

SUSTAINING LACQUER CRAFT HERITAGE THROUGH EXCHANGE PROGRAMS

Sakurako Matsushima ^{1*,2}; Ken Dillon ²

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ABSTRACT

Traditional natural lacquer crafts are declining, and in some societies, they have virtually disappeared. These crafts are an important Asian cultural heritage. As Asian societies evolved, unique lacquer arts, crafts and cultures developed. Skilled artisans transformed simple objects into beautiful and aesthetically pleasing craftwork reflecting each region's unique cultural traditions and heritage. However, modernization, new materials and industrial processes, changing values and lifestyles have threatened the traditional, often the slower, labor-intensive methods of lacquerware and lacquer craft production. The emphasis on efficiency and commodification is often prioritized over the intangible spiritual, social, and human values inherent in traditional crafts. Does a mass-produced plastic offering bowl hold the same social and communal significance as one meticulously crafted by an artisan who imbues the work with cultural knowledge and spirit? This study examines the history and growth of the Asian Lacquer Craft Exchange Research Project (ALCERP), its program format and objectives, achievements, challenges, and current research. Based on ALCERP's experience and collected research, this paper discusses the future of natural lacquer arts and the support needed to sustain and revitalize this remarkable craft, art form, culture, and way of life.

Keywords: *natural lacquer; lacquer craft; urushi; intangible cultural heritage; intercultural communication.*

DUY TRÌ DI SẢN NGHỆ SƠN MÀI THÔNG QUA CÁC CHƯƠNG TRÌNH TRAO ĐỔI

Sakurako Matsushima; Ken Dillon

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TÓM TẮT

Nghề thủ công sơn mài tự nhiên truyền thống đang đối mặt với sự suy thoái và ở một số xã hội, chúng gần như biến mất. Những nghề thủ công này là một di sản văn hóa quan trọng của châu Á. Cùng với sự phát triển của xã hội châu Á, nghệ thuật sơn mài, thủ công mỹ nghệ và văn hóa độc đáo cũng phát triển. Những nghề nhân lành nghề đã làm cho những vật dụng

¹ Utsunomiya University, Japan

*Email: info@asian-urushi.com

² Asian Lacquer Craft Exchange Research Project

đơn giản trở nên đẹp đẽ và thẩm mỹ, phản ánh truyền thống và di sản văn hóa độc đáo của mỗi vùng miền. Tuy nhiên, hiện đại hóa, vật liệu mới và quy trình công nghiệp làm thay đổi giá trị và lối sống đã đe dọa các phương pháp sản xuất sơn mài và thủ công mỹ nghệ truyền thống, thường chậm hơn và tốn nhiều công sức so với cách làm hiện đại. Sự chú trọng vào hiệu quả và tính thương mại hóa thường được ưu tiên hơn các giá trị tinh thần, xã hội và nhân văn vô hình vốn có trong các nghề thủ công truyền thống. Liệu một chiếc bát bằng nhựa được sản xuất hàng loạt có mang cùng ý nghĩa xã hội và cộng đồng như một chiếc bát được chế tác tỉ mỉ bởi một nghệ nhân, người đã thấm nhuần kiến thức và tinh thần văn hóa vào tác phẩm?

Nghiên cứu này xem xét lịch sử và sự phát triển của Dự án Nghiên cứu Trao đổi Thủ công Sơn mài châu Á (ALCERP), hình thức chương trình và mục tiêu, thành tựu, thách thức và nghiên cứu hiện tại. Dựa trên kinh nghiệm và nghiên cứu thu thập được của ALCERP, bài viết thảo luận về tương lai của nghệ thuật sơn mài tự nhiên và sự hỗ trợ cần thiết để duy trì và hồi sinh nghề thủ công, hình thức nghệ thuật, văn hóa và lối sống đáng chú ý này.

Từ khóa: sơn mài tự nhiên; nghề sơn mài; *urushi*; di sản văn hóa phi vật thể; giao tiếp liên văn hóa.

