

The future of Japan lies in the culture of the Japanese people.

Lacquer artist/Suzanne Ross



It has been 36 years since Suzanne Ross came to Japan from England. Fascinated by the beauty of lacquer, she moved to Wajima, and as a lacquer artist, she has won prizes at many art exhibitions and has accumulated many achievements. She has been active in promoting lacquer both in Japan and abroad, giving lectures and workshops not only in Japan but also overseas, and in 2015 she published a book about her journey, "The best things in life...Urushi" (Sakuranohana Shuppan). Through her book, she has been sending a message to the Japanese people that they should cherish their traditional culture. Five years have passed since the release of her book, and we asked her what she thinks and feels about Japan now, in the midst of the world's confusion caused by the evolution of technology and the pandemic.

**In the book " The best things in life...Urushi" released in 2015, you wrote messages to Japanese people "Be the world's big brother who teaches important life lessons through culture" and "Cherish traditional culture." Five years have passed since then, and the world, including Japan, has changed a lot. As technology, including AI, continues to evolve at an accelerated pace, partly due to the influence of COVID-19, how do you**

**honestly feel about Japan, Wajima, traditional crafts and the lacquer industry?**

First of all, I would like to talk about Japan, or the Japanese people, as I feel that they have become very weak over the past 30 years. I talk about Japan because I am in Japan, but I think the whole world is getting weaker. I feel that we are losing patience in everything.

I also think that young people in Japan are having an identity crisis. I think the answer for Japanese people lies in their own cultural roots, these days they are no from Americans, including their lifestyle. I feel that traditional crafts should not be lost in the sense of protecting Japanese culture and identity.



**It is often said that this is the age of the individual, but I think that the influence of convenient services and smartphones has created an environment where people don't have to be patient.**

It's okay to be free to do whatever you want, but I think that freedom and responsibility need to be considered at the same time. I can do as I like, but in doing so, I have a social responsibility as well. If I am healthy, I have to help those who are not. In the UK, volunteer activities are popular as a form of social responsibility, and I have tried to start volunteer activities in Japan several times, but it did not go well. I have the impression that there is a lot of opposition and it is hard to take root in Japan.

**Right. Perhaps this is not only about Japan, do you have any opinions about phenomenon of taking the “shortest distance” in everything? Just like a car’s navigation system...**

I don't like navigation systems (laughs). I think life is an adventure, so I think it's important to enjoy the journey.

As for the "shortest distance", the same goes for school. In Japan, there are exams, exams, exams, and if you hard this, you will pass the exam. That's all they do. Experience is the best teacher, and the most important thing from now on is lateral thinking. If you don't develop the ability to ask questions and puzzle problems, how will you solve them when you have them? Without this ability If you have a problem that you can't solve, you're out. If you have a variety of different experiences, challenges, and read books, you will be able to f ace future obstacles in many different ways without letting them break you .

There is a narrative "Don't forget to smell the flower along the way" It is important to goals, but the process is also important. enjoying life and learning from your experiences on your way to your goals.



**Thank you very much. Next, I would like to ask you about the world of lacquer. First of all, I would like to hear about the influence of COVID-19 and the reaction of the world**

**to the lacquer industry or traditional culture.**

To be honest, I am having a hard time with COVID-19. The obvious thing is that customers are not coming to Wajima. Exhibitions are no longer possible. I can't go to Tokyo, and we can't hold lectures or workshops. Some people are making online shopping websites with a grant from the prefecture, but it's hard to take good quality pictures and it's also hard to explain. I don't think people can fully understand the quality of the product unless they actually touch it and I explain it to them. I myself am not selling through online shopping at the moment, but if I were to do so in the future, I think it would be difficult to convince people to buy.

