

The Work of Jihei Murase

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The lacquerwork of Jihei Murase embodies the essence of formative art. It represents not merely the 'beauty of functionality' that settles comfortably into the hand, but is simultaneously a refined sculpture in its own right. Jihei is the third generation of the Murase family to adopt the name, following his father, Jihei II, who also worked in this field while his mother was involved in creating the wooden bases for lacquerware. For generations the family has venerated the Imperial Prince, Koretaka (844-897) as their ancestral god. He was responsible for the development of numerous woodworking skills while living as a hermit. For Jihei, lacquerwork begins with an encounter with the wood; he loves and is charmed by timber, devoting all his energies into transforming it into beautiful forms.

First he draws up a plan consisting of concisely applied lines, then he approaches the soul of the wood. Using a lathe that rotates at tremendous speed, he applies chisels he forged himself; wood shavings filling the air as a piece of sculpture is born before our eyes—a flask resembling a woman's torso, a small container reminiscent of a persimmon, or a tea caddy with concentric lines engraved in it every millimeter. The lid of the tea caddy is a perfect fit. Surrounded by wood shavings and covered in aromatic wood dust, Jihei strives to achieve something using the golden rule engraved on his heart. Next he uses a soft brush to build up numerous coats of natural *urushi* lacquer aiming to recreate an image of the delicate world embodied by the ritual utensils produced during the Heian period (794-1185). A pedestaled table has a delicate form and was employed to make offerings to the gods. A flask has a relaxed grace of form and was used to contain celebratory *sake*. Just one of these objects, placed in a suitable place, has the power to purify the surrounding atmosphere. They possess a tension that Jihei aims to create through the application of sacred *urushi* lacquer.

Negoro lacquer originated in the Negoroji Temple, which was built during the Heian period (794-1185). The lacquer utensils used by the Zen priests in their daily lives gradually became worn and scratched, exposing the black lacquer that had been applied beneath the vermilion topcoat, creating a simple, subdued effect over the years. It seems strange that despite the refinement of Jihei's lacquer works, they should display a tone reminiscent of *negoro* ware, which is the exact opposite. This is due to the fact that from the moment that people see and use his work, their hearts are captured and they become enraptured with it. They feel as if they had been touching it for a long time, experiencing feelings of nostalgia. The works possess a sense of eternity, leading people to want to always keep them close to hand until the time comes to pass them down to their children. It is the essence of the work created by the rugged, yet conscientious, woodworker, lacquerer and sometimes blacksmith, Jihei Murase, that we yearn to venerate.