

Kanzahi, Kushi and Kogai in the Liang Yi Museum Collection

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To survey the 5,000 pieces of hair ornaments in the collection of Liang Yi Museum, I have first selected 337 pieces from the tremendous collection with regards to the material use, which includes 232 with *maki-e*; 30 with tortoiseshell; 15 with glass; 21 with ivory; 26 with metal work; and 13 with other materials. From there, I further trimmed down the group to 175 pieces with great artistic significance to carry out a thorough research based on the use of *maki-e* technique.

Maki-e (literally meaning sprinkled picture) is a sub-category of lacquering. The technique is executed by first outlining patterns or motifs with lacquer on the surface of objects made of tortoiseshell, ivory or wood; and sprinkling gold or silver, or other fine metal powder onto the wet lacquer. There are a few types of *maki-e* - often used in combination - including *taka-makie* (raised *maki-e*), *togidashi-makie* (design flush with surface), *hira-makie* (flat *maki-e*), *hyoumon* (inlay of thin sheets of metal on a lacquer base), and *raden* (inlay of mother-of-pearl).

The base of a *kanzashi* (single or fork-shaped hairpin) was usually made of tortoiseshell or metal, further decorated with coral, *maki-e*, gold or silver metalwork to create decorative themes of flora and fauna. *Kanzashi* was originally used as an amulet - decorated only with plants and flowers full of vitality - and worn during ritual ceremonies to drive away demons.

Kushi (comb), like *kanzashi*, was also believed to possess the talisman power to drive away demons and evil spirits. A *kushi* is not only practical for combing and styling hair, but also decorative to complement an overall hairstyle. Published in 712, *Kojiki* (*Records of Ancient Matters*) illustrates the following story:

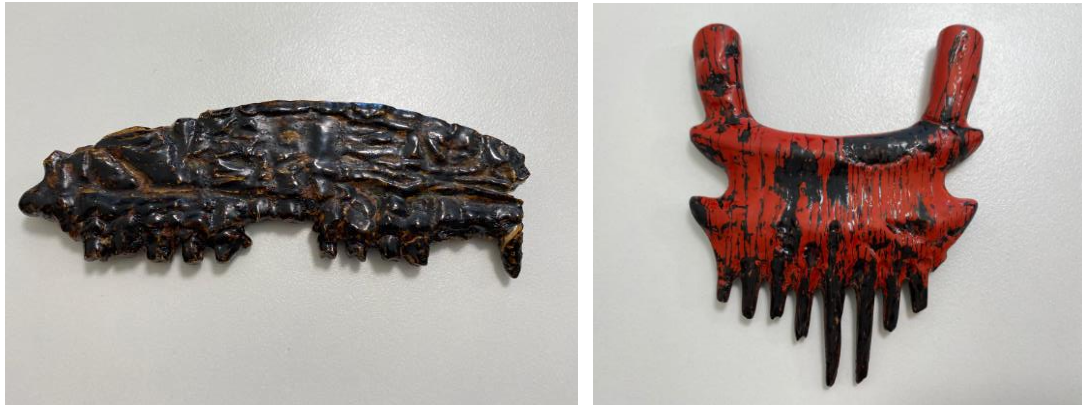
“After being banished from Takamagahara (a place in Japanese mythology as the residence of the heavenly gods), Susanoo no Mikoto (the storm god and younger brother of the sun goddess Amaterasu) met and fell in love with Kushinadahime (goddess of rice). To marry Kushinadahime, Susanoo no Mikoto must first defeat the eight-headed and eight-tailed serpent Yamata no Orochi. Susanoo no Mikoto, using his power, transformed Kushinadahime into a kushi and inserted it into his hair which gave him extraordinary power, and successfully defeated the serpent.”

Motifs decorated with *maki-e* are often embedded with profound meanings. For example, the theme *Hatsune no Choudo* (The First Song) inspired by chapter 23 of *The Tale of Genji*, represents the parents' wish for their daughter to be loved and cherished by her husband and his family after marriage.

Kogai (rod hairpin) is another type of decorative hair ornament usually decorated with *maki-e* and *raden* on a lacquer or tortoiseshell ground. Hair washing was not a habitual routine for the ancient Japanese, and a *kogai* was sometimes also used as a scalp scratcher. Lacquer art researcher Akio Haino (1941–2008) in his book *Kushi · Kanzashi* records that the term “*kōgai*” originates from “*kamikaki*”, meaning hair scratching.

Lacquer Combs in the Jōmon Period

A 7,200-year-old lacquer comb was excavated from the Mibiki site in Ishikawa Prefecture. To call attention to the fact that lacquerware and the ancient life of Neolithic dwellers were closely related, I conducted a research on the two combs using their images and available documents, and recreated the two using the techniques of wood carving and lacquering.



Recreated combs exhibited at *The Art of Takashi Wakamiya Contemporary Japanese Lacquer* held at the University Museum and Art Gallery of Hong Kong University in 2016.

Lacquered combs in the Jōmon period (c. 14,500–300BC) were not simply functional, but also worn by priests when carrying out rituals. In modern-day Japan, obsolete lacquerwares such as handy box (*tebako*), tiered box (*jūbako*), wooden bowl (*wan*), sake cup (*hai*) are designed as amulets to protect owners against evil spirits, and as blessings for prosperity.

