“Searching for the possibilities raised by the beauty of lacquer art, I go my way.”

ONLY QUITE RECENTLY has 20th century Japanese lacquer art begun again to attract more widespread notice, with exhibitions presenting works by several artists, various one-man shows, and the appearance of an increasingly large number of art-historical studies devoted to this art form. Lacquer art is Japan’s most prestigious and most highly developed ornamental technique and thus its richest form of artistic craftsmanship, so it is not surprising that this art form would be subjected to an acid test in the wake of the upheavals and waves of modernisation that affected all aspects of Japanese life in the past century. Alongside the realisation that tradition need not necessarily always bring richness but can also cause stagnation and paralysis, the threats posed by arbitrariness, excessive self-expression and the loss of traditional knowledge arose with equal severity.

Takahashi Setsurō, one of the leading exponents of his métier (1), was an artist who grappled with new and contemporary forms of expression in his creative work and in dialogue with other urushi masters who strove to achieve greater recognition for the lacquer art, and who endeavoured to gain for this genre parity with the fine arts. After having been honoured on numerous occasions by confer- rals of the highest state awards for cultural merit, he passed away at a ripe old age in Tokyo on April 19th, 2007. He had already bequeathed large portions of his opulent oeuvre in the form of a foundation to the Toyota Municipal Museum of Art in 1985 and subsequent years. A year since his death, the Museum of Lacquer Art in Münster, Germany is closely collaborating with the Toyota Museum to present a memorial exhibition which brings together artworks from the final three decades of his creative career.

When Takahashi Setsurō matriculated at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts (Tōkyō bijutsu gakkō) in 1933, he initially wanted to become a painter. But as is so often the case, his career choice met with a decisive refusal from his father. The young man therefore transferred to the Faculty for Artistic Craftwork, where he continued his artistic education in the Lacquer Section. Rokkaku Shisui (1867–1950) occupied the teaching chair for lacquer art at that time (4).

3 Takahashi Setsurō, Selected Works from the Collection of Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota 1995 (collection catalogue). Sotsujin kinen, Takahashi Setsurō, urushi-e kara sōkin e, 1930–1960 sendai [For the 90th Anniversary. Takahashi Setsurō, Lacquer Paintings and Sculptures from the 1930s until the 1960s], Toyota Municipal Museum of Art, Toyota 2004 (exhibition catalogue). Takahashi had bequeathed another important portion of his oeuvre to the Takahashi Setsurō Art Museum, which was established in his hometown of Azumino in 2003 (see note 12).
He too was a painter at heart and his artistic work was inspired by the impressions made upon him by spectacular artefacts, especially by the freely flowing painted lines used in the decor of Han period lacquers unearthed at digs, for which he was partially responsible at Lelang, now in North Korea. The development and usage of new pigments in the lacquer art can also be credited to his painterly approach.

At Rokkaku’s side stood two assistant professors, both of whom were talented and ambitious artists in this genre. Matsuda Gonrokō (1896–1986) and Yamazaki Kakutarō (1899–1984) would evolve during the post-war years into representatives of opposite poles, each with his own distinct position, and both artists would exert formative influences on 20th century Japanese lacquer art. Takahashi thus not only enjoyed an excellent education under outstanding mentors, he also found an orientation appropriate to his talent and character in his affinity with Yamazaki Kakutarō and this teacher’s notion of contemporary lacquer art.

The impressions he acquired in his childhood and youth would later prove to be equally influential. On September 14th, 1914 Takahashi Setsurō was born in Kita Hotaka, a village that had only recently been incorporated into the city of Azumino, which is situated on the Azumino Plain between two ranges of the Japanese Alps in west-central Honshū. His family was prosperous and respected. His father, who was the mayor of Kita Hotaka, was interested in art and dabbled in painting as an autodidact. The circle of painters with whom the elder Takahashi shared ideas included Yuki Somei, professor of Japanese painting at the Tokyo School of Fine Arts, whom the younger Takahashi was allowed to accompany on a drawing excursion into the mountains. This tour preceded countless subsequent hikes in untrammelled nature, outings that would enrich him with a lifelong source of inspiration and prompt him to indefatigably sketch the landscape with its ceaselessly playful clouds and moody veils of fog and mist.

His mountain-girdled homeland is numbered among the areas of Japan that had been settled at a very early date and which has yielded an unusually rich trove of prehistoric artefacts. The Jōmon culture (circa 10,000–300 BC), which is named for the cord patterns (jōmon) on its exceptional ceramics, left its traces here, as did the Kofun period (circa 250–710) with its characteristic mound tombs (kofun), the chambers of which were adorned with wall paintings and furnished with funerary offerings. Views of this primordial world and musings about these remote eras must have made a profound impression on young Setsurō. The distant past of prehistory could only be surpassed by an even mightier dimension: the starry firmament and, beyond it, the colossal vastnesses of the cosmos.