1. INTRODUCTION

Natural lacquer crafts are an important aspect of Asian cultural heritage. As with other intangible cultural heritages, traditional natural lacquer arts and crafts are in decline and, in some societies, have virtually disappeared. As number of master artisans diminishes, so does the repository of traditional knowledge, skills, techniques and values that they embody. The African proverb, “When an old man dies, it is a library that burns,” aptly describes the current state of lacquer arts and crafts in East and Southeast Asia.¹

In this paper, “lacquer” or “natural lacquer” refers to the sap of three species of trees native to East and Southeast Asia: *Toxicodendron vernicifluum* (China, Japan, Korea), *Toxicodendron succedaneum* (Taiwan,

Vietnam), and *Gluta usitata* (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand). *Urushi* is Japanese and *thitsi* is Myanmar for lacquer.

The seeds of ALCERP were planted as a result of a series of research sojourns in the early 1990s. For example, Myanmar has strong lacquer traditions embedded in its culture. In particular, the mores involving *thitsi* (natural lacquer) link many of these customs and values. Lacquer (*thitsi*) was used to coat Buddhist statues and religious objects and to craft beautifully made offering bowls brought to temples. In homes, guests were offered betel, fermented tea and cigars, each in special lacquerware containers and local cuisines served on well-crafted lacquerware tables. In Japan, for example, lacquer crafts and culture also have similar ennobling and social functions. Ancient temples, shrines and

¹ Amadou Hampâté Bâ, UNESCO Memory World, URL: <https://www.unesco.org/en/memory-world/amadou-hampate-ba/guardian-african-heritage> Last accessed: October 10, 2025

religious artifacts when rebuilt or repaired were coated with lacquer. Lacquer bowls and utensils ennobled and enhanced family and communal occasions. Societies across East and Southeast Asia share this intangible heritage, nurtured by the interplay of material, technique, milieu, and time. However, in the mid 1990s, a research residence in China evidenced the detrimental impact of unbridled modernization on traditional cultures and practices. Consequently, how best to strengthen and preserve this uniquely Asian heritage became a research subject. Therefore, preserving and strengthening this unique Asian heritage became a primary research focus.

In 2004, the Tokyo University of Arts received funding from the Myanmar Association to develop programs to support Myanmar arts and crafts. Because of her extensive research into the state of Asian urushi arts, Kiichiro Masumura, a professor of the Urushi Arts Department asked Sakurako Matsushima, a graduate of Tokyo University of Arts and professor at Utsunomiya University to create a program to both research and strengthen urushi arts in Myanmar. As the program grew it acquired its current appellation. A number of Japanese foundations have funded Project programs, most notably the Japan Foundation and Takahashi Industrial and Economic Research Foundation.

The purpose of the Asian Lacquer Craft Exchange Research Project is to promote natural lacquer arts, crafts, industry and education by increasing and intensifying communication and exchanges among lacquer communities throughout Asia. The Project began in 2005 with initial visits to Bagan, Myanmar. Yearly workshops were

subsequently held at the Bagan Lacquerware Technology College, introducing Japanese lacquer techniques and design to the faculty, students, and the wider artisan community. Over time, ALCERP expanded in scope and geographical reach to include programs in other Southeast Asian nations.

The Project promotes natural lacquer arts, crafts, industry, and education by bringing together artists, artisans, educators, and scientists for seminars, workshops, study tours, and art exhibitions. At these events, participants exchange information about lacquer arts, discuss national and regional situations, learn new techniques, and view contemporary lacquer art. A key goal is to foster communication and strengthen the global network binding lacquer cultures together. Lacquer arts and crafts constitute a common cultural heritage for the peoples of East and Southeast Asia.

ALCERP originated from visits by Project members to the Bagan Lacquerware Technology College. Bagan, renowned for its temples and scenic beauty, has long been Myanmar and Southeast Asia's leading lacquerware center. Local artisans are exceptionally skilled, employing refined techniques passed down through generations using bamboo, wood, and other indigenous materials. However, it was evident that local artisans possessed limited knowledge of lacquer arts, crafts, or of artisan communities outside of Myanmar. Beginning in 2005, the nascent Project initiated yearly workshops and lectures at the Lacquer College, introducing Japanese lacquer arts, techniques and design concepts to the faculty and students with the goal of demonstrating the potential and varied possibilities of lacquer. Specialists with

diverse expertise demonstrated Japanese techniques while studying those used by the local lacquer industry. (Matsushima 2008, 2009)

Initially focused on the College faculty and students, the programs later expanded to include the wider Bagan artisan community. This growing interest led to the inclusion of lectures on design, lacquer chemistry and pigments, as well as discussions on the state of Myanmar lacquer crafts and culture. The Project evolved through continuous dialogue with participants and the addition of new program features.

