style, and from this middle period on he came to specialize in dynamic images of animals in action, among them “Deer Herd” (1953), “Gale” (1965), and “Running” (1977), several of which were presented at Nitten exhibitions over the ensuing years. There is a water color picture created about the same time as the “*Fudo*” picture exhibited at the 15th Japan Contemporary Arts & Crafts Exhibition held in 1976.

An urushi picture was created about the same time as the “*Carp*” picture exhibited at the 17th Japan Contemporary Arts & Crafts Exhibition held in 1978. It is one of Yamazaki’s later works, but the contrast between the swimming fish and the water is quite beautiful, providing an excellent example of Yamazaki’s mastery of colored lacquer.

### Yamazaki’s Students & Legacy

ONCE retired from teaching at Tokyo University of Fine Arts, Yamazaki focused on creating works for the Nitten exhibitions. In 1953 he submitted “Three-Panel Screen with Monkeys” to the 9th Nitten exhibition, a work which won him a Japan Art Academy Prize the following year, and in 1957, he himself became a member of the Japan Art Academy. When the Nitten was re-organized in 1958 as a non-profit corporation, Yamazaki became a standing director. By 1969 he had become a member of the executive board, working on reforms to re-invigorate the organization as a whole, followed by chairman in 1974, and finally advisor in 1978. During these same decades, Yamazaki was also active as the first director of the Japan Urushi Craft Association starting in 1951, and from 1961 he began rallying craftsmen in Nitten’s craft section who were interested in pursuing new directions, forming and initially chairing the Japan Contemporary Arts and Crafts Association. The following year this organization began sponsoring the Japan Contemporary Arts and Crafts Exhibition, and in 1965 Yamazaki became its first president.

In 1966 Yamazaki was selected as a “Person of Cultural Merit,” a title with recognized him



Fig.1 “*Inochi aru tokoro*” by Mitamura Arisumi, 2013, 52nd Cabinet Minister’s Prize from the Japan Contemporary Arts and Crafts Association Photo: Art Design Center

Yamazaki’s ideal in this regard has been steadily realized, and he himself is recognized not only as an urushi artist, but as a leader of modern arts and crafts as a whole.<sup>9)</sup>

Within the urushi education offered at Tokyo University of Arts, Yamazaki’s legacy in terms of newness in design sensibility and the use of bold colors was carried on by at least two of his pupils, most notably Setsuro Takahashi (1914-2007) and Arisumi Mitamura (1949-).

Takahashi would become instrumental in paving the way for urushi to move out of the realm of traditional craft and toward the realm of pure art. He developed a method of working on flat-surfaced “urushi panels,” a format that he felt allowed him to find more leeway for free expression. Mitamura is the tenth-generation successor to an Edo makie tradition, but he, too, embraces a free style of expression. In 2013 he received the 52nd Cabinet Minister’s Prize from the Japan Contemporary Arts and Crafts Association (the organization in which Yamazaki served as the first chair). Fig.1 shows an urushi work, “*Inochi- aru tokoro*” which Mitamura received the Prize. [Fig.1]

Mitamura himself has also cultivated a number of younger artists both in Japan and abroad, his way of continuing his teacher Yamazaki’s ideal of “the next new thing that’s beyond what’s new now.”

## Conclusion

In the past, the use of colored urushi (Yamazaki’s specialty) would have invited a scolding in most art school settings, and even when Yamazaki started doing it, the use of such materials would have been regarded as “rustic,” especially in contrast to the beauty and elegance of the more elaborate gold- and silver-gilded makie style. Even so, by the time he was just 34 or 35 years old, after his journey to the West, Yamazaki had become a serious advocate for colored urushi.

In *The Works of Kakutaro Yamazaki*, art critic Kenzo Tajika discusses Yamazaki’s advocacy of colored urushi, emphasizing its outward effects on the development of regional crafts. He

9)——— Ibid., p. 46.

points out that Yamazaki's influence went beyond his own work to affect other regional urushi industries, and notes that "he broke away from the usual makie-style imagery and moved to individual production reminiscent of today's freshness, however this change is apparently influenced by his experiences abroad (same footnote as 8). Regrettably, this understanding of Yamazaki and his work seems, with a few exceptions, to remain unknown.

Interest in Japanese crafts, and particularly Meiji-era export crafts, has recently achieved new heights that would have been inconceivable just twenty years ago. Artisans like Edo-period makie master Zenshin Shibata (1807-91) have become extremely (perhaps even excessively) popular and well known. Looming too large also is Gonroku Matsuda (1896-1986), whose efforts to invigorate not just the urushi arts but traditional crafts in general are well known, even while his contemporary, Kakutarō Yamazaki, has remained relatively obscure even despite his contributions to breathing new life into modern urushi world and his cultivation of a number of successors who have carried on his vision. But as Yamazaki believed, craft should always proceed creatively aiming at "the next new thing beyond what's new now," for otherwise it cleaves only to tradition and becomes static, thus to depart from its essential objective of "beauty in usability" and also become left behind as art as well. In this light, for the way he moved steadily to embrace newness for new times while maintaining a firm respect for traditional technique, Kakutarō is one craftsman deserving of our re-examination.