**What is the difficulty of getting people to buy it after explaining to them?**

To be honest, lacquering is expensive. Even a single bowl that I make and sell costs between 28,000 & 120,000yen. Why is it so expensive compared to ordinary bowls sold in the market? It is necessary to explain. To grow a lacquer tree takes 12 years and a lot of care, for your efforts you are rewarded with about 200ml of raw tree sap. The base woodwork usually takes three years to dry and the lacquering process itself takes another year, so the simple calculation is that it will take 16 years. Even if you start from the lacquering process, it takes at least six months to a year, so the price is not high, but the best way to convince people of the quality of lacquer is to touch it directly, explain it to them, and have them buy it. There are many foreigners among my customers, they are convinced and buy from me.



**I understand that you also have foreign customers. What is the reaction of foreigners to lacquerware and Japanese culture?**

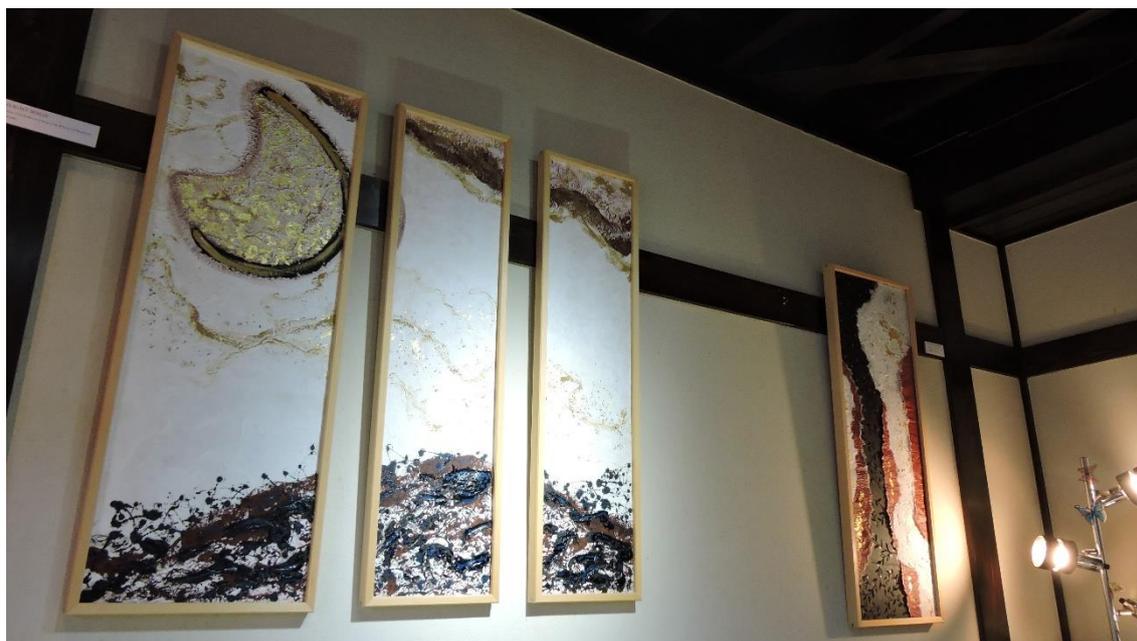
Since publishing my book five years ago, I have been traveling to Florida, England, and other places around the world to give lectures and workshops. Japanese culture is really popular all over the world. Foreigners have a fascination with Japanese culture and were quite knowledgeable about it. There are fans of Japanese culture everywhere. Lacquer is something that foreigners want to do quite a bit, but there are few opportunities. Prints and pottery are easy to understand because there are specialized galleries and the culture is similar to that of the West, but there is very little information about lacquer, including a lack of English translations. Raw lacquer itself is not readily available, so it is difficult to try first hand. I have been posting information on my website, but in this day and age, people are not very good at reading, and they want to do everything quickly on their smartphones, so I am not sure if they will read about the lacquer process or about the exceptional tools involved.

**I would like to ask you a little about yourself, Suzanne. Why have you been passionate about lacquer for more than 30 years? Where does the passion come from?**

First of all, lacquer is beautiful. It's fun, and you can never make the same thing twice. Lacquer is alive and is different every day, the same work can never be done twice.

