Transition of Lacquering Techniques and Social Dynamics in Medieval Japan
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This article examines the transition from late ancient to medieval modes of lacquerware production, with a special focus on the production techniques of lacquered tableware (bowls and plates), by analyzing its social and cultural background. Artisans, such as lacquerers and woodturners, who wanted to be self-reliant, opened new lacquer workshops around Japan in the late Heian period. In fact, some sites, including the Teramae site (dating back to the late 12th to 13th century) in Niigata Prefecture, have yielded archaeological evidence for the existence of casters and woodturners-cum-lacquerers working at the residences of local elites of the bailiff class. The unearthed objects include iron-melting furnace walls, rough-cut bowls and plates before applying lacquer, lacquered bowls and plates, and lacquer paint brushes and palettes. Later, lacquer artisans became more specialized and divided into distinct professions, such as woodturners and lacquerers. Meanwhile, persimmon lacquer (undercoated with a mixture of persimmon tannin and carbon powder and covered with a layer of lacquer) appeared from the 11th to 12th century. It was a simpler process with fewer steps and fewer materials. In addition, the technique of lacquer painting was introduced as a simpler alternative to gold lacquering. These new techniques boosted the demand for lacquerware. In the 15th century, the variety of woods used for cheap persimmon-lacquered tableware increased to include Japanese beech and horse chestnut, which further promoted the spread of persimmon lacquerware and caused the rapid decline of pottery bowls. As a result, a new style of tableware was established with lacquered bowls as its basis and with ceramic ware and unglazed earthen bowls as complementary elements. Some significant changes were also seen in lacquer paint tools, such as buckets and palettes, and lacquer-collecting techniques. Moreover, the growing popularity of soups and rice porridge, under the influence of the Zen Buddhist Sect, spurred the mass production of mortars and the spread of lacquered tableware. Another change in medieval Japan was the meaning of red lacquerware. Although it had remained popular since ancient times, its meaning changed from a symbol of the high social status of those who owned it to a reminder of Chinese lacquerware, such as red lacquerware of the Yuan and Ming Dynasties. In the 16th century, red lacquerware gained more widespread popularity, not only among artisans and merchants in urban areas but also among farmers in rural areas. This drastic change in the color symbolism seen in lacquerware and picture
rolls was a milestone in the transition towards the early modern period, representing the rise of cities and the independence of rural communities. Thus, this article insists that the production of lacquered tableware changed significantly in parallel with social changes at the transitional phase from the late ancient to medieval times as well as at each milestone of the medieval period.

Key words: lacquered tableware, undercoat of persimmon tannin, red lacquerware, wood types, rough cut, lacquer-collecting technique