Takahashi’s early artworks, however, would seem to have been as yet uninfluenced by these archetypal images and all-embracing visions. Instead, his youthful oeuvre seems to be under the spell of his teacher Yamazaki Kakutarō and in line with his mentor’s twofold striving: to liberate Japanese lacquer art from the rigid conventions of the traditional lacquer handicraft; and, through free artistic unfurling, to challenge the pre-eminence of technical perfection. This enterprise was entirely in accord with the tenets of the Mukei (“without form”) movement, which Yamazaki led until 1933. Like his mentor, Takahashi developed a predilection for panels and two-part screens, which would formatively determine the course of his future artistic career. Again following the example set by Yamazaki, Takahashi used luminous coloured lacquer painting (urushi-e) to design these panels like paintings (2).

His realisation “that pictures needn’t necessarily be made from paint, but can also be created with urushi” prompted him to use lacquer as the raw material with which to conciliate his originally painterly oriented talent. The prerequisites for this development were new pigments which significantly broadened the traditionally narrow palette of lacquer colours (iro-urushi). Influences from the

2 Constellations of the Flowers, 1949. Wall panel in polychrome lacquer on deep-black lacquer, 42 x 110 cm. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art
Art Deco movement also express themselves in the large-scale, mostly plant-like and sometimes angularly stylised decors that he would create until the early 1940s (3).

In 1952, the path that he had embarked upon logically led him to become one of the co-founders of the Creative Crafts Association (Sōsaku kōgei kyōkai), which had chosen free artistic design as its goal. He thus took a stance at an early date which would cast him into the fray of a fundamental argument about the proper direction for Japanese lacquer art in the second half of the 20th century—a debate which would later split into two camps. The traditionalists, whose primary intentions were to preserve the techniques and strive for their consummate mastery, grouped around Matsuda Gonroku and formed the Japan Crafts Association (Nihon kōgei kai) in 1955; their forum was the annual Japan Traditional Crafts Exhibition (Nihon dentō kōgei ten). The avant-garde lacquer artists, who prioritised aesthetic expression, chose Yamazaki Kakutarō as their leader and joined with him to establish the Modern Craft Artists Association (Gendai kōgei bijutsuka kyōkai) in 1961; Takahashi, along with other members of the Crafts Section of the Nitten, numbered among this group’s co-founders.

The Nitten, an acronym for Nihon bijutsu tenrankei (The Japan Fine Arts Exhibition), which was the official annual show of the Japanese Academy of the Arts (Nihon geijutsu-in), had been re-established after World War Two and would become an important instrument in Takahashi’s career: he began serving as a consultant for the Nitten in 1958, joined its board of directors in 1969, and was appointed managing director in 1982.

In the early 1950s, at approximately the same time that the Creative Crafts Association was founded, Takahashi’s style began to undergo a fundamental transformation. The formerly vivid colours became more muted, and lacquer painting was increasingly supplanted by an engraving method. This technique essentially involves coating a surface with deep-black, high-gloss lacquer (rōiro-urushi) and then using burnins tipped with variously shaped points to gouge lines and dots into the substrate. A thin coating of transparent lacquer is then rubbed on (suri-urushi). This uppermost layer is afterwards covered with gold leaf, which is subsequently scrubbed off with a brush so that the precious metal remains only in the incised recesses. The engravings thus appear as gold lines and dots which contrast with the profound blackness of the lacquered surface. This originally Chinese engraving technique emerged in the Western Han period (206 BC–9 AD) and was further refined in the Song dynasty (960–1279). It was appropriated by Japanese artists in the Muromachi period (1392–1568), but did not become prevalent in Japan until the late 17th century, when it established itself as chinkinbori (“gold sunken into carvings”) in Wajima on the Noto peninsula, which remained nearly the only location where it was cultivated.

Takahashi continued to use the Sino-Japanese term sōkin for his artworks: the first syllable of this word denotes to the Japanese carver’s gouge, the tip of which is shaped like the blade of a spear (sō). The results achieved through the use of the sōkin technique perfectly suited Takahashi’s intentions. The effect derives, on the one hand, from a profoundly black and highly glossy lacquer surface. He first used this in 1949 on his wall panel Constellations of the Flowers (2) and later relied on it for other large-format panels and two-part screens, on which the blackness could realise its full potential thanks to the objects’ ample dimensions. Light penetrating into the lacquer layers is absorbed, and the beholder likewise experiences an almost magical absorption, as though the ebony depths were an irresistible vortex. Takahashi formulated this as follows: “In Japan, the word shikkoku [lacquer black] expresses the beauty of blackness. I believe there are seven-coloured lights in shikkoku.”9

The blackness is further enhanced by its contrast with the gold-filled engravings that Takahashi cut into his compositions as lines (senbōri), dotted accumulated indentations (tenbōri), or deeper and sharper incisions (katakiri bōri) in the lacquer. The shimmering precious metal (gold leaf, but also often platinum or silver foils) and the glossy blackness enter into a dialogue (4), a symbiotic liaison that has been poetically described as “kuro to kin no monogatari” [a tale of black and gold].10

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8 Yokoyama 2000 (as note 1), p. 6.