Between 2005 and 2014, Bagan programs covered various techniques, Japanese lacquer culture, art education, design, Asian lacquer culture and art, Vietnamese

techniques, chemical analysis of lacquer and materials, and lacquerware restoration and conservation. In May 2013, Project members presented at the Asian Lacquer International Symposium at Buffalo State University (NY).

Beyond Bagan, in 2011 and 2013 the Project also conducted exchange programs at the Luang Prabang Art School in Laos. There used to be a lacquer craft tradition in Laos, but the skills had all but died out. The Project conducted workshops and lectures at the Art School where students showed great interest in lacquer arts.

In September 2014, to mark the 10th anniversary of the Project in Bagan, an exhibition of international lacquer art was held at the College concurrent with the



Figure 1: Japanese lacquer workshop, Bagan, 2009

Source: provided by authors

annual workshop and lecture program. More than 70 artworks were exhibited. Master Artist Kiichiro Masumura, a Japanese Living National Treasure and the Project's advisor, demonstrated Japanese *kanshitsu* and lacquer coating techniques. The event featured artists from Myanmar, Japan, and from across Asia, giving the program an international character. Study tours were organized to visit local studios and World Heritage sites. NHK World reported on this exhibition.

The 2014 Program was a major milestone in ALCERP's development. The program not only included an international art exhibition but also attracted researchers and educators interested in lacquer from around East and Southeast Asia. Many participants expressed interest in becoming Project members and bringing ALCERP programs to other Southeast Asian countries. (ALCERP, 2014).

2. METHODOLOGY

2015 Seminars and Discussions:

In order to expand, it was necessary to set clear goals and the create a framework for future Project events. Therefore, in August 2015, Project members held seminars and discussions at the Sofitel Angkor Hotel, Siem Reap, Cambodia. Eighteen members from Myanmar, Japan, Cambodia, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam attended. There were presentations on the current state of lacquer crafts and culture in each country and wide-ranging discussions on ALCERP's future.

Awareness & Education:

What strategies are most effective for increasing the size of the lacquer community (artisans, artists, scholars, and patrons)?

How to best educate the public about lacquer culture and raise general appreciation for lacquer art and crafts?

Cultural Sustainability:

What are the inherent strengths and weaknesses of natural lacquer cultures?

Historically, how did lacquer art and craft culture develop and thrive? How has it endured?

How to best leverage these strengths to ensure long-term survival?

Promotion and Use:

How can the use and appreciation of natural lacquer be effectively encouraged, particularly in contrast to mass-produced alternatives?

What specific obstacles hinder the wider adoption of natural lacquer (e.g., cost, performance, and accessibility)?

Capacity Building:

How can technical skill levels in lacquer crafts be most effectively raised among artisans?

How can the artistic expression and design quality of lacquer crafts be enhanced?

ALCERP members decided on the following objectives and goals:

Format: The “lecture/discussion – demonstration/workshop – exhibition” format was judged appropriate for the expanded Project.

Cultural Promotion: Events like the Bagan exhibition showcase and promote the art form to wide audiences, including fellow artisans, academics, tourists, and the general public.

Heritage Recognition: Urging local and national agencies to pursue traditional lacquer crafts being declared regional and world heritages.

Knowledge Exchange: Workshops and seminars facilitate the sharing of technical skills, artistic approaches, and information about preservation efforts among participants from diverse backgrounds and regions.

Skill Development: Training sessions focus on improving technical proficiency, introducing new methods, and preserving traditional techniques.

Networking: Poster sessions, study tours and similar events help build connections and foster collaboration between different lacquer communities and institutions. A social media presence is necessary. (ALCERP, 2015)

3. RESULTS

3.1. Chiang Mai Program

In February 2016, the Chiang Mai University Art Center hosted an exchange program. The lecture/discussion, demonstration/workshop, and art exhibition” format agreed upon at the Siem Reap symposium was followed. The program took place over three days. The keynote lectures were on the historical development of Lanna-Thai lacquer crafts, and the evolution of two Japanese decorative techniques. The afternoon lectures discussed the current state of lacquer crafts, art, and education by participants from Cambodia, China, Myanmar, Taiwan, and Vietnam as well as talks on specific aspects of Japanese lacquer history and culture. Demonstrations of Thai and Japanese lacquer techniques were held the following morning and the

workshops in the afternoon. On third day, there was also a study tour for participants to local lacquerware and woodworking communities. The study tour proved to be both educational and popular and became a part of future programs. Lacquer artisans, artists, educators and experts from Thailand, Japan, and other East and Southeast Asian nations participated in the program. More than 100 artworks by 50 artists were exhibited. The lectures, demonstrations, and workshops were well-attended. As was the art exhibition. There were more than 2,000 visitors over the 10 days.