The group of hair ornaments from the collection of Liang Yi Museum are possibly tokens of blessings from parents to daughters dating to the Edo (1603–1868), Meiji (1868–1912), Taisho (1912–1926) and early Showa (1926–1989) periods. The artefacts also reflect the determination of the craftsmen to fulfil the expectations of the parents who commissioned the pieces for their daughters.

The Liang Yi Collection of Hair Ornaments: Highlight Objects



A Set of Comb and Hairpin

Signed Hashiichi

20th century

Lacquer over tortoiseshell and silver

Hairpin length 14.5cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMC-094AB)

White lacquer remains very rare even in the present day. Even when pure white pigment is added to lacquer of high transparency, the result obtained will be an off-white colour, such as ivory. With time, the lacquer shall become whiter, but will never attain the tone of pure white. In the past, powdered water-soluble lake pigment or white lead was added to raw lacquer to create whiteness. Titanium is the modern replacement.

The interlocking rings pattern on the hair ornaments is created by the gold foil technique (*kirikane*). In ancient Japan, marriage was considered a union of two families for mutual benefits. The Japanese pronunciations of ring and peace are the same, both pronounced as “wa”, representing the peaceful union of the two families.



Comb

Hashiichi

20th century

Maki-e lacquer over tortoiseshell

Length 9cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMC-856)

This comb is made of tortoiseshell. On a green lacquer ground, gold foil is inlaid to create the pattern of sea waves (*seigaiha*). The comb is signed with the name Hashiichi, which could have belonged to Hashimoto Ichizou (1817–1882), a master swordsmith who pioneered the technique of *kawari-nuri* (free pattern lacquering) to simulate bamboo.

The origin of the pattern *seigaiha* can be traced to the chapter *Momiji-no-ga* (“Beneath the Autumn Leaves”) in *The Tale of Genji*, in which Genji and Tō no Chūjō perform the dance “*Seigaiha*”. The countless tides and waves are metaphors for the blessing of eternal happiness.



Comb

Yoyusai

19th century

Wood, lacquer, *maki-e* and coral

Length 9.4cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMC-368)

The craftsman of this comb made use of coral to represent the bright red colour of nandina (also known as sacred bamboo, or *nanten* in Japanese); silver powder to imitate snow; and the technique of raised *maki-e* to create the leaves. While the snowscape reminds people of the cold winter, the blooming of the tree represents the arrival of spring.

Yoyusai is known to create *maki-e* utilising the paintings and manuscripts of Rinpa school painter Sakai Hōitsu (1761–1828). The theme of this comb resembles plum blossom in Chinese paintings from the Song dynasty (960–1279), where plum blossom is one of “The Three Friends of Winter” (pine, bamboo, and plum blossom). The comb also has a connotative meaning of hoping the married daughter will have a bright future after enduring initial hardship. *Nanten* also symbolises “being able to overcome difficulties” as *nan* is the homophone to “difficulty” and *ten* to “change”. The comb is likely made as an amulet for a daughter about to get married.



Comb

19th century

Maki-e lacquer over wood and mother-of-pearl

Length 13.6cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMC-112)

The golden ground is piled with a large amount of gold powder, which is further decorated with a floral background using the technique of raised *maki-e* and the inlay of mother-of-pearl of butterflies. A butterfly represents the transformation of a caterpillar to an adult butterfly. It also symbolises the parents' expectations of their unmarried daughter to transform from a plain-Jane girl into an extraordinary woman, worthy of marrying a good man.



Comb

19th century

Maki-e lacquer over wood and mother-of-pearl

Length 13.3cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMC-115)

The golden ground of the comb is decorated with “herdsman flower” (*kengyūka*, also known as morning glory) using the techniques of raised *maki-e* and mother-of-pearl inlay. Morning glory invokes the romantic story of the Herdsman and Weaver Maid (the stars Altair and Vega), who are allowed to meet only once a year on the day of the Double Seventh Festival. This comb carries the symbolic meaning of finding the right person to marry.



Comb

Saito

19th century

Wood, lacquer and gold

Length 10.9cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum (LYMC-236)

Coated entirely with black lacquer, the monotone patterns of pine tree, cloud and thunderbolt are also created using black. According to the dictionary *Jōyō Jikai (Glossary of Commonly Used Characters)* written by Shirakawa Shizuka (1910–2006), lightning is the divine light that God shows people. The *kanji* character of lightning contains the character of God. In Japanese, the words “God” and “hair” share the same pronunciation as “*kami*”, which gives this comb a special attribute.

Pine in Japan also represents auspiciousness. The word pine (*matsu*) is the homophone to wait (*matsu*), which represents “good news will arrive soon”.

Conclusion

Hairstyles and hair accessories in Japan have gone through many evolutions over the centuries. The collection of Liang Yi Museum, home to over 3,000 pieces of hair accessories made of a wealth of materials and techniques, is a treasure trove for both visitors and researchers interested in the field of Japanese craft and lacquer art, by supplying ample resources on the socio-economic and traditional way of life of the people from the Edo to the Taisho period. More importantly, the collection also reflects the *shokunin* spirit (artisanal spirit), the dedication of a craftsman to perfect his craft.

Shokunin spirit is without a doubt the backbone of Japanese craft which instils artefacts with a human touch. Even today, when traditional hair ornaments are no longer worn on a daily basis but only during occasional ritual ceremonies, craftsmen continue to produce objects that rival the ancient masters, presenting a clearly traceable artistic heritage that is both impressive and enlightening.