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Aware that he had found the ideal medium for the artistic expression toward which he was striving, Takahashi continued to use the sōkin technique throughout his career. He developed and handcrafted his own gouges and continuously refined his methodology, often combining engraved lines and dots with other techniques and materials. For example, he applied gold leaf with lacquer to create a haku-e (foil picture), which he then scratched with a wooden stick in parallel and crosswise hatching to achieve subtly gradated golden tones. The delicate golden shadings in a honeycombed, filigreed frame create a peculiar aura for the twofold screen The Tale of the Fossils and for the embedded fossils that seem to float inside it (5). Such fossils, a leitmotif in Takahashi’s oeuvre, would repeatedly fascinate him throughout the decades following their first appearance in his artworks in the early 1960s.

Mokume, lacquer engraving which imitates wood grain, particularly enriched Takahashi’s means of expression. Although mokume is traditionally executed in a sprinkling technique, i.e. the decor is produced by strewing gold powder in various tones and densities, Takahashi’s mokume consists of countless short parallel strokes and dots arranged in undulating lines. The panel Chronicle from a Distant Past is unique among his artworks in its use of engraved mokume as a determinative element of the composition, and an even greater chromatic differentiation is achieved in the decorative effect through the addition of gold, platinum and silver foils (6). Tenhori (engraved dots) filled with matte silver, highlighted areas coated with red lacquer, mother-of-pearl inlays, and the metallic green shimmer of wing covers from the jewel beetle (tamanuhi) complement one another to create a restrained polychromatic harmony atop a midnight-black background. This blackness is significant not only as an absolute colour, but also because in this context it represents the unfa-
thomable depths of time, in which experiences subside into memory like layer upon layer of sediment. This panel, created in 1973, proves that Takahashi had achieved his mature style and had discovered his thematic world, which he would continue to explore in a series of further masterpieces.

Whereas the sequence of events in Chronicle from a Distant Past appears like stratified blocks of petrified wood, Reminiscence of a Distant Forest, a panel completed just one year later, similarly presents the motif of layering and even the cipher of an embedded butterfly, but also relies on icons with more readily comprehensible symbolism (7). A dove dwells in the sheltering depths of primeval forests, conjured here as an ornamental carpet of fallen leaves. Takahashi enlivens the sōkin technique here with coloured accents created by covering the leaves with alternating
dots of red and green lacquer to form a pattern that grows progressively denser as it approaches the edges of the foliage. With the squaring in the lower third of the picture, he alludes to his own method for creating a larger composition: beginning with a small preliminary draft, he would then draw a more precise sketch in a larger scale, and ultimately assemble the final drawing in its actual size across several sheets.

Takahashi’s further evolution of sōkin culminates in progressively greater transparency, which he achieves by combining ever finer, chromatically graded values with linear and dotted engravings. He compensates for the nearly total absence of colour by sparingly distributing inlays of milky white or bluish green iridescent mother-of-pearl and by applying small pearls. The twofold screen Moonlit Tombs from a Distant Past embodies an especially impressive interplay of technique and composition (8). The secrets concealed within the twin-peaked, forest-covered mountain are hidden tombs from the Kofun period, the walls of which are painted with triangles and circles that seem to glitter in the moonlight. Childhood memories would repeatedly return to Takahashi many decades after he had departed from Azumino. And the older he became, the more vividly these images would appear in his mind’s eye.

The archetypal mountain with its two summits is a most striking example of the extraordinarily long interval through which Takahashi would cling to motifs that he had once discovered and that remained important to him. The mount’s characteristic silhouette reappeared in 1987 in the centre of a circular tray (9). The clear form is executed in maki-e, the traditional sprinkle technique, and Takahashi strewed the fine gold powder with greater density as it neared the summit. But the forest, which had clad the mountain and was so important for the composition of the screen, has vanished now, leaving only a few sharply pointed cones of cedar trees to create interior accents as shimmering mother-of-pearl inlays. The sōkin technique is restricted here to short straight cuts, arranged in undulating parallel lines to represent zephyrs wafting through the treetops, i.e. the “Cedar Breeze”.