For the participants, the events were an opportunity to network and learn about the situation of artists and artisans from other nations. An important goal of the Project is to connect lacquer artisans and develop a community.

This was the first program to be actively promoted to the public. Promotional materials were distributed to galleries and cultural centers in the Chiang Mai region as well as to art schools around Thailand.

The majority of the attendees were students. To improve program events and make the Project more responsive to the Asian lacquer community, attendees were asked to fill out questionnaires. Comments were uniformly positive and constructive.

Questionnaire:

Number of Respondents: teacher (5), student (25), artist (9), craftsperson (6), other (3)

1. Were you able to understand the Lectures, Demonstrations and Workshops?

(difficult) <<< 1(0人)-2(7人)-3(20人)-4(19人) >>> (easy)

2. Were the Lectures, Demonstrations, Workshops, Exhibitions, and Performance useful for you?

(not useful) <<< 1 (0人) - 2 (0人) - 3 (12人)
- 4 (34人) >>> (useful)

3. What are you interested in learning about?

4. What was your overall impression of the Lectures, Demonstrations, Workshops, Exhibitions, and Performance?

5. What do you think about the future and possibilities of Thai lacquer crafts?

6. If you have any other suggestions or questions, please write them on the back.

From the survey results and informal chats with the mainly student attendees, most knew that lacquer was a traditional Thai craft. But unlike in Myanmar, where lacquerware and lacquer culture are distinctly rooted in the society, for most attendees, lacquer was not a part of their daily lives. The attachment was historical.

Many were interested in the variety of the artworks. Some comments that if there were more exchange programs artisans and artists might be stimulated to take Thai lacquer arts in new directions reinvigorating the craft. There was also great interest in the demonstrations and especially the workshops. Some expressed the desire not only to practice just one technique but also to learn the whole process of creating a lacquer artwork. (ALCERP, 2016)

Historically, Thailand, in particular northern Thailand (Lanna), had a robust lacquer craft industry. In the 1970's with the rush to industrialize and the growing tourist boom, lacquer crafts moved from artisanal workshops to industrial production.

Local workshops using natural lacquer all but disappeared and the cheap industrial “lacquerware” produced for tourists tarnished the image of Thai handicrafts. However, younger generations have a renewed interest in traditional materials and techniques and are using them to create new craft designs and artworks. Organizations such as the Sustainable Arts and Crafts Institute of Thailand (SACIT), which support traditional crafts, will hopefully increase the number of programs providing technical training to young artists and artisans. (Voharn 2022)

3.2. Hanoi Program

The Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum in Hanoi hosted the next exchange program. Lacquer artworks from Vietnam and other East and Southeast Asian nations as well as from the United Kingdom and the USA were displayed. The exhibition and symposium in August 2016 also included a poster session on aspects of lacquer arts, history and culture. Fifty artists exhibited, showcasing a wide variety of contemporary lacquer art using diverse designs and techniques. Text panels explained the current state of lacquer arts and crafts in each country. Lectures at the museum were on lacquer technique, science, and culture. The Japan Foundation Center for Cultural Exchange in Vietnam was the venue for demonstrations and workshops by artists and artisans from Vietnam, Japan, and Myanmar. Study tours were to the Hanoi Son Mai Vocational Centre to view the processing of raw lacquer, a mother-of-pearl inlay craft village near Hanoi, and a trip to Phu Tho to view lacquer tree tapping.

