

## Article

# Comparison of Contemporary Urushi Art Performance in Taiwan and Japan: Future Development of Urushi Art in Taiwan

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**Abstract:** From May 1st to June 6th, 2021, at the National Taiwan Craft Research and Development Center, the "2021 Taiwan-Japan Contemporary Urushi Art Exchange Exhibition" was co-hosted by the Taiwan Urushi Research Association and the Faye Art Museum in Yokohama, Japan. There were 56 exhibitors from Taiwan and 24 exhibitors from Japan, exhibiting 132 works. On the day of the exhibition, a lecture on the theme of "Taiwan and Japan Contemporary Urushi Art Exchange and Creation" was provided. In the academic exchange activities and the lectures, the speeches were all delivered in Chinese and Japanese in real-time translation. Participants learned about the diversity of contemporary Urushi art creation through the session on Taiwan Day. Through the planning of the exhibition and related in-depth research, it is found that it has a positive impact and inspiration on the development of Urushi art in Taiwan in the future. Through the exchange of Urushi art, Taiwan markets itself all over the world.

**Keywords:** Urushi ware, Color, Craft, Design

## 1. Introduction

When Taiwan came into contact with Urushi, the Urushi object came to Taiwan from Fujian, China. However, there were no Urushi trees in Taiwan, so there were no Urushi craftsmen at that time. During the Japanese occupation of Taiwan From 1895 to 1945, Yamanaka came to Taiwan and established the "Yannaka Craft Institute" in Taichung Prefecture. Since then, Taiwan's Urushi ware has been continuously learned and refined over the past 100 years. Urushi ware in Taiwan has its origins in the inheritance and continuous cutting of Yamanaka's Urushi technology. In the early years, there was significant development of wooden utensils exported to Japan in the Fengyuan District. These industries in Fengyuan thrived due to the increase in personnel costs. The transfer of Japanese production lines to China and, more recently, Vietnam, changed the pomp and circumstance of Toyohara in the past. Today, there are few small businesses left to support traditional industries as shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1. Source from National Taiwan Craft Research and Development Center.

During the epidemic, purification and restoration of the natural environment and the life of the earth changed the way of human life. Urushi connects nature to human beings and allows them to coexist, offering another reflection during this period. Urushi

production has been exchanged between Taiwan and Japan. A new generation of Urushi artists is seeking expression in Urushi creation that is not bound by tradition. Natural Urushi is alive and not affected by environmental changes, growing with us.

## 2. Research Background

In the early Ming and Qing dynasties, most of Taiwan's living habits followed the traditions of the Central Plains culture. Therefore, ordinary folk has access to Urushi ware, such as statues of gods, temples, red sleeping beds, wardrobes, Taishi chairs, tables, dressing tables, thanks baskets, tea saucers, and sacrificial fruit plates. At that time, black and vermilion (red) were the main colors of Urushi. Vermilion (red) represents the blessings and joys of the Chinese people and was more popular at that time.

In 1914 when the Japanese ruled Taiwan, the Japanese government introduced the Vietnamese species of sumac and planted sumac in Hsinchu Beipu, Miaoli Tongluo, Nantou Puli, and Changhua Bagua Mountain. In 1916, Yamanaka went to Taiwan and established the "Shanzhong Crafts Institute" in Taichung (Fig. 2.)



Fig. 2. Source from National Taiwan Craft Research and Development Center.

In 1927, the governor of Miura Taichung Prefecture believed that Taichung needed to set up a training center for craftsmen. Therefore, on April 18, 1928, the mayor of Endo City put the "Yamanaka Arts and Crafts Urushi Ware Factory" under the public management of the city government. Its name was changed to "Taichung Arts and Crafts Institute". The Urushi engineering and wood engineering courses were planned to be two-year undergraduate courses and one-year graduate courses. Each subject had 5 enrolled students with a total of ten students per year. The director was the director secretary of the municipal office, and Yamanaka was hired as the dean of education. Yamanaka and the craftsman taught and trained the students for the production of 'Penglai Tu' and were in charge of the training and technical part of all the training institutes. The decorative patterns of Penglai Tu were all the aborigines, landscape characters, fruits, plants and flowers, animals, and snake-like patterns with the theme of Taiwan. The talents of Taiwan's early Urushi craftsmanship were raised. In 1936, Taichung Arts and Crafts Institute was changed to "Private Taichung Arts and Crafts Training Institute". In 1937, it was upgraded to "Private Taichung Arts and Crafts Training School" (Fig. 3).