The mountain is again present a decade later—not in two dimensions this time, but in three—as a sculpture (10) forming one part of a series of sculptural works which the artist, who was over eighty years old at the time, created in the 1990s and in which he demonstrated his astonishing ability to continually discover new modes of expression. All of these objects are crafted in the so-called “dry lacquer” process (kanshitsu), an ancient technique used as early as the 8th century to manufacture statues of the Buddha. The original mould is shaped from brick earth; its interior is lined with plaster and then coated with a releasing agent; afterwards, strips of hempen linen are applied in layers and glued with nori-urushi (lacquer used as an adhesive). After approximately seven strata have been built up, they are removed from the mould and the application of urushi is resumed. This method enabled artisans to create lightweight, sturdy and diverse forms, so it was especially suitable for sculptures and vessels.

Takahashi exploited the advantages of dry lacquer in
10 Fossiliferous Forest, 1997. Sculpture in mokushin-kanshitsu, black and red lacquer, height 47 cm, width 60 cm, depth 18 cm. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

11 The God of the Forest, 1995. Sculpture in mokushin-kanshitsu, black and red lacquer, height 56 cm, width 78 cm, diameter 12 cm. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

12 The Eternally Bountiful Earth 4, 1993. Sculpture in mokushin-kanshitsu and deep-black lacquer, height 71 cm, diameter 14.5 cm. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art

13 The Eternally Bountiful Earth 14, 1993. Sculpture in mokushin-kanshitsu and red lacquer, height 59.3 cm, width 10 cm, diameter 21.8 cm. Toyota Municipal Museum of Art
his series of vases and in his sculptures, although he opted for the mokushin-kanshitsu variant (dry lacquer around a wooden core) in the latter genre. In this type of kanshitsu, strips of hemp are soaked in lacquer and glued around a carved wooden body. The wooden core is not removed afterwards, so these objects are considerably heavier than is ordinarily the case for dry lacquer artefacts, but the applied, lacquer-stiffened strips of textile facilitate freer and softer modelling.

The black lacquered, matte shimmering surface of his mountain-shaped sculpture Fossiliferous Forest acquires an additional grainy texture through the admixture of powdered grindstone to the lacquer (sabi). From a formal standpoint, the sculpted mountain with its three-dimensional interior decorations enclosed in chambers is more closely akin to the tray than to the screen, which was created two decades earlier. Takahashi had already explored the vocabulary of motifs in the symbols inside the mountain before; they appear in his tree sculpture The God of the Forest (1995), where enigmatic, symbolically charged shapes perch atop arm-like boughs that spread widely apart in an almost phantasmagoric manner (11).

These kanshitsu sculptures, which would seem to have been created in a late orgy of creative intoxication, also include a multipart series entitled The Eternally Bountiful Earth (1993). These objects take highly imaginative and often bizarre shapes, into which the artist inserts clearly geometrical bodies, primeval metaphors that quickly grow beyond their formal bounds or wittily playful elements, all of which Takahashi combines to achieve astonishing effects (12, 13). With these unprecedented sculptures, Takahashi set new standards for recent Japanese lacquer art.

He had used the kanshitsu technique a few years previously in a series of vases with freely modelled shapes that produced a character more reminiscent of sculptures than vessels (14). Most of these artworks are coated with high-
gloss rōro-urushi, where bodily presence of unfathomably black lacquer reaffirms that “it is the blackness which gives urushi its strength.”

Blackness reasserts its absoluteness in two caskets conceived as a pair and patterned after the outlines of the ideographs for sun and moon (15, 16). These scroll boxes impressively confirm that Takahashi, who only rarely made traditional utensils such as incense containers or tea caddies (17), was indeed able to devise unconventionally innovative solutions in this genre as well. It is surely not coincidental that the boundaries between object and sculpture blur once again in the example of these boxes, which correspond to one another in both contentual and formal aspects.

Takahashi Setsurō had originally intended to become a painter, but was trained as a lacquer artist instead. Yama- zaki’s influence, and to an even greater degree Takahashi’s own diverse talents and insatiable urge “to experiment with the most widely varied things”, can be credited with leading him, in the course of his career, to discover, explore and appropriate many areas of artistic creation as a painter, calligrapher, lacquer artist and sculptor. His candour and creativity earned him the distinction of ranking among the most versatile Japanese lacquer artists of his era. It is not without a certain irony that he fulfilled, albeit wholly undogmatically, one of the traditionalists’ postulates, not only achieving perfection in the employed techniques, but also further developing them and reviving ancient practices.

The course of Takahashi Setsurō’s long career spans nearly the entire 20th century. As a painter, as an artist devoted to the material of lacquer, and as a poet, he manifested and condensed into an artistic language impression that he had principally absorbed in the natural world (18).

The Museum für Lackkunst, Münster [Museum of Lacquer Art, Münster] exhibition, April 20th to July 27th, 2008 is accompanied by German and English editions of a richly illustrated catalogue by Jan Dees and Monika Kopplin.

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