Poster sessions, introduced in Hanoi, became a popular venue for visitors and participants at this and later programs. As

in Chiang Mai, students from universities in and around Hanoi as well as students from China, Japan, and Taiwan along with their teachers participated in the program events. The participation of many international artists and students in Hanoi was encouraging. As at the Chiang Mai program, workshop and demonstration participants as well as visitors were asked to fill out questionnaires. The responses were positive and useful. (ALCERP, 2016)

It was an honor to hold the art exhibition at The Vietnam National Fine Arts Museum. The space provided was an ideal venue for it. However, there was no separate space for the lectures. Therefore, they were held in the exhibition room which did not have seating and left most attendees having to stand. However, the classrooms at the Japan Foundation proved to be well-suited for the demonstrations and workshops. The Vietnamese lacquer art displayed with one exception were *son mài* paintings. There appeared to be little craft or object art produced using natural lacquer. Several survey respondents noted the diversity of lacquer crafts and arts displayed and hoped that the program would encourage Vietnamese lacquer artists to experiment with object art.

3.3. Bagan Program

The Project returned to its roots in Bagan in September 2017. The Bagan Program was organized in partnership with the Lacquerware Technology College, the Myanmar Lacquerware Association, and Tokyo University of the Arts. There was a four-day exhibition of international lacquer art at the College. Over 70 lacquer artworks were exhibited. In addition, there were lectures by lacquer experts and workshops on Myanmar lacquer techniques as well as

study tours to lacquerware studios and shops in the Bagan area. Artists, educators and researchers from 10 Asian nations as well as several from Europe and North America participated. With so many students and educators in attendance, there was a natural focus on lacquer arts education.

The feedback from the students and other participants was very positive. Most wished that the event was longer, so that there would have been more time to spend with each other. As in the Chiang Mai and Hanoi, it was gratifying to see so many students attending. (ALCERP, 2017).

3.4. Cambodian Program

The Cambodian program, held in Siem Reap in September 2018, was the largest to date. With each event, the Project has grown. More than 120 participants from 14 Asian and European nations gathered in Siem Reap, where 76 artworks were showcased at the Sofitel Angkor Resort and at Angkor Artwork Studio. A wide variety of contemporary lacquer work was exhibited including traditional lacquerware, lacquer object art and lacquer paintings. At the symposium, the current state of Cambodian lacquer was discussed and there was a panel discussion on the overall state and future of lacquer arts and industry in Asia. Eighteen posters were presented addressing a wide range of topics. For example, research done on the chemical properties of Cambodian lacquer and furniture restoration. As in Hanoi, the poster session became a place to meet and discuss. Participants viewed traditional Japanese and Southeast Asian lacquer techniques at demonstrations and hands-on practice at workshops. There was a field trip to Kampong Thom province to

observe lacquer collection methods. The exhibition, events, and the assembling of lacquer artists and experts from all over Asia provided the opportunity to pursue our common goal of creating a thriving international lacquer community and fellowship. This international and communal focus will genuinely lead to the growth and spread of lacquer art.

However, the lack of participation by the local Cambodian community was disappointing. Holding the event at a luxury hotel was one reason for this. Another was that the upheavals of the late 20th Century had severed younger generations from their own cultural traditions and heritage. While this program extended the international reach of the Project, an important goal is to “promote lacquer arts” in Cambodia. Reviving Cambodian lacquer crafts will be challenging. (ALCERP, 2018).

3.5. Tokyo “Urushi Forms and Hope”

We were pleased to hold “Urushi Forms and Hope” in September 2022, the first ever exhibition of modern Southeast Asian lacquer art in Japan. This event was originally planned for September 2020 as the “World of Lacquer”, an exhibition of international lacquer art with events similar in format to ALCERP’s earlier programs. However, the COVID pandemic intervened, and the exhibition was first postponed and later canceled. We decided to return the Project’s focus to Southeast Asian lacquer arts and communities. For many artisans in this region, the impact of the pandemic was devastating. International tourism all but disappeared and in these nations many

artisans were dependent on tourism for their livelihoods. As a result, the Project began to explore new ways of connecting lacquer communities using modern technology. Project members, for example, created videos chronicling the history and current state of lacquer arts and crafts in their regions. We asked participating artists to create video demonstrations and interviews. This Video Archive is online and serves as an educational and technical resource.²



Figure 2: Poster, Tokyo “Urushi Forms and Hope”, 2022
Source: provided by authors

More than 3,500 people over the 11 days visited the “Urushi Forms and Hope” exhibition at University Art Museum at Tokyo University of the Arts. There were 70 lacquer works from the Southeast Asian lacquer nations – Cambodia, Laos,

