

HUNGARIAN ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS
DOCTORAL SCHOOL

**URUSHI AND THE JAPANESE LACQUER
TECHNIQUES**

Synopsis of the DLA dissertation

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The theme and aim of the research

Studying the history of our continent, we can come to the conclusion, that the influence of Eastern cultures in one way or another, always can be seen in Europe. From the 17th-18th century particularly strong interest tended towards Japanese art, through the introduction of the exceptionally beautiful art objects, which are arrived to Europe thanks to commercial concerns. Their unique appearance and signs of outstandingly fine craftsmanship impressed and fascinated the western commoners. Not Western European alone, but Hungarian private collectors also purchased and transported Japanese artworks to the homeland. In the beginning, they enriched private collections, but later came to the possession of public collections and by nowadays the several works of art stored in Japanese collections of Hungarian museums became the part of the national cultural heritage. Proceeding from this statement, we have to realize that we are obliged to take responsibility of their preservation as well as the cultural properties belonging to our national history and European culture.

Japanese artworks and especially lacquerwares, in the course of times have suffered a lot of damage and most of them are in a severe condition. For the study of the materials and manufacturing techniques and so the preservation of them we are in lack of special literature, and we haven't got enough specialists working in this field.

(Restorers with general knowledge usually are not familiar with the unique features (e.g. the polymerization) of Japanese lacquer. They're not aware of its dangers and the special environmental conditions need for its appropriate application. In western special literature we can often find inaccurate or false denominations, descriptions caused by wrong spelling or understanding of original Japanese texts. These deceptions make the understanding of this very complicated area much more difficult for the uninitiated eyes. By my research and with the writing of this dissertation I've tried to fill in the missing knowledge and to make it accessible to the specialists.

The results of the research

In the course of my research activities, it became clear to me, that the theme groups pointed in my preliminary project plan (history, manufacture techniques and restoration of Japanese armors and their lacquered surfaces) are consisting of such a huge data of knowledge, that their exposition is beyond the limits of this dissertation. Hence I have tried to write up the theme unit which comprises the principles of my entire research project: the Japanese lacquer, *urushi*, and its processing techniques, because in lack of this basic knowledge, it's impossible

to present and explain restoration in itself or related to the subject of Japanese armors. For this, in my dissertation I concentrate on the presentation of *urushi* and the manufacturing techniques of lacquerwares.

In my DLA thesis I've tried to picture the preciseness, concentration, patience and last but not the least the respect which is indispensable for the manufacture of lacquered objects. I've tried to present the multiply layers of knowledge which is crucial for the understanding and cognition of lacquerwares, and which also comprises the manufacturing techniques. The research and knowledge of materials, and manufacturing methods are the fundamental criteria of restoration. Without the extensive knowledge of these factors, ethical, authentic and professional restoration work cannot be carried out. This general principle of western restoration is in accordance with the Japanese approach, which suggests that only lacquer artists with serious experience should undertake restoration work. In the Japanese academic educational system the students get proficiency in the manufacturing techniques, in the art itself, and only the next step is the study of restoration techniques. As a European restorer, I always worked on to converge and mutually understand the western and eastern approach, hence I've tried to walk a road – through the study of the manufacturing techniques of lacquerwares – which finally leads to deeper understanding of the mental engrossment, and the high level of preciseness necessary to the work of this field of Japanese arts, and so the better appreciation of the philosophy and approach of the eastern restoration professionals. Through consultations with my Japanese masters, I've learned several methods, special techniques, cannot be found in any special literature. I hope these, as well as my experiments and detailed descriptions of manufacture, might serve new information for the specialists of the field.

Besides my theoretical research results, I emphasized the detailed technical descriptions in my dissertation. I did it, because as a restorer and academic teacher I know exactly, the general delineations of certain methods how meaningless can be, which in fact makes the practical application and the correct cause-effect understanding impossible. Therefore I made efforts to the elaborate, authentic and complete transmission of the knowledge I gained from my personal experiences and from my Japanese masters. I think one of the best ways of transmission of relevant and detailed knowledge is the doctoral dissertation. For those who really have connected to this theme and the practical usage of certain methods, I hope, I'll be able to give a thorough, overall picture about the most common techniques and materials. It's evident for my colleagues, and maybe I don't have to express, that how dangerous can be, if we use the theoretically gained knowledge in practice without the guidance of experienced

specialist. There are unfortunately a lot of examples for this on international level. It's a commonplace, but I have to stress, that nothing can replace practical experiences and it's especially true in the context of *urushi*. Inefficient interventions using inappropriate materials and techniques can endanger the condition of the object in a short or long term period, and cause serious, irreversible damage, but on the contrary, the principles of restoration ethics appoint the preservation of works of art in their present state and their transmission to next generations. This general ethical approach, which is conceived earlier in statements of several European conservator organization (ECCO, ICOM, etc.), is in correspondence with the clearly formulated approach of Japanese conservators. Nowadays, in order to materialize this approach in reality, Japanese institutes pay more attention the education of European *urushi* conservators, so to facilitate the preservation and conservation, restoration of Japanese works of art stored in European museum collections.

Since the limited frame of the dissertation, much of the knowledge base I developed during my research (e.g. history and manufacture of Japanese armors, and the restoration of them and lacquered objects) couldn't be presented in this work, but I'd like to publish those research results later, in another paper and continue my study program of Japanese armours.