What Is Lacquerware?

Learn what lacquerware is by looking closely at a carved tray, a shell-inlaid box, and a gold-decorated sake vessel.

By BeenEast Editorial · Reviewed November 6, 2026

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What is traditional lacquerware?

Traditional East Asian lacquerware is made by coating objects with lacquer derived from tree sap. Bowls, trays, boxes, and furniture often have a wooden core that gives them their shape. Their lacquer surface may be colored, carved, or decorated with shell or metal powder.

Sources: The Met — Lacquerware of East Asia: materials and repeated coating

A red tray, a shell-inlaid box, and a gold-decorated sake vessel show how differently makers can work with this material. Each brings a different part of the craft into view, from the depth of a carved scene to the fine lines of a flower.

A garden carved in red lacquer

A garden rock and small figures rise above finely patterned ground on this fourteenth-century Chinese tray. The Met identifies three background patterns for sky, water, and land. Even within a single red surface, the carving gives each part of the scene a distinct texture.

Sources: The Met: Tray with Women and Boys on a Garden Terrace



Figures and a garden rock rise above three finely patterned backgrounds. China, 14th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Florence and Herbert Irving, 2015 (2015.500.1.31). Public domain.

This depth comes from lacquer built up over a supporting body and then carved. Cutting away the background leaves the figures standing higher, an effect called relief. The Met identifies the tray's surface as carved red lacquer but does not specify the material beneath it.

Sources: The Met — Lacquerware of East Asia: materials and repeated coating · The Met: Tray with Women and Boys on a Garden Terrace



Detail of the same tray, showing figures beside a finely cut diamond pattern. The Met, 2015.500.1.31. Public domain.

In the close-up, the child's outline meets a dense diamond pattern. The larger figure and the tiny repeated cuts give the eye two scales of detail to explore.

Sources: The Met: Tray with Women and Boys on a Garden Terrace

Building the lacquer surface

Lacquer gains its thickness one thin coat at a time. Each coat must harden before the next is applied. In a humid cabinet, tree lacquer undergoes a chemical reaction called polymerization that turns the liquid into a solid coating. Urushi is the Japanese name for this lacquer.

Sources: V&A — Urushi conservation: curing chemistry and maki-e · The Met — Lacquerware of East Asia: materials and repeated coating

The repeated coating gives a carver enough material to work into. A bowl with a thin lacquer finish and a deeply carved tray are both lacquerware, but the tray's decoration depends on a much thicker buildup.

Working with raw lacquer also calls for care because it can irritate the skin. A supervised workshop introduces safe handling and the judgment needed between coats.

Sources: V&A — Urushi conservation: curing chemistry and maki-e

Shell, metal powder, and carved lacquer

Pale shell peonies stand out against the dark lacquer of the Korean box. On the Japanese sake ewer, a vessel for pouring sake, gold petals and fine leaves spread across the rounded body. The Met identifies these decorations as mother-of-pearl inlay and gold and silver maki-e.

Sources: The Met: Stationery Box Decorated with Peony Scrolls · The Met: Sake Ewer with Decoration of Chrysanthemums on a Stream Bank · The Met: Tray with Women and Boys on a Garden Terrace



Mother-of-pearl pieces form the pale peonies across the dark lid. Korea, 15th–16th century. The Met, 2015.500.3.1a, b. Public domain.



Chrysanthemum petals and fine leaves rendered in metal powder held in lacquer. Japan, 17th century. The Met, 2015.500.2.49a, b. Public domain.

Three ways to decorate lacquerware

Technique	What the maker does	What makes the design	What you can see
Carved lacquer	Build up lacquer, let it harden, then cut into it.	The lacquer itself forms the relief.	Raised figures stand above the carved background.
Mother-of-pearl inlay	Place shaped shell pieces into the lacquer decoration.	Pieces of shell form the pattern.	Shell forms pale, iridescent patterns against the lacquer.
Maki-e	Sprinkle metal powder onto wet lacquer to form a design.	Lacquer holds the metal powder in place.	Metal powder forms the decoration, which may be flat or raised.

On the tray, the ornament is carved into lacquer. On the box and ewer, shell and metal powder become part of its surface. The material connects the three objects. The way each maker decorates it sets them apart.

Sources: The Met: Tray with Women and Boys on a Garden Terrace · The Met: Stationery Box Decorated with Peony Scrolls · The Met: Sake Ewer with Decoration of Chrysanthemums on a Stream Bank

BeenEast Editorial checked the descriptions against museum records. The photographs show the objects discussed and come from The Met Open Access collection.

References

The Met — Lacquerware of East Asia: materials and repeated coating · The Met: Tray with Women and Boys on a Garden Terrace · The Met: Stationery Box Decorated with Peony Scrolls · The Met: Sake Ewer with Decoration of Chrysanthemums on a Stream Bank · V&A — Urushi conservation: curing chemistry and maki-e