Fig. 3. Source from National Taiwan Craft Research and Development Center.

In 1995, the National Taiwan Arts and Crafts Research Institute in Nantou was commissioned by the National Center for Traditional Arts in Yilan to conduct a training class. Chen Huoqing was hired to set up a ten-month training course. Most of the course content was taught in traditional techniques. At that time, the Urushi art training class maintained a solid and earnest effort

to teach Kung Fu to students. There were five and a half-day classes a week, and the basic primer, scraping, sticking, decoration, and Urushi paints were taught from scratch. The traditional base of wooden Urushi ware in the workshop was taught by Chen Huoqing. However, Chen Huoqing was in poor health at that time, so he asked Huang Lishu to help him teach. There were thousands of decorative techniques that were taught by Wang Qingshuang, too. As for Urushi painting, Urushi painting techniques were taught from the basic properties of Urushi by Wu Chuan and Zheng Li who were well-known Chinese Urushi painters

### 3. Research Purpose and Methods

In recent years, there have been actively promoted exhibitions, forums, and lectures on exchanges between Taiwan and Japan on Urushi art. Taiwanese craftsmen can go abroad to understand Japanese craftsmen directly and deeply and to obtain exposure to different new thinking and innovative concepts through local event hosting. Such exchange exhibitions continue to connect Taiwan and Japan, countries and countries, paint and paint, and people to people for seeking growth through the collision of creative concepts from different countries and different techniques. To enhance the international vision and creative skills of Taiwan's contemporary Urushi craftsmanship, the development of Urushi craftsmanship in Taiwan is required. To continue to develop the use of Urushi craftsmanship, Taiwan's Urushi works need to be known to the world. Based on the above research background and motivation, the purpose of this research is found as follows.

To achieve the research purpose, the research steps are composed of three stages. In the first stage, the analysis in quantitative research was used to sort out the conceptual differences in the creation of the Urushi craft and to discuss future exchange exhibition planning. In the second stage, the traditional Urushi craftsmanship and contemporary Urushi craftsmanship were compared and summarized through the analysis of Taiwanese and Japanese works. Finally, collectors' preferences and aesthetic values for Urushi craftsmanship were investigated through in-depth interviews.

A total of 24 Japanese writers and 56 Taiwanese writers participated in the exhibition. 17 respondents from Taiwan and 17 respondents from Japan participated in the questionnaire survey.

### 4. Results and Discussion

For the question of 'Do Urushi artists want their works to be just for fun?', 64.7% of the Taiwanese artists answered negatively while 23.5% replied positively. However, the Japanese artists were much more positive as 64.7% of them answered 'much' and 'very much.' (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Answers to the question 'Do Urushi artists want their works to be just for fun?'

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No	6	35.3	2	11.8
Not much	5	29.4	4	23.5
Normally	2	11.8	0	0
much	1	5.9	2	11.8
Very much	3	17.6	9	52.9
Total	17	100	17	100

For the question of 'Do Urushi artists want their works to be exhibited in local exhibition halls?', 94.1% of the Taiwanese artists answered 'yes', and 70.6% of the Japanese artists replied 'yes' and 'very much' (Table 2). As the majority of Japanese artists performed Urushi arts for fun, they did not seem to be willing to have exhibitions.

**Table 2.** Answers to the question 'Do Urushi artists want their works to be exhibited in local exhibition halls?'

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No			1	5.9
Normally	1	5.9	4	29.4
Yes	4	23.5	2	11.8
Very much	12	70.6	10	58.8
Total	17	100	17	100

For the question of ‘Do Urushi artists want their works to be exhibited in domestic exhibition halls?’, 94.1% of the Taiwanese artists answered ‘yes’, and 76.5% of the Japanese artists replied ‘yes’ and ‘very much’ (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Answers to the question ‘Do Urushi artists want their works to be exhibited in domestic exhibition halls?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No			1	5.9
Normally	1	5.9	3	17.6
Yes	3	17.6	3	17.6
Very much	13	76.5	10	58.8
Total	17	100	17	100

For international exhibitions, all of the Taiwanese and Japanese artists replied ‘yes’ (Table 4). This shows that all of the artists did not want to have international exhibitions.