² Video Archive, ALCERP
<https://asian-urushi.com/index.html> Last accessed: October 10, 2025

Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam – as well as works by Japanese and other international artists influenced by Southeast Asian art and culture. There were many positive comments about the range and quality of art displayed and the videos of lacquer techniques and cultures from the Video Archive. During the exhibition, 11 international and 5 Japanese artists participated in a range of activities, including gallery talks, performances, and a study tour to a lacquer tree plantation to practice lacquer sap collection in Daigo, Ibaraki. We were very pleased with the response to “Urushi Forms and Hope”. (Matsushima, ALCERP, 2022).

4. DISCUSSION

4.1. Achievements & Challenges

The Project’s most significant achievements lie in two key areas: raising awareness of Asia’s shared lacquer heritage across Asia and fostering increased contacts among the craftspeople, artists, educators, researchers and others in the lacquer cultures of Asia and beyond. As previously noted, the artisans of Bagan knew little of lacquer arts and industry outside of Myanmar. Similarly, *son mài* artists in Vietnam knew little of the finely crafted lacquerware or the artisans who made them in Myanmar. Today, Southeast Asian lacquer artisans and artists have a better understanding of each other and their unique circumstances surrounding their crafts – the materials, skills and techniques and the cultural foundations that underpins them.

Beyond simply increasing contacts between lacquer communities, the Project’s programs and components have served as effective models. Other programs and organizations have drawn inspiration from ALCERP approach and have incorporated

them into their own programs and events. We are gratified to see this development. The art exhibitions provided the opportunity for local artists, artisans, and students as well as the public to view diverse selections of expressive lacquer object art, jewelry, painting and lacquerware from across Asia. Many participants and exhibition visitors encountered for the first time, unique forms such as Japanese expressive lacquer art, *son mài* painting, or Bagan lacquerware.

While the lectures included such diverse topics as lacquer chemistry, pigments, and furniture restoration, the heart of the lecture/discussion component was the state of lacquer arts and industry in each community. Participants engaged in free flowing, in depth discussions of their circumstances and issues as well as possible ways to support and strengthen lacquer culture. The lectures and discussions generated greater public awareness of the common heritage shared by Asian cultures.

The demonstrations and workshops were well received. The opportunity to view master artists at work and practice techniques reinforced the understanding gained at the exhibitions and lectures with hands-on experience of working with lacquer.

Study tours were important not only to visit local craft villages, studios, institutes, or lacquer tree areas but also to put the program in context by developing a better understanding of the host culture.

The ALCERP programs create a flurry of interest in natural lacquer arts and crafts. How to harness this interest and create momentum is an important challenge. It would be best to have a training program prepared at the end of each Project event to receive students

and artisans interested in learning lacquer techniques. What all lacquer artists and artisans agree upon is that working with natural lacquer is a slow meditative process that cannot be hurried. Demonstrations and workshops can create interest, but learning the technical skills takes time and effort. At present, ALCERP does not have the ability to organize training programs. However, we believe that raising the technical skill of young artisans is essential if lacquer arts are to survive.

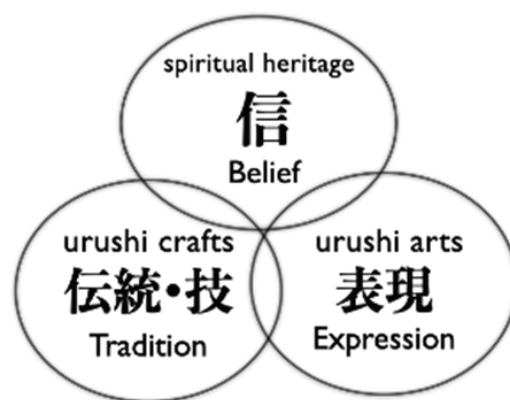
4.2. Current Research

The Project is revisiting Laos. The Lao people are proud of their culture and traditions. There are artisans who make traditional baskets and bowls for Lao people and tourists alike. To again use natural lacquer in Making their crafts would add beauty and value to them. Artisans in Luang Prabang state that there is no lacquer in Laos and that it must be sourced from Thailand and Vietnam Making it very expensive. And that the lacquer sap is of poor quality because it is adulterated. In 2011, the Project had a sample of “Thai lacquer sap” (*Gluta usitata*) analyzed and indeed, it had been contaminated with motor oil and paint thinners. The *Gluta usitata* lacquer tree grows throughout Laos where its sap is undoubtedly used by some local farmers. To reestablish a lacquer craft industry, stands of lacquer trees need to be located and farmers shown, if necessary, how to collect the sap. Then a market for it needs to be created by offering to purchase lacquer sap on a regular basis. This would generate an extra source of income for farmers. The lacquer then could be sold to artisans at a reasonable price. An affordable and stable supply of lacquer