Every day is a learning experience. This morning I couldn't make red lacquer well, and I was just thinking that even though I have been doing this for over 30 years, I still can't do it well (laughs).

Also, there is a wide range of expression, which is amazing. What kind of expression should I use next? Which material should I use? Shall I use stone? Shall I use metal? Shall I show the grain of the wood? It's fun to think about all these things. Now I enjoy a large range of expression and challenge myself to do a variety of things, but when I first started working with lacquer, it was very difficult. It's a small and restrictive world, some of my teachers, living national treasures, and told me a lot of things I shouldn't do. But now I am enjoying the unique expression that only I can give. The other day, I was invited to Echizen Washi in neighboring Fukui Prefecture to help revitalize the town, and asked if I could collaborate with them. In return, I received a lot of washi. The washi is thick like cardboard and cannot be used directly on wood being too thick. I wondered if I could make a lacquer painting out of it, so I tried. I was worried when I first showed my new washi work to my regular customers, but they were very supportive and happy. It is now selling quite well.



**You mentioned earlier that there is a line between what not to do, what exactly is it?**

There are many details such as the height of the legs, the finish, the corners, the colors, traditionally silver is sealed with black and gold is sealed with transparent lacquer. When I sealed the silver in green, everyone was surprised and asked me how I did it.

but if you can't think freely, it's impossible to conceive .

### **What is the reason why free thinking does not grow?**

That is the bad thing about Japanese traditional crafts. Also it can be said, the bad point of Japanese society. Blindly following rules dictated by an authority without questioning that authority or the appropriateness of that rule to yourself and to society. People need to think about how the rules fit into today's society, understand the logic behind it, and judge if those rules are still relevant. In fact, the most important thing is, to understand why we have to follow any set of rules.

A long time ago, when I was studying lacquer art at the training center, I heard a Japanese proverb that says, "A stake that sticks out gets hammered down,," but in Wajima, a living national treasure teacher told me in Wajima, "Pull out the nail that sticks out and throw it away. That's how inconspicuous you have to be. We have to follow the rules unquestioningly.

### **It must have taken a lot of harsh times to establish your position, but will you continue to work in Wajima?**

The world of IWajima-nuri is based on a division of labour system. I studied to be able to do all of the processes by myself because I intended to eventually return to England to work. There were many times when I wanted to return to the UK due to childbirth or visa issues, but each time I was forced to stay in Wajima (laughs). As long as God is telling me to stay in Wajima, I'm going to stay in Wajima. I've already half given up on the idea of working in England (laughs).

### **Lastly, could you tell us about your future activities and goals?**

By collaborating with Echizen Washi, I was able to create something I had never thought of before. I would like to challenge myself to do something new with respect to encounters, and I would like young people and men who have never touched lacquer before to feel the charm of lacquer. In addition to bowls and plates, I have been making accessories mainly for women, but now I have started making accessories for men as well. Shamans in the \*Jomon period also wore lacquer ornamentation so I would like young men to wear lacquer as well. I think Asian men are fashionable and would surely look good with it.

\*The period of B.C11,000-B.C200 in Japan.



Has it existed from Jomon period?

Yes! Lacquer has a history of over 9,200 years and was highly prized being used for many purposes, the design was so innovative that it could be used today.

**Is there anything else?**

I would also like to see the lacquer trees managed by a forest cooperative. I would like to see a system in place where young people are paid with government money to plant and manage the lacquer trees every year. It takes twelve years to take care of a tree, and I would like to see that done properly.

On a more personal note, I was planning to travel around the world, but the COVID-19 has made it difficult. I know enough about Japan, so I would like to visit Europe once more. I want to learn more about the history and culture of England. I would like to know more about my own culture.

Also, since I sit all the time, I've gained a lot of weight compared to when I was younger. My immediate goal is to lose about 10 kilograms (laughs).

**Thank you for your precious time today.**