**Table 4.** Answers to the question ‘Does the Urushi artist want his work and the opportunity to be exhibited internationally?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No opinion	0	0	2	11.8
Yes	3	17.6	2	11.8
Very much	14	82.4	13	76.5
Total	17	100	17	100

For the question of ‘will lectures or forums be held at the same time as the Urushi Art Exchange Exhibition?’, 82.4% of the Taiwanese artists answered ‘yes’, and 64.7% of the Japanese artists replied ‘yes’ (Table 5). This also shows the majority of the artists want to learn more through lectures.

**Table 5.** Answers to the first question ‘Will lectures or forums be held at the same time as the Urushi Art Exchange Exhibition?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No opinion	3	17.6	6	35.3
Yes	3	17.6	5	29.4
Very much	11	64.7	6	35.3
Total	17	100	17	100

For trading their works, 82.4% of the Taiwanese artists and 88.2% of the Japanese artists replied ‘yes’ (Table 6). Most artists seem to want to sell their crafts to the public (Table 6).

**Table 6.** Answers to the question ‘Do you want your works to be traded during the Urushi Art Exchange Exhibition?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No	1	5.9	0	0
No opinion	2	11.8	2	11.8
Yes	3	17.6	8	47.1
Very much	11	64.7	7	41.2
Total	17	100	17	100

76.5% of the Taiwanese artists and 64.7% of the Japanese artists thought that Urushi art needs to be a life craft (Table 7).

**Table 7.** Answers to the question ‘Do you want Urushi art to be a life craft?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No	0		1	5.9
No opinion	4	23.5	5	29.4
Yes	4	23.5	6	36.3
Very much	9	52.9	5	29.4
Total	17	100	17	100

Most of the artists from Taiwan and Japan thought that Urushi crafts pursue artistic values than simple crafts. 64.7% of the Taiwanese and 58.8% of the Japanese artists answered ‘much’ and ‘very much’ to the question ‘Do you think Urushi works are more "artistic than craftsman?"’ (Table 8)

**Table 8.** Answers to the question ‘Do you think Urushi works are more "artistic than craftsman?”

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No	6	35.3	7	41.2
Yes	3	17.6	7	41.2
Very much	8	47.1	3	17.6
Total	17	100	17	100

To the questions ‘Do you think the beauty of traditional Urushi art needs to be further developed into contemporary art?’, 82.4% of the Taiwanese and 64.6% of the Japanese artists answered ‘yes’ and ‘very much’. This shows that the artists thought that Urushi arts need to integrate contemporary art (Table 9).

**Table 9.** Answers to the question ‘Do you think the beauty of traditional Urushi art needs to be further developed into contemporary art?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No	2	11.8	1	5.9
No opinion	1	5.9	5	29.4
Yes	3	17.6	6	35.3
Very much	11	64.7	5	29.4
Total	17	100	17	100

In educating Urushi art, 88.2% of the Taiwanese and 70.6% of the Japanese artists thought that teaching Urushi art needs more artistic courses. This is related to the artists’ thought of integrating contemporary art into Urushi art (Table 10).

**Table 10.** Answers to the question ‘Do you think the content of Urushi art teaching can have more artistic course education in addition to technical teaching?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No opinion	2	11.8	5	29.4
Yes	5	29.4	6	35.3
Very much	10	58.8	6	35.3
Total	17	100	17	100

The artists thought that it takes a long for Urushi art to be developed and its development needs to be more focused and emphasized. 76.5% of the Taiwanese and 70.6% of the Japanese artists hoped the development of Urushu art with more endeavors (Table 11).



