



# Exquisite lacquerware: A father and son's pursuit of lacquer art

Words by Ye Jia-hui Translated by Compass Magazine Photography by You Jia-huan

"Whether it's my father or me, we both have dedicated our entire lives to lacquer art, and we do so only because we hope all Taiwanese can understand that lacquerware isn't just a famous Taichung craft, but also a distinctive Taiwanese art," says local lacquer artist Lai Tso-ming. "Before we really reach the goal of transforming lacquer art into a common Taiwanese handicraft and precious part of its culture, we still have some work to do."



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1. To this day, Lai continues to discover the endless possibilities of lacquer art.
2. Lacquer can be combined with any natural material such as rice grains, pearls, eggshells or leaves.

If you've ever had the chance to visit the Lai Kao-shan Lacquer Art Museum, you may have been fairly surprised to be greeted not by a staff guide, but by a 60-something grey-haired gentleman. While his clothing and fingertips are stained with all sorts of pigment colors, that doesn't affect his frank, bright artistic demeanor. In fact, this person, Lai Tso-ming, is not only one of Taiwan's most important and valued lacquer artists, but also the son of museum namesake Lai Kao-shan, father of Taiwan's lacquer art.

### An original Asian art form and handicraft

When people hear the words "lacquer art" or "lacquerware", most associate the handicraft with Japanese origins. According to Lai Tso-ming, while there has been a lot of discussion about lacquerware's beginnings, to his knowledge the oldest lacquer products to be discovered were made by the Japanese 9,000 years ago, with the oldest Chinese products dating back 7,000 years. Regardless of which country first developed this art, it undoubtedly started in Asia and should be a source of pride.

However, questions remain about how high-status lacquer art came to Taiwan in the first place.

And how did Taichung became Taiwan's capital of lacquer art? According to Lai, during Taiwan's colonial period, the Japanese cultivated many lacquer trees and opened lacquerware factories and schools on the island because of their love of the products. As one of the three largest timber-industry centers in Taiwan, Fengyuan was considered by the Japanese to be the ideal location for developing a lacquer industry, which requires large amounts of wood. Thus, these perfect conditions made Fengyuan Taiwan's lacquer art capital.

Born in 1924 in Taichung city, Lai Kao-shan enrolled at the age of 13 in the Taichung Technical School, opened by the Japanese, to learn lacquer art so that he could have a profession to support his family with. His excellent performance led to a recommendation for admission to Tokyo University of the Arts to be schooled by lacquer masters Wada Sanzou and Koumo Touzan. With his talent and skills, Lai's lacquer artworks earned him many local and international awards and, in order to help develop Taiwan's art education and cultivate artistic talents, he returned to Taiwan and opened the Guangshan Lacquerware Shop in 1963. Heavily influenced by his father, Lai Tso-ming made the development of Taiwanese lacquer art culture his lifelong mission.



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1. When it takes one day to create a single layer, one can imagine how much time is needed to create this beautiful lacquerware.

2. Lai produces all kinds of lacquerware, including jewelry and daily-use products in order to return lacquerware to Taiwanese daily life again.

3. This "Payuntuchi" plate is a work created by Lai Tso-ming's father in the 1940s. The painting shows a Thao tribe girl traveling across Sun Moon Lake on a boat.

when he was very young. He not only went to Japan and studied lacquer art at Kanazawa College of Art in 1985, but also inherited his father's job and helped to promote and teach the art and its culture after returning to Taiwan.

### Patience a key virtue in lacquerware production

Since childhood, Lai Tso-ming has been surrounded by his father's lacquer, pigments and their distinct aromas. Even now, the 65-year-old artist still makes a full commitment to the creation of lacquer art, a time-consuming technique requiring processes such as repeated coatings and polishing. However, in a modern era where efficiency is considered everything, not many appreciate the idea that "fine products come from slow work". According to Lai, natural tree lacquer is the best artistic material in the world because of its qualities of being acid-resistant, alkali-proof, heat-resistant and durable. In addition, lacquer's uniquely strong adherence makes it easy to combine it with any other material. One could say that before mixed-media art became a common concept, ancient peoples were already putting it into practice by creating lacquerware.

There are many difficulties in promoting lacquer art, according to Lai, but the biggest challenge is the heavy, complicated procedures that intimidate many beginners. Sometimes, even though the creator has done the 31 "basic" processes correctly, there will remain the possibility that the finished product has failed because of various factors such as the quality of lacquer, humidity levels, temperature, moisture content and salinity. However, it is because of such difficulties that we appreciate the hard work of lacquerware artists even more.

Two decades ago, after dedicating his life to the craft, Lai discovered a variety of notes and records about the use of lacquer on pottery in both China and Japan. Deciding to merge the advantages of Asia's two most famous art/handicraft forms, in 1983 he combined them into an art labeled "chi tao" (lacquer pottery) in an effort to create a representative Taiwanese art form. The process of chi tao making is not only shorter and easier, but also provides more ways to showcase the beauty of lacquer and pottery. Thus, Lai's creativity and dedication to lacquer art earned him an award from the Council for Cultural Affairs in 2001.

## Famed Taichung products favored by Japanese

Picking up a raw lacquer tube on the table, Lai demonstrates some basic lacquerware-making processes. First, he dips a clean cloth into some lacquer and polishes the color onto a piece of pottery and, allowing the dark, matte pigment to slowly reveal a radiant color totally different from before. According to the craftsman, most people who touch raw lacquer for the first time have allergic reactions to it but, after a period as they really begin to become lacquerware artists, these reactions go away. He says he isn't sure if the lacquer adapts to humans, or humans adapt to the lacquer.

When Taiwan was still governed by the Japanese, most lacquerware produced here were daily utensils such as soup bowls and tea-brewing items. During this time, Taichung-produced lacquerware became so famous and popular that Japanese gave it a name, "Penglaitu", to indicate where it was made, in keeping with the Japanese habit of designating lacquerware by its point of origin. One of Penglaitu's strongest characteristics was its decorative graphics usually being related to Taiwan, such as bananas, pineapples or Taiwanese aborigines. Thus, Penglaitu became one of the most popular souvenirs among Japanese travelers and officials.

## Discovering the beauty of lacquer art in daily life

Lai always feels a sense of regret that despite the once-popular Penglaitu lacquerware and lacquer artists' assertion that their art is a precious Taiwanese cultural asset, its creation has been going downhill. Facing the fact that lacquerware is always listed as a handicraft and not an art Lai, who now teaches at Tainan National University of the Arts and National Taichung University of Education, says he always feels so powerless when instructing his students on the importance of lacquer art, because even famous lacquer artists, not to mention younger artists, cannot make a living off of this profession. The risk is that new craftspeople may face too many economic difficulties before they have the chance to stand out.

Despite all the above challenges, Lai Tso-ming still tries to be hopeful about the future of lacquer art. He produces all kinds of lacquerware, such as jewelry, furniture and daily-living products, simply in an effort to make lacquerware more common again and help people appreciate its beauty. To support him, his students also grow lacquer trees in Nantou county so



1. Lai Tso-ming shows how to paint lacquer.

2. This lacquerware is unlike products most people know because of its abstract and bold color combinations.

3. Lai's biggest goal and achievement as a lacquer artist is to revive lacquer art in Taiwan.

that they can produce raw lacquer themselves without depending on imported products. In the end, Lai hopes that lacquer art will show the same enduring qualities of lacquerware itself, which continues to shine regardless of how much time has passed.