sap would increase the beauty and value of the artisan’s work. This manner of market creation has been successful in Cambodia. (ALCERP 2022)

4.3. Future Prospects for Lacquer Crafts

Lacquer is a natural product and lacquer crafts a meditative art. Working with natural lacquer requires a high degree of skill and artistry using techniques developed over centuries. Will lacquer crafts and heritage survive the hurried pace of modern life and values? We believe that for natural lacquer to continue to be relevant lacquer cultures need to maintain or develop three qualities: Spiritual heritage and belief; Lacquer crafts and tradition; and Lacquer arts and expression.



Education & Awareness Skills and Techniques

Figure 3: Future Prospects
Source: provided by authors

Societies with lacquer craft traditions need, if not to believe, at least to respect their heritage and traditions. In Japan, as noted, when a temple or shrine is repaired or rebuilt, natural lacquer is used on its wooden surfaces. Lacquer is an ennobling material.

It has spiritual attributes. In Myanmar, when offerings are brought to a temple or gifts to a wedding, they are carried in lacquer vessels. There is a communal belief in living their heritage. This is why education and awareness raising are important. In societies in which traditions are weakening and in decline, awareness raising programs can deepen young people's understanding of the importance of attachment to heritage, strengthening and maintaining belief in community and culture.

Artisans need to honor their vocation by respecting their materials and tools and strive to raise their skills and craftsmanship to the highest level. Refining skills and techniques that were passed down from one generation to another. Artisans need to live their heritage by continuing to hone their skills. Without belief there is less motivation.

The pursuit of beauty embodies the pursuit of skill. Inspired craft is art. Craft so beautiful that it becomes art. The point at which craft and art meet is where lacquer crafts and culture will thrive and be sustainable into the future.

At present, many lacquer communities do not have enough skilled craftsmen to produce high quality lacquer crafts. "Master" craftsmen from outside are needed to teach groups of artisans which will over time raise their skill levels. Education and awareness raising are important, but skill and technique are paramount at this juncture. Lacquer offering bowls brought to temples need to be beautifully, skillfully made and imbued with the spirit, knowledge and heritage of the culture.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Asian Lacquer Craft Exchange Research Project most important successes have been in education and awareness raising. Inviting artists, artisans, educators and others to participate in programs created the space where they could interact and build relationships share their knowledge, skills, artistry and increase their awareness of lacquer arts common heritage. The exhibitions, demonstrations and workshops showcased the diversity and beauty of lacquer arts and crafts, further educating the public and strengthening the belief in lacquer crafts as a cultural heritage.

However, the Project did little to directly support the development of the skills and techniques necessary for lacquer crafts and culture to survive. In most Southeast Asian nations, master artisans have few students to pass on their knowledge and skills to. In addition, the conflicts of the 20th century disrupted some societies hindering knowledge transmission. Further, fewer young people want to enter the crafts industry, believing that it has little potential as a livelihood.³

Lacquer crafts are likely to decline further without highly skilled, highly motivated craftsmen. To compete with mass-produced synthetic products and still thrive, they need to create craftworks that approach art. Masters need to instruct apprentices. Studios and training institutes need to be established, and markets need to be created for high quality lacquer crafts. In the haste and stress of economic development, heritage can help

³ Private communication, U Maung Maung, Director, Myanmar Lacquerware Association, <https://burmacrafts.org/about-mla/> Last accessed: October 10, 2025

hold peoples and communities together. Lacquer is one such heritage.

“It is our hope that people will appreciate and admire not only the beauty and

diversity of lacquer arts but also, in these troubled and stressful times, note the serenity and patience with which this art is made at the nexus of tradition and modernity.” (Introduction to ALCERP, 2022).

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