**Table 11.** Answers to the question ‘ It takes a long time to create Urushi art. Do you hope that the future development will be full-time?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
No	1	5.9	0	0
No opinion	4	23.5	5	29.4
Yes	4	23.5	4	23.5
Very much	8	47.1	8	47.1
Total	17	100	17	100

To the questions about understanding how the artists think about future development, most of them answered that Urushi art must be sustained, and it is necessary to develop it further. 23.5% of the Taiwanese artists hoped to continue developing Urushi art, and 23.5% and 47.1% of the Taiwanese artists thought that international exchange, and education and encouragement of people to learn about Urushi art are necessary for the development of Urushi art. The Japanese artists showed similar responses. 29.4 % of the Japanese artists thought that the continuation of the development of Urushi art, and another 29.4% hoped to have a regular international exchange. 23.5% thought that the promotion of Urushi art is required through an academic exchange, which showed a different opinion of the Japanese artists from that of the Taiwanese artists as only 5.9% of them hoped to have the academic exchange. The Japanese artists thought that the exhibitions for educating people is less important as 17.6% of them agreed on this. However, 47.1% of the Taiwanese artists hoped to have the exhibitions be a chance to encourage people to learn Urushi art.

**Table 12.** Answers to the question ‘ What is your vision for the future development of Urushi art through the international exchange exhibition?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
Continuing to create and diversify Urushi art and crafts	4	23.5	5	29.4
Hoping regular international exchanges	4	23.5	5	29.4
Promoting Urushi art globally with the academic exchange	1	5.9	4	23.5
Encouraging people to learn Urushi art through exhibitions	8	47.1	3	17.6
Total	17	100	17	100

On the use of Urushi artworks, 88.3% of the Taiwanese artists and 58.8% of the Japanese artists thought that Urushi artworks need to be used in daily life. The artists thought that Urushi artworks have functionalities for daily life use. 5.9 and 11.8% of the Taiwanese and Japanese artists thought that Urushi artworks have such functionalities. However, 29.4% of the Japanese artists regarded Urushi artworks as an artistic activity, which was different from the thought of the Taiwanese artists. 5.9% of them thought that Urushi artworks can be artworks only.

**Table 13.** Answers to the question ‘ Do you think the works on display are works of art or handicrafts? How do distinguish them?’

Answers	Taiwanese		Japanese	
	Number	Ratio (%)	Number	Ratio (%)
Artworks and crafts at the same time	13	76.5	10	58.8
Crafts to be used in daily life	2	11.8	0	0
Artworks only	1	5.9	5	29.4
Handicraft due to functions	1	5.9	2	11.8
Total	17	100	17	100

## 5. Conclusions

In recent years, the exchange of Urushi art between Taiwan and Japan has been actively promoted through exhibitions, forums, and lectures. This study was carried out to help the craftsmen have different ways of thinking and innovative concepts through local activities. The result showed that Urushi art needs to be enjoyed by people and exhibited to the public in general. However, the Taiwanese and Japanese artists showed different opinions as less number of Japanese artists preferred to have exhibitions. and For the question of ‘ Do Urushi artists want their works to be just for fun?’, 64.7% of the Taiwanese artists answered negatively while 23.5% replied positively. The Taiwanese artists were more active in the education of Urushi arts than the Japanese artists. However, the artists in both countries hoped to have a chance to sell their works more than before. The majority of the artists thought that their works can be used in daily life as they have enough functionality.

The artists of the two countries agreed that future development of Urushi art is necessary but have different thoughts. While more Taiwanese artists thought that international exchange is important, the Japanese artists put less emphasis on it. The Japanese artists rather preferred academic exchange while the Taiwanese artists thought that international exchange is more important. For education and encouragement of people to learn about Urushi art, the Taiwanese and Japanese artists showed similar opinions. For exhibitions, a less number of Japanese artists regarded it to be important compared to Taiwanese artists. The artists thought that Urushi artworks can be used in daily life. However, more Japanese artists regarded the artworks to be related to arts rather than crafts.

The result of this study shows the common understanding and differences in the thoughts on development, advertisement, marketing, and the concept of Urushi art between the Taiwanese and Japanese artists. Therefore, the results provide the basis for future research on how to develop Urushi art and raise the recognition of the artworks globally.

