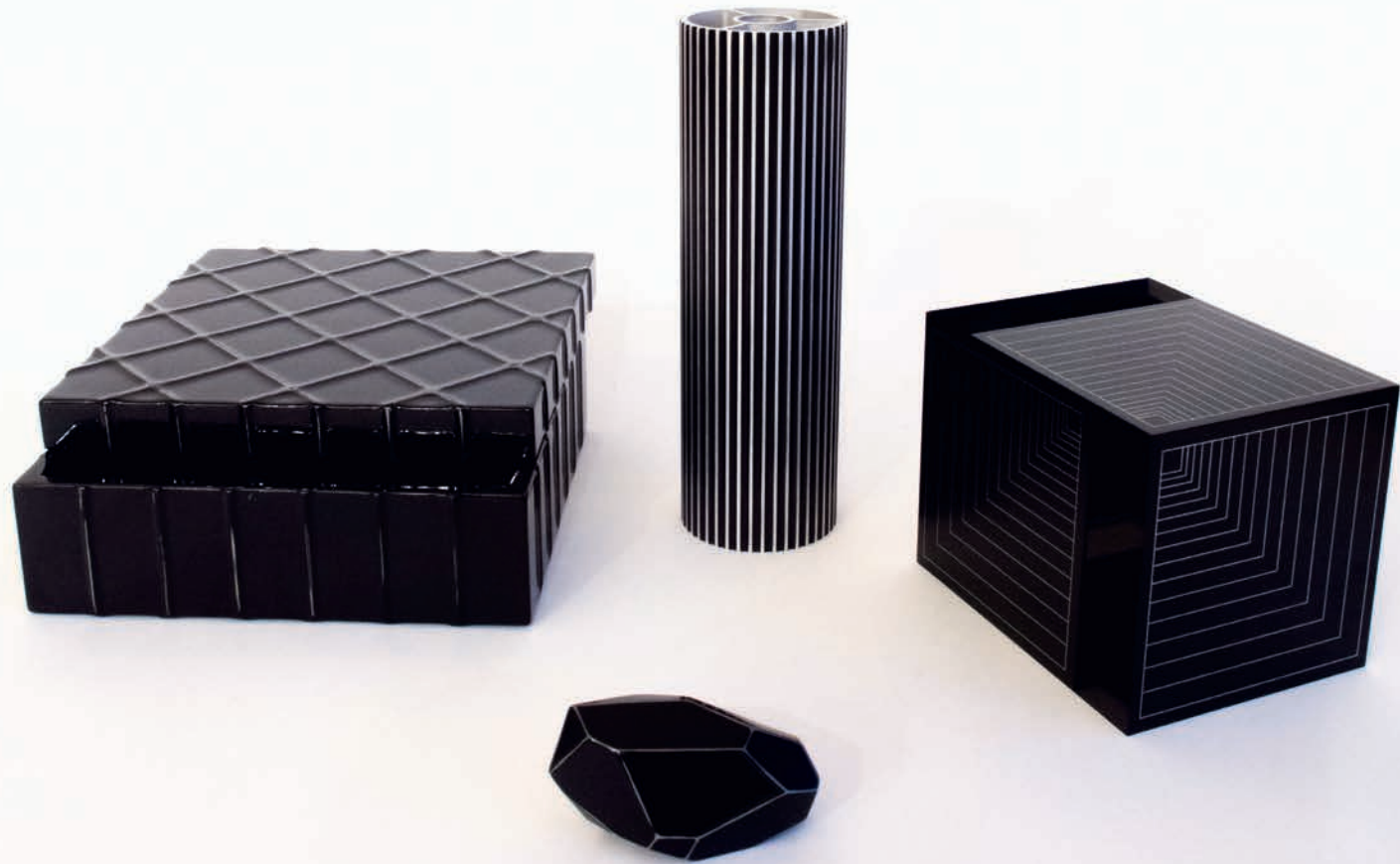


Design

THIS PAGE, FROM LEFT, 'TOGI' BOX, PATTERNED USING CNC MILLING; METAL 'KAKERA' PAPERWEIGHT AND 'SHIMA' VASE; AND 'SAKKAKU' STORAGE CUBE, WITH COMPUTER-GENERATED PATTERNS, ALL BY KISHU+ OPPOSITE, A LACQUERED PAPERWEIGHT IS POLISHED TO REVEAL THE METAL BENEATH

GLOSS MAKING



Kishu+ harnesses traditional savvy and technical smarts to give Japanese lacquerware a very contemporary lustre

PHOTOGRAPHY: YASUYUKI TAKAGI WRITER: JENS H JENSEN





Like many other rural communities, the city of Kainan in Japan's Wakayama prefecture is struggling to sustain its traditional crafts. Kainan's claim to fame is *Kishu shikki*, or Kishu lacquerware – Kishu being the name of the old feudal domain it once belonged to.

