How to Clean and Store Your Lacquerware

Learn when to hand-wash lacquerware, how to store it, and when a change in the finish calls for specialist care.

By BeenEast Editorial · Reviewed November 6, 2026

Read the online guide

When lacquerware can be washed

Hand-wash modern lacquerware when its maker approves washing and the finish is intact. Keep older pieces, objects with an unknown finish, and damaged pieces dry until their care needs have been assessed.

Sources: Kenta Takeshige — How to Care for Fine Natural Urushi Lacquerware · Denver Art Museum — The Craft and Care of East Asian Lacquer

Urushi is lacquer made from tree sap. Before washing an everyday bowl, check its rim, inside, and foot. The rim is the edge around the opening; the foot is the raised base that supports the bowl.

Sources: The Met — High-Footed Bowl



This historical bowl illustrates the rim and foot named in this guide. The washing advice below applies to modern tableware whose maker approves hand-washing. High-Footed Bowl, Japan, early 17th century. The Met, 2015.500.2.13. Public domain.

Why edges and joints matter

A lacquer finish forms a coating over a body that may be made of wood. As humidity changes, wood can expand or shrink beneath the coating. Liquid can enter through cracks or chips and reach the material beneath the coating.

Sources: Canadian Conservation Institute — Care of Furniture Finishes · Kenta Takeshige — How to Care for Fine Natural Urushi Lacquerware

On a box with metal fittings or shell inlay, inspect the seams as well as the broad lacquered surface. A raised edge or a gap around an attachment needs assessment before you wet or wipe that area. Check that any care instructions cover the assembled piece, including its decoration.

How to hand-wash an everyday bowl

For his own wood-and-urushi tableware, lacquer artist Kenta Takeshige recommends lukewarm water, a soft sponge, and a mild, pH-neutral liquid detergent. For a piece approved for this method, wash it separately, rinse away the detergent, and dry it promptly with a soft cloth. Check the underside and the foot for droplets before putting it away.

Do not soak the bowl or put it in the dishwasher. Use the soft side of the sponge, and keep metal utensils and rough ceramic away from the finish. If food remains stuck after gentle washing, ask the maker how to loosen it before using more pressure or leaving the bowl in water.

Sources: Kenta Takeshige — How to Care for Fine Natural Urushi Lacquerware

Where to store lacquerware

Store lacquerware on a shelf away from direct sunlight and heaters. Light can gradually change the color and reduce the gloss of lacquer. A stable indoor climate also limits movement of a wooden body beneath its coating.

Sources: Denver Art Museum — The Craft and Care of East Asian Lacquer · Canadian Conservation Institute — Care of Furniture Finishes

Leave enough space to lift each piece out without scraping another piece. For bowls designed to nest, check where the upper bowl’s foot touches the one below. Store them separately if that contact falls on raised decoration, and keep rough ceramic bases away from lacquered surfaces.

Sources: Kenta Takeshige — How to Care for Fine Natural Urushi Lacquerware

When to stop cleaning

A glossy surface can still have cracks or areas of missing lacquer. These two photographs show missing lacquer at a corner and a crack near the binding of a Japanese lacquered album, ALB-116, in the University of St Andrews collections before conservation treatment.

Sources: University of St Andrews — Conservation of a Japanese Lacquered Photograph Album

View photo in the online guide

At the corner beside the binding, a large area of missing black lacquer exposes the brown material beneath. Album ALB-116. Photograph from University Collections, University of St Andrews.

View photo in the online guide

A narrow crack runs upward from the bottom edge of the cover, just to the right of the brown binding. Album ALB-116. Photograph from University Collections, University of St Andrews.

Both conditions call for assessment before cleaning. A cloth can snag a loose edge, and wet cleaning may affect exposed material differently from the surrounding lacquer.

Sources: Canadian Conservation Institute — Care of Furniture Finishes

If an edge is lifting, leave it in place. Keep water and cloth away from damaged areas. Photograph the whole piece and the affected spot, noting when you first noticed the change. Contact the maker for a recent piece or a conservator experienced in Asian lacquer for an older object.

References

Kenta Takeshige — How to Care for Fine Natural Urushi Lacquerware · Denver Art Museum — The Craft and Care of East Asian Lacquer · Canadian Conservation Institute — Care of Furniture Finishes · The Met — High-Footed Bowl · University of St Andrews — Conservation of a Japanese Lacquered Photograph Album