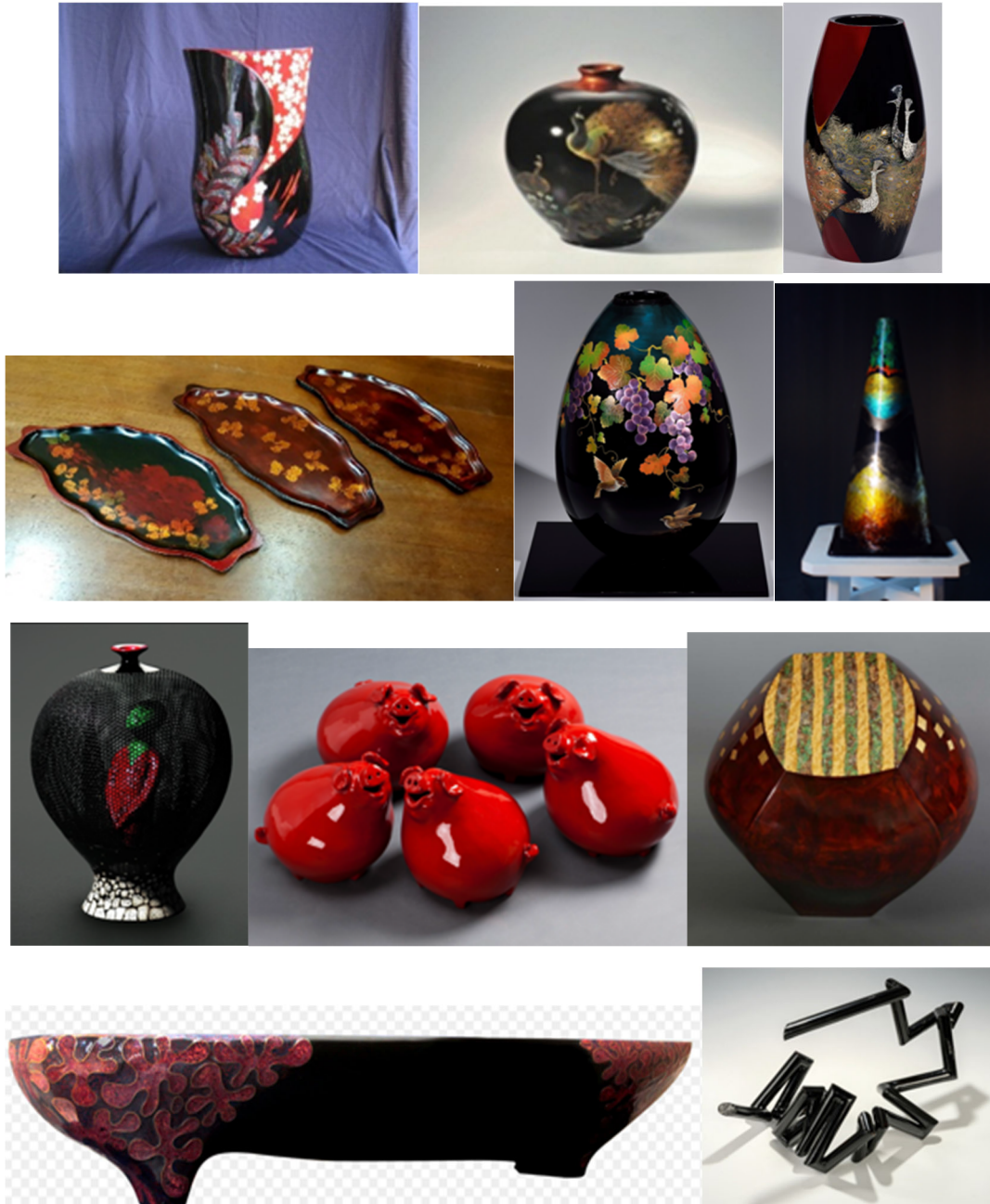
**Author Contributions:** The author contributed to the paper. S.-Y.C. Collects and organizes data and acts, H.-H.L. as the corresponding author .