Lacquerware has been produced in Japan since prehistoric times, at first to create simple daily utensils such as bowls and trays, since layers of lacquer offer a durable, waterproof barrier on wood, bamboo, linen and even paper. Over the centuries, a great range of decorative techniques was developed to embellish it, using, for instance, pieces of shell or ivory (*raden*), or a fine gold powder (*maki-e*). European nobility hankered for these exquisite pieces of craftsmanship in the 17th century, when lacquerware was simply referred to as 'Japan' (just as porcelain is still called 'china').

Until recently, simple lacquerware was found on dinner tables in homes across Japan, while the more elaborate variety was often given as gifts for weddings or other special occasions. But what was, a couple of generations ago, a booming industry is now struggling to compete with cheaper Chinese products and to keep up with consumers who prefer imported dinner plates over local lacquered miso soup and rice bowls.

In 2015, Takemi Senda, of the publicly funded Wakayama Industry Promotion Foundation, sat down with Yoji Hashimoto of Hashimoto Shitsugei, a Kainan-based lacquerware producer, to look for ways to reverse the decline in demand for the local speciality. They knew that the accumulated skill of the city's 200 small workshops was unrivalled in Japan, but demand was declining and the future of many of the third- or fourth-generation family businesses was bleak.

'Unlike other lacquerware-producing regions such as Aizu or Wajima, the brand recognition of Kishu shikki in Japan is not very high, so we thought, why not look overseas for new markets?' says Senda. Hashimoto quickly gathered four other lacquer specialists, and together they applied for public funding. Thus Kishu+ was born, with a mission to make lacquer sexy again.

Takt Project, a Tokyo-based design practice led by Satoshi Yoshiizumi, was hired to oversee the process.

After a research trip to the Maison & Objet fair in Paris, they decided to focus on interior products rather than tableware, as many of the exhibitors they talked to 'had some reservations about putting food on objects they perceived as being coated with chemicals', explains Yoshiizumi. As Kainan manufacturers were some of the first to experiment with applying lacquer to plastics and compound wood in the late 1940s, Yoshiizumi was keen to explore new possibilities for the base material. 'While respecting the region's artisanal heritage, we also wanted to fuse this traditional craft with modern technology and see where it would lead,' he adds.

The 'Shima' vase and 'Kakera' paperweights are both shining examples of this intriguing mix. First covered in a coat of lacquer, their edges are then polished to reveal the metal underneath, the lacquer's warm sheen contrasting beautifully with the raw aluminium. A similar technique is used on the 'Togi' box, another high-tech/handmade object decorated with a chequered pattern made using a CNC milling machine. It is given several coats of a base colour, then a coat of gold, and finally more coats of colour, before the protruding parts of the pattern are sanded down to allow the gold to shine through. This is a modern interpretation of Negoro lacquerware, which was made in Wakayama during the Middle-Ages – its simple lacquered objects, worn out by centuries of use, are left with parts of their darker base layer exposed.

The collection also includes 'Sakkaku' storage cubes, decorated with computer-generated geometrical patterns transferred using silkscreen; a set of 'Minamo' candleholders, 3D-printed with wave patterns; and two types of lights, both made using lacquer with sprinkled gold powder to reflect the light source. The new designs will be unveiled at Paris' Maison & Objet 2018 in January. 'I'm hoping they will show the world a new perspective on our traditional techniques,' says Senda, 'and that it will be the starting point for bringing a new kind of Kishu lacquerware to the world.' ★ kishu-plus.jp



ABOVE, A CRAFTSMAN AT SHIMAYASU HANKOUGEI, ONE OF THE KAINAN WORKSHOPS THAT IS PRODUCING LACQUERWARE FOR KISHU+
RIGHT, THE 'FIGURE' LIGHT, WHICH IS MADE USING LACQUER SPRINKLED WITH GOLD POWDER