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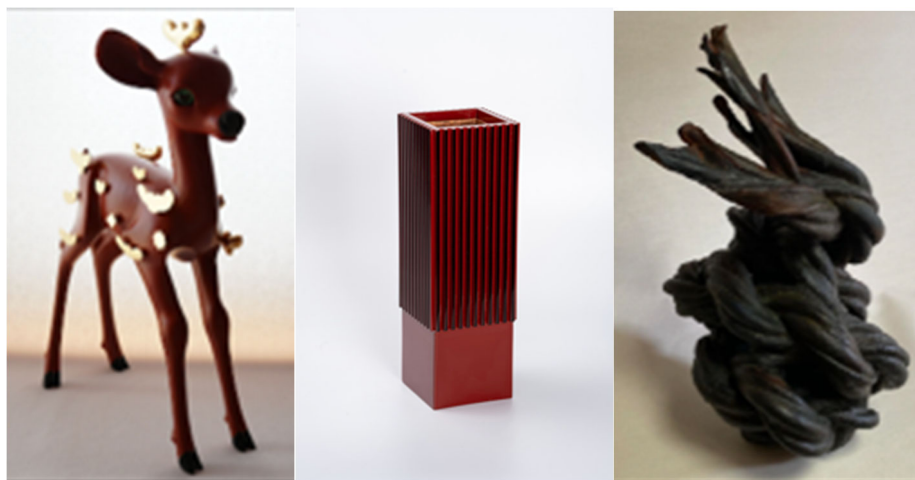
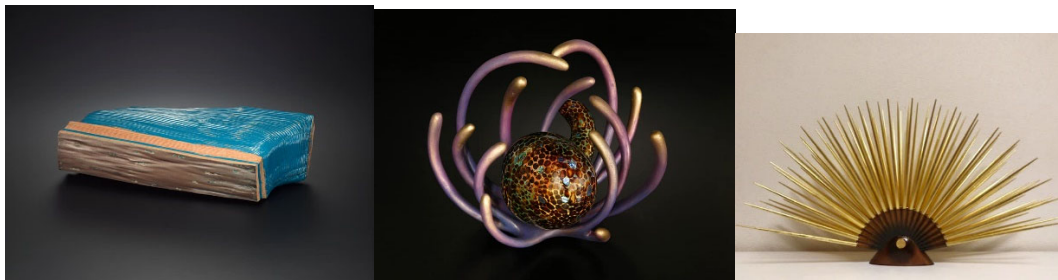
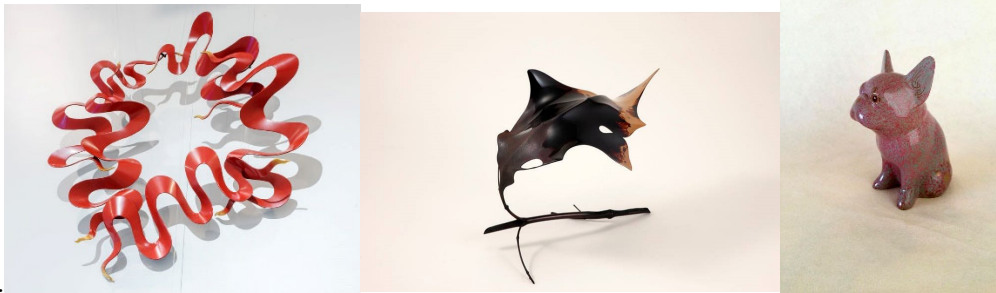
## Appendix

Examples of Urushi art by Taiwanese artists including Wang Xianmin, Wang Xianzhi, Wu Mingyuan, Peng Kunyan, Chen Dingfu, Liao Shengwen, Liang Weiwei, Gu Qijun, and Zhang Senyang



Examples of Urushi art by Japanese artists including Matsushima Skurako, Muramoto Shingo, Matsuda Tamaki, Otsuka Tomotsugu, Mashiyama Akie, Nakajima Yasutaka, Umezu Nahoko, Nakashizuka Shiho, Takamiya Yoko, Ino Ichizo, Akabori Ikuhiko, Mitsumi Irahara, Nishikawa Masanori, Hoshi Atsumi.







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